**AGM 2021 7.30-9.30**

**Chair – Aims and this year’s theme: ‘Inclusion’**

It has been another successful year for us in meeting our aims of enhancing, promoting and protecting the park. There is always more to do but we’re celebrating tonight what we have achieved and thanking those involved for giving up their time, expertise and energy.

I want to thank our fantastic committee and say how great it has been to have more new blood in the team. We’ve been joined by Jess Ryan who focuses on community engagement, Sally Harman as secretary and David Lee as our webmaster. David has also helped to fill the gap left by Rita Evans who has stepped down as our membership secretary. Thank you Rita for your contribution and for drawing the neglected Love Seat to our attention.

And, of course, thanks to our Wednesday morning volunteers who have provided over 1000 hours of gardening this year. So lots to celebrate what we’ve achieved together and this year I am going to take **‘Inclusion’** as my theme for the report.

Let’s start with the awards. You don’t win these awards unless you work in partnership with the stakeholders – the Council’s Parks and Countryside team and Denne Neighborhood Council. And you can’t win these unless your approach is inclusive. - welcoming to all and involving community participation which is why the Friends are so important.

Last week the Park won a Green Flag for the second year running. New this year were the awards from the South and South East in Bloom competition. Silver Gilt in Large Park category – so we are aiming for Gold next year and ‘Thriving’ for ‘Its Our Neighbourhood’ – could we achieve ‘Outstanding’?

The £60 entrance fee was one of the best investments the Friends have made. Sorin Cariaman, the Council’s new Parks Operations Manager and also an In Bloom judge, suddenly managed to get things done in the park which we requested repeatedly – such as removal of dead trees. On top of these improvements, at the Awards photo shoot, we were joined by Councillors Roger Noel and Tony Hogben, who witnessed first hand the rat problem: several rats made an appearance and we didn’t even say cheese. The Councillors have committed to addressing the problem that mars people’s experience of the garden. £60 well spent.

I’m now going to report on our achievements against our aims of enhancing, promoting and protecting the park. I’m also going to be announcing some of our own awards tonight. These are to people who have made a difference to the park and who aren’t part of our fabulous committee and Wednesday gardening team.

**Enhance**

* ‘Sense the Change’ has been our big project of the year and we have raised over £12,000 to help restore the garden.
* In August we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the garden with an event and display of the project. Alison Farrell, who raised most of the money was unable to join us – hence the thank you photo.
* As I’m sure you know the garden was designed to be inclusive. Alison also spent lots of time consulting with groups with additional needs so that the garden builds on its history, for example meeting the needs of older people and those with dementia.
* We haven’t yet spent all the money or addressed all the requests. Some are beyond us such as the need for better toilet provision and for repairing pathways. But the sundial is repaired, more roses have been planted, and last week the refurbished love seat was finally installed. The love seat was funded by National Lottery Community funding and we are now launching a selfie photo competition ‘Love at First Seat’ to bring the garden to the attention of the wider community.
* The first award tonight goes to Mark Baldwin, the gardener for PHSG who goes above and beyond his 2 days a month contractual hours. He donates his own time, seeds and plants to the garden and helped us create some guides to the planting.
* Mark’s colourful beds were joined this year by our own display of hollyhocks, cosmos and zinnia. A creative solution to two empty beds. The cutting back of the yew hedge had revealed how neglected these had become with gaps and misshapen shrubs past their sell by date. Our enthusiastic Wednesday team cleared them ready for replanting but only to find the plants were unavailable.
* Thanks to David Hide, our horticultural director, for masterminding the solution and for sowing hundreds and hundreds of seeds. Thanks also to our volunteers for pricking out, planting, watering, staking, deadheading and maintaining such a stunning display. Visitors have loved the colourful flowers and more colour in the park is a frequent request so we’d like to build on this success – perhaps spread the love to other areas of the park.
* The Wednesday morning volunteers have done a fantastic job all year – not just in the Sensory Garden where over the next 3 weeks they will be planting up the two beds for winter colour and to showcase planting for climate change.
* They have donated over 1000 hours to enhancing the park – planting, weeding, pruning and clearing paths. One of things as Chair I am most proud of is how inclusive this team is. They welcome everyone to the group. Since the pandemic several people have joined because they felt isolated, or for their mental well being or because unable to work or facing a long summer holiday with little to fill it. We continue to build bridges with social prescribers, the YMCA and youth justice – progress is slow but we strongly believe that gardening can create opportunities and wellbeing. Overall, our numbers have doubled even though we have had to say goodbye to volunteers such as John who got his dream job working for a nursery and Sue, one of the founding members of the team - we miss both her and her cakes!
* It is noticeable how since the pandemic more people have wanted to get involved in volunteering and this is also true of companies. A team from Balfour Beatty Rail Depot spent a day clearing at the pond and we’re giving an award tonight to Next Phase Recruitment for their ongoing support – sending a team of 4-6 once a month to join the volunteers. Their energy is impressive.
* Litter doesn’t enhance a park. In June we ran a litter-picking event – thanks to Ros Shiel for getting us some good PR on this and launching our litter-picking heroes awards. Our awards are going to Sarah Ciampa our youngest champion, to Vincent and his carer Ellesha, to the Strawford Centre who have litter-picked for years and to TSB who do weekly litter patrols in the town and park. Mandy Ayling, John Bartlett and Michelle Kingscott are also highly commended.
* The Council also does much to enhance the park. Of course, we always want them to do more and finally some of our aspirations have been listed in the recent copy of the Management Plan. We have argued this needs to include projects for the mid term so that they can be costed – which is a pre-curser to us being able to raise funds. Notable enhancements this year are the dredging of the pond and the decision to turn a section of the park into meadow grass. This may have upset one dog-walker but we are very supportive of using more of the park to be inclusive for wildlife not just for humans. Stefen Hepburn has done a baseline survey of the meadow this year so we can assess whether the range of glasses and flowers supporting insects and birds helps to improve biodiversity here.

**Promote** (and educate)

* I’ll now turn to our second overall aim which is to promote the park. It may seem like we don’t need to do much as if you go to the park on a Saturday morning and it is heaving. It’s great to have park run back – a very inclusive event – and we’re still pushing for a better running path which would be great for other park users too. We need to make sure that the park meets the needs of a wide range of people. That’s why it will be so good when the skate park is finally refurbished next year.
* Getting back to live events has been great. We enjoyed the PHSG event and the very successful Shelleython. The Friends facilitated the Poets Corner ‘stage’ and hats off to David Hide who is the Chair of the Shelley Memorial project. Jess Ryan has been making a difference as our new community engagement director – she got going immediately by organising our on-line quiz and has been helping to make all our events consultative and inclusive with imaginative polls and activities. The recent Kingslea Music Fest was a great event and Stefen played an ace by creating a fabulous spin wheel game about our target species which proved very popular with the children. Engaging schools is a challenge when teachers are so overstretched, but this event helped us to connect with a wide range of people. We were delighted to hear the school used our tree trail for an assignment during the pandemic. The children had to take a photo of themselves at each of the 8 trees.
* David Lee as our new webmaster has really helped us to bring in more new Friends – and in a more diverse way since previously we were heavily reliant on people signing up at events so there were lots of people we weren’t reaching. David has made it easy to sign up direct from the website and has given our website a fresh look with links to more up-to-date news. We now have over 350 Friends.
* Bianca Brace has continued to build a following and now has over 1300 on Instagram. Instagram helps us to reach out to younger people in the community. Bianca is taking a break to focus on being a new Mum. We’re delighted that Ben and Bianca will add to our committee’s inclusivity by being representative new parents too – a demographic that struggles to find time to volunteer. We wish you both all the best.
* In promoting what we do, we promote the Park. Ros Shiel has been using her PR skills to push interest in us and our events and we have featured in a ‘Sounding Out Horsham podcast with Chesworth Farm and in the Visit Horsham film. Luna and Annalees from Whistlestop Arts who made the film are here tonight. They came to us with a proposal for a second project ‘a ‘Virtual Day Trip to Horsham Park’ for people unable to visit the park. They will be telling us all about this innovative inclusive project which our £200 contribution helped to deliver – they also deserve one of our awards for promoting inclusivity.
* Another successful initiative to promote the park has been our photographic project. Ian Nicol, who richly deserves an award for creating a photographic record of the park during the year. You saw a small selection of photos as you arrived. He has created a huge archive of photographs – we have work to do to maximise their use and we now have a wonderful set of images for promoting the park.
* We have also done further work to promote and educate on our six target species. Stefen has completed the set of beautiful posters and created the spin wheel activity we can use at events. We did some children’s webinars on supporting hedgehogs, bees and birds in spring. Thanks to Ros Shiel and Bianca Brace for the on-line Kinder Living Show and Ben Brace with Nigel Langridge did an adult webinar on surveying trees in the Park.

**Protect**

* This brings me to our third aim – protecting the Park.
* The tree Survey webinar was the start of recording the Ancient and Veteran trees in the Park so they are listed on the Ancient Woodland Inventory – this makes them a material planning consideration should anyone want to develop the park. There used to be a total of two veteran and three notables listed in the inventory for the park - a misleading picture of the asset we have for wildlife, for carbon sequestration, for mitigation against flooding etc. We have done 2 survey sessions with a great group of volunteers who are keen to do more in the Spring so more is being added to this map all the time. We’d then like to go on to survey them for their ecosystem services value. Thanks to Ben Brace, our tree expert, for leading this and helping with the wider Green Spaces Forum project which aims to map the trees across the whole Town. If you have a tree in your garden that you want surveyed just let us know.
* We have been developing a relationship with Sussex Gardens Trust. As well as giving us a small grant their committee visited in the summer for a tour of the park. They were enthusiastic about the potential of the park and want us to get it included in the Historic Environment Record. This will be another means to protecting the park for future generations to enjoy.
* We were hoping by now to have made some progress on protecting the Park under the Fields in Trust scheme but a change in the Leisure and Culture cabinet member put us back to square 1 and the ongoing dispute over the Local Plan makes this low on the new cabinet member, Roger Noel’s priority list. There is much work to do to protect the park and other vital green spaces in the Town and we are meeting with Roger Noel next week to start discussions.
* Last year we all learned the value of the park for our physical and mental wellbeing. All people deserve equal access to it and to feel welcome here. It is also vitally important for social cohesion and a sense of community and that is why it is critical that we retain the 60 acres so that there is space for different people to enjoy the park in different ways and for wildlife to flourish alongside us.

**Our own organisation**

Finally, a note on our organisation. We have been a Community Interest Company for a year and I’m sure this structure and the excellent financial controls, have made it easier for us to raise funds. Thanks to Barbara Hammond for this. Barbara has also spent time helping us to get essential policies in place – not the most exciting thing we have done this year but good to have our house in order for data protection, safeguarding, health and safety etc. Thanks to Barbara and the committee for their hard work on this.

To close with my theme on Inclusion. Equal access to green space is a big national issue. There have been a flurry of reports on this. Parks groups across the country, like ours, are looking at the challenge of increasing a wider participation in their activities. It is not surprising that many volunteer groups comprise mainly of people old enough and financially secure enough not to have to work but that doesn’t make for inclusivity or diversity. I think we are very lucky that on our committee, we have a group of people with diverse talents and who contribute their time and energy, most of us alongside work commitments. Some of us might be towards the end of our careers and others only at the start, but that diversity of age and perspectives is important. A key question we often discuss is whether we are being sufficiently inclusive in our approach. Could we do more? How do we involve those members of the community who might feel excluded from the park, excluded from our events or who may have difficulty in getting their voices and needs heard. At the end of the day, wide community involvement will be best for the community’s health and social cohesion, best for the park and best for protecting it for future generations.