

Annual Report for 2014

In a little over a year since our last AGM much has happened on the Common and in the Orchard. This time last year the steps up to the orchard had just been completed, and these seem to have been generally welcomed, blending in well with the surroundings, and we were even able to do a trial sowing of wildflowers in the disturbed earth. The cows showed considerable interest in the steps at the beginning, managing to trash the whole area, but since then things have calmed down: they are due back on the Common this week, so we await progress with interest!

The big development this year has been the start of the refurbishment of the paths, and we should thank Ed Cearns here for finally getting the County and City officials to talk together and produce a joint plan. FoMC was heavily involved in the discussions, and although, inevitably, not all our recommendations have been accepted, what has been done so far has been widely welcomed.

Sadly, the mess at the Fort St George has not yet been tackled but this has been held up by the work on the Bridge. The next stage will be more contentious: there will be a planning application out soon for the proposed widening of the Cutter Ferry path and the small path alongside Victoria Road and this will be controversial and will need to involve the Secretary of State. Of course these issues are related to the continual abuse of the Common by heavy lorries and illegal parking: last year we thanked Andrea Reiner for finally obtaining a legal agreement between the Council and Green King over parking and delivery issues. I was going to report that so far this year nothing has been done to see that this agreement is enforced, despite almost daily photos being sent by our members to the relevant officials, but this morning I had an email from the relevant City official to say that he thought there was now enough photographic evidence to begin legal proceedings. Perhaps next year there will be progress to report.

The new Open Spaces Officer worked hard with the Committee and relevant officials to produce an updated *Management Plan for Midsummer Common*. Not much has changed from the previous plan, but biodiversity plans have been enhanced, and it has been made much clearer who is responsible for implementing the recommendations. We are pleased that the Plan includes a recommendation that lighting levels should not generally be increased on the paths: improved lighting can often give a false sense of security which is not helpful, and it would certainly not help our efforts to increase the wild-life presence on the Common. There is increasing pressure from the cycle lobby to make sure that all cycle paths are well lit, and, whilst the committee has no objection to replacing the existing lights with something more energy efficient and aesthetically pleasing, we intend to oppose any increase in the level of light on the Common.

The arrangements for the large city-wide events seem now to be working well, with greater stakeholder involvement and debriefing meetings and we will continue to be involved to ensure that the new paths and grass verges are not trashed again by ill-planned big events. FoMC again ran a successful stall in the children's area of the Strawberry Fair, and we intend to repeat this on June 6: volunteers will again be needed.

This year we received a generous City Community Grant to help us with our publicity, and you will see one of our purchases - our lovely large cow banner - in the Hall this evening. We also now have a notice-board in the orchard, which explains to passers-by about the orchard and what we do as a

group. Thanks to Amy we now have a presence on Twitter and Facebook, and almost permanent loan of the Camboaters gazebo. We have also acquired a small additional old tent, to help with planning events in the orchard, when it always seems to rain. We were awarded a Savill's Environmental Green Award and another small grant from the City to help establish our wild flower meadow in the orchard. This has been held up by the long delay in beginning the work on the Newmarket Road entrance, but after many years of frustration it looks as though the work is finally near to completion- I had warned David Ifould that we might have a riot this evening if the work had not started! The fun part now starts and we are going to need a lot of support from members to transform the space into a welcoming entrance-our major project for 2015.

And what of the orchard? Dick and Barry continue to work tirelessly to keep this peaceful area looking so beautiful and the benches are well used by many people. There was plenty of fruit on all the trees, until, quite mysteriously, it all disappeared over the course of a few nights. We never did catch the culprit, and now we have a noticeboard we are hopeful that we can establish some 'orchard etiquette' to ensure this does not happen again. The orchard picnic was a great success, despite the lack of fruit- some bright cardboard substitutes just as mysteriously re-appeared. Will, our bee expert, came along to show everyone the swarm of bees in our hive: hopefully by next year we will be able to harvest some honey. I should add that I am concerned that we rely very heavily on our two committed orchard workers and I would like to make a plea on Dick's behalf for a few more volunteers who can handle a mower.

Our biodiversity developments concentrated this year on swifts and with the help of Guy Belcher, the Environment Officer and some very the committed members of *Action for Swifts*, we succeeded in getting permission for the installation of swift Pipe Boxes under the eaves of the Elizabeth Way Bridge. This is apparently an excellent place for them! A small transmitter for broadcasting swift calls will be installed at the beginning of May, and then all we have to do is wait. Particular thanks are due to Dick Newell, from *Action for Swifts* for his generous hospitality for the working party making the Pipe Boxes and his willingness to climb up large ladders to install the boxes. Our next project is a bat survey and we have already acquired a bat detector which members can use during their walks on the Common.

It just remains for me to thank all our local Councillors and Council officials for their continued support, particularly Anna Michell in her new role as Open Spaces Officer, Guy Belcher on biodiversity issues and, of course, Kenny McGregor, our excellent tree expert.

This morning I read a newspaper article about some research which showed that the mental health gap which divides those in wealth and poverty is 40% narrower for people with easy access to green spaces, and that countries should use green spaces to help reduce socioeconomic health inequalities: in a very small way I hope we are doing our bit here.

Susan Stobbs (Chair)
22 April 2015