

FRIENDS OF BARNWELL COUNTRY PARK: Chairman's report for 2017

It has been another busy year.

First up was last December's Christmas Fayre at which Paul and his friend Richard manned the stall for most of the afternoon - and many thanks to both of them. It was the last year of Eric's and Philippa's reindeer which continued to delight all the visitors as well as the wood-turned ornaments. We made £350 and it was also a significant moment as it was when we met Kim, who has been a tower of strength to us this year.

Unfortunately, we are doing the Christmas Fayre this year. In the absence of the reindeer, we decided to try a tombola, and emails were sent out to all Friends asking for interest, and almost none came back, so we have pulled out due to lack of support.

North Lake Path was also completed with much excitement and very fine it looks too. We had the official opening on September 17th with our MP Tom Pursglove - I will mention that in due course, but want specifically to thank Mr and Mrs Hoskins who were the ones to promote the plan in the first place.

We had a brilliant new initiative from Clare Faulkner with her wild sleep-out - 30 campers braved the imminent rain and had a fantastic night out, raising £270 for the Park and opening it up in a completely new way. Thank you very much indeed Clare.

Our Treasurer, Edward spent a huge amount of time this year raising money for the Music in the Park day. In this he was helped massively by Kim, and together, they managed to raise £3000 not just from one agency, but from two, Northants Community Foundation and Arts Council for England, and then to convince both to donate the full amount in spite of the clash. It was touch and go with a couple of recent donors backing out at the last moment, but in the end, we were very grateful for donations from Persimmon, Digfield Ales, Steve Driver, East Midlands Music and Oundle School who also provided chairs. With five bands and a specially composed piece, it was our largest undertaking so far, and fortunately the weather was more kind than not. Parking was always going to be an issue, and it was disappointing that the estate of the Duke of Gloucester rejected our please to hire a field for the day. Oundle School allowed us access to the football pitches on South Road, and an extensive taxi service was set up to accommodate the larger number of bands in addition to the visitors. In the event, although we had roughly the same number of visitors, we had fewer cars this year, with more people deciding to walk. Advertising was much more effective, with a wide poster campaign, and promotions from all the local radio stations, including Cambridgeshire, and even a mention by Petroch Trelawney on Radio 3. Edward had set up the Northants Emergency Service Cadet Force to help with parking, but they pulled out literally the day before and left us high and dry. Again we had had very few volunteers from the Friends to help out, and we were extremely lucky that the Oundle International Festival team came to our rescue, along with local students. The beer went very well indeed, and although there was an unforeseen clash between the Goats milk icecreams and the cafe, it was another really good day, raising £700 in cash, and I'll leave Edward to tell you about the rest. Feedback was generally positive, the only negatives being, from the band, the flooring, and from the audience, the PA system: fortunately, with the two big donations, we have been able to knock both of these on the head: we have invested in some very good solid flooring panels which fit together to make a proper stage, and we are sharing a really good PA system with the audio luncheon club, so next year should be much more effective! The other issue is that the Sunday clashes with both Wimbledon and Silverstone - and Matt has to pay his staff double to be there.

To address all of these issues, we have decided to join forces with the Oundle International Festival next year. We will be one of the opening numbers on the first Saturday this time, with all the advantages of advertising, helpers, and hopefully, minibuses if we need them.

Now back to the opening of the North Lake Path. Along with canapes and prosecco, 30 of us saw the unveiling of the donors' board, which is now up in its oak casing at the start of the path by the bridge. The opening was staged alongside our first Made in Northants event, which we called the Kingfisher Food Festival. This was a Friends Initiative which was managed by the Park. It was a small start with 5 stalls, but lovely stuff for sale and it will now start to grow - not least because pictures of Tom Pursglove there are all over his website! It was another event which suffered from poor advertising, something we must focus on for the smaller events that we want to promote.

Moving on from this, we are still trying to set up a flower-arranging class. This was such a good idea - the four seasons of the Park and four flower arranging sessions, but our initial attempt at Easter suffered from too little advertising time. Our latest, the Christmas wreath is clashing with the same idea at Lyvedon and Foxtail Lily, and although we have emailed all the Friends to ask for their support, only one has signed up at the moment, so it may well not get off the ground. It is the same story with the 100 years of Farming initiative.

We are waiting for Ken Signs to deliver the roundels which we will use to identify the projects we have worked on around the park, and also orienteering plaques. There will also be a Friends' Corner Display which will go up in the corner behind me here to let visitors know what we do and how they can help.

I hope that you have received our new electronic Newsletter - for which many thanks to Edward and Mollie.

So looking forward now:

Firstly, please do go and do all your Christmas shopping at Waitrose in December - and put those green tokens in the Friends' box as it is 'our month'! This is for the Tots' play area to have the refurbishment it needs.

It took us some time at the last Committee meeting to decide what to have as our theme for the Waitrose application. The play area itself will be improved with a grant from Augean which is going to the Park itself, and Matt will tell you more about that in a bit. We talked about a mobility scooter - Matt has inherited one and we have undertaken to pay for its batteries and upkeep, but we have applied to the Bruce Wake Trust for funds for this and a second mobility scooter further to improve access for all. The other option we discussed was to have exercise stations in different places around the Park to attract more runners and fitness enthusiasts, but we have got no further with this idea. There has also been interest in a min Traction Engine rally in the Park.

The rangers are still pushed for space. The container has been a huge help, but really another is needed, as well as a safety fence around the compound because of health and safety. There is a big amount of money available for this sort of project, enhancing tourism and employment and outdoor activity in the European LEADER fund, which has to be paid out before Brexit kicks in, and we have tentatively initiated a project to go alongside this - to provide a covered performance space, with Matt's support, as well as the additional containers in the compound plus a secure palisade fence around that area - tailoring project specifically to LEADER funding - so we need to get going if we are to get anything.

We have been talking to Paul Bancroft Architects and RE Newton Joiner Contractors about a performance area for Music and Drama which will both enhance the education facilities by providing wet weather cover, and give greater privacy to the kingfisher itself as well as a better viewing platform to watch it.

We have resolved the Toilets issue - they are now being opened earlier so that early dog walkers can use them. The unauthorised entrance on Barnwell Road is impossible to resolve due to the inherent liability of any alternative solution - I have watched people of all ages leap merrily down into the chasm, and if the Park's risk assessment can't cover them, there is no way we can stop them.

And so now to the Marina – I would like to welcome Phil Sterne who is an enthusiastic supporter of the Friends and a major mover behind the cycling pathway system which is being integrated into this part of Northamptonshire - he has been involved in the development of the Marina. Although this could present opportunities for the Park, given the planning now in place it represents a potential threat to our future as it involves several restaurants which could threaten the Kingfisher Café and a large amount of free parking which will mean that our visitors will not need to come and pay their whack to the Park - as you know the majority of our funding comes from the parking fees, and we intend to work hard with the council to ensure that we do not lose out and to establish some form of compensation if we do.

Well, that's about it. Thank you for your support and your continued interest in the Park. I hope that this time next year finds us equally, or even more, successful, and with equally high hopes and aspirations.

Edward James