

- We opened the doors at 11am, and began the meeting at 11.10am, with about 25 people present, including 7 committee members and our warden, Ian Glover.

1. Welcome (Sue Takwani, Chair)

- Sue welcomed all present and gave an overview of the Friends' history and what we do.
- The Friends were set up in 2014 to help with conservation work in South Norwood Country Park.
- Volunteer numbers have grown over that time, and staff numbers decreased.
- The site is 125 acres.
- Our workdays are held on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of every month, and also on every Tuesday morning and/or afternoon.
- Workdays are run by Ian Glover, our warden, and trained volunteer leaders.
- As well as workdays, we promote the wildlife of the Park. We hold wildlife walks - bird, butterfly, bat, tree ID walks and fungi forays.
- We pay for a specialist mycologist to lead fungi surveys and forays.
- We are planning one or two new walks – keep an eye on publicity.
- John Hickman kindly hosts a cemetery walk for us every year, to raise funds.
- We carry out a weekly butterfly transect, between April and September, and report our findings to Butterfly Conservation.
- We have a committee, which helps with planning and organisation.
- Our membership comprises a large email list.
- The local community is kept informed via our website, social media and quarterly newsletters.
- The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) also help in the Park, working for two full days a month.
- We co-ordinate with them, and will finish work the other has started and vice versa. There is some overlap in the membership between the two groups of volunteers.
- Our volunteers litter-pick, and empty the dog-poo bin daily (the bin was installed by us).
- We also host some corporate volunteer workdays.
- Sue gave a massive 'thank you' to all the volunteers. We couldn't do our work without you.

2. Workdays/wildlife walks (Ian Glover, Countryside Warden and workday leader)

- Ian introduced himself and explained his role – to manage the various environments in the Park.
- He reiterated that he couldn't do his job without the help of volunteers.
- Using PowerPoint, with lots of photographs, he gave an overview of the year, to-date - March 2025 to February 2026 – in celebration of the Park and the work.
- There were 70 volunteer workdays – where the sun always shines, and the volunteers are always smiling!
- Volunteers contributed 1,783 hours (includes litter-picking, committee meetings, assisting on nature walks).
- We held 11 nature walks: a dawn chorus bird walk, 2 fungi forays, 2 tree ID walks, one hedgerow walk, 2 bat walks, 2 butterfly walks, one winter bird walk.
- We hold as wide a variety of walks as can.
- As Sue said, there are some new ones to come.

He gave a quick introduction to Park, its inhabitants, and its management.

- It's a 125-acre nature reserve, with a mosaic of habitats which is what makes it so valuable for biodiversity.
- It was artificially created in 1988/89.
- The Park is best known for its birds.

We saw pictures of:

- Kestrels, in and on the bird box, paid for with a grant secured by the Friends. It was installed by a tree surgeon.
- Water rail – which is very illusive. You need to arrive before 8am to see. It's more often heard (sounds like a squealing pig) than seen. It lives in the wetlands or lake area.
- Daubenton's bat – we have spotted 7 out of the 17 UK species on the site. The Daubenton's bat has distinctive light. It skims above the lake and uses nearly webbed hind feet to scoop up insects. The lake makes good habitat for bats, as water means insects.
- Brown hairstreak butterfly – the butterfly transects showed 17 species (along a set route). There are 19 across the whole site (including the brown hairstreak, not seen on the route). It is a specialist on blackthorn.

The habitats:

- are managed through various forms of arrested succession.
- Succession is the biological process whereby, in a temperate climate, every habitat will tend over years to revert to woodland – scrubby, secondary woodland. This would mean the lake would silt up and then become the same.
- This loss of habitat diversity would significantly reduce the overall biodiversity value of site.

The work done:

March

- Finishing touches of the winter work (October to March is the winter season and is the busiest time for work in the Park). This comprised blackthorn-coppicing; willow-coppicing, and hedge laying along the seasonal path.
- Hedge laying is an ancient country craft. It involves a pleaching cut – which is a cut made towards the base of the main stem, cut 80 percent though. This leaves the bark and cambium layer intact, meaning that nutrients can still travel up the stem.
- The stem is laid at a 30-degree angle, which encourages upward growth.
- It forms an effective livestock barrier.
- Ours is laid in south of England style, designed for sheep.
- We don't have livestock but we do this to keep the craft going; it manages and rejuvenates the hedge, extending its life. It provides cover for small birds, and creates a green corridor for small mammals to move around.
- The dead hedge around the lake helps to keep the lake set aside for wildlife, creating a barrier.

April – August (spring and summer)

- Is nesting-bird season, so we are limited in terms of the work we can do on the site.
- We 'tinker' around the edges of habitats.
- We make protective barriers, keep smaller paths open and care for newly planted trees etc.
- The main paths are kept open by a contractor; smaller paths need to be done with volunteers.
- Dead hedging – we restock and repair. They diminish as they rot and are deconstructed by people climbing over, especially around 'the beach'.
- Dead hedges are warmer and damper which is a wonderful habitat for insects and fungi – including blue velvet on a stick, which is very rare.

- After-care of new trees – we clear brambles and other growth from around the base, and water the trees.
- In June last year, we did some emergency tree-planting – Croydon Council had some excess trees, and so we added them to the Friends' Plantation, near Beckenham Cemetery, to see if they'd survive. It's the worst time to plant (winter is the best time). Will added mulch and water, lots did survive.
- We dealt with invasive species:
- Giant hogweed is very nasty if it gets on skin. The sap negates skin's resistance to UV and is a risk to people, dogs and wildlife.
- 12 years ago, it was out of control; now we're in single figures down from hundreds every year. We dig it out before it flowers.
- Himalayan balsam – is very abundant through the wetlands. It grows quickly, dies suddenly. But it shadows over other plants and creates erosion. It seeds, and from our site these enter the streams and flow to other sites.
- It's a particular problem because bees love it, which means other plants don't get pollinated and a monoculture is created.
- Fortunately, it has shallow roots and is easily pulled out.

September-November

- Is when we can focus on ponds, streams and wetlands.
- When the Park was created, there were 4 reedbeds. Over the years the willow has overshadowed the reedbeds, meaning there's only one substantial one now.
- We coppice the willow so that the reeds aren't overshadowed.
- The coppicing cycle has accelerated to a 4-year cycle from an 8-year cycle. This has led to natural reed-regeneration around lake which is encouraging to see.
- We'll add to this and plant more reeds in the spring.
- Pond-clearance - in 2024, we couldn't see the wetlands pond. Volunteers, and Croydon mountaineers cut back reed iris and bulrushes. These plants cover the water, drink a lot of water, causing the area to dry. The willow then grows and we lose the pond.
- Stream-clearing - to do this clearing, we put on chest-waders and get in the streams. In the autumn, it's not so cold, but natural processes are slowing down. There's no breeding. We are able to cut back vegetation and keep streams open and stop them drying up. We've been opening up the Chaffinch Brook.
- We can also inspect brooks and see what work needs doing.
- We also cleared the channel and pipes leading into the lake. The lake got very low over summer, because there was no rain and it is spring-fed. But it was slow to fill once did rain started because the pipes were quite blocked. The lake is now refilling easily.

December-February (winter)

- Willow-coppicing around lake (carried out by TCV).
- Tree-planting in Ryeland Fields, which is now part of South Norwood Country Park.
- We planted hazel; in 7-10 years, we will start a coppicing cycle.
- Ian explained what coppicing is, and why we do it.
 - It relies on the same principle as hedge laying.
 - Trees are cut down to the ground in winter, when all energy is stored in the roots.
 - When spring comes, the energy comes up in burst, and new growth comes.
 - A single stem grows back as bundle (called rods or poles).
 - This is then coppiced again in another 7 years.
 - It's been done in the UK for 6,000 years.
 - The cut stakes are used for fencing; or burned as wood for charcoal. It's a very reliable product.

- Oak used to be coppiced on a 50-year cycle for shipbuilding.
- Willow has a 1–2-year cycle, for basket-making.
- Coppicing Blackthorn – when coppiced, new growth is promoted through the ground.
- Blackthorn coppicing
- We coppice blackthorn for habitat management, for the brown hairstreak butterfly.
- We coppice on a 3–5-year cycle. This maximises new growth. We're doing every 4 years, because we have 4 big sections. This winter, we are finishing 4th compartment.
- Next year, as we restart, it will be much easier to do and will make our winter work more diverse.
- What we've been cutting had been left for approximately 15 years.
- Hairstreak eggs are the size of a poppy seed, laid on stems.
- Ian counts the eggs – there were 284 eggs this year, which is a bumper crop, and a positive indication that the conservation we're doing in La Motes meadow is working.
- Blackthorn flowers early; wild plums and cherries are beginning to flower too
- When we coppice blackthorn, we use the larger branches to make stakes. We put a point on, using an axe, and use these to create structure for the dead hedge. Stakes provide support for the material added and contains the footprint/space taken by the hedge.

What's next? We will:

- Diversify the range of flowering plants, by creating-mini meadows and planting woodland flowers and marginal plants around ponds and streams.
- Continue clearance work in the wetlands.
- Continue the vegetation clearance and bank restoration along the Chaffinch brook. We had focused on the channels.
- There won't be so much to do, given what we've done this year.
- Continue to coppice the blackthorn to maintain the habitat for the brown hairstreak butterfly. This will be the beginning of the renewed coppicing cycle
- Continue hedge laying along the seasonal path.
- Replace dead plants along the path and coppice a little to rejuvenate. There will be more hedge laying at a later date.

Beavers' proposal:

- This is not strictly under the remit of the Friends.
- Citizen Zoo contacted Croydon Council with the idea.
- Ian said that he originally doubted it was possible but met Citizen Zoo and went to Paradise Fields in Ealing where there's been a successful project since 2023.
- He could see similarities between the sites.
- The Ealing beavers are thriving as is their environment. They've made a complex network of ponds. They create a mosaic of wetland habitats which improves biodiversity.
- We're halfway through the community consultation.
- It's been hugely positive, with good questions and concerns raised.
- People are very strongly in favour proposal (89 percent), with additional numbers neutral and very few against.
- The project is right at the start. No decisions have been taken. Consultation is a necessary part of the process.
- There will be a third-party feasibility study which will involve independent specialist testing on areas such as water quality and a survey of baseline species.
- There would be plenty of safeguards in place. The project would need a licence from Natural England who will need evidence of this local agreement and the specialist information.

Conclusion:

- Ian thanked all who'd given time to workdays, fundraising, litter-picking. He couldn't do his job without all of them and their time.
- Sue thanked Ian for his informative presentation.

3. Treasurer's report (Chris Peskett, Treasurer)

- Chris confirmed that we are in a good position financially.
- Our year runs from January to December 2025.
- At the end of December 2025, we brought forward £22,000.
 - £10,000 of this was a gift from John Hughes, which we are looking after and deciding carefully how we will spend. Carried forward from 2024.
- Income:
 - £5,000 income came from donations and calendar sales. £2,123 donations were mostly from walks and membership; calendars are our biggest source of income, namely £3,802.
 - £44 came in from selling cloth bags for WeLoveSE25, which we paid on to them.

Total income: £5,970

- Expenditure:
 - Public liability insurance - £262
 - Tools and equipment - £2,551. This covers wear and tear, and new items which come along, such as UV torches so that we can see hairstreak butterfly eggs in the dark!
 - Bird food - £408 (supplies are replaced daily, alongside the litter-picking). The great tits are particularly keen.
 - Membership fees (Association of Croydon Conservation Societies - ACCS) - £8
 - Website fees - £283
 - Calendar printing costs - £1,557 – the profit from the calendars (£2,245) equates to our tools' expenditure.
 - Professional fees - £1,325 - were for our mycologist. He's found 147 species of fungi. These facts and figures help to protect the Park, and it's status; Bromley were aiming to turn it into a housing estate back in the 1980s.
 - AGM room hire - £25

Total expenditure: £6,463

- In addition, we have £5,000 invested, meaning we have £27,000 in total in the bank. It's a good situation, but it needs a lot of care.
- Of this, £4,000 is ringfenced, given Croydon Council's precarious financial situation. We have set it aside as contingency for mowing meadows, to protect the habitat for kestrels feeding.
- John Hughes' gift is also ringfenced.

Potential mosaic:

- We also have money set aside to support a beautiful mosaic for the Park. Local artist Corin Ashleigh Brown has designed a mosaic for the Elmers End platform and is about to apply to the Arts Council for a grant.
- We hope having the mosaic will draw families further into the Park.
- Corin said how helpful the presentation had been, understanding how important it was to protect the Park, and not least for mental health benefits.
- Corin offered to show the design to anyone present who'd like to see it.

4. Election of Officers

- Sue Takwani thanked all the committee for their work over the year. She said that all had agreed to stand again.
- Four officers re-elected:
 - Chair – Sue Takwani (proposed by Chris Peskett; seconded by Chris Claridge)
 - Vicechair – Chris Claridge (proposed by Sue Takwani; seconded by Chris Peskett)
 - Treasurer – Chris Peskett (proposed by Chris Claridge; seconded by Howard Dingley)
 - Secretary – Leonie Mason (proposed by Chris Peskett; seconded by Karen Hughes).
- 3 additional committee members – Sundeep; Jonathan (website); Howard Dingley.
- Sue thanked Ian.
 - He is the best warden.
 - We all love the Park, but he does a brilliant job and makes our volunteering so much better.
 - He's an expert but also makes our time enjoyable, even when we do jobs we hate – we understand why they matter.
 - He was so invested in the Park, even before he was warden, and led us unpaid for a long time. We couldn't do this without him!

5. AOB

Sue thanked everyone for coming. She encouraged everyone to have more cake, and to see Corin's design, and opened the floor to questions.

- Howard passed on information about buying nest boxes for £30 from a regular Park walker, Phil. Howard has contact details.

Questions:

- What happens if the Lake does get very empty. Is there anything we can do?
 - Ian said there wasn't much we could do, as it is spring-fed.
 - He said beavers could help, as they would slow the water-flow through the site.
 - He reiterated that last year was very dry.
 - Desilting is possible but it's very expensive, and it's disruptive, so you could only do a section.
 - Desilting streams or the pipe does help.
 - The low water levels did attract a few different species – such as a green sandpiper. Some level of seasonal variation is quite good.
 - Beavers have helped with water level fluctuation at Paradise Fields.
 - But a family of beavers can only do so much.
 - Sanderstead Ponds was very dry – it was filled with tap water and everything in the water was killed, so care is needed.
- Who had put fish in the lake?
 - The Council put some in, but the carp have been put in illegally by fisherman.
 - Ian hasn't got formal records of past species.
 - Terrapins are also in the lake but at the moment, they cannot reproduce at the moment because it isn't warm enough.
- Are there plans to clear the island?

- Yes. Ian will probably hire contractors and will aim to clear a quarter of the island a year and establish a rotation. It's one of the things the Friends will pay for.
- From Platform 3, there are overhanging branches - can they be cut back, as they block the view?
 - Ian said that this is on his list, and he hopes to do this in March/April. 3 volunteer workdays were cancelled at the end of last, so there is a bit of a backlog.

Sue thanked everyone for coming, and the meeting was closed at 12.26pm