

BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST: MINUTES OF AGM 2016
2 October 2016 2:30 pm, Bearsted and Thurnham Bowls Club

Present: 63 Members and Friends, (see attendance sheet) including Richard Ashness (Chairman); Dena Ashness (Trustee); Sharon Bayne (Trustee); Chris Street; David Ward; Jeff Winn; Peter Schmoeger; John Wale (Deputy Chairman and Secretary).

Apologies: Apologies were received from 27 Friends as per the attached list.

Chairman's Remarks: The Chairman welcomed members to the AGM and thanked everyone who worked for, and supported BWT in various ways, giving time freely in the cause of sustaining and enhancing BWT. There were 25 regular Volunteers, led by Jeff Winn, David Ward, and Peter Schmoeger. The Trees and Benches initiative was well-promoted and sensitively managed by David, and generated regular income. Operational costs were kept low, with Peter providing excellent maintenance skills in addition to the good maintenance planning by Jeff. We have good communications via the website managed and updated regularly by Judy Buckley, who is also Editor of the Newsletter. The Trust's income had been maintained by the tireless work of Chris Street, membership secretary' (in addition to tree & bench sponsorships) and general running had been expertly coordinated by John Wale.

The one "black spot" was the failure of Access for All: it was a matter of sadness that the views and attitude of some displayed disrespect towards the feelings of others.

Accounts for Year to 30 June 2016. Richard Ashness, Acting Treasurer, presented the audited Accounts for the year to 30 June 2016, a signed copy of which was available to all present. He reported an in-year surplus of £14,714.55. Total income was at a similar level to previous years, with a slight decline in membership donations. However this was offset by a rise in other areas, including donations "in memory". Operating costs were kept to a minimum through "in-house" servicing and replacement of parts. The only capital expenditure was for the very well received woodland sculptures dedicated to the memory of our former treasurer Bernard Head. Reserves were in a healthy position.

Maintenance

Jeff Winn thanked all 25 volunteers who work up to 3 mornings each week.

Jeff reported that this had been a year of very different weather conditions, being very wet in early months, and then from July onwards we had seen hardly any rain. This necessitated the regular use of our water bowser to keep as many of the large number of newly planted trees alive. At the same time we have continued our regular routine of grass cutting and general maintenance within the 3 year plan, and also the routine servicing of our equipment.

The football pitch is cut on a regular basis on behalf of Roseacre Raiders Football Club, who pay us to cover our fuel costs.

An additional step has been placed on the steps towards the Lilk Valley from the Old Avenue, since one was particularly high.

A water drainage channel was installed at the bottom of Willson Avenue to prevent erosion. All such channels are cleared out at regular intervals.

An additional drainage pipe was installed on a second area on the public footpath across Moore Meadow, and both of these have been seeded to encourage the grass to grow.

We have had another relocation of slow worms, this time from a development in Essex; BWT received a further donation of £300 in recognition.

The staff from the Tudor Park Hotel made one of their regular visits in June, and carried out

some tree planting near the fallen oak in Moore Meadow: we are expecting them again later this year to continue this.

The other regular visit we have is from 3 classes of year 2 pupils from Thurnham Infants School, who are shown around the site and we tell them about the origins of BWT and its wildlife.

This year's Hay Cut, for which we paid, was carried out by a local farmer, who cut and baled the three areas in front of Gore Cottage. This provided in excess of 400 bales, which were collected again by the Buttercups Goat Sanctuary.

Steve Andrews, the chain saw artist who created the owls and other animals on the fallen oak returned to carve the Green Man on the north side of the ash tree stump in Moore Meadow. He has also been in the last few days to do some preservative work on the original owl carvings.

Finally, we have again been awarded the Green Flag for 2016/17, with a mark in the highest category.

Trees and Benches: David Ward reported that from September 2015 until August 2016 we have arranged sponsorship of 20 trees and 6 benches, providing an income of £6800. Included in these sponsorships are 13 new Life Members. Between November 2015 and February 2016 we planted approx 400 whips to form what will eventually be a wooded area to the south of Moore meadow. 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, and where possible we allow the sponsors to state their preferred location. During the coming Autumn and Winter we hope to plant more trees in Moore meadow, and additional trees both in the area opposite the tennis courts and adjacent to the Roller Bench Wood. Members may have noticed BWT has changed the design of the tree plaques to an oval shape and where possible they will now be attached to the tree. This enables better access for grass cutting and generally looks tidier. As some of the plaques are getting on for 10 years old, they are beginning to look a little shabby, so if anyone is interested in replacing their plaques for the new shape, they can do so at a cost of £10.

Membership: Chris Street's report indicated there were now 1180 Family Memberships including 482 Life Memberships, 11 of which were converted during the year. There are 68 subscription renewals outstanding. Chris thanked all in the Delivery Team, who distribute Newsletters and Information Leaflets, saving BWT hundreds of pounds each year.

Outreach and Community Links: John Wale referred to the visit by 90 pupils from Thurnham School's Year 2 in September; involving a guided tour hosted by John, Jeff and Derek Hawkins; the children had all written appreciative letters, excerpts from which had been reproduced on the website and some in the BWT Newsletter.

A very informative Wildlife Walk in May had been led by Simon Ginnaw of the Maidstone Group of RSPB.

Sharon and John had been invited to speak at the AGM of Bredhurst Woodland Action Group. There were many points of common interest.

The Green Flag judge visited BWT on 15 June; she was very impressed by the condition of the site and the care taken by volunteers to make the site attractive to members and visitors. The assessment of 85%plus was a reflection of the hard work put in by everyone.

Environmental Management Plan: Sharon Bayne confirmed the 3-Year Plan was still in operation, with planting and maintenance following the overall environmental and ecological strategies which strikes a balance between amenity value and nature/wildlife. Feedback from users and external visitors has been positive.

Management Committee: The current Management Committee comprised six plus one additional member. All were willing to continue and were re-appointed.

Access for All: The Deputy Chairman reported that despite the continuing development of BWT and the regular statements of positive support, the matter of the Dogs-on Leads Policy over 40% of the 26 acres introduced in 2015 was still a problem which sees no sign of resolution. The present policy has largely been ignored by many dog walkers, and knowing that it had no powers of enforcement, BWT sought advice from Maidstone BC. Following a meeting with MBC Officers in March 2016 BWT introduced a new “off-leads” corridor from the Holy Cross gate to the entrance to Lilk Valley. Additional signs were also placed, again at MBC’s suggestion, to make the designated areas clearer. By early May 2016, 15 of these signs were vandalised or removed. Some of the colour-coded maps were also defaced or removed. The local PCSO was shown the damage, and he stated this was a clear act of criminal damage. Further replacement signs were removed during the summer – a further act of theft. After further discussion with Maidstone BC, BWT is considering the possibility of a Public Space Protection Order to make enforcement possible.

Dena Ashness, a Founder Trustee, gave a detailed personal statement setting out the rationale for the present code; this was followed by extensive and wide ranging comments and questions which are set out in Appendix 1 below. It was clear that this issue is a cause of sadness and concern to everyone present.

Questions and discussion were concluded at 4.00 pm. Ann Manning proposed a vote of thanks to the Committee, and this was endorsed unanimously.

Appendix 1 to AGM 2 October 2016

Item 4. Access for All:

Statement from Dena Ashness, Trustee.

As you have heard Bearsted Woodland Trust continues to be very successful in many areas, winning awards and providing enjoyment for lots of people in the community,

But sadly there is a blot on the landscape, a black cloud which is hanging over it and that is the subject of Access for All.

As a Trustee, I take my responsibilities very seriously and believe it is important for me to say something here today.

The history has been well documented and is available on the website and the Deputy Chairman has updated you this afternoon.

Given the need to respond to the Dogs on Leads Survey and the fact that Dogs On Leads Policies work in other places - such as those owned by the National Trust, for example which, like BWT is private land - I could see no reason why one should not work here.

However, from day one the Policy was ignored and it has now escalated to a stage where signs are being removed and vandalised. In addition our volunteers have been subjected to a lot of verbal abuse and even threatened with physical violence on one occasion.

Talking to friends recently, almost none of them go there - even those with dogs because they do not like the atmosphere and attitude of those people who refuse to adopt the policy. It seems that a group of dog walkers have taken matters into their own hands encouraging people to ignore the policy creating virtual anarchy.

Because that is what you get when society has rules and people ignore them.

It is very sad that this once great community project has degenerated to this stage with the Givers - volunteers who do things for the benefit of others - on one side, and the Takers - who, ignore the Policy, remove and vandalise signs, refuse to consider the needs of others and make no contribution other than their £5 subscription - on the other. And there are lots of dog walkers who are not even members including professional dog walkers sometimes with several dogs. I understand that some dogs never cause a problem but the refusal of their owners to adopt the Policy simply gives licence to those people whose dogs are a nuisance.

But the Trustees, Management Committee and volunteers remained determined to find a solution that will be acceptable to the majority of our members.

We were optimistic when a group of dog owners requested a meeting with us which took place a few weeks ago. Sadly there was not much common ground. I think the only conclusion was that we all wanted a solution. One of the reasons they said they refused to adopt the policy is that Pauline Moore's land is not secure. I would like to make it clear at this stage that BWT has no remit to provide an area for dogs to run free. Nevertheless ignoring that we asked whether, if that area could be made safe, they would agree to the Policy, they said "no", on the grounds that some of their members can't walk that far. So it

seems that, in their opinion, anyone who owns a dog is more important than everyone who doesn't.

I can't see that is right. Surely the young and old, people who are infirm or who may be recovering from an operation should come before dogs. We have already had one serious incident where an elderly gentleman required hospital treatment following a dog attack. Perhaps if a child is injured or maimed those people who don't support the policy will change their minds. As a Trustee of this charity I don't want to wait until that happens.

But serious injury aside I sometimes think that dog owners don't realise that there are a lot of people who are wary of dogs, especially large dogs running around loose.

The Trust continues to receive complaints. Only last week a couple wrote to say that they were considering not renewing their membership because they no longer visit BWT because of uncontrolled dogs.

But it is noticeable that over the last year or a number of people who own dogs and who refused to pay their subscription when the Dogs on Leads Policy was introduced (although no doubt continued to use the land) have renewed their memberships.

I think the reason for that is so that they can come here today and put their case. I hope they have come with ideas of how to solve this issue which is that Bearsted Woodland Trust is an area for everyone to enjoy and that, there should be a reasonable area where people can walk without the fear of being approached by dogs.

Comments and Questions

David Barker: as a dog owner he appreciated the concerns of some. Having lived in the village for 6 years, after moving here from Dorset, he has not encountered dissent from BWT Volunteers, and commends them for the work they do. He does not condone violence or damage. To have a warden patrol or CCTV would not be good use of BWT resources. He walks the site twice daily and has never had an issue with volunteers. He felt we need reconciliation in order to reach a satisfactory solution.

Jackie Preston: suggested a vegetable plot for children, in order to encourage ownership of the site. Jackie, on behalf of a non-member, also referred to Ragwort in Moore Meadow: Sharon Bayne replied that we do control this as part of the annual hay cut.

Neil Henderson, resident of 11 years and frequent dog walker: felt that escalation was the problem. Neil walks at 06.00 to 07.00 and would put his dog on a lead in given circumstances when it was safer to do so. He asked the time of day surrounding complaints. Neil added that he felt there was a dictatorial approach from those who do not own dogs, and felt it was important that children learned how to behave when around dogs. The present rule was inappropriate. We are all on the same side and need to find the "middle ground".

Nicole Harrington: the two sides are entrenched, and the signage suggests BWT has lost focus. It is more important to reprimand owners of badly behaved dogs, not everyone.

Sue Broadbent: as a resident of the village for 42 years Sue made the case for those with disabilities. BWT is a wonderful place to get out and walk, with many benches to aid resting. She would not walk her dogs if they were not under control, and enjoys meeting and talking to other walkers.

Carole Wale: a dog owner in the village for many years. Visited BWT with grandchildren earlier this year; on both occasions the children had been molested by dogs not properly controlled. One 5 year old and one 8 year old had been very frightened by the experience.

Lesley Harding, a volunteer, lives in Downswood, uses walking poles and cannot risk falling over: not a dog lover, does not want dogs in her space, and had been abused by an aggressive dog owner when she questioned why the dog was off-lead. She felt if a prosecution was brought others would fall into line.

Jane Shottliffe: we are fortunate to have BWT. She is a dog owner who walks with others who keep dogs on lead; it is very annoying to see others who flout the rule - why? Is it the geography of the site? What is wrong with the 40% rule?

Frank Jagger, owner of Alfie: BWT was formerly used for a variety of purposes, and he was reluctant to give up the available space. The land is flat, has good parking and the area is free from risk of dogs running on to roads; it is the safest area for dog owners. In recent years three dogs had been killed on the Ashford Rd after running out from Moore Meadow; none from the nearer 40% area. Frank concluded the site was "back to front".

Barbara Long: was impressed with the tone of today's discussion. She felt the Trustees had bent over backwards to accommodate everyone, but from the 2014 survey there was a clear majority in favour of a policy of control. This was democracy, and within this process the argument will never be agreed by all.

Andrew Knatchbull: whilst the debate is civilised, behaviours on site are not! How do we get the message over to the wider community and educate everyone? Parking on highway verges on Ashford Rd near the Gore Cottage access has become a safety issue.

Dena Ashness: BWT's own success brings visitors who travel from further afield.

Andrew Knatchbull: We all have to work with each other.

Sue Broadbent: could there be parking and more benches in Moore Meadow?

Chairman: Richard said he was pleased that discussion was focussed on seeking solutions: if we were able to build car parks and provide additional fencing, such positive solutions could take us forward together.

Lesley Harding: BWT is private land, so can we minimise the problem by keeping the site for our own members?

David Barker: there are several Public Rights of way which cross BWT. (Post Meeting Note: BWT's actions, following discussion with KCC in 2015, were entirely within the law. Equally, under the Countryside and Wildlife Acts, owners had an obligation to keep animals under close control.)

Jackie Preston: said she would object to an area being "exclusive", and wanted to keep access for all. Could BWT look at a larger parking area at the eastern end?

Frank Jagger: given the number of external visitors who were non-members, was it not more relevant to blame them? He proposed that BWT should consider

(i) opening the present 40% area for dogs off leads up to mid-day, and

(ii) adopting a voluntary dog walker's charter, with a dog warden to enforce the scheme. Frank added that he was personally prepared to finance the cost of a dog warden.

The Chairman asked dog walkers if they would agree to this, and on a show of hands all were in favour.

Derek Hawkins, a weekday maintenance volunteer, pointed out that the Bearsted PC Play Area was busy from 10.30 onwards. He did not agree with the earlier suggestion on times.

Ingrid Cunningham: pleaded for Moore Meadow to be made secure for dogs, and asked for money to be spent to achieve this. The Chairman asked dog walkers present whether they would comply if this suggestion was carried out, and the general response was "no". David Ward added that there were more than 3000 maturing hedge plants from the 2011 Community Planting around the south and east borders, and it would be very difficult to provide further fencing behind these. David felt that if dogs could not be controlled they should not be off lead.

Nicole Harrington: older dogs have difficulty in walking across to Moore Meadow to be allowed off lead. It is easier for them to exercise nearer the car park.

Peter Back: agrees with the suggestion to allow dogs off lead to 12 noon. He had previously suggested the junior football pitch, play area and maze be fenced off and within these areas dogs would have to be on leads at all times. The remainder of BWT could then be "off-leads".

Jackie Preston: many elderly people visit BWT but are scared when faced by loose dogs, and hence feel restricted.

Sue Broadbent: her own dogs were always under control; it was important to keep animals under control near toddlers.

Tim Harrington: said the situation was "not helped by the aggressive attitude of BWT and others".

Adrian Bouwens (maintenance volunteer): the 2014 survey of members pointed clearly to the policy now in place.

David Barker: was now the time for a new ballot?

The AGM ended at 4.00pm.