

The Friends of Beckenham Place Park

NEWSLETTER NO. 84

Spring 2018



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Welcome to the first Newsletter of 2018.

There are many things planned for the Park and Mansion by Lewisham. The Friends continue to work alongside the council for the benefit of Park and Park Users.

To this end we are waiving membership subscriptions this year and hoping for more members so please tell your friends to get interested in what is going on and come and visit. It is a wonderful area for all of us and ideas and interest from members is valued, please talk to us.

Firstly, very many thanks to Mal and Margaret Mitchell who are stepping back from the incredible level of support and activity they have given to the park for the last 25 years. We cannot thank them enough for all the hard work and knowledge they have given on behalf of the park.

We now have a new committee:

Elaine Storey (Chair), Carole Hope (Secretary), committee: Glenys Crane, Nick Goy, Janet Waldon, Ron Hale, Margaret Friskney, Roger Thomas, Mal Mitchell,

Volunteer opportunities exist for various roles.

Letter from Secretary

Happy New Year to the Friends of Beckenham Place Park! As Secretary I would like to extend my apologies for the fact that this Newsletter has been a long time coming. Those of you who attended the AGM last July will be aware that I volunteered to take on the vacant role of Secretary. However, since then changing circumstances have meant I have not been able to devote sufficient time to it. I hope that this first Newsletter of 2018 will be the start of more regular updates.

Friends who have recently visited the park will no doubt be aware that Lewisham Council secured planning permission (from itself) to embark on the major landscaping works forming its plans for 'regeneration'. Tree felling and lake excavations have already started. The Friends continue to try and influence and be a moderating voice and we continue to send representatives to their forums and both Elaine Storey, our Chair and Mal Mitchell, our former Chair, have attended meetings between the project officers, contractors and new users of the park.

Although Lewisham are going full steam ahead with landscape works we are not yet aware of tenders issued or works to rebuilding the stable block and desperately needed toilets. There also does not appear to be any progress with regard to the Environment Agency's Flood Alleviation Scheme in the east of the park. Coincidentally spoil from the lake excavations has been deemed by the Council as the 'wrong type' with which to build the walls for the FAS bund. There is now a new planning application to use this spoil to create a 'mounded garden and additional re-contouring of land by way of placement of surplus earth-fill material' adjacent to the railway line and brick bridge.

At the last AGM we were accused of being a negative group towards the regeneration but viewing the current ugly tracks from mountain bike racers across the parkland and into the ancient forest it is perhaps understandable. Indeed, the committee are at a loss to comprehend how these tracks and other similar instances complement the 18th century parkland so coveted by Lewisham Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

RJK Properties, who lease and sub-let the Mansion, have recently been in discussions with the Friends with a view to expanding the use of the Visitor Centre during the week to groups other than the Friends. This is an ongoing dialogue, but one result will be a synopsis of the Visitor Centre agreed by both parties and posted on their website. As far as we are aware RJK Properties will be seeking an extension of their lease and also, as far as we are aware, Lewisham have yet to develop a strategy for the long term use of both the Mansion and the Foxgrove.

There was an Open House event in the summer and a Festival of Lights in December. The squirrel has been handsomely repainted following a competition to choose the style, the BMX track in the east of the park has been opened and, in addition to the MTB cycle event in the west, there was a recent cycle event for children. There are now various activities taking place and also planned inside the Mansion such as Yoga, artists' studios, creative skills and room hire for parties, etc.

A final contribution from me for now is to announce that the Friends have decided to waive membership fees this year in celebration of 90 years since the park came into the public domain, courtesy of London County Council, but of course donations are always welcome. Carole Hope

Message from the Chair

First of all, let me add my thanks and appreciation to the years of service to the Friends from Mal and Margaret.

As visitors to the park will be only too aware, Lewisham Council is well underway with its regeneration plans for the park.

Trees have been felled and the area of the lake bed is being cleared, to the dismay of many park users.

We will continue to work to achieve the best possible outcome to the regeneration plans, although our influence is limited. To this end, members of the Friends attend the four forums established by the Council in place of the disbanded Working Group. This is our only opportunity to influence the direction the Council takes in the future.

If you have comments or suggestions to make about what is happening in the park, please email Alison Taylor who is the regeneration officer. Her email is alison.taylor@lewisham.gov.uk. Please remain courteous and polite at all times. There have been several unpleasant incidents in the park recently, where the feelings of some park users have got the better of them!

As you will see from the newsletter, we are resuming our regular programme of walks in the park this year and hope many of you will join us. We are also planning to relaunch the newsletter and to organise some meet-ups where Friends can get together and get to know each other.

The role the Friends play in the park is probably more important now than it has ever been. Please get involved in whatever way you can, whether in the Visitor Centre, the Sensory Garden or perhaps leading a walk?

Visitor Centre News

The Friends of Beckenham Place Park Visitor centre is open every Sunday from 12 to 3.45p.m. although our opening times are flexible and we can open at other times if required. Anyone who comes to see us has a chance to find out more about the buildings and parkland.

We are always pleased to have your comments and ideas about how we can make our little collection as interesting as possible. We hope that, in our room, we have something for everyone - young and old.

Volunteers to help staff the V.C. are always welcome.

Sensory Garden News

Enjoy gardening? The Friends continue to have regular workdays in the Sensory Garden usually the 2nd and 4th Saturdays in the calendar month but might be only the 2nd Saturday during winter months. We have a regular team of about 12 but new volunteers are always welcome. Contact email bpp.friends@hotmail.co.uk.

Dates are usually on the website.

Gloves and tools are provided, as is guidance and no experience is necessary. Tasks range from weeding, path maintenance, planting and pruning. Our volunteers have a range of skills and years of experience. Most of them are even friendly!

Meet us in the Garden. Bad weather may mean dates are postponed at short notice.

Other Volunteering Opportunities

Lewisham appointed Lucy Mitchell as Community Engagement Officer for the park. She is arranging volunteer sessions so there is also now regular volunteering work in various areas of the park on Wednesdays 10-1pm and on the last Saturday in the month 10-1pm which is organised by Lucy Mitchell, Community Engagement Officer at Lewisham Council and she can be contacted on email lucy.mitchell@lewisham.gov.uk

Squirrel makeover

The famous landmark of the BPP squirrel received a makeover a few months ago and the new design has certainly gone down well with many visitors. The Friends assisted in acquiring £350 towards the cost of the repainting from the remains of a council grant a few years ago.



Park Landscape Work

This is 'in progress' in the park from the excavation for the lake (where we are concerned regarding loss of habitat for vulnerable bats due to large tree felling) and loss of trees which demarcate the now redundant golf fairways but give cover for wildlife and also make a beautiful scene when viewed from the Mansion. There is potential and already happening damage to vegetation and grassland being churned into mud due to cycling events. Many whips have been planted where Lewisham deem there should now be woodland edges which will obviously take decades to establish and can no way replace present loss of mature species. There will be the conical 'mound' of excavated soil as described in the Secretary's letter above. The Project Manager recently advised that 20 trees and some 'scrub' had been reprieved following concerns from park users. Those who remember the storm of 1987 will recall how easily we can lose trees due to forces of nature. We urge the retention of as many as possible as weather is forecast to be more unpredictable in future.

Beastway Cycle Events

Thoughts on mountain bikes in the park.

The cycling club Beastway held a mountain bike event in the park earlier in the month and another is planned for February, although whether using the same route is not clear.

After these events, any damage to the park caused by these trial events will be assessed by the Council.

Friends Committee member, Nick Goy, responded to this new use of the park with the following words:

"I find the proposed route alarming in terms of 'ploughing through' several areas of thick woodland, as well as seemingly deliberately winding through sensitive woodland edges, using trees as slalom obstacles etc. The council has made much of turning the golf course into an 1870 landscape, indeed this was the basis of the £5m HLF grant, but I keep hearing of more parkland being used as permanent or events-based Mountain biking muddy trails. The park is unique in Lewisham in having a countryside character. It is also a designated Local Nature Reserve and contains Ancient Woodland. The ethos of mountain biking events does not seem to value the quiet enjoyment of the park and its natural beauty, but merely as obstacles to be traversed as fast as possible with as much mud as possible. At the end of a half-day event, visiting riders leave for home, which apparently can be from other distant parts of London or the South East, but they leave a mess for months on end for other park users. This spoils the enjoyment of the park's beauty."



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Park User Forums

Friends committee members continue to attend the 4 forums created to replace the old BPP Working Party.

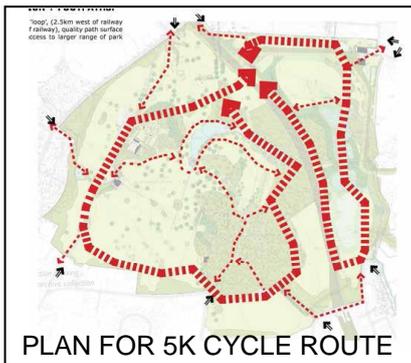
One covers Nature, History and Interpretation. Another Children and Young People. The third covers Events and Arts and the fourth Active and Sports. Obviously there would be some crossovers between these forums. Our attitude is one of flagging up any possibilities of causing harm to the park. To this end we have raised concerns about tree felling, cycling and other events. We have also cooperated with some of the 'new' park

users such as childrens' activities ie. Young Explorers group who used the garden area. We also share our not inconsiderable knowledge of the park with others advising on walking routes if asked.

REPORT ON GO-AHEAD FOR THE REGENERATION SCHEME

Permission to go ahead with the regeneration of the west side of the park was granted by the Planning Committee (A) at Lewisham Town Hall on the 19th of October last year. Alison Taylor, Heritage Lottery Fund Project Manager, made the case for the proposal which was outlined by Suzanne White, Planning Officer in charge of proceedings. On her recommendation, the six councillors who turned up in time to vote passed the motion but some controversial issues remain unresolved so the story doesn't end there.

Due to questions raised in the initial feedback about the scheme, a further flurry of planning documents was presented just a month before the decision was made; 31 more on top of the 36 submitted for the application in 2016. Although two extra ecology reports, a lake restoration feasibility study, archaeological assessments, revision of building and car park (as well as management and maintenance plans) had been included in an attempt to overcome any controversy, three people came to voice their objections on the day of the meeting.



They highlighted conservation and health and safety risks, as well as loss of amenities, related to: the installation of an artificial lake and wetland area, shared access to footpaths with cyclists, permission for informal mountain bike routes, car parking provision within the park and overflow in surrounding residential areas and the omission of a purpose built visitors centre in the proposed scheme.

The complexity of the issues in hand merited a more in depth discussion but given the time limit imposed, as well as the impression that councillors hadn't studied all the documentation, the motion was waved through as if

the resolution was a foregone conclusion. However, the final outcome leaves several matters outstanding. Unfortunately the minutes of the meeting, approved on the 7th of December, didn't register the main condition of approval which established conservation a priority.

The request by Councillor Walsh about cycle use on paths was included: *“Additional Condition: Prior to the first occupation of the refurbished Stable Block, a Cycle Management Plan shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The plan shall include measures to manage the safe use of the proposed new routes within the park by all users”*. The minutes also record the Planning Officer's response to other objections: *“The ancient ash plantation is not affected by the proposal”* and *“The visitors centre would remain within the Mansion”*. The Committee also agreed to approach Bromley Council about introducing measures to mitigate non-residential parking in Westgate Road.

How the regeneration of the park evolves will depend on the interpretation of the approved plans which assert that a *“Country park character”* is the intention, and acknowledge that the park should be carefully managed to maintain a balance of recreational use and natural character. As the saying - picture the wood for the trees - goes, the devil will be in the detail. The need for tree protection and the conservation of vulnerable wildlife habitats will be ongoing issues as pointed out in the final ecology report which states further studies will be necessary. When planning permission was granted the Environment Agency hadn't approved the lake infrastructure which now contemplates a smaller and deeper reservoir of water and extended wetland unlike the envisaged restoration of the 18th century landscape. The future of the Visitors Centre in the Mansion is uncertain as it depends on the goodwill of the leaseholders, but is secure until the present contract runs out on the 28th of September 2018.

The outcome of the story will depend on how decisions are made by the proposed Steering Group which represents certain vested interests not necessarily in harmony with the Friends vision of the park. The complete management structure is in the Management and Maintenance Plan, copies available in the VC.

PROJECT STEERING GROUP MEETINGS

To be attended by:

HLF Project Manager
Community Engagement Officer
Business Development Manager
Grounds Manager
Design Team
Contractors(s) (during Implementation stage)

EVENTS For 2018

More events are at the planning stage and will be published on the website. Children must be accompanied by an adult or carer. Conditions may be muddy and uneven please wear appropriate clothing.

MARCH

Thursday 22nd - 9.30am

Bird Walk led by Liz Anderson. Liz and others from the Kelsey Park Birdwatching group are surveying Beckenham Place on a regular basis. Bring binoculars if you have them.

Meet at the Mansion steps/car park

APRIL

Sunday 29th - 2pm

Bluebell Walk led by Nick Bertrand of Creekside Educational Trust and London Natural History Society. This will be dedicated to FBPP members who worked for the conservation of the park during the last 25 years.

Nick knows as much as anyone and more than most about the park ecology.

Meet at the Mansion steps/car park

MAY

Sunday 20th - 2pm

A History Walk, learn about the origins of Beckenham Place and how the Park has grown out of the Landscape with Mal Mitchell.

Meet at the Mansion steps/car park

JULY

Saturday 28th - 8.45pm

A combined Moths (Bill Welch) and Bats (Ishpi Blatchley) Walk plus a touch of Astronomy (Mal Mitchell). Bat detectors will be provided but please bring torches and warm clothes.

Meet at the Crab Hill entrance opposite Ravensbourne Station (different to most starting points). On street parking available.

OCTOBER

Sunday 14th - 1.30pm

Fungi Walk with Dr Mark Spencer. Mark has led several fungi walks in the park, he and his colleagues know it well. This is not for the purpose of collecting edible fungi but to see the variety of fungi in the park.

Meet at the Mansion steps/car park

NOVEMBER

Saturday 10th - 9.30am

Bird Walk led by David de Silva. Dave is a regular visitor to the park and knowledgeable 'birder'. Meet at the Mansion steps/car park.

Some of these events include periods of standing while looking at specimens and features. A typical walk around the park is about 2 or 3 miles. Time taken can vary between 1 and 3 hours but people can leave an event whenever they like provided they can find their own way out of the park.

Officially the gates to the road into the park are closed at dusk, so if staying in the park after dark we advise people to park outside.

One of concerns forwarded to Lewisham' Project Manager concerning the tree felling taking place follows:

Dear Alison,'

Much of the planting associated with the golf course will be removed' (London Borough of Lewisham) Although some of the trees might be fairly young, many must have been planted early last century to delineate the golf drives and thus are a well established part of the environment - historic in their own way.

Have you ever spent time outside the Mansion, drinking in the magnificent vista leading uphill to the distant woodland?

These lines of trees add interest and draw the eye around the whole scene. The shadows delightfully created excite the eye and change through the day with the sun's movement. It is such a charismatic and characterful view.

Imagine just a blank and boring green canvas with nothing to hold the gaze. The trees could even demarcate natural 'rooms' for Events.

The whole vista is unique and evocative, you have something wonderful here - don't destroy it.

I am a ten minute walk away from enjoying the park and I see the therapeutic effect the view has on visitors - it will be a gross mistake to lose it. When surveying visitors during the HLF Bid I spent many hours talking to park users and nearly all said 'don't touch the trees!'

I have the best interests of the park and to this end am on the Friends Committee and also a Mansion volunteer. I beg you to please think, discuss and plan ways to incorporate these trees into the design before it is too late.

I paint in oils and enclose my view of that area. I have also painted the Mansion with part of the golf course and have other ideas in my head. At present I am painting the view through the veranda railings towards the woods with the rainbow which was seen on the Sound Trail launch. Without the trees and their shadows this unique view would be nothing!

Yours sincerely, (a park friend)

PS I love the squirrel!

