

FRIENDS OF QUEEN'S WOOD

Chair's report to Annual General Meeting 12 July 2023

This last year has been one of a return to something like normality after the disruption and strains imposed by Covid. But it feels like a new normality. This spring the Wood looked resplendent after the abundant rains earlier in the year and the paths were as muddy as ever! But underlying it all has been a sense that we have entered a new era. The effects of the trampling of the Covid era are still very visible. These have been compounded by the lingering impact of last year's long, hot, dry summer, which already seems destined to be repeated this year. Certainly we have been alerted to the realities of climate change and this must now shape our perspectives ever more. We in the Friends have always prided ourselves as the eyes and ears of the Wood on behalf of the Council and this role is going to be ever more important as we face the future. It is not just a matter of dealing with current problems, whether by ourselves or reporting them to the Council. It is a matter of thinking more deeply about changes in the Wood and how we need to factor these into our thinking about its future, whether the short or long term.

One striking difference between this last year and the two previous ones, is that we have been no longer preoccupied with the proposed **flood mitigation scheme**. In May of last year the scheme had included some suggestions of ours that improved the scheme and reduced, but did not eliminate, our objections. Importantly joint working had started properly with the Council under the principle of co-production. Then abruptly the Council told us the scheme as then was did not produce sufficient benefits and that it was going back to the drawing board. They then ceased any meaningful communication until this May. Then, after many months of pressure, they confirmed that they were no longer proceeding with the scheme in its original guise. In doing this they acknowledged the key role that our own work on the scheme played in this decision. We do not know just what works they are now considering but it has been said that there will be little or no effect on the Wood. This outcome was a major achievement for us and many thanks to all our members in the support you have given us along the way. It has been a long, hard and sometimes frustrating slog but well worthwhile! This is not of course to say that the issue is dead. The need to protect properties in the immediate vicinity of the Wood and beyond remains as cogent as ever and we shall continue to work with the Council to find a solution while safeguarding the ecological and amenity value of the Wood.

The state of the **paths** has long been a sore point. At present they are not good enough to enable visitors to move around the Wood in safety and comfort. The health of the Wood also depends on visitors not unduly straying off the paths and thereby compacting or eroding the soil. We have long lobbied for something to be done. The Council has now confirmed that a strategy and design for significant improvements will be drawn up, and that the Friends will be closely involved. As yet there is no indication of a timetable or agreed funding but it seems to us that a comprehensive improvement programme could stretch to several years. In the meantime there should be limited repairs to some of the worst sections of the paths.

The drafting of the new ecological **management plan** for the Wood remains a work-in-progress, the term of the last one having expired over two years ago. Ordinarily the delay might have been of concern, but it does reflect the complexity of the issues. The plan not only has to take account of the Council's wider parks and green spaces strategy, which has still not been published, but also needs to reflect a common approach to the Borough's three ancient woodland sites. Most importantly it has to

address the needs not just of the next ten years but also the challenges that have to be faced in the longer term, particularly that of climate change. The work is in the hands of the Council's Nature Conservation Officer, Annabel Foskett, who is herself an ancient woodlands expert, and we have continued to work closely with her on this. In this context It has been gratifying to hear that the resources of the Parks Department have been increased despite the many financial pressures the Council faces.

While this broader strategic work is taking place practical action to enhance **nature recovery** in the Wood has not been put on hold. The Council obtained a grant from the Mayor of London's Rewilding Project, which has been used to fence off three small areas of the Wood particularly affected by heavy footfall to help restore the soil and habitats for wildlife. Reduced trampling will allow plants, young trees, and mycelia to grow back, providing habitat and food for birds, invertebrates and small mammals. The Friends were closely involved in deciding the details of this work, and we hope it will be extended further in due course.

The role of **The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) and our own monthly working parties** cannot be overstated. It is not just a matter of making the Wood looking spic and span and addressing small scale needs but is also one of contributing strongly to its sustainability over the long term. Gratifyingly, participation in our monthly working party sessions has increased over recent months. These sessions not only help deal with immediate needs but carry out work under a longer term programme of work drawn up with TCV.

On the **home front** our membership remains at record high levels and our financial position continues to be strong. The Committee is near to full strength, but we are conscious of the need to manage succession. That means we always welcome help from any quarters both to carry our essential management functions and to strengthen our areas of expertise. We have continued with a strong programme of events. These include the Family Fun Day, which took place last summer after a gap of two years and is to be repeated this year in early July, and a series of themed walks about the Wood over the year. And we should not forget our annual party, which this year is taking place in the summer.

Last but not least we are delighted that the **Café** has reopened after being out of commission for a number of months. The Café is not only an important part of the fabric of the Wood but it plays a vital part in drawing visitors into the Wood. We look forward to working closely with the proprietors and staff in the years ahead.

John Dorken
29 /6/2023