

WASHPOOL AREA RESTORATION PROJECT

ANNUAL REPORT FOR CHISELDON PARISH COUNCIL 2022

Improvements

Having succeeded in securing a grant from the Science Museum Solar Park Fund, last Spring we were able to have a pipe installed from the stream to the lower pond and have the two stretches of oak boardwalk on the site replaced with gravel paths. As a result, the lower pond now holds a good level of water for most of the year and the paths are a safer, long term replacement for the rotting boardwalk.

Comments from the general public suggest they are very pleased with the result.

Washpool Track

Another item for which we obtained funding was to carry out repairs to the main track into Washpool from the track that runs from the Butts Business Centre (BBC), past Cow Hill and the Sewage Pumping Station to join the Sustrans Cycle Track.

Unfortunately, after I had obtained a quote from THWC contracting of £1,552.80 +VAT and secured the necessary funding from the Solar Park Fund, Thames Water (TW) encountered a serious problem at the pumping station and for several weeks in late 2020 had to tanker sewage from the station in a continuous stream of 45 ton tanker lorries. The route they used, besides not being their legal route to the pumping station was totally unsuitable for this type of vehicle and a lot of mud was generated which had to be hosed off before the tankers went onto the public highway. The run off from this operation found its way down the Washpool track and did a substantial amount of damage. The previous quote no longer being relevant I asked THWC to requote and the cost of repair had risen to £14714.90 + VAT. The amount we were granted by the Solar Park Fund could no longer be legitimately spent as it would not be sufficient to make an improvement. The terms of the grant mean we will have to return this amount to them because it can't be spent for this purpose.

TW wish to upgrade the track so that if such an emergency should arise again the access track will be able to carry vehicles of the required size. I naively assumed they would make good the damage to the Washpool track but so far they have refused to accept responsibility. Even worse, when I attended a meeting with TW and Burderop Estates and Alex Rathbone, owner of BBC in late March, to my horror TW announced they intended to upgrade the track to a concrete road to take the weight of the tankers and to engineer it in such a way that any storm water would drain from their impermeable track surface, down the Washpool Track to the stream; thus exacerbating the damage they had already done.

Burderop Estates' agent, Arthur Witchell, has suggested they should dig a drainage ditch down the side of the Washpool Track, and repair the deep channels the runoff has carved in the track. He suggested WARP volunteers would keep the drainage channel clear to ensure the track isn't damaged again in the future. I understand negotiations between TW and Burderop Estates are ongoing because TW will need the Estates permission for the upgrade. They also need to negotiate with Alex Rathbone for permission to access the track over her land. Previously, their right of access was along the same track but from Church Street which is no longer suitable.

Ash Tree

Sadly last July a mature ash tree growing on the hillside which we know had been a roost for bats, split and shed a large portion of trunk across the track. The tree turned out to be a victim of ash dieback and the remaining section was in a dangerous state and needed to be made safe. Also the fallen portion was on a steep slope and could have fallen further. Burderop Estates cleared the part of the tree that was blocking the track and we are grateful to the Parish Council for their help in paying for the tree surgeon to make the rest of the tree safe.

Tree Planting

Having lost such a large tree and it being the year of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee we would like to plant an elm tree on the hillside. Elm trees were once a common sight in the English countryside, as depicted in John Constable's paintings until they were pretty much wiped out by Dutch Elm Disease. There are now disease resistance strains and we would like to contribute to this iconic tree's return.

We understand the Parish Council and other groups also plan Jubilee tree planting and it occurred to us that it would be good to co-ordinate these tree planting ceremonies in some way.

Volunteer Days

This year, as pandemic restrictions have eased we have been able to re-start our regular Volunteer Days and so far these have been really well attended. One small positive effect of the Covid lockdowns has perhaps been that people have more appreciation for what is on their doorstep and are keen to help look after it. Several new volunteers have become regular attendees which is very welcome.

Hedgelaying

One task which we have completed with our volunteers is the laying of the hedge to the right of the small sheep gate at the top of the site. We began clearing this hedge prior to the pandemic so it has been a long haul. We normally complete a hedge a season. To date, this is the toughest hedgelaying task we have attempted as it consisted of some fairly large trunks to cut through and it was on top of a bank.

Contingency Finances

We are getting quite short of contingency funds. We have been very fortunate over the years in attracting donations from people who wish to thank us for what we do and we are always very grateful for this. Sadly, fund raising takes time and energy and our small management team already expend a lot of effort administering the project and working on the site.

A few years ago we set up a 'Friends of the Washpool' organisation where we asked people for annual subscriptions in return for newsletters and a special annual event. This was an early victim of the first lockdown when the annual event planned had to be cancelled. We urgently need to revive this scheme.

Site Extension

Having established that the Parish Council is happy to consider extending the lease of the site with Burderop Estates to include land further downstream we are currently looking to draw up a management plan to share with interested parties.

Although we will need to seek grant funding for some improvements that we would like to make we wish to come up with a scheme that will require no or low ongoing maintenance as far as possible.

In Conclusion

Being involved with WARP is a very satisfying experience. The very positive feedback we receive from the local community is so rewarding.

We are very grateful to the Parish Council for its continued support, without which this popular project would not be viable.

Hilary Howe

Chairman