

BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST: MINUTES OF AGM
3 October 2021 2:30 pm, Bearsted and Thurnham Bowls Club

Attendance: 35 Members and Friends and Trustee.
Apologies received from 25 Friends and Trustees.

1/2 Chair's Welcome and Opening Remarks John Wale (Chair, BWT Management Committee)

1 Chair's Welcome

It was wonderful for everyone to be able to meet in person after last year's on-line AGM forced by Covid. The Bowls Club were thanked for the use of their clubhouse. Attendance and Apologies are given on attached lists.

2 Opening Remarks

John Wale introduced new members of the Management Committee and thanked Sharon Bayne and Judy Buckley, who had stepped down. Sharon's contribution in Environment, Ecology, and Law had been crucial in shaping BWT, and also Judy's with the Newsletter and Website, not forgetting Michael Buckley for his photography which provides a magnificent record of BWT's history and development.

John then introduced Adrian Bouwens as new Vice Chair; Martin Gray: Treasurer and Trustee; Barbara Long: new Newsletter Editor; Martin Herrema: new Web Editor and weekday volunteer; and Dave Green (co-opted on MC): weekday volunteer and deputy to Jeff Winn in Maintenance.

John emphasised the importance of BWT to the wider community during the past 18 months: open air, nature in and around, rural surroundings; peace, solace, and the opportunity to meet friends or family in the open. BWT had become a haven for many: footfall had been very high, bringing many new faces, mostly local but some from outside areas.

Although school visits had not yet resumed, BWT had hosted two Outdoor Performances by local drama group "The Chandeliers", watched in line with the current Covid guidelines.

John also thanked volunteers, returning to the challenges on site and working initially within Covid protocols, similar objectives but under changed working rules. There was much to celebrate: BWT's maturing site; new challenges, "greener" areas and ways of working, greener tools and policies in management of the site, and how we look to the future. But there are also challenges: developing and preserving ecology in face of increased visitor numbers, coping with national diseases such as Ash Dieback, naturally destructive and damaging weather events.

John emphasised that BWT is a team and community activity involving trustees, management committee and volunteers, but no-one claims to have a monopoly of wisdom. We can't do all this without the support of Friends of BWT, and their comments on site, their supportive emails and their suggestions which give cause for thought and help to keep us going.

Future Challenges were clear: BWT is maturing and so are we (the volunteers). In order to manage what we have and develop further, we need to recruit new Members, new volunteers, and especially to engage with young people, so that BWT's future can be assured.

3 Accounts for 2020/21 and Hon Treasurer's Report:

Martin Gray presented the Independently Examined Statement of Accounts (copies available at meeting and on website) for the year to June 2021 and reported an in-year surplus of £5,082 compared to last year's deficit of £(4,644). This was largely due to a reduction in expenditure without the large one-off items paid last year.

Replacement fencing was reduced but offset by fees to progress planning permission and obtaining quotes for the proposed Ashford Road Car Park with planning permission finally received in September. Martin noted we recommenced payments for tree surgery, primarily due to Ash Dieback with further costs to be incurred in the next financial year.

Overall membership fees remained steady, with a reduction in donations but offset by an increase in tree and bench sponsorship. Reserves remain in a healthy position.

These annual accounts have been examined and reviewed by our Independent Examiner, Anil Mathur, and by BWT's Management Committee.

4 Maintenance, Projects and Volunteers:

Jeff Winn began by thanking all Maintenance volunteers. There were several additions this year bringing the number to 25. The year 2020/21 had been very challenging because of the lockdowns, but when we were able to return, all were very keen to do so, and to take on board the Covid safety protocols which we put in place. The new battery powered equipment, which we purchased in 2019 after the theft from the Barn earlier that year, has all received good reports for ease of use and lack of pollution. The 2020 lockdown from March to June meant that many grass areas were left to grow, which was appreciated by a large number of visitors. We therefore decided that in 2021 we would leave more areas uncut for longer periods, in some cases mowing paths through the grass and around the picnic tables. The Church Landway hedge has been cut several times by the volunteer team taking into account the bird nesting season. The larger hedges around Barn Meadow near Gore Cottage are cut annually by a contractor with a large tractor mounted hedge cutter. We continue to service and maintain our equipment ourselves as far as possible, including this year replacing a failed bearing on one of the mowers.

5 Trees and Benches, Sponsorship and Replacement Policy:

David Ward suggested BWT suspends all further tree sponsorship for the time being. There are no mature trees worthy of sponsorship; however demand is still high and a waiting list is being kept. Trees currently being cut back or cut down will have to be replaced at some point, and this will require sponsors to be kept informed of tree surgery or replacement.

Broken and missing plaques - a continuing challenge - are gradually being replaced (54 since July 2021) and the new designs are standing up well, with little or no damage.

10 original benches, badly rotted, have been reconstructed in-house and replaced in-situ by volunteers; two special benches and wooden sculptures have been treated with preservative.

We have also checked and loosened tree support straps where required.

Finally, maintenance work on the Manning Maze (constructed in 2009) will start in the near future and continue through the autumn and winter.

6 Environment and Wildlife, including Wild Flower Areas 2020/21 and 2021/22:

Adrian Bouwens mentioned the colourful and much-admired Wildflower areas, which would be extended in 2021/22 in Moore Meadow; to the log piles and dry hedges to encourage wildlife, reduced mowing regimes in the summer. The Fitness Trail had been used by young and old. For next year, it was also planned to build a stag beetle tower and position more bird boxes, including falcon boxes if suitable locations could be found.

7 Membership Report and Newsletter Delivery Team Chris Street **Membership**

We have **1169** current family memberships, which includes **567** Life Members.

25 new members have joined BWT since this time last year; we're really pleased to see that **10** of these joined with Life Membership.

163 members now receive their newsletter by email. This helps us to save money on printing and especially postage for those members who live outside the Bearsted area.

This year we have also seen an increase in the number of people renewing their annual membership online, by either a one-off amount for the current year or have set up an annual payment to reach us on 1 July each year.

Newsletter Deliveries

Chris thanked all the newsletter delivery team who volunteer to deliver our newsletters and other information. Chris said BWT have a wonderfully reliable team, and without their help it would cost BWT hundreds of pounds each time renewal letters and newsletters are delivered.

It was lovely to see the delivery team, who were able to meet each other for a "cake and coffee" get-together in August.

8 Newsletter:

Barbara Long: A bumper 12-page Woodlander had been published in September; it is a year since the last one, which has allowed us to include so much more material. More than a thousand Members received hard copies, most of them hand delivered by our band of volunteers. A further 150 members received the email version. This Woodlander was the first to be designed by Sue Fuller, who has taken over from Paul Street who produced 10 previous issues and understandably felt it was time to hand over to someone else. We think Sue has done a great job. Apologies, though, to volunteers hoping to see rather larger photographs of their recent gatherings. Sadly a technical problem with the original photograph meant it could not be used any bigger, but we will remedy this in future. The "Woodlander" is now being published annually, with the website used to communicate news throughout the year; Barbara would welcome Members' ideas, short articles and photographs for the next issue in 2022.

9 Website:

Martin Herrema paid tribute to the excellent website work put in by Judy over 12 years. For the immediate future, it would be "evolution not revolution".

Website improvements since last Management Committee

- Following agreement at the last Management Committee, Martin has created a new 'About BWT' page which sets out our charity status and listed objectives.
- The new page also sets out BWT's strategic governance arrangements and, for the first time, lists its five trustees.
- The 'About BWT' page also sets out the operational responsibilities of the eight people on the Management Committee.
- The existing 'Contact' page has been amended to now only include the BWT mobile phone number, postal address and web email contact form.

End of year: timeline, photo album and AGM minutes

- Martin said he proposed to update the 2021 timeline at the end of the year, and asked MC members to provide one or two milestone suggestions to ensure that this timeline reflects the full range of our activity.
- Martin will liaise with the Newsletter editor to choose several images to complete the 2021 Photographic Album.
- Minutes of the 2021 AGM will be added to the relevant section once they are agreed.

Web future developments

- Following a 'ballpark quote' obtained earlier on 2021, The MC has previously agreed to consider budgeting for a website redesign and possible change in hosting and Content Management System (Drupal to WordPress). This decision would be taken during 2022.
- The website editor therefore proposes that, subject to budget approval, he undertake a detailed evaluation of current needs and possible future changes and obtain three quotes (including VAT) during the first quarter of 2022 and report to the MC to enable it to make a considered judgement on the best option to develop the website.

10 Community Outreach and Green Flag: John Wale

As mentioned in the Introduction, organised School Visits and Talks to Groups had not been possible.

John confirmed that the "Green Flag" Community Award had been achieved again, the award being in the highest category, a great tribute to the work put in by everyone.

11 Any Other Business and Questions Notified by Friends.

Richard Ash thanked Management Committee members and Trustees for all their efforts in making BWT such a wonderful community asset; this was endorsed enthusiastically by all present.