

The Friends of Barnet Countryside Centre : Chair's Report, July 2014

Significant progress has been made in many areas of the Centre's work over the past year. Although construction of the new Environment Centre has been delayed, necessary preparations have been completed, and educational work and volunteer activities have continued.

Educational work

One of our primary aims is to provide activities for local young people to educate and inspire them in appreciating the natural world. This year there have been over 1300 children on school visits, including a number from schools that have not visited us before.

An additional activity undertaken by sixteen schools was the Picnic Lunch Challenge. The idea behind this was to increase the children's environmental awareness by encouraging them to bring 'waste-free' lunches to the centre, and to sort any left-overs into 'compostable', 'recyclable' or 'landfill'.

During the winter months, when school visits are less frequent, Annabel conducted ten 'outreach' sessions with primary schools, to help them with their own environmental education.

We had three year 10 students from Mill Hill County School on Work Experience, and they enjoyed themselves a great deal, learnt a lot and proved useful helpers to the Centre.

Following successful visits by two Secondary schools – St. James' and Henrietta Barnett - contact was made with four other local schools and exploratory meetings are to be held with teachers from the Totteridge Academy and Queen Elizabeth's School for Boys.

A team of twelve 16/17 year-olds will be volunteering on 7th September as part of the National Citizen Service programme, 'The Challenge'.

The Reserve

The site now looks very different from its appearance last year. Preparations for the new building have included the cutting down of several trees – including the eucalyptus – and the erection of a reptile-proof fence around the construction region. This has reduced the available area for visits, but good use has been made of some 'arisings' – an outdoor classroom has been fashioned from seats cut from the eucalyptus trunks, and the huge piles of chippings have been carefully distributed on paths all round the site, making them much easier to walk on in all weathers. Work on the meadow has included more shrub and bramble clearance and the construction of large compost containers which are already working well. A Hazel copse is being developed on the West path, to provide an additional outdoor learning resource.

Monitoring of wildlife activity on the reserve continues – there is a weekly butterfly survey, and the use of an action-activated camera in different locations has enabled us to observe unobtrusively.

We had some very strong storms this winter, but previous investment in an arborological survey and subsequent surgery meant that damage to our trees was minimal.

The water leaks that plagued us last year continued, at considerable expense to Noah's Ark, and so an alternative supply pipe has been installed from the Main Gate meter all the way into our building.

This has two advantages – there is no longer the constant anxiety about another leak developing, and also the lead pipes have been completely bypassed.

Volunteers

We have an expanding number of volunteers who come along to the weekly Monday afternoon or monthly Sunday sessions – there are now 172 on our contact list, and 56 of them contributed an outstanding 1235 hours of their time to support our activities. Some new volunteers have specific interests and knowledge, which have proved particularly helpful in improving our work.

Areas of work performed by volunteers this year include : Running the website, opening and closing for school visits, Memory Stick production, Classroom Displays, Photographic Surveying, Tool Maintenance, Butterfly Monitoring, dead hedging, ditch clearance, pond maintenance, keeping the paths clear and laying chippings, plus of course all the day-to-day boring stuff like keeping clear access, ensuring the classroom and kitchen are clean and tidy, and, for the trustees, attending meetings!

We are very aware of our Health and Safety responsibilities towards all visitors to the Centre, and two volunteers who attended a First Aid at Work course led a 'trickle-down' session on a Saturday morning.

Communication

Our website is updated regularly, and initiates many enquiries and contacts. There are links to a wide range of topics, as well as reports of recent activities and planned events. A monthly e-newsletter, "Keeping in Touch", has updates on volunteering opportunities, reminders of working party sessions and BCC events.

Events

A variety of events are a very important part of the Centre's work – not just because they contribute to our funds, but because they increase local families' awareness of our work and help us meet many of our aims. However, with the prospect of work starting on our new building being 'imminent' for much of the year, we did not hold our customary Spring and Summer open days.

The main event this year was the annual 'Make a Difference' day, with this year's theme 'Nurture Nature' – a variety of activities including a significant amount of work being done on the meadow. In October we held a 'Monsters, Bones and Bonfires' event – over 60 children, with their parents or carers, came along. A storm the previous night meant that the Reserve had to closed off, but the organisers and volunteers showed their adaptability by setting up games and scooter trails in the hard-standing areas.

In January we held a very successful Quiz evening in Pennefather Hall – as well as having a most enjoyable time, over £1000 was raised towards the Centre's funds.

Over 20 early-risers came along to the May Dawn Chorus session – 26 species were heard!

A Bat evening is planned for August.

It would not have been possible to run any of these without the willing support of so many trustees and volunteers, for which we are very grateful.

Funding

As you can see from the Accounts, we raise money in a variety of ways, but we are particularly grateful for the donations from two bodies, the Hadley Trust and John Lyon's charity.

Centre Manager : Annabel Foskett

This is the second year of contract work that Annabel does for us in the role of Centre Manager, primarily to promote our environmental education programme but also to help organise us with the reserve work. Regular management meetings are held to receive reports on her activities and to guide her work. Annabel promotes, organises and leads our school visits and continues to get very positive feedback from visiting teachers. Two trustees have met with Annabel to support her in producing lesson plans for the various sessions she offers. She is working on and modifying seasonal task lists for the reserve.

We are grateful for the enthusiasm and energy Annabel gives the centre.

London Wildlife Trust

Our long-term planning is coordinated with LWT. Their North London Area Manager, Jo Mould, is leading the discussions with Noah's Ark regarding the details of the lease/licence that will be arranged with them for the use of the new building and our responsibilities for the reserve – Noah's Ark have sent a copy of the commercial lease to LWT, and it is now with their solicitors.

The Barnet branch of LWT have held two of their meetings at the Centre, and we have profited from being able to borrow tools from their store in Mill Hill.

The new Environment Centre

As mentioned previously, Noah's Ark have encountered considerable difficulties with making progress with building our new Environment Centre. After overcoming many planning hurdles and having agreed detailed plans with ourselves and London Wildlife Trust, estimates for the work specified were too high. New contracts on a 'Design and Build' basis are currently being explored by the Noah's Ark Trustees, and the latest plans are to start building in September and to complete by March 2015.

Dick Elms, Chair of the Trustees