

Friends of Eaton Park, Annual Report 2020

Introduction

This year's annual report covers the first year of COVID 19. The March lockdown immediately triggered cancellation of the city council's band programme and all Friends' events. We moved committee meetings to Zoom and met when we could, to garden, do litter picking, and cycling activities. We also met in the summer to discuss and help shape the future of Eaton Park Community Centre.

The park was a life-saver for many. People turned to it as a safe place to meet friends, to exercise and to enjoy fresh air and nature. Pathway edges became threadbare as walkers and runners politely made space for each other. Car parks grew busy. There was some litter and some graffiti, but the park's carefully honed self-care mechanisms swung into action.

Volunteers from the Friends, and many ordinary members of the public too, picked up litter supplementing morning litter sweeps by Norwich Norse workers. Throughout lockdown the Friends reported graffiti as it happened and city council staff removed it, often in 24 hours. We celebrated the beauty of the park through Facebook posts reaching thousands of households every week.

Friends of Eaton park helps set the tone for the park, showing people how much their park is cared for and subtly encouraging people to feel that they too can help make a positive difference and help Eaton Park thrive.

Eaton Park Community Centre

Friends of Eaton Park were invited by Community Development Officers from Norwich City Council to take on the running of Eaton Park Community Centre. The centre opened in the 1980s and many founder members stayed on the committee until covid led to the a mass resignation.

The Friends have always had a close working relationship with the Community Centre. For many years, bookings officer Liz Davies represented the centre on the Friends committee, and the Friends provided an online-presence for the community centre through a dedicated page on their website.

Chair Stuart Beard and vice chair Helen Mitchell had several meetings, including with city council and community centre representatives, and in July, the Friends devoted its committee meeting to discussing the future of the community centre.

We decided that running a community centre is a different kind of activity to helping a park thrive, and our small group could become over-stretched. Shortly afterwards Stuart and Helen came up with a solution which we hope will nurture natural synergies. Stuart Beard stepped down as Chair of the Friends took on the role of Chair of the community centre, and began recruiting a new committee. As vice chair, Helen took on the role of acting chair of Friends of Eaton Park.

Stuart will continue on the Friends of Eaton Park Committee, where he is cycling champion. Helen is helping the community centre with communications and PR. The Friends' Facebook page is being used to raise the profile of the newly re-opened Community Centre.

Schools, report from Pat Garner

Each year the schools group works with a single class of year 3 children (ages 7 to 8). This year's programme of six activities ranging across environment, arts and care for the park, was cancelled apart from one very successful litter picking session.

The group comprised Linda Chapman, Pat Garner (coordinator), Maggie Knox, Ruth Pearson, Lynn Preston and Susan Yallop. It met twice, including for a 'team-building' litter picking session.

To find out more or to join the group please contact Pat Garner: patgarnerpat84@gmail.com

Gardening Group, report from Sarah Scott

We continued our highly successful participation in the Growing Communities Project at City College. In January as we were given 300 daffodil bulbs and planted them on the slope above the West car park where they were in bloom by early March. In early February Sarah Scott collected seeds, compost and seed trays from City College to start off seedlings for the scheme in her greenhouse.

There were two sessions in February and March, working on beds near the Rotunda and in North Park Woods and the adjacent small orchard. Activities included weeding and mulching fruit trees, cutting back ornamental grasses and planting up perennial wallflowers, Tradescantia, lavender and hardy Geraniums from City College.

We were delighted to welcome new members to these early sessions though covid meant we then had to cease meeting as a group. During the months of early lockdown volunteers took it in turns to water, weed, and deadhead roses in the rose garden. By midsummer the flowerbeds looked great.

Group sessions re-started in early July – with a covid risk assessment in place for safe-working. By this point we had agreed to have just one 'formal' group session a month (the first Thursday) and to drop the third Thursday session – though individuals could arrange to do simple tasks such as deadheading roses, alone or in pairs.

We continued group sessions in August and September, and Sarah delivered the seedlings she had raised to City College, receiving in return Sedums, Day Lilies, Red Hot Pokers, Armeria, Aubrieta and Lavender. We planted these and some of our own plants and seedlings, at our October session. Frustratingly, we were under lockdown again, during November.

The December easing of lockdown coincided with the first Thursday and eleven volunteers planted bulbs from Growing Communities; Narcissus canaliculatus in beds near the ponds and the café raised beds, Narcissus 'Sweetness' round the cork oak on the slope at the end of the West carpark, and red tulips in planters at the Community Centre.

We were extraordinarily lucky to get this tiny 'window' of opportunity – lockdown temporarily eased, receiving the bulbs AND having plenty of volunteers. We finished the year on a high!

To find out more or to join the group please contact Ruth Pearson: hrp4734@gmail.com

Cycling

Eaton Park is a natural community hub for cycling. It is used by all ages, from young children learning to cycle, to training for adults, cycle speedway, BMX, and as part of many people's daily commute. The Friends are also keen to encourage more people to travel to the park by bike. 2020 was the year the Friends stepped up their commitment to cycling.

Chair, Stuart Beard developed a new partnership with Cycling UK through local officer Andrea Auburn, and later Richard Andrews. Through Cycle UK he obtained a grant of £1500 to spend on cycle development including attending a course to become a certified 'Ride leader'.

A Friday evening in March saw the friends co-host an early evening glow ride event – 'Pushing Ahead'. Ten volunteers, and some 100 attendees of all ages, had great fun decorating bikes and riding around in the dark. The café stayed open for and provided hot chocolate for everyone, funded by 'Pushing Ahead'. There was a great community feeling.

Community bike rides were held at the start and end of the year. Around an hour long, rides typically include a coffee break. Sadly covid put paid to other community bike rides and Dr Bike sessions.

To be in the loop for Dr Bikes sessions and community bike rides, or get involved in Friends' cycling activities contact stuartbeard@ntlworld.com

Woodlanders

We held our first self-led group session in Bluebell Wood. Four of us had completed a training course with The Conservation Volunteers, qualifying us to lead outdoor sessions. Nine volunteers spent a couple of hours in Bluebell Wood clearing brambles and saplings, and a splinter group of three went litter picking. Covid forced the cancellation of all other planned activity.

To find out more or to join the group please contact Helen Mitchell, helenmitchell@inthefields.co.uk

Park Infrastructure

The Friends paid to install a bench to remember Andy Anderson. Located on the left of the central avenue, near the Rotunda, the inscription says: "For Andy Anderson who told the tale of Norwich's great parks". We facilitated installation of a bench by Enrique Matamala, working closely with Maggie Fink from Norwich City Council. Christine Wilson, one of our three life members, and previous Chair of the Friends, paid for a bench to remember her brother.

A suggestion from local woman, Ellen Futter, suggested a need for a bench near the North Park Avenue entrance, between the play area and the meadow. Ellen and others arriving on this side of the park, will be able to rest there before setting off round the park. The Friends are paying for the new bench which should be installed in spring 2021.

Membership

For the year January to December 2020 we had 88 members. This comprised three life members, 71 renewals and 14 new members. Considering the pandemic this compares well with 92 in 2019.

Our committee was Stuart Beard (Chair, and then ordinary member), Julia Corney, Pat Garner (Membership Secretary), Judith Lubbock, Helen Mitchell (Vice Chair and then acting Chair), Ruth Pearson, Sarah Scott (Honorary Secretary) and Sabine Virani (Treasurer).

In June, Judith Lubbock resigned from the committee, citing lockdown as having made her reflect on the need to have more time for herself and her family, especially as she continues with her council work. Around the same time, we welcomed Jane Saunders, onto the committee.

We met in January, March, May, July, September and November. The AGM, which was due to take place in April, was cancelled due to covid.

Julia Corney took on the task of collating Friends' hours and in 2020, despite covid, the Friends we did over 400 hours voluntary work, gardening, litter picking, doing photography, social media posts, writing newsletters and more.

Income generation

Income was confined to membership fees and donations.

Partnerships

This year we only managed one session with Good Gym. We were unable to work with Norwich Fringe but made plans to pick up again with them in early 2021.

In late November 2020 we began discussions with Steve Hitcham of Good Gym about becoming a partner in his new venture – EPIC Norfolk (Exercising People in Communities). Together with Steve we came up with the idea of weekly hour-long sessions for a group of children from Bluebell School, volunteering, discovering and learning about Eaton Park.

The children live next to the park, but not all of them use it that much. The idea is to promote individual and community wellbeing through working together on simple activities, and the resulting conversations and connections.

Communications

With activities limited for much of the year it was in the main Facebook, where posts were regularly viewed by 7000+ in a week, that provided the most significant on-going communications for the park. The Friends' received five newsletters and we obtained excellent press coverage for the Community Centre in the Evening News. Eaton and Cringleford Gazette also continued to cover the park, with photos from Stuart Beard and words from Helen Mitchell.

Conclusion

It's been a year when many things were cancelled, but also one in which some very good things happened. We had time to give proper thought to the future of the community centre, and we helped shape its new management set up, embedding from the start close working with the Friends.

The committee adapted well to zoom. We now share information before the meeting through email updates so that meetings can focus on discussions and decision making. They often take less than an hour.

The gardening group really came into its own, growing in numbers, and in confidence in the areas of the park we have made our own. Growing Communities – now source of many of our plants – is an inspiring partnership between Norwich City Council, City College and community groups such as the Friends. This partnership, along with new connections – with Cycling UK and with EPIC Norfolk – show partnership working to be at the heart of what we do.

Warm thanks to our Friends and partners

Edward Bolton, Louise Curtis, Maggie Finck, Max Griffiths, Simon Meek and Suzanne Parkinson, (Norwich City Council), Cllr Matthew Packer, Richard Andrews and Andrea Auburn (Cycling UK) Terry Bane (Norwich in Bloom), Ian Couzens (our auditor), Alan Dawson and Andy Brazil (Butterfly Conservation), Brian Dermott (Band Coordinator), Chris Evans (Norwich Park's Tennis), Matt Davies (Norwich Fringe), Pam Frost (Growing Communities), Becky Harris (PCSO), Ryan Hughes (Active Norfolk), Rob Howe, David Potter and the team at Eaton Park Café, Alex Hurrell (Just Eaton and Cringleford), Debbie Murray (The Conservation Volunteers) Duncan Reekie (Bluebell School), Mark Rhodes (NDSME), Stella Sheldon (Age UK Norwich), Martin Skipper (East of England Apples and Orchards Project), Rob and Ruth Trown (Eaton Park Crazy Golf), Michael Ottaway, and Norwich Norse Environmental's grounds team.

Helen Mitchell, Acting Chair of Friends of Eaton Park, April 2020