

BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST: MINUTES OF AGM 2014
28 September 2014, 2:30 pm, Bearsted and Thurnham Bowls Club

Present: 56 Members and Friends, including Richard Ashness (Chairman); Dena Ashness (Trustee); Sharon Bayne (Trustee); Chris Street; David Ward; Jeff Winn; Peter Schmoeger; John Wale (Deputy Chairman - who took notes).

Apologies had been received via email or verbally from Bernard Head (Treasurer) and 10 Friends of the Trust (list available).

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the AGM, and confirmed that only Friends of BWT were entitled to be present. He thanked the Bowls Club for the use of their clubhouse and Kevin Street for operating the cash bar.

In opening his review of the past year, Richard paid tribute to Dave Johnson who had died in October 2013 and was much missed. As Maintenance and Projects Manager for 6 years, Dave had shown many admirable qualities, leading the team of maintenance volunteers through an exciting period when circular paths, the Lilk Bridge and the Tractor Barn had all been built, and the basis for the current maintenance regime had been laid.

BWT were also delighted to welcome back Sharon Bayne, who had agreed to become a trustee and serve on the Management Committee.

Bernard Head, BWT's Treasurer for the past 10 years, will, for health reasons, be standing down from this role during the coming year 2014/15. Bernard wishes to remain actively involved in BWT's work as far as possible, and will be helped by the Chairman and others.

Works during the past year included the planting of Riders' Wood (December 2013) the placing of the commemorative bench for Pauline Moore, and the hugely enjoyable 10-year Celebration event in August 2014.

BWT were again placed in the highest award category for Green Flag, and the judge was very complimentary about the site and the volunteers who contribute in so many ways to maintain previous standards.

The Chairman concluded by thanking Judy and Michael Buckley, who maintain BWT's website, and the volunteers who distribute leaflets and newsletters, and also litter pickers who keep the site in such a tidy condition.

Treasurer's Report The Chairman presented Bernard Head's report on the year's accounts to 30 June 2014. These had been examined and approved by the auditor and by BWT's Management Committee. During the year, income from various sources including subscriptions, tree/bench sponsorship and donations exceeded expenditure by £11,313. Reserves continued to be in a healthy state; however there could be a time when these resources were needed to help maintain the site should volunteer numbers become reduced. The Chairman thanked Bernard for his very careful management of BWT's finances. There were no questions on details within the Financial Report, but (under AOB) Mr D How asked if in future the auditor's signature could be added to the approved accounts.

Maintenance Report Jeff Winn summarised work during the past year:

- Grass Cutting and general maintenance had been carried out in accordance with the 3-year plan
- Preparation for and community planting of Riders' Wood in the northern part of Moore Meadow
- Cutting of the now-flourishing hedge planted in 2011 along the southern boundary of Moore Meadow.
- Work to restore upright trees which had suffered during gales and the exceptionally wet winter and spring.
- Hedge cutting on BWT land and the Church Landway (for Bearsted PC); also regular mowing of the football pitch for two junior football clubs.
- Installation of a memorial bench in the glade above the Lilk Valley, in memory of Dave Johnson.

- Installation of the memorial bench for Pauline Moore on the mound opposite the former riding ring in Moore Meadow
- Renovation of BWT notice boards at the Sutton Street entrance, to be followed by similar work on others.
- Path replenishment works by Marriott Tudor Park staff as part of their team “awaydays”
- Future works will include: a new kissing gate enabling access from Roundwell to Moore Meadow, together with a new “welcome” board; renovated “welcome” boards at the entrance from Ashford Rd and near Holy Cross Church (Willson Avenue).
- There are currently 22 maintenance volunteers, including 3 new members of the team. Jeff thanked everyone for the work they do in such a willing and positive way.

Trees and Benches: David Ward reported that during the past year 19 trees and 5 benches had been sponsored, generating a combined income of £6,685; as a result, BWT welcomed 12 new Life Members.

- Between November 2013 and February 2014 we planted approx 700 whips in the community planting of Riders’ Wood.
- Currently we still have a number of trees available for sponsorship, but the spaces available are rapidly diminishing due to the continuing popularity of this form of remembrance.
- Bench sponsorship has been very popular this year, and within reason we make benches according to demand; where possible we invite the sponsors to state their preferred location.
- After careful thought, has been decided that we will not be sponsoring trees in Moore Meadow, since most members stated a preference to leave the area as natural as possible. However it was felt that a small distribution of benches if sponsored could be placed along the circular walk. This would give some respite to those walkers unable to complete the circuit without a rest.
- In September large stone with a memorial engraving to Pauline Moore was placed by her favourite Oak tree. David said that Gillian Barlow wished to express her thanks to Gallaghers for donating this stone.
- The stone compliments the engraved bench placed on the high ground overlooking the Oak and which has proved so popular with walkers: sometimes it seems you have to queue up to sit on it.!
- Lastly a splendid sycamore bench has been located on the ground adjacent to the path to the bridge in a memorial area dedicated to our very much missed colleague David Johnson.

Membership: Chris Street’s report was presented by David Ward. Currently there were 1187 Family Memberships including 437 Life Members. Chris wished to thank all in the Delivery Team, who distributed Newsletters and Information Leaflets.

Community Links: John Wale referred to the visit by 90 pupils from Thurnham School’s Year 2 in March; later in the year the school had received a Gold award from the Geographical Association including information gained from the visit. Roseacre Junior School had also spent a morning at BWT, gaining information for school projects. Bearsted Beavers have carried out litter-picking on two occasions.

Environmental Management Plan: Sharon Bayne confirmed she would be preparing the new 3-Year Plan; this would again focus on a balance between amenity and nature/wildlife. Moore Meadow would be subject to a light management approach in order to preserve existing features; there was insufficient grass to justify a hay-cut, but we would be completing planting of native trees along the boundary of the Ashford Rd in late 2014.

Despite new arrangements made with RAMSAK, the contracted Hay-Cut for designated areas was carried out very late and this meant much of the hay had been gathered and stockpiled by volunteers, a huge additional task. The Management Committee were now looking at other options for future years.

Management Committee: The current Management Committee comprised six plus two additional members. With no vacancies and no additional nominations, members of the present Committee were re-elected.

Access for All: The Chairman and Sharon Bayne introduced this item, giving the background to the survey carried out among BWT's membership:

Purpose of and response to the survey

- As a result of a growing number of complaints that the Trust was not providing adequately for members who wish to walk undisturbed by dogs, the Management Committee had conducted a survey within its membership to assess the scale of the problem and explore possible solutions. Questionnaires had been sent to all BWT "Friends"
- There were over 350 responses...which makes this a very statistically significant survey. 37% of respondents were dog walkers, 63% were not. Most people welcomed the decision to conduct the survey:

Scale and nature of the problem

- Some replies doubted the existence of a problem, but 50% of respondents reported a negative experience of one sort or another. It would appear that, since BWT is one of the few places in which dogs can safely run free, it has become dominated by loose dogs and many people visit the Trust on fewer occasions or not at all as a result. However responses also showed that this was not simply a "dog walker v non dog walker" issue. The Chairman added that the Trust was taking action to help those who no longer wanted to visit BWT.

Level of support for a 'dogs on leads' area

- 60% of all respondents - including 33% of dog walkers - favoured the introduction of a 'dogs on leads' area. 23% were opposed to the idea and the remainder unsure, ie three times more people want this policy than object to it. Reasons suggested as to why it was not a good idea included practical problems such as enforcement and boundary management, but mainly related to the freedom of dog walkers to allow their dogs to run off the lead.

Conclusions from Management Committee

- The survey has revealed that there is a major problem and a very strong mandate for a 'dogs on leads' area in which visitors can be confident they will not have bad experiences with dogs. One suggestion the Management Committee members were considering was to request everyone to keep dogs on leads in all areas other than Moore Meadow, whilst acknowledging that, to succeed, the policy would require the understanding and support of responsible dog owners.
- The Chairman recognised that this was a difficult and sensitive issue, and invited comments from the members present. All views would be recorded and given further consideration by the management Committee. The full response to these suggestions will be published in our next newsletter and on our website, along with detail of the policy to be adopted. In the meantime, the Chairman said BWT would welcome volunteers to make up an informal dog walkers group to help us with solving the problem identified by the survey.

Discussion of Access for All: Points made in general discussion at AGM 28 September 2014

Following the presentation the following comments were addressed to the Chairman and Management Committee by members of the audience:

1. Shirley Ballard: did not think dog walkers should be restricted; children on bikes have been seen cycling into walkers.
2. Liz Vickers: the route into Church Meadow is via Lilk Bridge
3. Al Sopata: if Moore Meadow is chosen as the dogs-off- leads area, is it not the most dangerous, being close to Ashford Rd and Roundwell?
4. Jacky Preston: if dogs cannot be controlled by voice they should be on a lead.
5. Ian Bruce-Russell: If dogs were off lead in Moore Meadow, would this include Barn Meadow too?
6. Frank Jagger: If policed from the Lilk Stream Bridge, which part of the site should be dog-free? Is this an administrative decision? (*Chairman replied "Yes, based on the majority of responses"*)
7. Michael Buckley: It was clear from the survey that something needs to be done, but it is impossible to police; Moore Meadow is the only area which meets criteria [for safe and practical management].
8. Sandra Knatchbull: Dog walkers are on BWT land 24/7, trying to police others; imposition of a "dogs on leads" rule may lead to a drop in membership. Pauline Moore (a dog lover) would not have liked this suggestion.
9. Al Sopata: should we not approach those who cannot control their dogs?
10. Liz Vickers: Should the Children's Play Area be the [designated] zone for dogs on leads?
11. (no name): On 28 June 2003 Dog Walkers' Actions "saved" land for BWT. Mrs Dena Ashness refuted this point on the basis of fact; she had approached Bearsted PC and subsequently purchased the land from the Developer.
12. (no name) :The increase in dog-walking users (largely non-Members of BWT) since 2003 has created the problem
13. Ann Manning: should we look at non-Member issues? (ie use by non-Members who walk dogs?)
14. Geoff Rands: If Moore Meadow is used as the designated area for "dogs-off-leads" then additional parking will be needed in Moore Meadow since, for some, it will be too far to walk.
15. Ann France: agreed with above (G Rands); also, the fence in Moore Meadow will need constant repair/maintenance. (Dogs chase rabbits!)
16. Brian Prior: where is the nearest area where dogs can be exercised "off-lead? – (Answer from audience was Mote Park and Vinters Valley Park)
17. John Wood: the suggestion is unenforceable and therefore a "bad rule"; he cited Harvey Field as an example –ie supposedly dog-free but dog-training classes are held there.
18. Jacky Preston: the suggestion of having just Moore Meadow as the designated "dogs-off-lead" area would restrict those walkers/visitors who prefer a wider area:could it extend to the Lilk Bridge?
19. Jo Cottee : did not like the way the survey results were presented; there were no positive comments and no views expressed from "the other side". (Chairman: it is clear that owners love to walk their dogs, but now it appears exclusively so; if we examine survey comments, many are positive, but also selfish in that they do not see the views or experiences of others.)
20. Shirley Ballard: Should we ask irresponsible dog owners to behave more appropriately?
21. Frank Jagger: Moore Meadow is not convenient, since it is over the other side of BWT.
22. (Speaker on back row): The survey has been democratically carried out and the people have spoken.
23. Mrs Sue Sopata: historically, the land has always been used for dog-walking.
24. Chas Ashley: (BWT Volunteer) the area suggested [for dogs off leads] is the correct one.
25. J Wale [personal views as Volunteer, "friend of BWT" former dog-owner and grandparent] very difficult issue, but survey results left BWT Management Committee

with no choice, so we cannot avoid the issue any longer; there is no easy or perfect solution Rules would be impossible to police, but will have to try to introduce voluntary code.

26. Ann France: could a “time of day” rule be introduced for dog-walkers to keep animals on leads? [Sharon Bayne responded that any “rules” had to be as simple as possible.
 27. Other comments: Pauline Moore would have wanted dog-lovers to enjoy Moore Meadow, but “it is a long way to go...”
 28. What are cost implications of secure fencing for Ashford Rd boundary? [Chairman replied that he was unsure whether BWT should spend its funds on security of dogs allowed to run free on the site.]
 29. Mrs S Fernandez: The area around Church Landway/Church Meadow is a safe site-BWT would be asking owners to move to a less safe/secure area [if Moore Meadow.]
 30. Mr D How commented it was not BWT’s responsibility to carry out fencing (for dogs): if they cannot be controlled they should not be off the lead.
 31. Adrian Bouwens (Friend and Volunteer): we have “done the subject to death”; now need to consider at BWT MC and reach a decision.
- **Chairman’s summing-up:**
 - **There have been some good suggestions, which the Management Committee will take away, and also look at points of detail.**
 - **BWT MC will produce a detailed “survey results” document**
 - **BWT MC will announce the outcome together with decisions on the way forward**
 - **Chairman appealed to those dog-walkers present to form a representative group to facilitate an interface with BWT (agreed)**

Any Other Business:

- Adrian Bouewens asked if the Management Committee could develop a strategy for wider site use, eg Log-piles for children to climb, or opening up the Old Wood Area?
- The area of the Public Right of Way in Moore Meadow is waterlogged and boggy, especially in wet weather; could volunteers look at this, please? This was agreed.

Closing Remarks: The Chairman thanked everyone for coming and for their continuing support. The meeting ended with a round of applause from the audience.