

THE FRIENDS OF ROWNTREE PARK: REPORT ON THE YEAR ENDING OCTOBER 2018

The year 2017-2018 has been a busy and successful one, with many activities and one-off events. Membership is booming and the committee has expanded to 15 Friends who work to benefit the Park and its users. This report shows that the Friends are in a vibrant and financially-healthy state!

Financial status (see separate report)

The Friends' finances are in a good state, with our year-end bank balance nearly £3000 higher than last year. Apart from grants, income was largely from membership (£1425), duck food sales, Young Friends and (this year) the Scarecrow Trail. Nearly £8000 was spent on gardening, funded by £8575 from Growing Green Spaces (council grant money, c/o York CVS). Useful items such as a new event gazebo, feather flags for advertising and stools for the clubhouse were purchased from our own funds, along with the inevitable payments towards admin and insurance costs.

Membership

Our introduction of online payment has been very successful. Since November 2017, we have taken around 200 subscriptions via Paypal (of which about 50 renewals), bringing our total membership to an all-time high of 384 households. Paypal has also allowed for easy online donations.

Discounts at Friends' events and at the Reading Café are two attractions of membership, along with the monthly newsletters. In terms of recruitment, our Facebook 'events' always have 'How to Join' details within them, and we also raise awareness through the notice boards and by wearing labelled hi-viz jackets when we're working in the park.

Gardening

Our grant-funded gardening project has two aspects: maintaining a section of the park (the long borders and two side gardens), and bringing in more volunteers, with more varied backgrounds. Many other gardening tasks have also been carried out, besides the grant-funded work.

Many of the planned structural additions are now complete, with one side garden (the goose-free picnic garden) now very well-used by local people for gatherings. Raised beds have been purchased and planted up with annuals and herbs. We now have a good selection of hand tools. We still need to work on getting signs up in the borders, so that people strolling through are aware of the Friends' input.

On the other hand, it was a very hard summer for gardening, due to the late spring and the very dry summer. We are starting to understand which plants can survive and thrive in the context of a volunteer-managed garden. The focus here needs to be on robust perennials, and the identification and recording of successful plant types is an important consideration for the future.

The regular volunteer base for gardening has increased to around 25. In addition, we work closely with the council and with workplace groups (notably Aviva, Network Rail, Waitrose, TSYS and Portacabin), with students (via University of York Volunteering Service) as well as with one of the local primary schools. Regular gardening sessions are now twice weekly during the growing season.

However, although we had some fun social events with YUMI, the partnership did not deliver new gardening volunteers, and has therefore been concluded. More can be done on expanding our reach, but recruitment takes time and effort.

Litter-picking, snow wardens and other volunteers

The Friends created a new litter-picking team and recruited additional snow wardens, several of whom are new volunteers. We celebrated our volunteers' work by inviting them to a Christmas celebration in the café and a summer picnic in the picnic garden.

Contact with the council, library service and police

The Friends have a good working relationship with relevant areas of the council, notably this year, the dynamic Beki (environment officer). We were involved with discussions about the flat above the café; although we would have preferred the flat to continue to be true to its original purpose, we

hope that the park will benefit financially from income from its new incarnation, a holiday property. We continue to work closely with the Reading Café and with Explore (the library service), identifying areas where we can work together. We have been in regular contact with the local police, due to issues with a particular group of young people, and occasionally with the tennis club, about their plans to refurbish the pavilion.

Younger Friends

Over the year we have run 12 events, creating over 700 interactions with children and families. The high turnout is attributed to excellent weather, increased social media advertising and a reputation for affordable fun events. Amongst the events were den building, Rowntree Park Rocks, recycling, Brilliant Birds, the Legendary Easter Egg Hunt, wreath-making and woodland folk. The book 'The Lost Words' inspired a series of poetry workshops, led by local poets encouraging the children to explore a set of nature words. Videos of the poems have attracted interest on social media. Tickets were sold in advance for some of the more popular events, so that they ran more smoothly and the risk of lower numbers in poorer weather was lessened.

The all-new children's book themed Scarecrow Trail attracted hundreds of people, finding scarecrows throughout the neighbourhood and concluding at the Friends' tent in the park.

Nature Ninjas is a popular new after-school activity, encouraging primary-age children to explore nature. Based in the newly-redecorated 'clubhouse' below the café, activities included owl pellet dissection, nest building and den building. We will run this again in the summer term for Reception & KS1 children.

Very Young Friends continues to run successfully, with a core group of about 7 families (often joined by others) following seasonal, forest school style activities. In addition, we have hosted forest school sessions for Knavesmire Primary School. These run twice a month for Reception and as required for other age groups.

By charging modest amounts for most activities, and receiving a £300 grant from Aviva, the Younger Friends more than covered their running costs.

Music

Organising free musical events was a new activity for the Friends, this summer. It was very well received and successful, helped by the largely fantastic weather. Groups of young musicians from York Music Service showcased their work on Saturday mornings, and then local groups of various styles played on either Saturday or Sunday afternoons. In terms of audience numbers, the most popular was 'The Big Sing' so it looks like this is one to plan for, for next year.

Art

In the latter part of 2017, Gerard Hobson ran two lino printing workshops. This summer Nick Booth was our artist in residence and four art students from the University of York St John made some striking installations, assisted by staff from the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. A project to commemorate the end of World War I started at the end of summer 2018.

Wildlife

The Friends continue to work on deterring geese; goose droppings are the most common complaint about the park, so we feel we should take note of this. The geese are dispersed by a rota of volunteers visiting at dawn and dusk. However, the geese do still fly back, during the day. We are looking for additional sustainable and humane solutions.

In other wildlife news, vandals broke the wildlife pond railing and the beck-side path edgings, over the summer, but we will have a repair session soon. On the positive side, the Friends installed two owl boxes and a four-room floating duck hotel, took part in the 'Big Garden Birdwatch', as well as recruiting a bird-counting volunteer. Kingfishers and foxes have been regularly seen during our dawn visits, and the mallards have had a great breeding year. Our duck food packets remain very popular with visitors, and donations towards the costs of this provide a useful income stream for other wildlife activities. The year ahead will see more efforts to help maintain a diverse wildlife.

We hope you agree that 2017-18 was a great year for the Friends; here's to the future!