

# THE FRIENDS OF HORSTED VALLEY

Annual General Meeting, 7 November 2012

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Although it may not appear obvious to members, the Committee has once again been busy throughout the year, but this year with many things still left unresolved unfortunately – through no fault of our own I might add – and I'll go into more detail about these in a minute.

Our membership at the end of 31 August 2012 was 87, which includes 6 Junior Members. This is an increase of 6 from the same time last year. Apparently Greenspaces tell us that we have the largest membership of any of the friends groups in the Medway Towns, which is good; but is it quite so good when put into context and you think of the thousands who live within a five-minute walk of the Horsted Valley ?

Gift Aid has been put into place and this will be claimed. The Friends of Horsted Valley is financially viable, although I would once again ask you to take the opportunity whenever you can to recruit new members and I hope that by the end of this Report you will be in a better position to explain to the hundreds of regular users of the Horsted Valley just why it is important for them to join the Friends and not just leave it to others. I am sure that all those who use the Valley do not want to lose it but we are always required to provide proof that something is wanted by the general public and this requires action on everyone's part. The greater our membership, the greater our influence. It's no good leaving it to others and then complaining when an amenity is lost. Now, obviously, I am preaching to the converted but you can play a vital rôle in getting this message across to the great "unbothered". Our combined voice is far more powerful than scores of individual comments. We are all aware of the straightened financial times in which we live but an annual membership of £2 cannot be said to be exorbitant. And that brings me on to my first thank-you: to you, for coming out tonight and for your support over the year. Thank you very much !

I'll start with a good piece of news and that is that Henry Worthy was co-opted in September as our first Junior Member representative on the Committee. He has an interest in the countryside and the natural world and we are really delighted to welcome him to the Committee. The idea is that we 'old fuddy-duddies' can benefit from Henry's knowledge of 21<sup>st</sup> century young people, their interests and concerns and, hopefully, Henry will learn from first-hand experience about the trials and tribulations – and the rewards - of being a volunteer and how voluntary organisations have to be structured in order to function successfully and legally.

We are grateful to our local councillors, Trevor Clarke, Sylvia Griffin and Rupert Turpin for a donation of £75 from their Ward Fund, which was presented at Fort Horsted, at the end of a guided tour for Trevor, Sylvia and Rupert, the Headmaster of Horsted Primary School and the Committee of The Friends of Horsted Valley kindly given by the Business Managers of Avondale, Paul and Chris Coutts-Smith. We had a fascinating couple of hours and Paul and Chris want to open up Fort Horsted to local schools for educational purposes, local organisations and eventually the public. There is work which still needs to be done before this plan can come to fruition but The Friends of Horsted Valley is working in conjunction with Avondale with Ann Southern, our flora and fauna specialist, and Jenni Dawson carrying out a survey of Fort Horsted's flora and fauna. The findings will be added to the work already done in the rest of the Horsted Valley by Ann over the last decade to produce a comprehensive record for the whole of Horsted Valley. This document, incidentally, has an important rôle in providing evidence when applications are made for special status for the Horsted Valley.

Obviously one of the major issues has been the construction of Horsted Park and we were all very disturbed at the destruction of the hedgerow on the eastern boundary of Horsted Park, including mature trees such as the walnut tree. Our local Councillors arranged a visit to the site, to which I was invited, to discuss our various concerns on a bitterly cold, misty damp morning in April but as a consequence, if we now have any concerns, I may contact both the Project Manager, John Bryant, and Peter Frost, Development Manager, at

any time. As requested by them, we have provided Countryside Properties with a list of indigenous planting appropriate for a development which abuts land designated as an Area of Local Landscape Interest, ie the Horsted Valley. This designation is supposed to give the land some protection but regrettably it is not infallible as has been shown by Medway Council's Planning Committee's permitting the construction of houses and a foul-water tank in the field which had previously never been developed. During this meeting we were able to discuss the action Countryside Properties was proposing to take to return the lower part of this field to a more natural state. Liaison between us will be on-going for some years.

Following on from this meeting, our local Councillors, The Friends of Horsted Valley represented by me, Ann Southern and Barry Eldridge, members of Medway Council's Planning Department and representatives from Countryside Properties met at the Gun Wharf to discuss the Eco Park, known to us as the Horsted Farmyard. Ecological work on this land had been carried out by Mid-Kent College and Ann Southern had drawn up suggestions, based on this work, as to how this might be built upon in order to improve the habitat for flora and fauna and also attract back species previously found there. As well as improving its environmental facilities, we wish to see the land opened up to the public but, in order to protect the habitat, access would need to be under controlled conditions. This is another of our unfinished projects as we await information about Countryside Properties' plans for the Eco Park.

It is good that our existence is recognised and our knowledge and expertise welcomed but we do have to remember that we are dealing with a national development company, so our influence will always be restricted by marketing and financial demands. However, we have been able to draw to their attention matters which they had not previously considered.

The second major expenditure of time has related to the several planning applications over the year for a Healthy Living Centre in Luton, which, I hasten to add, The Friends of Horsted Valley fully supports in principle. However, the plans have stated the need to appropriate part of the Daisy Banks, land designated as an Area of Local Landscape Interest, to compensate for the loss of part of Luton Infant and Junior Schools' playing-fields, a need which The Friends of Horsted Valley contests. Although the plans have been withdrawn on each occasion so far, due to failings by Medway Council, this issue has not gone away. However, we are hoping that sense will prevail and that the Healthy Living Centre will be built on a site more convenient and appropriate for its users. We have to thank Andrew Birch for the great deal of time he spent researching and collating information for The Friends of Horsted Valley's responses, which I should add, were fully supported by the Kent Wildlife Trust. The Friends of Horsted Valley did also submit a question about this matter to the full Medway Council at its meeting in July, which Vivienne Parker and I attended.

Related to this, I should add at this point the work done by Vivienne Parker in gathering all the material required to complete the application form for Commons Registration - and canvassing users for evidence of their support - which would confer the designation of the northern end of the Horsted Valley as a "Town Common", a designation which would provide a greater form of protection for the land.

We have also heard recently that Medway Council is finally going ahead with the proposals it made in its Local Plan some years ago that various open spaces within the Medway Towns, including the Horsted Valley, should be given Local Nature Reserve designation. This will give the Valley a little more protection against development, but not totally. However, it is considered by some that the Daisy Banks and the Coney Banks are worthy of SSSI status. This would give them much greater protection but it is much more difficult to achieve. With good management of the land, this is one of our long-term aims.

One matter which has been worked on this year and has reached a successful conclusion is the BORA footpath. You may know that the Bishop of Rochester Academy is being rebuilt and expanded onto its playing field. To compensate for the loss of its playing field, it has reclaimed land which it owned, but could not afford to fence, with the result that for some 15 years the public had had access to that land. Enclosure for a playing field of this previously-open land meant that public access to the Daisy Banks from Shipwrights Avenue would be lost. Andrew Birch did his research, got the support of his local Councillor Tristan Osborne and his local MP, Tracy Crouch - both of whom I should like to thank for their support -

and put forward his proposal to BORA for how this public access could be maintained. BORA accepted his proposal and a path has been cut through the woods alongside the new playing field. Regrettably, however, some people are not satisfied and the fence is constantly being torn down in places !

We have been fortunate in that the RAF Air Cadets 1404 Chatham Squadron have been working in the Horsted Valley as part of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards scheme. Some of you may have seen them at work. It is a pleasure to be with them: they are smart, polite and hard working. It was a privilege to be invited to their Annual Inspection at Rochester Airport last month and to see what individually and as a squadron they had achieved. They are a group of young people to be proud of.

Litter regrettably remains a serious problem in the Valley and much remains to be done. Friends of Horsted Valley members did a superb job over 4 Saturdays in the spring clearing litter and serious fly-tipping from the Southern Field. Several lorry loads of rubbish were taken away. Ann Southern has now drawn up plans to submit to Greenspaces on how this field can be brought back into a state where flora and fauna can once again flourish. In an attempt to prevent discarded food-packaging finding its way back into the field, Trevor Clark arranged for a litter-bin to be placed on the Maidstone Road at the point where people seem to finish eating.

Deborah Rowles, Community Life Champion at ASDA, also arranged a litter-pick for the land around the Horsted School playing field, which some members joined. On completion of this, they then moved into the southern end of the Horsted Valley, which is much improved. Future efforts must now be concentrated on the serious litter problem at the northern end of the Valley.

On more mundane matters 3 Newsletters have been produced this year and the Committee has met 10 times over the year. We have also this year produced a five-year Management Plan, which is on our website if you wish for more details, and it is monitored regularly at our Committee meetings. However, I shall just highlight 2 of the action points. By the end of 2013 we hope to have achieved agreement for a traffic island to be placed at the bottom of Walderslade Hill. We believe this to be feasible and necessary for the public safety of not just those using the Horsted Valley but also of those using the area for their every day business. Again, we have to prove this is needed and wanted and therefore intend to carry out a survey of those crossing the Walderslade Road at this point but it will require volunteers to help us do this. So, when the call comes, do please respond, as the Committee cannot do this on its own. Secondly, we feel that a survey of the positioning of litter and dog-waste bins needs to be undertaken to see whether some of them can be better placed and thereby reduce the costs of installing, and more importantly emptying, additional bins.

Andrew Birch, Ann Southern and I attended a meeting with Greenspaces early in the year to discuss plans for the Horsted Valley. The Friends of Horsted Valley is always represented at the "The Medway Urban Parks and Green Spaces Forum", the co-ordinating body and spokesman for friends groups, where we are able to exchange views and ideas. We are represented at the Luton Pact meetings and had a display at their Community Day on 29 September. We also had a presence at the Davis Estate's Jubilee party in June. Charlie Thompson and I attended a Conservancy Training Day at the St George's Centre on 17 May. Ann Southern and Jennie Dawson attended a day course on Grassland Management at the Kent Wildlife Trust's headquarters at Maidstone. Andrew Birch and I gave Kim Richards, Kent Wildlife Trust's new Green Infrastructure Officer and link with friends groups across the County, a most enjoyable guided tour of the Horsted Valley, which she will no doubt mention in due course. It was a glorious day when the Valley was full of wild flowers and was really looking its best. Thank you for joining us this evening Kim and we very much look forward to working with you at Kent Wildlife Trust.

One sad note is that our photograph/writing competition did not attract any entries, so this will need to be looked at again if we are to continue with the idea of generating interest in the Horsted Valley by this means.

None of this could have been done without the hard work, perseverance and dedication of the Committee. Every member has contributed according to their talents and we are lucky in having such a wide range of skills to draw on. Unfortunately, Andrew Birch, our Vice-Chairman, has reluctantly felt that he needs to stand down from the Committee due to pressure of his other commitments, although he has very generously

offered to help on any special projects where necessary, and I wish formally to record the thanks of the Committee to him. He is a multi-talented individual with an extraordinary capacity for work. He has made a significant contribution to the setting up of a sound infra-structure for The Friends of Horsted Valley.

Whilst I have listed the many things we have been dealing with over the year, I am concerned that we have not had a very high profile in the public eye, unlike some Friends groups. As I have said, the area of the Horsted Valley is far greater than that of any of the other Friends groups. So, whilst not impossible, it is not as easy for us to put on events for public participation, although it is our intention to do so. And, covering such a large area, it is open to greater threat: “a little bit here for development, another small bit there won’t do too much damage” until one day, what have you got: not a lot. And that is where so much of our energies are expended – behind-the-scenes work. Much time is spent on researching and fighting ill-conceived planning applications. We also want to improve the Horsted Valley but that costs money so we are planning to concentrate next year on obtaining funds to improve the Valley: signage, better footpaths, seating, planting, educational material, publicising what the Valley has to offer to a wider audience are just a few examples. As always, we are very pleased to receive your suggestions and ideas.

So, although it may not be obvious, we are all working very hard and I should like formally to record my sincere thanks for the great commitment shown by all Committee members. There is much we should like to do, but, as volunteers, there is only so much each of us can do, so please, later on, do offer yourselves for election to the Committee. You may think you have nothing to offer, but you will be surprised, we shall find talents you never knew you had ! The more Committee members we have, the lighter the load for individuals and the more we can attempt, as it will not be so onerous for the few. So please be thinking about it, as we are a friendly bunch who work well together.

And, finally, I should like to officially record our thanks for the interest and support we have received from our local councillors, MPs and Medway Council’s Greenspaces Team, particularly Daniel Gooch, the new Greenspaces Partnership Officer, without whom life would be much more difficult for us.

I have finally come to an end and should be pleased to answer any questions you may have.