

Minutes of the AGM of Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park, held in RBC Council Chamber on September 9th 2024

Introduction

The aims of the meeting were explained: to introduce the committee; to recount the successes and improvements in the events and activities in the park, and to take a look at and answer questions in reference to the Management Plan.

Firstly, introductions were made:

Sue Runciman, Acting Chair, following the sudden death of Kathryn Stuart in November last year;

Lynne Lambert, historical member, responsible for communications;

Stella Claridge, Financial Secretary.

Guests who had been specifically invited were Heather Lewis, Rushmoor's Ecology Officer, and Steve Bailey, who leads the work parties in the park, holding the contract for it and working with the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership. Other councillors who were invited were not present.

Other persons present were as follows –

Peter Lambert, Kathy and Les Murrell, Carole Bailey, June Burford, Carol Morgan and Angela Dean:

12 people altogether.

SR explained that changes were made to the constitution last year to the effect that terms of office would last three years. However, due to the need to re-elect a chair, it would be necessary to re-establish those terms now by electing the officers.

LL nominated SR as Chair; SC nominated LL as continuing in her role; SR nominated SC as Finance Officer. These roles were all seconded and agreed upon.

A change to the agenda to accommodate childcare arrangements meant that the first item became the Management Plan.

Management Plan 2023 - 2028

Heather Lewis firstly wished to thank Steve Bailey for his commitment to the park, for the quality of his work and for his vision in the planning of it; for his friendliness and competence. She explained that RBC outsources a good deal of estates work to SB and BVCP, RBC having few resources of their own.

HL further explained that the Management Plan was brought together with the input of several agencies, and that there was a consultation with the Friends' Group. She thanked the group for working with RBC. She explained that she does not work with the estates team, that her role is primarily to do with planning, and that the part of her role that involves QEP is a bolt-on. She can answer questions about the Management Plan – its rationale, etc and the work regarding the pond, but not anything to do with the budget, which should be addressed to Andy Ford, the Park Manager. She said she would talk about the pond first, as there were some questions that were asked immediately, as follows:

June Burford asked who has the contract for the pond, and SR asked whether or not the pond was going to be diminished in size, and if so, why. Residents near to the park are concerned that their gardens will be flooded, as has happened in the past. This week has seen a good deal of rainfall – last Wednesday the pond was empty – by Saturday it was full.

Heather explained:

£7,500 of the Esso funding has been ring-fenced for the pond, and there is no capacity to do additional work to what has been decided. Not only does RBC have to cut its cloth according to this budget, but they also have to demonstrate to Esso that this money is being spent fully on the pond. The pond has been an issue for a number of years, and it does what woodland ponds do – they become wet, and they dry out. The trees around it take the water out of it, and leaf litter also reduces the water in the pond. The plan is to turn it back into something that holds water, by reducing the shading and leaf litter, and to encourage plants to grow on the banks for better ecology. They will therefore be opening it out by the removal of 10 semi-mature trees, many of which are leaning over the pond. These trees are primarily willows. The more mature trees on the south bank are staying where they are, and there will be no work carried out around their roots.

Furthermore, they will be deepening the pond again. It's an artificial pond. There is some piled silt on the eastern bank, from previous silt removal, which has become covered in holly. The ground stays wet mainly because it has been dug. The central section will become three foot deep (at present it is only inches deep), over a small area. Then the silt will be dragged back so that the sides are more graded. A graded shallow bank of a gradient of 1 in 10 will provide a number of different habitats. They will not be massively diverse, but better than at present. A small area of the pond next to the 'island' on the eastern side will be filled with silt, thus reducing the appearance of the size of the pond, the intention nevertheless being to increase its water capacity.

LL had asked whether this could be avoided, and the silt spread instead across the park, expressing a willingness to do so as part of the work party work. HL responded that this represents a lot of nutrient-rich silt. RBC do not wish to spread this silt across the park as it will mean the spread of a good deal of unwanted plants – for example, nettles. Another solution would be silt disposal – but this would be costly, and would cut significantly into the £7,500 allotted to this task. The pond will therefore appear smaller, as they will be sacrificing a small area in order to maximise its potential capacity, and to keep potential contamination in one place (it may be that pollutants have made their way into the silt).

HL continued to describe the work, explaining that much of the budget is for engineering – two people with a digger over two days – which is expensive. RBC has chosen a known contractor, so that there is no need to get extra quotes, which is helpful. The removal of the trees will take place in the middle of September. HL believes that the trees will be removed from the site, which will make it easier for the machinery to move onto the site and then around the pond. The work is expected to be completed by October-time, and the pond will need to be kick-started with a bit of planting following this. The silt will be removed by professionals, and it will look brutal to start with: muddy, etc. (Steve mentioned that they will need to take into consideration availability of contractors, and what works best). There will be plug-planting, to put the first plants in.

If the pond is large and in an open setting, it is best not to plant, but if it is in a public setting with a good deal of footfall, planting limits the amount of footfall. Plants can be put in in the spring by the work parties.

SR asked whether or not some maths could be done to determine whether or not the proposed work would actually increase the capacity of the pond, bearing in mind residents' concerns about flooding. HL said that they did not have a drainage engineer, and without one it is a difficult thing to calculate; SB concurred with this. A hydrogeological survey would be expensive, and there is not enough money. HL explained that she is not fully aware of the drainage in the pond. The purpose of the work is to enhance its ability to retain water, and she would be surprised, she added, if it was hitting the groundwater aquifer.

Steve Bailey added that he does not think the pond would flood, once the work is done, as its capacity should be increased. The moved silt will dry. Heather added that they will not stop the silt removal once the eastern side of the pond has been filled, but will instead add it to the existing bund on which the holly has grown. There will be no waste removal costs.

Lynne Lambert observed that three feet is not very deep, and that her own pond fills in every autumn.

Heather responded that three feet is deeper than what we have at the moment, and that if we had more money, it would be good to do a study, but that in the meantime the removal of the silt to a depth that will hold water will be a good start. LL said if there is a risk of contaminants as Heather mentioned earlier, then the risk would remain wherever the silt was put.

Heather said that the complete removal of the silt for the site would require a waste disposal license, and would take much longer.

Steve Bailey mentioned the example of Brickfields, which had a similar issue, which has been dealt with in the same way, and which has sprung back to life. However, it is four times the size of our pond, and it was pointed out that we do not want even less of a pond. SB and HL reassured members that the intention is to increase capacity, not to reduce it, and that they will take silt out onto the existing bund. The eastern edge will be sacrificed, but this small part of the pond will act as a facilitator, to enable this work to be done easily and in a cost-effective, efficient way.

June Burford queried the use of a known contractor without considering others in a best-practice way. HL said that the chosen contractor is known to them as a good worker and is RBC's preferred contractor, adding that they are limited by their procurement list, which he is on. She added that she doesn't have her own budget and therefore cannot answer specific budgetary questions. However, she went on to explain that in the Procurement Policy there are a specific number of contractors in the pool for each kind of job that varies according to expense. The smaller the job (and this is considered a small job) the lower the number of contractors in the pool.

LL asked if the pond work would be done by the same contractor who had pollarded the willow (which resulted in the death of the tree), and HL did not know. It was thought that Katie Herrington might know, and probably Kevin, of trees@rushmoor.gov.uk.

On a positive note, Les Murrell wished to add that he thought the proposed work was brilliant, adding that it will be great to see some varied wildlife around the pond once it has been re-established. There may be amphibians etc. QEP is small and urban, and at the moment has a diversity of habitats but no freshwater diversity.

SR mentioned that the Management Plan is a useful tool, fit for purpose and easy to understand, but that the preamble giving context has become out of date. HL mentioned that it would be due for a review closer to 2028, adding that there will probably be a review in 2025.

Steve Bailey shared the findings of the committee, led by him, on Saturday afternoon, when a list of priorities had been created for work in the park. He reassured members that the two rhododendron tunnels would be kept, and we would be tidying up the North-East corner of the park. He added that we have been disappointed with the state the park was left in by the contractor last year, and it was agreed that we need a better quality of job.

SB added that he apologises for the delay in putting in the additional benches, which have awkward fixings that make it hard to install them firmly. A solution to this is being sought, and he expects this work to be completed over the winter.

Understorey planting will be a priority: bulbs have been planted in previous years and will be planted this year too. Three or four areas have been identified for this.

Heather added that there is some money from Esso for rhododendron clearance and LL asked if some of that money had been used for this clearance already – HL directed her to Andy Ford. This will be discussed at a meeting that is being held on Wednesday, as will the interpretation boards, which have not been forgotten. She mentioned having sent out some wording for these previously (this wording has been looked at, updated and agreed by the Friends Group). RBC has not yet contracted to have them made, but they do have a budget and a cost, and following the pond work, this will be done.

Heather Lewis was thanked for her detailed reporting, and left the meeting.

FQEP Annual Report

SR went through the headlines of the annual report, the whole of which can be found on the website. Points to note were as follows:

Increased membership (up to 144 from 137, and FB followers up to 839; we believe this increase happened after the Cove Brook Fun Day, which was an event we thoroughly enjoyed and wish to take part in again, it was so positive).

The monthly amble is now followed by a social gathering at the Thatched Cottage public house, and some members have formed a team for the Quiz Night there, which we attend once a month; some members attend Fleet Film together also.

The Cove Brook Fun Day was a real highlight of the year and we look forward to attending again (although it is thought that this happens bi-annually rather than annually).

We are very pleased with the work on the Farnborough Road car park, which is now smooth and divided into clear bays.

Financial Report: Stella Claridge

Stella explained that the report runs up to May 31st as we expected to hold our AGM rather earlier in the year, and in future will do so.

Income was £1,186.42. Expenditure was £698.15. The balance as of 31st May was £1,352.15. The main income has come from a donation by Blackwater Valley Friends of the Earth of £300; a grant from HCC to go towards a new shed of £512, donations from events and from the Rushmoor Lottery. Our main expenses have been bulbs, yew hedge plants, nesting boxes, a table and a banner for events.

SB asked if anything further had happened since May, and SC reported that the insurance cover had been paid, and reimbursed – so no – nothing of note.

Angela Dean voiced concerns over the security of the shed, and LL assured her that there will be a cage, to protect it from incursion. Angela added that there is space in her garden, which backs onto the park, should we wish to use that – and was heartily thanked for this offer by all members.

Les Murrell told the group that a Climate Community group has been formed from a variety of local green groups and that we should expect an invitation to a meeting in early October. He added that he and his wife Kathy (also present at the meeting) had attended the first meeting and were amazed by how many green groups there are in the area. There is a new Climate Change Officer, whose name is Sophie, who is developing a Climate Change Action Plan for the area. There was a good deal of positivity at the meeting.

Sue Runciman closed the formal part of the meeting by thanking everyone involved in the work of the park, and in particular Steve Bailey whose commitment and leading of the work parties is exemplary.

Following this part of the meeting there was a presentation by Lynne Lambert:

For the Love of Honey Bees, with a bee observatory and honey-tasting.

This was a fascinating presentation at which everyone learned something, and enjoyed tasting the different types of honey at the end – heather honey and wildflower honey. Our grateful thanks are due to Lynne and Peter Lambert who went to great trouble to bring the bees, to write the presentation, and to present it to us in such a way that everyone left with a new view of bees and their community.

The Date of the Next Meeting is to be confirmed, but will be in June.

Sue Runciman,

Chair

FQEP, September 13th 2024