



## **Friends of Castle Parks – Chair’s Report 2024 AGM 2pm, Thursday 13 February 2025**

### **Overview and looking back**

2024 has been a year of consolidation and steady, productive endeavour from Kate Dixon, NCC Parks Officer in Berwick (the only such officer in the county) and the Friends’ volunteers – gardening and committee.

It’s also important to acknowledge the input of NCC’s NEAT Team.

The continuity of gardening volunteers and their willingness to turn out in all weathers and tackle all sorts of challenges in the parks is a measure of Kate’s effectiveness as a leader and her skills as a manager.

The group continues to fund an impressive range of free events in the parks and to pay for repairs and maintenance of equipment and park furnishings (such as the sculptures and signposts), and purchase new equipment and plants for the parks.

Measures of the group’s success are: the positive engagement across social media; the high opening rate of the regular newsletters sent via Mailchimp; the connections and partnerships with a growing range of local and national groups; and, of course, the ever-increasing footfall in the parks.

The group’s effective networking promotes wider community engagement, which is beneficial in supporting the group’s activities, including fundraising.

The parks again received accolades in the Green Flag Awards (with Flagstaff Park gaining GF status this year) and in the RHS It’s Your Neighbourhood Awards.

It was a joy to enjoy a special Christmas meal with all the volunteers at Pier Red this year and celebrate all the group’s many achievements.

### **In the parks in 2024**

One of our regular volunteers, Gordon, stepped back from volunteering this year. We miss his incredible input but hope that he is enjoying some well-deserved downtime. The regular crew - Kate, Keith, Marge, Enid, Monica, Julia, Gail and Angela along with occasional helpers - continue to keep the parks in good order.

Regular wildlife counts continue with Kate and Enid feeding statistics into the British Trust for Ornithology.

The parks are largely respected by those who use them, but a fire meant repairs were necessary to the new compost scheme in Coronation Park. As well as the regular varnishing of the sculptures, sculptor David Gross and his wife have begun repairing areas of rotten wood and splits, which will continue into this year.

Three new signposts were commissioned and paid for by the Friends and have been installed by NEAT.



### **Working in partnership**

Links forged last year with groups such as Tweed Forum ensured a wider range of stalls at our yearly Big Beastie Hunt which proved to be a much more manageable event than in 2023.

The Berwick Festivals Group continues to benefit us in terms of general support and marketing for Open Gardens and in connecting with other groups. This group also helps with funding applications – such as the CCZ's Create Berwick Fund joint application for promotional postcards and Town Council funding for the advert in the Chamber of Trade's Town Map. The Chamber of Trade also supported Open Gardens by funding the printing of all promotional materials in 2024 and have committed to the same for 2025. The Chamber also enabled us to link with shopkeepers and businesses in Berwick for Open Gardens' window displays.

Visit Berwick and Berwick Community Trust are strong allies. The recent round table event in January 2025 (convened by us and held at the William Elder Building) gathered a cross-section of some 15 organisations running and funding events in Berwick.

Our links with the RHS led to the publishing on their website of Monica's Story – a beautiful testament to the benefits of volunteering with the Friends in terms of wellbeing and companionship.

### **Events**

One of our core aims is to attract people into the parks for wellbeing, social interaction and for the benefit of the parks. Our calendar of events and open calls for help at events such as the meadow raking are central to this aim as well as in fundraising. 2025's (third) wassail was the largest yet and included an appearance from Rag Bag Morris Dancers.

With the support of Berwick Bowling Club, we celebrated the installation of the new sculptures in Flagstaff Park joined by representatives of the schools and Tyne Housing Trust along with the young designers, their families and local dignitaries.

As well as being social gatherings, Open Gardens and the Plant Sale raise the funds required to keep the Friends' work afloat. They raised £3060 and £467 respectively. It was decided not to run the Winter Talks this year as audiences have decreased but last year the talks raised £179.

We are fortunate and grateful to receive some ad hoc donations including those raised by Lindsay Allason-Jones' at her Garden Party (£520 in 2024).

As with all the Friends' work, it's the volunteers who make events happen through planning, delivering posters, helping on the day and coming up with ideas. Thank you: Kate, Yvonne, Peter, Valerie, Enid, Jane, Sophie, Lindsay (and so many more). Special thanks to Lindsay, the group's Secretary, who issues the papers for, and takes the minutes at, our meetings.

### **Social media, website & newsletter**

Huge thanks to Valerie Bistram for her ongoing management of our Facebook account (1.6k followers at time of writing); and to Peter Bistram for continuing to keep our website up to date. Our Instagram account stands at 406 followers and our regular event and information-focused newsletters are well-received by 155 subscribers. We also submit regular press releases to the local paper.



### **Summing up and looking forward**

In 2025 we are looking forward to developing our links with Berwick Visual Arts through Open Gardens and an art project in Castle Vale Park to be created by local school children through workshops with a local artist. The project will be jointly funded through grant applications. This is the culmination of several years' work and consideration of projects that involve young communities in Berwick.

At time of writing, all our usual events are in the diary for 2025 – Wassail, RSPB Birdwatch, Easter Bunny Hunt, Dawn Chorus Walk, Tai Chi, Plant Sale, Open Gardens, Big Beastie Hunt and Art in the Park.

We are fortunate to be in a strong financial position which allows a solid contingency as well as to look at plans to benefit the parks and community such as the art project above. Thanks to our Treasurer Peter who keeps on top of the figures and ensures we're always up to speed.

The challenges related to our ageing volunteer demographic remain. Strategic succession planning and volunteer recruitment continue to be a central aim in terms of sustaining and perpetuating the group's work, particularly as we know that (although she has no plans to disappear), Kate won't be around forever. Networking with like-minded individuals, groups and associations is key to cementing the importance of the work the group does within the town – attracting visitors to it and keeping it an attractive place to visit. As a group we need to continue to give this issue of future proofing our work real consideration in 2025.

### **Final word from JKL**

I feel quite emotional to let go of the reins of this fantastic group after the privilege of calling myself chair for four years. However, I feel incredibly optimistic knowing that Valerie Bistram will be taking up that role and I look forward to supporting her as vice chair. Fresh eyes and ideas are an essential part of any group – voluntary or otherwise – and this is an exciting change.

I am enormously proud of all our small but mighty band of friends has achieved. I am also grateful and humbled by the friendship, support and cake that has flowed freely my way from all the volunteers and, of course, from Kate.

Here's to 2025 and beyond.

Jackie

Jackie Kaines Lang 11 February 2025