



Friends of Castle Parks – Chair’s Report 2023

Looking back at 2023, it seems hard to believe what our small band of volunteers has achieved both in the three parks we help to maintain and enhance and in terms of running events, fundraising and engaging with the community in a range of ways.

The small group of gardening volunteers continue to punch well above their collective weight. Working under the expert guidance of Kate Dixon their hard graft ensures the parks are well-kept and beautifully planted. Kate is employed by Northumberland County Council and it is important to note how fortunate Berwick is to have the county’s only Parks Officer. NCC’s NEAT team is also instrumental in maintaining the parks.

Our events group has also excelled itself during the year, running more events than ever before and raising essential funds to facilitate the work does.

Volunteers enjoyed a well-deserved outing to the Felton Park Greenhouse facilitated by Lindsay Allason-Jones and on to Howick Hall and its superb garden. We also joined together in an après Open Gardens party and celebratory Christmas gathering at my house.

In the parks in 2023

The regular wildlife counts continue with Kate and Enid feeding statistics into the British Trust for Ornithology and achieving recognition for the consistency of their work over six years.

Compost schemes were built in Coronation and Castle Vale Parks by volunteers and courtesy of our grant from the RHS sustainability fund. The grant also enabled us to purchase a shredder.

We maintained our Green Flag status for Coronation & Castle Vale Parks from Keep Britain Tidy and again achieved ‘Outstanding’ in the RHS In Your Neighbourhood awards for all three parks.

Towards the end of the year two new reclaimed wood sculptures designed by local schoolchildren and realised by David Gross and Tyne Housing Project were finally completed and installed in the Rose Garden (Flagstaff). The honeybee and hedgehog have been warmly received by passers-by and applauded across social media.

Our young gardening volunteer Dylan Coates was nominated by Kate and won a Love Northumberland Award.

Thanks to our regular crew: Kate, Keith, Marge, Enid, Monica, Dylan, Stephen, Gordon, Julia, Gail. And to all those who help out occasionally – the amazing effort at this year’s meadow-raking was heart-warming.

Another aim of the Friends is to create a social and caring environment for all. I truly believe this is something we have achieved across our activities and our gardening volunteers exemplify that ethos.



Working in partnership

Working with Pollinators along the Tweed (Destination Tweed) and Buglife we held a pollinator walk 'Meadow Life'. We contributed to a film with Connecting Threads: Tweed River Culture which culminated in a caravan cinema arriving in Berwick on Parade for a day. As part of fulfilling the requirements of our RHS award, we held a composting workshop and our final winter talk is on composting. We again supported Heritage Open Days with a guided walk.

Berwick Wildlife Group and Swan Life Trust continue to join us to support the Beastie Hunt and Buglife also joined us.

Through connecting more effectively with Berwick Museums we have also attended heritage networking events in Berwick and connected with other organisations such as Till Valley Archaeological Society.

We were approached to support gardening initiatives/needs in the town (Low Greenses by Town Council and Foul Ford by Greener Berwick) but our volunteer gardeners have enough on their plates. Moving forward it would be great to connect more effectively and work in partnership with groups involved in gardening in the town such as Greener Berwick.

Our links with the Berwick Festivals Group pays dividends in publicity and marketing for Open Gardens specifically but also in terms of connecting with other groups and our profile within the town.

Events

One of our core aims is to attract more people into the parks for their own benefit and for the benefit of the parks. With that in mind, the team held more free events than ever before in 2023.

Our inaugural Wassail happened in the community orchard on January 17, Old Twelfth Night. Other firsts included Art in the Park and all-new free Tai Chi in the Park led by Pete Barnes. Many events, including Easter Bunny Hunt and Big Beastie Hunt, enjoyed record attendances – indeed, the popularity of the Beastie Hunt means we need to reflect on how to manage the event in 2024.

As well as encouraging wellbeing and social interaction, some of our events are also fundraisers. The Plant Sale was held at 1 Castlegate instead of Castle Vale Park and raised £544; and Open Gardens ran over two days instead of one and raised a record £2400. The Winter Talks continue to raise a small amount over the winter months.

Lindsay Allason-Jones' Garden Party raised over £500. Thanks yet again to Lindsay.

Thanks to all who help with the events, planning, delivering posters, helping on the day and coming up with ideas. Thank you: Kate, Yvonne, Peter, Valerie, Enid, Jane, Gordon, Lindsay (and so many more) and a special thanks to Sophie Hamilton who keeps everything event-wise on track.

Social media, website & newsletter

Huge thanks to Valerie Bistram for her ongoing management of our Facebook account (1.5k followers at time of writing); to Peter Bistram for continuing to keep our website up to date. Our



Instagram account stands at 280 followers and our regular event and information-focused newsletters are well-received by 140 subscribers.

Recruiting new volunteers

I am enormously proud of all our group has achieved not just this year but over the 12 years of our existence. The one area I would like to see grow is our volunteer cohort. Currently, quite a large load falls on a few shoulders. Over the three years of my tenure as chair we have tried various ways to encourage new people to get involved with some success. However, as a group, we need to keep chipping away at this, particularly in terms of the committee and organising and running of events.

Final word from JKL

It is a great privilege to call myself chair of this extraordinary hard-working, high-achieving group. I personally am hugely grateful for each and every contribution from our regular gardeners and committee volunteers but also to those who come along and support our events, engage with us on social media and in the parks and stop by to help on an ad hoc basis. The work you do and the results you achieve are a huge asset to Berwick. Thank you.

Jackie Kaines Lang, 28 February 2023