

Friends of Blythe Hill Fields Chair's Report – AGM – 8th October 2009

Our last AGM was on the 13th November 2008

Huge thanks to Judith, Zahra, Sydney, Harriet, Sam, Marcel, Ivor, Lara, George and that nice man from the River Pool Park Group who planted 9 trees on the Codrington Hill section on Sunday the 30th of November. The weather was foul but spirits were high when we saw what we had achieved. Now it is down to the Birds, Bees and Bugs.

There are 3 each of Crab Apple, Bird Cherry and Mountain Ash. 6 seem to be OK, 1 is a little off colour and 2 look sickly. If we are doing this again, we must pay more attention to physical support for the trees, mulching their bases and watering and maintenance.

Thanks to the Tree Council and Glendale for funding and support in kind and, of course to Lara without whom the project would never have got off the ground. Unfortunately, there were no under 16's there – except Sam – and he did his bit. We do need to work on our “young people involvement” aim. Anyone who can assist in developing that would be very welcome.

We had a decent turnout of volunteers on the last Saturday in January, who cleared growth around the hedging planted in previous years. In March, we held another session, when we focussed on filling in gaps with replacement planting and, again, clearing around the existing planting. The number of volunteers this time was down to 4, with Lara helping too. I worry that Glendale may reconsider their support for us in our quest for a better bio-diversified Fields if we are unable to muster more volunteers than this on a regular basis.

We might need to think in terms of fewer events and more publicity for them if we were to continue to deserve support for this important work. We need to bear this in mind when making plans for future events.

I think that we need to ensure that we maintain what we have already planted as much as plant new whips. If our objective was to create a hedge around the whole park, there remains a great deal to be done and I'd prefer to sustain what we've achieved so far rather than overreach ourselves.

Following damage to our planting by careless mowing and, probably, other means, Lara arranged some replacement planting along the boundary with Austin Close and Darrell made some restitution along the Montacute Road boundary. Gaps in what we thought we had achieved remain and we resolved to continue to fill these on future planting days. We agreed that Glendale's remedial promise had been fulfilled and we should move on.

Both we and Glendale need to get smarter if our hedge planting is to be a real success.

Judith represented us at the Lewisham Parks Conference on the 22nd of November. Their tour visited Sydenham Wells Park, Manor House Gardens and Chinbrook Meadows. The interactive water play area at SWP has brought more children into the park and we should bear it in mind for our playground. MHG has a very good play area and café. Both are worth a visit to see what's possible. The meadows area was not so impressive but this may be because it had received its autumn cut. Judith observed a lack of “meadow” in Chinbrook Meadows but Alan said it was very much worth a visit. If you compare what it's like now to its former condition, you can't fail to be impressed. My thanks to Judith for representing the Group at the Conference. This is good for our knowledge building and our profile within the Borough.

We agreed on a new logo. All of the competition entrants were contacted and Aoife Gilbride, the winner, was presented with a prize of some art materials provided by Sydney. My thanks to those all who gave us their ideas to use and to Sydney for his work in producing the finished article.

Gavin and Alan met with Chris Elder of City and Country Farmers' Markets. Chris felt that our site would not work well enough because there were no toilets, no mains water, the passing trade was not that good, no power available on site, not sufficient hard-standing for the stalls and the position of the site was not good enough. He thought that one-off events would work well providing the weather was dry. We decided to leave the idea aside for now.

Some preparatory work on a possible application to Awards for All for a trim trail has been done by Elizabeth and Alan. This would hopefully help alleviate childhood obesity and encourage children and adults to actively do some exercise. It became clear that we would need to produce more detailed financial accounts than we had attempted in the past so this had to be dealt with first. That work is now completed and we can look at this idea again. In considering that idea, we resolved that we should continue to try to improve the Fields on this kind of "piecemeal" basis rather than try to pull together one "all encompassing" scheme.

Liz James from the Crofton Park Local Assembly met with us to discuss a proposal from the Assembly involving their assistance in promoting the festival and their attendance at the Festival. Agreement to both led to a comprehensive leaflet delivery across the ward and a successful raising of the Local Assembly's profile at our June event.

Next LA meeting is on Wednesday 18th November at 7:30 pm at St Hilda's.

Initial ideas considered by us for applications to the Mayor's Fund included Trees, Toilets, Flower meadows, a level grass area, a garden area with good disabled access, a drinking fountain, a sculpture, a willow weave sculpture and a panorama view indicator.

We narrowed that down to three proposals. A plan to restock the Fields with new trees to replace those gone, dead or dying and one to create a wildflower meadow were approved. A third proposal to create an area more conducive to ball games was discussed. Several very serious concerns were raised but, most importantly, the technical viability of some of the more complex options involved was challenged and these will need to be resolved if those options are to be reconsidered. There was some support for the concept of a small area close to the playground where the existing grass might be improved without intrusion but there were those who felt existing spaces were adequate.

With help from Lara, Sydney and Alan worked up a bid to the Local Assembly for the Trees and Wildflower Meadow ideas. These won support at the Assembly meeting in late June and were fast tracked to Mayor and Cabinet by Sarah Cooper and the Assembly Support Team.

By July, our proposal for tree re-stocking and the wildflower meadow(s) had been approved at £17,025. Many thanks to the Crofton Park Local Assembly for their support.

Work has already started with the mowing and treatment of the ground for the meadows. We have a community event for the planting of 50 sq m of wildflower plugs planned for Saturday the 17th of October from 10:30.

Work continues on refining the plans for the Trees Project.

In April new signs and a new notice board were installed in the Fields. This is part of a pilot of new corporate branding of Lewisham facilities. Friends were given guidance on how to make their views known. We gave this feedback direct :-

"I am afraid that I can't report much enthusiasm for them. They are very clear and easy to read. But they look like interior signage rather than something appropriate

for outdoors, particularly a Park. They are a bit stark and clinical and not at all organic, green or natural. The sign at the Codrington Hill entrance seems to be "moisting up" inside. The noticeboard doesn't provide much space inside for notices. It certainly allows for fewer than the old board did. We could also do with a second noticeboard at one of the other entrances as there is a lot of "traffic" through the park to/from Brockley View and Montacute Road. We also wondered whether the Finger Post should point to Crofton Park rather than Brockley."

There is growing unhappiness with the fingerpost in the middle of the Fields and there are signs of deterioration and damage in a number of places. I will feed this back to Lewisham shortly.

Holding a Festival in 2009 was hugely spurred on when Councillor Scott was able to announce in November 2008 that our local Crofton Park Ward Councillors had agreed to make £1,400 available to us towards the costs of the event from the Ward Locality Fund. This gave us the confidence to press on with organising the event from an early stage knowing how about 50% of our costs were to be funded. The continuing generous support of the Crofton Park Councillors is much appreciated.

Key lessons from 2008 called for better control of access by vehicles, management of litter and recycling, provision of drinking water supplies and sufficiency of toilets and we seemed to succeed in all of these areas.

It was felt the Festival was a really big success again. Lots of families were spotted having picnics in the fields while the live music was playing and people shopped on the stalls. We had a record numbers of stallholders with a great blend of offerings. The event was more open than last year with more going on.

Thanks to:

Dawn for organising our poster and leaflet printing.

The Police Horses and their Officers. They went down very well.

The Firefighters of Forest Hill.

Lewisham Arts Festival Fund for financial support.

Mo and her family and friends who were joyously overrun by creative kids in the Craft Tent.

Nicholas Taylor, the family Barnes and Sam Kirk at Lewisham for top notch litter management and recycling.

Josh Franklin and Lewisham Community Sports.

The weather.

The Mayor, Sir Steve, for doing an official welcome.

And just everyone else who helped or attended.

And the Donkeys. Well, if we do them in 2010 we need more helpers and a proper rota of who's helping when or another way of providing them entirely.

Plug plants were up for sponsorship at £1 each for the new flower meadows. £105 was raised.

We seem to be interested in another event in 2010 and will discuss this later this evening.

The question of Charity applications for stalls came up in our preparations. Do we as a Group want to accept charities as stallholders at our events? We agreed that we were not actually against charities taking stalls as such. We remain concerned if the purpose of the stall is simply to fund raise without offering anything of interest at the same time. We will give more thought to this for 2010.

Following complaints about unsavoury behaviour under cover of the stand of trees in the N.E. corner of the fields Lewisham's Tree Managers carried out some thinning and pruning. Repairs to the boundary fence on Codrington Hill and to the barrier at Montacute Road were also completed.

Marcel and Mark continue to keep our web-site up-to-date on a regular basis keeping our members informed of our events and activities.

My thanks to Kylie for her invaluable help in compiling our minutes, broadcasting our messages, helping manage our finances and her general all-round enthusiasm and commitment.

My thanks to the Ackroyd Community Centre for the meeting room facility. (Declaration of interest – I am a Director here.) It's clean, bright and warm and if we can improve the soundproofing a bit – it'll be great!

In March it was confirmed that Blythe Hill Fields had been awarded £75,000 of PlayBuilder funding for the children's playground to be spent in the year 09/10. Many thanks to Kylie, Josh, India and Martin Hyde for their work on the bids made the previous September. The emphasis of the funding is for Focus on Play for 8-13 year olds which will encourage children's sense of play. We agreed that the best way of proceeding was to engage a landscape architect who would do the consultation, design, any planning applications and then manage the work as a whole package. There is a fee of 13% of the budget plus 2% to deliver involved but this option is preferred by the Dept for Children, Schools and Families who are providing the funds and is also preferred by GreenScene. We decided that we thought this would be the best way forward too.

Groundwork S E London were appointed and met with us in June to get the consultation process started. We talked about what should go into the playground and what might happen outside of the existing boundary. Fencing around the perimeter of the playground was mentioned to keep out dogs but instead of using the usual metal fencing, hedging could be used instead. It would be a softer alternative and less harsh on the eye. The idea of including a grass area for ball activities was discussed. Sarah organised some preliminary sketches and ideas which were on show at the Festival which she attended and obtained further views from park users.

In July, Suzanne from Groundworks handed out some designs for the new playground. In the feedback obtained at the Festival, it was suggested that there should be a natural approach to play within the new playground. 81 responded with completed questionnaires. There were plenty of ideas, some being ecological, trees and grassy areas, ropes, swings, climbing, the new equipment to be accessible for all abilities, water, plants (bamboos), somewhere to shelter, but the new playground should discourage anti-social behaviour and to enhance security for the parents whilst with their children.

As I write, we are awaiting the next revision of the plans which will be detailed and costed. And Groundworks have made an additional funding application to Marks and Spencer which could add some £20,000 to the budget. Result awaited. The completion deadline remains the beginning of April 2010.

Since October 2003 our purpose has been to achieve sustainable improvements and facilities in Blythe Hill Fields for the benefit of the whole community. We have a good head of steam up and I hope you will remain enthusiastic in continuing to promote the increased use and enjoyment of this essential open space.