

A Brief (and hopefully accurate) History of The Friends of Williamson Park, gleaned from a variety of sources and written by the Chair, Joy Greenwood, in June 2018

In the archive that FoWP Secretary holds, there are File records dated 2003-2009 which show that:-

- In 2005 The Friends registered with Charities commission. (At this time the park was a limited company and the owner, I've been told, was a key member of the friends' group).
- The group seemed to be mainly interested in fundraising, especially for the upper playground.
Ideas suggested were Antiques Roadshow, Everest climb (Memorial steps), Atkinsons coffee evening, a Shakleton lecture.
- In 2008 organised a talk on history of park from Andrew White,(and one evening showed a film 'singing in the rain' in the cafe).

There was a copy of a Friends' newsletter dated April 2008. This said 'volunteers wanted to join a scheme to be eyes and ears of park. This is a new venture'.

It also said that the playground project had been achieved,(opened 2008) but going to continue fundraising to do things like replacing water fountain near lake, a new playground for older children.

However, one of the original members has said that once their main objective had been achieved, there was a lack of momentum to continue with other projects.

I found no further information on the Group from the archives until recently, when I was shown a Report by Will Griffiths (at that time he was the Park's Operations Manager). It explained that the City Council took over operational control of the park from the company in December 2010, and that since that time had made improvements which had led to Visit England Accreditation for the first time in over 5 years.

It would seem that in 2010, a volunteer group called Greenfingers, was set up in the park by Mark Christie (University of Cumbria Senior lecturer in sport and physical activity), as part of a research project into older adults' volunteer experiences in conservation in an urban park. Students were involved alongside the volunteers.

And in the same year, there was an advert on the Council's website asking people interested in joining The Friends to get in touch.

One member remembers that there followed a meeting in the cafe at which 2 or 3 members of the 'old Friends' group were present. This was later followed by an AGM in 2012 and a new committee was elected. In this first year they had 16 members. This new Friends' group revised their Constitution, had named tabards made, cleared out the Green Room in the Wyresdale Road carpark, worked on the bird feeding area, and helped planting trees.

In Will Griffiths' Report of 2013 above, The Friends and 'volunteers' were mentioned as having helped with many improvements to the Park. These included planting schemes near the Butterfly House, clearing of Rhododendrum ponticum from the woodlands with aid of a grant from DEFRA, planting of trees in Fenham Carr using a Woodland Management Grant and erecting 50 bird boxes constructed by the the Youth Offending Team .

After the completion of Mark Christie's project, the Greenfingers group wanted to carry on and a member has reported that they arranged to do jobs with the park staff (GMOs). As the group got larger some of the volunteers did lighter work like weeding, and at some point it was decided to

have a gardening group on a Monday. Later (possibly 2015) David Redmore (who was just a regular volunteer at the time) persuaded the park staff to let the Friends' adopt and renovate the 'begonia garden', now called the Friends' Garden.

Since then the two groups have merged under 'The Friends of W.P.' and continue to work at least two half-days a week.

Monday mornings are generally used to continue working in the Friends' Garden, and the Butterfly House garden and more recently to develop another area, named Queen's Winter Garden, which was first discussed in the Autumn of 2016.

Whereas Thursdays' are often set aside for 'construction' work such as repairing walls or hedges, painting the outside of the cafe or the Green Room, constructing benches and picnic tables, cleaning signs, making the new birdfeeding area, erecting and maintaining birdboxes.

In addition to this practical work annual Big Park Birdwatches, Bat and Butterfly walks and talks have been organised and open to all, although sadly not well attended by the public.

Fundraising has also continued:-

- there are collection boxes in the cafe and shop to raise money for bird food.
- We have been lucky in that various supporters have made donations to the Friends, these included bird food, prints of artwork to be sold in the shop or a percentage of the sales of their pictures, calenders or photographs which were being exhibited in the cafe or shop.
- The biggest fundraising project was the series of Ashton Evenings *- five music concerts combined with art exhibition/sale or a raffle held in the Memorial in 2015/16.

Money from these Ashton Evenings, together with a grant, made possible the upgrade of the bottom playground for older children, phase 2 has yet to be completed.

A grant was raised to fund a further refurbishment of the Upper Play area, which was completed in Spring 2016 and a Best Practice Award given for the bid.

The funds have been used to reinstate the Cascade in spring 2016, buy a log-splitter for the GMOs to help prepare wood for sale in 2017, and recently to part-fund a larger trailer for use in the park.

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*ASHTON EVENINGS

Friday Feb 27 th 2015	music – Sue Parish, Exhibition – Sarah Bellwood
Friday June 5 th	music – Paul Palmer, Exhibition – Chas Jacobs
Friday October 9 th	music - Quay Change Exhibition – Patricia Haskey

spring 2016.	music Sue Parish, exhibition – Arteria
autumn 2016	music – Quay Change, exhibition – Down to Earth.

We had range of sponsors from local businesses who funded catering.