

Orchard plan for common may bear fruit

■ CHRIS HAVERGAL

A NEGLECTED corner of one of Cambridge's most famous open spaces is set to be transformed into a community orchard.

Residents are being consulted on the plans for The Pound, a small area of grassland on the southern edge of Midsummer Common which links to Maid's Causeway.

At the moment it is an unloved plot between allotments and homes which is infested with brambles, nettles and thistles.

Under the proposals, it would be planted with historic varieties of apples, plums, gages and pears, and tended to by volunteers.

Species with links to the Cambridge area would be selected and families would be able to come down to pick a share of the crop.

The orchard plan was drawn up by the Wildlife Trust to bring The Pound back into use and to enhance biodiversity, and it has the backing of the Friends of Midsummer Common.

Dick Baxter, the chairman of the Friends group, said: "At the moment it is full of brambles and thistles so we want to get it back into use with apples and plums."

"We could put in barbecues and make it a lovely place for people to meet and enjoy themselves – it's very exciting."

Mr Baxter said he believed the plans would get the green light.

He said: "Everybody I have spoken to thinks this is a tremendous idea."

Many of the historic orchards in the Cambridge area have been lost in the



PLANTING PLAN: Dick Baxter on Midsummer Common

last 50 years but new ones have started to spring up.

The Wildlife Trust has produced a management plan for Midsummer Common, which has been used for grazing since at least the 13th century.

Other proposals include creating meadow areas by the Ferry House, the public toilets, and adjacent to Walnut Tree Avenue.

If the plans are accepted, the orchard's first trees would be planted early next year.

Comments on the proposals, which can be viewed online on Cambridge City Council's website, www.cambridge.gov.uk, must be made by November 13.

Feedback will be presented to the council's west and central area committee in December.

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*chris.havergal
@cambridge-news.co.uk*



NOT DIGGING IT: Barry Higgs and Dick Baxter of the Friends of Midsummer Common say the rules are slowing projects

Picture: Duncan

Green-fingered group all tied up in red tape

■ **CHRIS HAVERGAL**
Local government correspondent

A COMMUNITY group is waiting to hear that it is not breaking the law every time it puts a spade in Midsummer Common.

Victorian regulations ban digging on some green spaces around Cambridge and the Friends of Midsummer Common technically breach this every time they dig their community orchard.

They asked for a letter giving them consent 14 months ago but are still waiting to hear back from Cambridge City Council.

It gives the group little hope of getting a swift resolution to their latest project, to erect a shed in which to keep their tools in the orchard.

Members have been told they will need to get planning permission to put up the hut, even though the council is funding it.

Dick Baxter, chairman of the Friends, told a meeting of the west/central area committee: "I'm getting so fed up with it, I wish I had never asked for this tool shed."

The orchard was planted last March

I don't think you will go to prison if you sign a letter saying we can put a shed on the common

– **Barry Higgs, Friends of Midsummer Common**

on The Pound, a previously unloved patch next to Newmarket Road, but at the moment the tools for tending it are kept in the public toilets on the other side of the common.

Plans for the £700 shed were revealed at the committee's October meeting and, at first, Mr Baxter thought he would only need a letter from the council saying the shed could be put up.

However, an email from green spaces manager Alistair Wilson said the group would need planning permission, would have to comply with building regulations, and would even need the green light from a Secretary of State.

The requirement for ministerial

approval was dropped because no entrances to the common will be blocked and the issue of building regulations has also been resolved.

But planning permission remains a hindrance and Mr Baxter said he hoped the issue could be resolved more quickly than the ongoing by-law debate.

Barry Higgs, the group's secretary, told council recreation chief Cllr Rod Cantrill he needed a "dose of common sense".

Cllr Cantrill said it was the first he had heard of the by-law issue and would look into it.

He added: "This is an illustration of where public authority regulations and rules don't necessarily benefit city residents and the broader community.

"We will hopefully get a shed on that site in the near future but there are a number of obstacles we need to overcome."

Cllr Cantrill said he was being advised by officers, but Mr Higgs said: "I don't think you will go to prison if you sign a letter saying we can put a shed on the common."

chris.havergal
@cambridge-news.co.uk

Community group digs its heels in over legal challenge



HOLDING FIRM:
Barry Higgs and
Dick Baxter of
the Friends of
Midsummer
Common group

A COMMUNITY group was told to sign a 14-page legal agreement if its members wanted to put a spade in Midsummer Common.

The latest twist in the 16-month saga of the Friends of Midsummer Common's orchard project would have banned the organisation from speaking to the press and required it to implement employment laws even though it has no staff.

It also stipulated the city council would have to approve content put on the Friends' website and that first class stamps should be used on all correspondence.

Chairman Dick Baxter refused to sign the document, meaning the group technically breaches a Victorian by-law every time it turns a sod – and that it still doesn't have permission to erect a council-funded shed.

Barry Higgs, the organisation's secretary, attacked the snail-paced progress at the latest meeting of the west/central area committee and said all that was needed was a simple letter granting permission.

At the previous panel, green spaces chief Cllr Rod Cantrill said he hoped the problems could be overcome soon, as the *News* reported, but then the closely-typed draft agreement was despatched.

It failed to address the central issues of digging and the shed and

■ **CHRIS HAVERGAL**
Local government correspondent

referred instead to a future letter from Cllr Cantrill.

The Friends had been told they would need planning permission and even consent from a Government minister – a requirement which was later dropped.

Mr Higgs said: "It is clear this committee's wishes in this matter have been constantly frustrated and unnecessarily complicated and expensive staff work has been undertaken.

"Are we being intentionally frustrated or is this simply incompetence? It cannot be pressure of work because so much staff effort has been wasted."

The orchard is already planted in, next to Newmarket Road, but at the moment tools are kept in the loos on the other side of the common.

Cllr Cantrill said he had sent an email telling staff to address the issue after the last meeting.

He said: "It has become one of those things where officers have decided to take a very legalistic view so I need to renew my efforts trying to get it resolved as soon as possible."

chris.havergal
@cambridge-news.co.uk



Picture: Keith Heppell 639621

It looks very promising at the moment – so many people have been saying how great it will be when they grow

– Dick Baxter, chairman of the Friends of Midsummer Common

Orchard scheme comes to fruition

A COMMUNITY orchard on Cambridge's Midsummer Common is starting to take shape.

Some 15 apple trees have been planted on The Pound, a previously unloved plot next to Newmarket Road, and it is hoped that in a few years' time families will be able to pick their fruit.

The area had already been cleared of brambles, nettles and thistles, and is now home to five varieties of trees with historic links to the area, plus new hedges.

The project is being led by Dick Baxter, chairman of the Friends of Midsummer Common, as reported in the *News* last November.

He said: "It looks very promising at the moment - so many people have been commenting on the trees and saying how

■ CHRIS HAVERGAL

great it will be when they grow.

"They will probably fruit next year but I think it will take five years before they are sufficiently mature for people to wander underneath them.

"At the moment there are a few of us looking after them and then we will be looking at getting more volunteers."

Varieties planted so far are New Rock Pippin, Wayside, Histon Favourite and Jolly Miller.

When fully grown, the trees will supply apples for eating from October to May and cooking apples in September.

A second phase of planting will see Wallis' Wonder plum trees rooted alongside Cambridge Gage and Willingham Gage Trees, which will fruit from August to October.

A third, in a couple of years' time, will see Laxton's Favourite and Warden pear trees planted for eating and cooking in September and October.

The Friends hope to install barbecues and picnic tables to turn the orchard into a community hub.

Mr Baxter said: "Anybody will be able to take the fruit and there will be no controls put on it - the last thing we want is fruit lying on the ground."

Cllr Julie Smith, Cambridge City Council's arts and recreation chief, attended the planting.

She said: "This is a fantastic project that has already brought many residents together. It will undoubtedly attract more fans when it literally bears fruit."

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chris.havergal
@cambridge-news.co.uk

PARTING SHOT:
Alistair Darling

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