

FoPH AGM 2018

Chairman's report

The Chairman's report starts with an apology to those who may have been expecting a new face this year after my statement at last year's AGM about retiring. As you can see I'm still here, and with the excellent support of our Committee, and in particular John, our secretary, hope to be able to continue for a while yet.

Once again we have seen record numbers of visitors to the Heath and while this is to be welcomed in benefiting the well-being of everyone it does mean we have to be even more conscious of the balance between wildlife, habitat management and accessibility for visitors.

For some weeks now our volunteers have been considering the summer bracken control. You may remember the wonderful heather show last summer in the area just north of the stream walk and dry hedge. This was a direct result of a request for help to the SDNPA and their volunteers to clear that area of bracken earlier in the summer. They will continue to help us again this year with an additional cut later in the season to further improve the regeneration of heather there.

Our own volunteers continued to hand pull bracken from the more scattered heather clumps and cut it on the south facing bank close to the Little School. The Town Council again funded our request for Peter Cains to cut the more open and accessible areas with his tractor and topper. My thanks to Alf Smallbone and Les Bowden for organising all of this and to our loyal band of volunteer helpers for seeing it through.

Last August saw the arrival of our new and slightly larger equipment store which has made storage easier and much more flexible. Mark Greef kindly led those volunteers who turned out to lay the foundations for the new container.

Our stall at the Secrets of the Heath event in late August proved very attractive to both young and old who participated in the shaving horse and draw knife activity kindly provided by Oliver Young. Although we always hope to sign up new members it is the opportunity to talk to visitors about our aims and activities that is also so important.

The arrival of Autumn saw us commence with the winter programme of conservation and control of woodland spread. Volunteers removed saplings from the open areas and woodland margins using our recently purchased and ever popular tree poppers. There was also a huge amount of effort put in to removing the previous year's dead bracken fronds from the area opened up by the Park volunteers in the summer enabling them to have an easier cut this year.

The season was completed with the establishment of a mixed hedge along the south side of the Heath Road car park. We hope this will both screen the shipping container and tidy up the boundary to the car park and, in due course replace the decomposing dry hedge. Of course I must not forget our most enjoyable Xmas supper

at the Plump Duck which has now become quite a tradition for our volunteers and Committee members.

You may remember that last year we worked with the Town Council in formulating both a Memorandum of Understanding and a revised Constitution in expectation of it helping mutual understanding and a better working relationship. All concerned had high expectations of its success, however in practice, it is clear more work is needed in trying to find a common vision. This has been somewhat complicated by the development of a new management plan. In hindsight it is clear that this management plan needs to be revised, and I understand that this is planned for the coming year and will hopefully also consider our suggestions; I would particularly like to thank Melanie Oxley for her expert work on our recommendations for the plan.

The Town Council continue with their plans for the development of the pond through the bank improvement scheme. I have been recording rain fall and water levels each month since September in order to have some measure of the rise and fall of water levels over the year. This information might be useful if we experience a reduction in average rain fall due to climate change.

Members might be also interested to know that my monitoring of neighbouring badger setts has identified that badgers are back on the Heath and happily excavating new homes in at least three places. This knowledge together with a wildlife survey to be done as part of the new management plan should give us a much better idea of how the Heath is being used by wildlife and guide us in the best way to manage the Heath for wildlife as well as visitors.

I would like to finish by thanking our hard working Committee and volunteers, also thanking our members for continuing to support us. Thanks also to the Town Council for their support and encouragement and the use of the Rose Room for our AGM and the Council Chamber for our meetings

Richard Warton

Chairman

15th May 2018