

1. Welcome (Sue Takwani, Chair)

Numbers present: 21, including 7 committee members.

Sue welcomed us and thanked the Victory Club for hosting us.

She outlined the work of the Friends for any present who were new to us:

The Friends group – set up in 2014 and approaching our tenth anniversary – is a group of volunteers with the aim of helping with the conservation and restoration of South Norwood Country Park, which is a local nature reserve. We have twice-monthly workdays, led by Ian Glover, who has the qualifications and experience to make sure our work actually benefits the Park. 10-15 volunteers help on every workday – over the years many of us have learnt new skills.

Membership is simply joining our email mailing list; membership donations are voluntary.

We aim to promote the Country Park as a local asset, for nature and wildlife. We do this through nature and wildlife walks, which Ian (Glover) will outline later.

We keep the local community informed through our social media sites.

Volunteers have been key – in the absence of a warden – and in addition have helped with litter-picking and mowing smaller areas of the Park. We collaborate with The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) and finish work they start and vice versa. Some of the Friends are also volunteers with TCV.

Sue also confirmed the very good news that Ian Glover has been appointed warden. As well as leading our workdays, Ian had held the post of assistant warden; when the previous warden left, he worked on his own in the Park until Croydon Council (CC) went bankrupt.

Ian takes up his post on 2 April. Sue expressed our collective delight in this appointment and what a positive step it is for the future of the Park.

2. Report on 2023 and preview of 2024: workdays, projects and walks (Ian Glover, Secretary and workday leader)

Review from March 2023 to March 2024

Ian started his review with an overview of the year:

We have held 24 Friends' workdays, on the second and fourth Saturdays of every month, from 10am to 12pm. At a conservative estimate, that represents 560 volunteer-hours.

Bird walks: in May we held a dawn chorus walk, starting at 5.30am – worth the early start because of the majesty of the sounds. One of our committee, Howard Dingley, led a successful winter bird walk.

Bat walks: were run by Ian, and held in May, July and September (this last one having been postponed three times in August, due to the rain). The Park is the second-best site for bats in Croydon. We have seven different bat species (there are 17 breeding species here in the UK). The best site (South Croydon Lake) is only better because the lake is larger.

Fungi forays: were new walks for us this year. The first one was held after a prolonged dry period, but we were still able to see a number of species; the second foray happened after rain, which made it even better. It's a good new avenue for us and helps us to discover and appreciate the micro diversity in the Park. Clifford Davy, who led the walks, provided us with a list of the species we'd seen.

Ian then outlined the conservation work carried out in the Park this year, which follows a seasonal pattern:

March: is when we finish off winter work. This month, it was tree-planting, which we'd done in collaboration with the London Wildlife Trust (LWT) and TCV. The main area is near the New Beckenham Cemetery, which we've been planting since 2014-15. Most of trees have come from TCV and LWT's The Great North Wood project. This has included planting bigger trees (2-3 metres), not just whips.

Whips are often in danger of being swallowed up by vigorous growth of scrub around them. Larger trees fend for themselves much better. Clay areas collect too much water – and so we transplanted some trees to drier areas. The larger trees are secured with large stakes and hessian ties.

Another planting project by the brook at Harrington Road; we were reclaiming an area that used to be inhabited by species like moorhen and water rails. Prior to this, we'd cleared the area of the invasive giant hogweed, but this opened up the area to dog walkers.

To reclaim the area, we planted hedgerow trees and erected a protective barrier.

April to September

As we move into spring and summer, we start to enter the bird-nesting season and growing season, which influences what we're able to do, as we seek to protect habitats:

Keeping the paths open - they quickly become overgrown. This is infrastructure work, to service the park, and keep it open.

We cut back soft vegetation; process and remove fallen trees; cut up fallen trees into logs. We are able to use logs, in 80-100cm lengths, to create a log wall – which is very good for invertebrates and fungi.

The main paths we clear are the seasonal path and path alongside the reedbed (keeping lots of cow parsley and nettles under control).

With the path running from the SNCP compound to Harrington Road – we clear sightlines, so people feel safer.

The wetlands path runs from the beach around the lake, to the end of the seasonal path and scrub area near the visitor centre. We work to keep people out of the meadows but keep these paths clear and open.

We also had three sessions clearing the cemetery path, which needed lots of clearance work (with the help of TCV).

Keeping streams open

The Chaffinch Brook enters the Park by Ryelands Fields. It flows downhill to the wetlands (aided by a pipe installed in 2017); water then flows from the lake to the Quaggy and Pool rivers.

One of our annual tasks is making sure the streams stay open, so water flows through the Park. We remove wood and debris, so rivers don't become full of silt.

The channel leading into the lake is very important to keep clear, otherwise the lake level would get lower and lower. Volunteers literally got stuck in, to clear silt.

Building and installing benches

We built and installed three benches: one by the reedbed; one by Chaffinch Brook entrance to park; and one by the pitch and putt.

We dig holes for the feet and put them in; we back fill them with soil and rumbling, tamping this down, and then put the top of the bench on.

After-care of newly planted trees

Whips are easily outcompeted, and so clearing around them is necessary; this is a less popular task than tree planting!

We also fill in gaps in hedges we've planted.

Locating and removing invasive species

We have an ongoing search-and-destroy mission for Giant Hogweed. It starts growing in April, grows fast and has large leaves. Each plant sends out 100s of seeds. They overshadow wherever they grow, meaning banks end up dry, and the soil is more liable to erosion.

We used to have 100s of heads of Giant Hogweed. Last year, we only had six, with five located by the Friends and one by Thames 21.

It's important work because of the river flowing through the Park. We could be source of transmission to other sites and so need to keep it under control.

Building and maintaining dead hedges and habitat piles

We tinker around the edges of habitats; whenever we're working, we think about how to enhance them. When we are clearing, we use harvested materials to create habitat piles – which are good for wildlife and small mammals.

Dead hedges – are long. We install them to protect areas such as the reed bed and the ‘beach’. They are a way to consolidate the arisings. They keep things tidy and serve the wildlife.

The reedbed is one of most sensitive areas. We want people to be able to see in but need to protect from entry.

- Coppicing

We coppiced willow in September and October and used the stems to reinforce the dead hedge around the edge of the reedbed and extended it, using upright stakes to give it structure, and infilling with the willow branches.

Ian explained the various stages of coppicing willow: first, the trees to be coppiced in the future are cut to the base in winter; this leads to shoots growing rapidly from the resulting stool the following spring: you can then harvest between for between seven and 30 years.

What was coppiced in the past was used for basket-weaving and charcoal; we use ours for the dead hedge. It also creates a scoop, which bats feed over.

We also coppiced blackthorn, for different reasons. It is incredibly spiky, and the produce is rubbish, but there are two benefits to doing it. First, the blackthorn was growing out of the hedge into the meadow, and it turns the meadow into scrub land. Second, it lets more light into the hedge, which encourages new growth – ideal for the brown hair-streak butterfly to lay its eggs.

- Hedge laying

We also managed blackthorn by laying a hedge from it – another ancient craft. We cut through most of the trunk (80 percent) with a billhook or saw, making a ‘pleaching cut’. We then bend and lay the stem at 30 degrees; we add structure to the hedge with hazel stakes and binders to give shape to start with.

Cutting like this promotes vigorous, vertical growth from the branch that’s been laid, rejuvenating the hedge. We’ll do this over a 10–12-year cycle, extending the life of the hedge and protecting wildlife. Hedge laid like this was used as an effective cattle-proof barrier.

The hedge that was laid like this in 2022-23 is showing levels of regrowth and is where the butterfly eggs are. As we work along the hedge, we’ll have different levels of regrowth.

The current clearance created a huge quantity of arisings because the blackthorn had not been cut for years. There will be less in the future. But we needed to process the material, or it would have taken up too much meadow floor. We constructed another dead hedge, behind the living hedge, and habitat piles.

- Clearing brambles

We cleared brambles from the area near the compound and tram tracks in January. This creates space for primroses to come up. We may need to move the work to December, as they were already quite well grown, and were in flower only a few weeks later. This is very rewarding work, with such quick results. The benefit of a lot of the work we do takes years to see.

Preview of 2024

Ian then laid out the current plans for the rest of this year:

We hope to install one or two more benches once nesting is underway.

We will undertake a bit more path-restoration – putting down roadstones and potentially digging some ditches alongside to help drainage.

We will do some marginal planting – alongside the brook near Harrington Road, to go with the new hedge plants already there.

Over the winter, we will plant more trees, filling in the gaps in hedges and establishing devoted coppicing areas, called cants or coupes. These will comprise sweet chestnut, hornbeam and potentially hazel. We will then be able to coppice on a cycle, to give us produce to use. It may enable us to start new crafts, such as producing charcoal.

Willow coppicing will be done on a short rotation, every other year. It creates dense bushy habitat and provides great cover.

We will continue restoring the Environment Garden which, over the last few years, has been abandoned. Recent corporate workdays have started work on restoring the educational area, which shows all areas of the Park in microcosm.

Many of the projects the Friends undertake are done in collaboration with TCV, who are now also able to hold corporate workdays. This ‘cross-pollination’ helps us to do tasks that are much more ambitious, meaning we are not just maintaining but managing and developing the Park.

3. Treasurer’s report (Chris P, Treasurer)

To the end of December 2023, our total income was £11,193. This comprised:

- £1,761 in donations – thank you! This included a few very generous donations, and donations on our walks and every while litter-picking.
- We sold and cleared our stock of tote bags, raising £54.
- We received £264 from Croydon Council, to cover our public liability insurance for 2022 and 2023.
- A grant of £4,000 from Thames Water – they came to the Park for a meeting, wading through the mud!
- A grant of £400 from We Love SE25 – for benches and the repair of a section of path, restored by a committee member.
- A grant of £800 from Natural Heritage (National Lottery) – spent on binoculars, loupes (magnifying glasses) for the fungi forays, our fungi specialist’s fees for leading the walks and a bat detector.
- We also brought in £3,913 from our calendar sales.

To the end of December 2023, our total expenditure was £9,287. This comprised:

- Our public liability costs of £152
- £1,151 on tools (saws, billhooks for hedge laying, a rechargeable drill and rechargeable impact driver).
- £471 on feeding birds – slightly less now, having managed to stop some of the crows eating all the food!
- £8 on membership fees for ACCS (Association of Croydon Conservation Societies)
- Website costs of £238
- Our calendars cost £1,528 to produce: we sold 400, making a profit of £2,415 (with another 5 sold in January – in the next accounting year)
- £5,235 on path restoration – using the Thames Water grant and some of our own reserves. We still have some road stone left, which we hope to use for the viewing platform installation/repairs.
- £350 fungi foray costs
- £45 table hire at Stanley Arts, to sell calendars.
- £109 for wood to build the benches (one bench still to be installed).

All of which leaves us with a surplus of £1,906 which added to funds brought forward, leaves us with £10,618 in the bank.

This leaves us in a healthy position, but we expect the new warden to be very demanding (!) and we know he has a shopping list already. For example, we know we need a woodchipper, as we can't use bonfires.

4. Social media developments (Lynn Chambers)

Since the last AGM, Lynn C has kindly been developing our social media presence. She attended the AGM for first time last year and has been keen to increase the number of channels we use to reach other ages and groups of people. Lynn reported on the various platforms:

Facebook – was already up-and-running and used by lots to show beautiful photographs from the Park.

On 14 August, we launched Twitter (now X) and Instagram – with help on content coming from Ian and Sue, so that all posts were on track.

Over 32 weeks, there have been 59 uploads/posts on Instagram and 63 posts on X.

Instagram has 402 followers. These aren't necessarily all active, but there is a growing understanding that the Park is a nature reserve, and has a community that cares. There have been on average 16 likes per post, with 7 out of 8 most popular featuring people/volunteers. Audiences like to see people doing things: i.e. 3 covered the fungi foray or a bat walk; 3 featured workdays with volunteers.

People also liked the kingfisher image, used to promote the calendar. This is a 'good news' story.

X – as a platform is more political and used by journalists. We have a smaller following, of 238 followers. Some of these may overlap with Instagram, but it could be that we are reaching 600 unique followers.

Each X post had an average of 79 views, which helps put us on the map. For example, the Mayor tagged us when he visited the Park, as did Sustrans when they volunteered on a corporate visit.

Some aims looking ahead:

- We want to keep sharing stories about volunteers and workdays and events. And ‘before and after’ pictures of work are great, as they give hope.
- We’ll be looking to produce an events calendar.
- And we’ll aim to keep sharing seasonal nature news, so there is a continuous feed of stories. Lynn isn’t a nature expert but having Ian in post will be a huge help.
- We want to highlight things for people to look at when they’re in the Park.
- Instagram will create local connections – we’d love to get to 1000 followers.
- With Twitter, we will aim to link locally and regionally with businesses we can leverage – we’d love to reach 500 followers.

Technical difficulties meant Lynn was unable to share her slides: she will circulate to the committee so we can see them.

Sue thanked Lynn, particularly as she brings skills we don’t have, and we have reached younger people as a result.

Action: Lynn to circulate slides.

5. Election of officers and confirmation of committee (Sue)

Sue explained that we have four officers, all of whom are willing to continue.

They are:

Chair: Sue Takwani – proposed by Chris P; seconded by John Hickman

Vice-Chair: Chris Claridge – proposed by Sue; seconded by Chris Peskett

Treasurer: Chris Peskett – proposed by Sundeep Takwani; seconded by Howard Dingley

Secretary: Leonie Mason – proposed by Sue Takwani; seconded by Sundeep Takwani.

Sue explained that the role of Secretary had previously been split into two roles – Secretary and Minutes’ Secretary. Ian had been Secretary but, as the new warden, he can’t be on committee. He will continue to come to meetings as an observer.

Committee members: Sundeep Takwani, Jonathan Tolhurst and Howard Dingley are willing to continue (and Sue reiterated thanks to Howard for leading our bird walk for the first time).

We had asked for two new volunteers to join the committee. We are delighted to be joined by Lynn Chambers, who has already been helping us grow our social media profile, and Laura Foster, who helps to organise Park Run, and has recently joined us on workdays.

6. AOB

Public thanks

Sue thanked:

- John Hickman for his Cemetery Walk – he has done several for us. They are always brilliant, with such good narration and anecdotes. We plan another for June.
- John Hughes – who compiles our annual bird report, logging species based on his daily visits to the Park. He is currently very ill and is unable to come to the Park; the 2023 report as a result covers sightings to October. He is a brilliant supporter, and we're keeping in touch with him – and showing him photos.

Sue shared a statement from him, in which he passed on his heartfelt thanks to the Friends' committee and volunteers. He said he was heartened to see photos, to hear of our plans, not least in reclaiming the wetland habitat (La Motes), and improving water flow to the lake. He said he was looking forward to hearing more, if it ever stops raining!

- All the volunteers; and local community for buying calendars, and local photographers for supplying their photos. Every year we're able to buy and sell a few more calendars, and they are a great source of income – which we are putting towards the wetland project.

Visitor Centre

Sue brought us up-to-date, saying that we don't have any news to report. We are still hopeful it will be rebuilt. The work on the environmental garden will go ahead regardless.

A separate group has secured funding from a National Lottery fund for a 'pop-up' Visitor Centre. They will be opening the kiosk on Saturdays, and running educational projects.

As a Friends group, we are not focusing on it – it is the Council's responsibility to sort it.

Questions

We then took questions and comments from the floor.

John Hickman thanked the Friends for looking after a tree that's personally very important to him. He also proposed a vote of thanks to the Friends and Ian Glover for all their work – which is recorded here.

Mention was made of an exhibition which had just started at Stanley Arts – Norwood Narrative – which is a history of regeneration of South Norwood. It is centred around the High Street.

A question was asked about the viewing platforms, and who has responsibility for them: material for their repair has been purchased; the Council currently doesn't have the personnel to install the new platforms – they only have one handyman. They've put out adverts to employ another, but no appointment has been made, despite there being lots of applicants. The Friends had offered to help but the Council decided we wouldn't have been covered by insurance.

Now that Ian is warden, he will be able to help the handyman. The work should be done this spring. The new platforms will be made from recycled plastic – which will last longer than wood. The two concrete platforms will remain; the 2 wooden/broken ones will be replaced.

Sue thanked everyone for coming; it was good to have a strong turnout.

The meeting finished at 12:35pm.