

friends of Waterlow Park



AGM 10 June 2015: Report from the Committee

Overview

As last year, the year has been dominated by discussions about the future of the park. FoWP is a key member of the transitional Waterlow Park Committee set up to discuss how to deal with the impending cuts. Our horticultural volunteers go from strength to strength and really make a contribution to the park looking good. The whole committee has worked very hard providing support on many different aspects of park life as this report shows.

Relations with Camden

Finalising the Waterlow Park Committee [WPC] has taken much longer than planned but the terms of reference have now been agreed. The WPC will be a strategic and consultative committee working with Camden in its role as the corporate trustee of the Waterlow Park Trust to protect the park. It is clear that a major part of the WPC's role will be to help manage the 'assets' of the park and begin fundraising to meet costs as budgets cuts bite. Final membership of the WPC is still to be settled and it is important that key stakeholders are represented. There will also be a role in the future for the FoWP outside the WPC.

Camden still holds quarterly meetings for the chairs of its Friends Groups which enables a useful exchange of views. Christine Farrell is our link with the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, which is a particularly important and useful source of information about developments in London parks and support for ideas in these difficult times.

The properties in Waterlow Park

The big issue this year concerns the four properties in the park. The two lodges are being renovated to be let as private rentals [with high Highgate rents] and should be available from September. Ultimately all their rental income will flow to the park once the costs of renovation have been met. The Park Centre has proved much more problematic. Funded initially by Camden and the Heritage Lottery Fund [HLF] to be an environmental educational centre it has failed to find a regular purpose and is a real drain on park finances, costing about £50,000 p.a. out of a total park budget of about £350,000. Soft market testing over the last year has shown there are few if any organisations willing to take it on under those planning constraints and so it is now being put out to tender with the likelihood of an application for change of use. We should know by July whether there is a possibility of it being rented. At the same time the Lauderdale House Society is in advanced negotiations for HLF and Camden monies to renovate and improve Lauderdale House. This will include the building of an educational centre for their arts work with children.

FoWP has tried very hard to argue with both Camden and the Heritage Lottery Fund that it is not sensible to have two educational centres funded initially by both the HLF and Camden in one park - but to no avail. We know very few people in Highgate realise this is happening. We feel that there has been a failure to consider the development of the park as a whole and, while there are quite clear historic reasons for this, it is a very great shame. Significant opportunities may well have been lost to generate sensible monies for the park. By September the future will be a lot clearer.

Horticulture and volunteering

The horticultural activity by volunteers, organised by the committee, has burgeoned over the past year. With an eye to next year's 125th anniversary of the opening of the park, our work has concentrated on improving existing herbaceous planting around the park. A grant from Channing School enabled us to revamp the half circles by St. Joseph's gate and a number of fund-raising events have enabled us to replant other beds this autumn. Last October, for reasons both aesthetic and practical, we planted up irises from existing thinnings to indicate the watercourses on the main lawn area. Meanwhile, as part of our regular maintenance programme, we have tended the sensory border, the sundial circles, the lavender terraces, the hydrangea triangle and the rose circle.

To prepare for increasing cuts in the park's budget we have been recycling plants either to sell at one of our plant sales, or to support our own projects and those of the head gardener. One example is the propagation of persicaria cuttings from a surplus on the hydrangea triangle on the southern perimeter path. The head gardener will use these to plant along the northern bank of the middle pond. As low-lying ground cover, the persicaria will prevent soil erosion, deter weeds, require little water once established and sport a thick carpet of long-lasting pink flowers to delight the park user.

We have also been experimenting with re-establishing the RSPB sunflower plantation by growing from seed some 400 sunflower seeds. These will be planted up over the next week and should provide a good show for visitors (and birds).

The volunteer programme has attracted a number of new, local volunteers of high calibre who thoroughly enjoy their morning sessions on Thursday in the park. We are of course always looking for more help. Anyone who is interested in giving up Thursday mornings, please visit our website to find out how.

The community orchard

Since being planted in February 2013 the orchard has flourished, with our team of dedicated volunteers watering the trees throughout the relatively dry summer months. Last year's newcomers, the four Cox's Orange Pippins and the Doyenne du Comice pear, took time to settle but are now looking very healthy.

Last summer Fitzroy Park's orchard expert Mick Rand came in to help and advise with the stone fruit pruning. As well as trimming the trees, we removed the cage from the cherry tree and started reducing the height of the other cages, allowing them to spread their branches a bit in their second year. Sadly the cherry tree was savaged by what appeared to be a dog attack, and is now on life support behind the Park Centre.

Most of the trees have blossomed well, and this year we are not taking the fruit off in the spring in the hope that we can sample a small harvest at the end of the summer. Very little of the fruit which did grow last year survived the squirrels and birds, so we want to do better

this year. The orchard has its own web-site at www.waterlowparkorchard.org.uk and occasionally tweets @WaterlowPkOrchd

Kitchen garden

There have been some changes in the community groups that manage the kitchen garden plots this year. The Whittington Hospital group and Hargrave school gave up their work and their plots were allocated to two new groups, the Church group and Archway children's group. There is no shortage of people who wish to grow produce in the kitchen garden: a good sign we think. The garden itself is a feature of the park and attracts many visitors, once they discover it, behind the tall yew hedges. We continue to advertise it for the Open Garden Squares weekend in June and last year there were over one hundred extra visitors to the park and the kitchen garden that weekend. This year, the open day of the Open Garden Squares weekend will be on 14 June.

Trees, views and maintenance issues

Consultation about the siting and occasional felling of trees in the park with the Camden tree department has continued following the agreed outline plan covering trees and views. FoWP continues to argue that new trees must be appropriate to the site and not ruin historic and well loved views.

Not long after the last AGM there was a proposal to have 'Forest Schools' use the wildlife area around the upper pond and install some 'recreational' features such as a balancing beam. This was resisted by the FoWP who felt there were other more suitable green spaces for such recreation. We had hoped that what was formerly the RSPB 'sparrow meadow' by the Swains Lane gate would be mown this year as it just looks overgrown and unkempt. This has not yet happened but progress is sometimes slow. The fountain has had a difficult year with a number of problems interrupting smooth operation. It is currently out of commission again.

The park has now almost reached saturation level with memorial benches and there was some confusion over where benches were to be appropriately sited in 2014-15. Unfortunately, there are still not enough benches near the tennis courts, despite repeated requests. It seems that this is not an area where memorial benches are deemed appropriate as there is a perceived higher likelihood of vandalism. In our experience the damage to benches in this area has been mainly due to contractor vehicles destroying them by mistake.

The outstanding work on drains has now been completed. Dog waste bins have been removed and ordinary bins are now in use. This was because the old bins were rusting. A proposal for beehives which might have been welcome (especially to the Orchard), depending on their siting and management, seems to have gone into abeyance. The TCV Conservation Volunteers continue to contribute to the park, working principally in the nature areas around the top and lower ponds.

Wildlife

To date funding applications which have been made for some monies to develop wildlife infrastructure have not been successful. Nothing has so far come of the proposal to have beehives in the upper pond area, but this is still an aim.

Sport

FoWP has long wanted to develop a strategy for sport in the park, particularly to see the tennis courts used more productively and to encourage children and young people to use the park more, ideally on the courts. Progress on this is painfully slow, not least because we do not have enough resources on the committee to work up ideas. We have met with Camden to discuss how to take this forward and also what other healthy sports could be developed - such as an outdoor gym. Coolhurst tennis club continues to hire some courts to run tennis for children but it is not clear to what extent this is helping meet our aim of getting underprivileged children doing sport. There are also some maintenance issues which need to be resolved. We would welcome one or two more members onto our sports committee to help us develop ideas.

Anniversary of the public opening of the park - 2016

126 years ago Sir Sydney Waterlow offered the grounds of his Highgate estate to the London County Council to be a 'garden for the gardenless'. To mark this and the anniversary in 2016 of the formal opening of Waterlow Park in 1891, FoWP continues to gather historical information and memories via its website from people worldwide as well as locally from residents. Last September a joint initiative with the HLSI archives led to a display of some of their holdings in the HLSI, and the Friends are already planning one or more events for 2016. Please do offer your memories, your material and your time to help make this happen.

Events

In the months following the 2014 AGM, the Friends put a great deal of time and energy into organizing a day-long event to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the bequest of the land for the park. The 'Lark in the Park' was held on a rather grey Saturday in late September [20th] on the grassy space below the tennis courts. The members of the committee and other Friends, supported by numerous family members and others, made a herculean effort to bring this off successfully.

Sir Sydney's descendant Sir Christopher Waterlow opened the event together with the Deputy Mayor of Camden. Stalls and activities run by the Friends offered games, music, plants and refreshments – all with the aim of bringing people together to enjoy and celebrate the park. Local Highgate businesses were extremely generous with sponsorship and prizes for a raffle and other competitions.

Although the Lark was fairly small-scale compared with some other regular local events, it took considerable effort and demonstrated the importance of forward planning and of bringing in as many supporters as possible from outside the committee. The 2014 event was envisaged as a dress rehearsal for a larger celebration next summer to mark 125 years since the grand opening of the park in 1891. We hope to attract new volunteers and helpers to make this an even better day.

During the year the Friends have planned occasional afternoons during school holidays of trails and quizzes for families. These are always weather dependant and we had to cancel in May 2014 but we have had a great response to the events held in July and October 2014 and at Easter this year. They offer a valuable opportunity to talk to visitors and their children and to sign up new members. The new high quality Guide to Waterlow Park leaflet, highlighting features around the park, has proved popular on these occasions. The Oxfam Bookshop in Highgate has kindly put some on sale at £1 each.

In June this year, FoWP initiated a fundraising concert jointly with the Lauderdale House Society which was held at Highgate School. This was much enjoyed by over 100 people and raised a total of £1800. Additional funds were raised from a group visit to the Savill Garden near Windsor.

Future plans

While all the work around horticulture, wildlife and general maintenance will continue, our chief efforts in the next year have to be concentrated on sorting out how the park will be run and financed and organising suitable celebrations for the 125th anniversary. A key part of any strategy for funding the park has to be to increase our membership, and to get park lovers to be a little more involved in helping the FoWP committee with its many tasks, including the fundraising that will become increasingly necessary.

Website and social media

The website is the main vehicle for communicating information about the park to the general public, in addition to the newsletters sent electronically to our members. We try to provide up to date information on forthcoming events and current issues and consultations relating to the park. It also contains a changing display of excellent photographs showing the beauty of the park. Tweeting continues to bring information about aspects of the park to a wider audience. We also retweet the best of park users' tweets. Follow us on Twitter @WaterlowPark and @WaterlowPkOrchd. The park also now has a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/waterlowpark).

Organisation and membership

We feel a large membership is essential to ensure that we not only cover the views of our many park users but are seen as a legitimate voice for park users. Membership has risen so that we have more than 155 members this year, which is an increase on 2014. We also have over 270 people on our email list. We would like to convert them into paying members this year. We are now offering new ways to pay including cash, cheque and bank transfers and, through our website, credit and debit cards and PayPal.

The committee this year comprised: Marcia Beer, Christine Farrell [co-chair], Ian Henghes [secretary], Louise Lewis [membership], Mel Manhine, Ceridwen Roberts [co-chair], Richard Shipman [treasurer], Patricia Walby [horticulture] and Patricia Adams. Patricia Adams and Ian Henghes are standing down at the AGM so in all there are three vacancies. Ceridwen Roberts stood down last year and was co-opted as co-chair in the absence of any one else willing to take this on. She is standing for co-chair this year. Marcia Beer is willing to stand as secretary. We are particularly keen to recruit someone from the committee from south of the park as this area is still not represented on the committee.

All the committee deserve our thanks for combining their work for FoWP with busy domestic lives and day jobs.

Ceridwen Roberts

Co-chair, FoWP on behalf of the committee

9 June 2015