

Annual Report

Friends of Combe Valley

October 2022 to September 2023



Friends of Combe Valley

Combe Valley Countryside Park
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Friends of Combe Valley is a Registered (in England) Charity Number: 1163581

Introduction

Another successful year for The Friends of Combe Valley, we have continued to connect people with nature by developing our ties with the local community including schools. We have progressed with improving the parks beautiful landscape to offer opportunities for good health and well being. Promoting park, people and nature.

Events

Coronation weekend

Following on the success of the Platinum Jubilee last year, we held a successful community lunch on May 7, with 30 people coming to enjoy cake and games in the sunshine. On Monday May 8 we joined the King's call for a volunteer day with a litter pick along the beach at Glyne Gap.



The Great Big Green Week

In June we held our second Great Big Green event, to increase awareness of the Park's role as a green space and its importance in developing a diverse and healthy environment, with emphasis on preventing further climate change. Around 90 participants attended taking part in a herbal health benefits, awareness walk, recycled paper pot making, various nature related crafts plus a large photographic exhibition of local nature. A small history of the park was also exhibited.



A number of local organisations assisted with Happy Harold Bus providing transport from Central Hastings. We enjoyed cakes, biscuits and pastries made by members of Friends of Combe Valley, Uzbek samosas and pancakes and plates of Syrian dolmas and sweets, made by refugees who wanted to make a contribution to the community involvement event.

Open day and showcase on September 16

The open day was a chance to welcome people to the Discovery Centre and the park generally, to show case all the work that we do and to encourage people to join the Friends and become volunteers in the park. Around 50 people attended and we gained 10 new members, with many offering to volunteer.



Nature Detectives

Emma Ramsden, who is employed by Groundwork South (GWS) on behalf of the Combe Valley Countryside Park CIC (the CIC) continued to provide discovery and play sessions in the park for families. The Friends continue to provide support for these sessions with volunteers and they are an important way of connecting children with nature.



Cliff Willard /Pete Clarke have been working with local scouts and cubs building bird boxes, bug poles and other nature related projects.

Social Evenings

In January Wednesday social evenings began to give people connected to the park an opportunity to get together, to relax - natter, do craft work, play board games and whist drives. This has become a regular feature on the third Wednesday of the month and provides an informal venue for members and subscribers. Please check out Facebook for up to date social events.



Conservation work

Paths in the park

The backbone of our work in the park is helping to keep the paths clear and passable



supplementing the work of East Sussex County Council who have responsibility for the rights of way in the park and Rother DC and Hastings BC who own land in the park. The hard working volunteers eagerly respond to reports of paths being blocked by fallen trees as well as regular work parties clearing path rides as well as litter picks which unfortunately still includes picnic waste, drink cups and dog waste.



Community Garden

In 2021 we started re-wilding round the Discovery Centre, using funds from the Cooperative Community Fund to plant wild flower seeds and lay wild flower turfs on the mound to the north of the Discovery Centre, this has expanded into a project for a Community garden around the Discovery Centre. In the summer Hastings BC agreed to extend the area of land leased to the CIC up to the drainage ditches to the East and South of the Discovery Centre.



With money from the Green Recovery Grant received by the CIC and working with GWS and Annie Brown, a landscape designer who was employed under the grant, plans were drawn up for the area and some of this was achieved: in particular a compacted gravel (Hoggin) path beside the car park, giving safe access to the Discovery Centre for wheel chair users and pushchairs.



The mound beside the path has been turfed with wild flower turfs and six semi-mature birches have been planted.

The raised beds around the Discovery Centre have been cared for by volunteers and work is continuing to allow much of the area to become naturalised, with a mown area outside the Discovery Centre for events, and mown paths for access across the site.

With support of a Chalk Cliff Trust a grant we were able to paint two sides of the Discovery Centre, the third side was painted with funding from the CIC and a donor. The paintwork was completed by Wave Art, a community group now installed at the compound on the site of the old tram depot in the Bexhill Road.



Work on the area round the container store which was installed last year has been completed, establishing an exterior working area with fencing to define the area and the ground surfaced with wood chips. Two large composting bays have been constructed with pallets. A fixed circular picnic table with benches has been donated and installed and is used regularly by the friends working parties.

Signs for the park

The production of new signs for entrances to the park has been an ongoing project, finally this year the signs were sent for printing, with financial support from funding to the Friends from the Police and the CIC from the Green Recovery Fund. The installation of the signs will begin early next year by the Friends & volunteers.

Furniture



The long standing hope of building furniture for the park started this year, with two rustic benches beside the wild flower mound at the Discovery Centre, using wood from local woodlands. With the Tesco grant for outdoor furniture and under the guidance of Cliff Willard and Pete Clarke, two permanent picnic tables have been constructed and installed outside the centre. In a variation on the normal design for such tables, the tops have been extended at either end so they can be utilised by wheelchair users.

Warden service

The warden service has continued with the wardens walking the park and picking up on issues needing attention, most of which can then be dealt with by our volunteers. The presence of the wardens helps contribute to the peace of the park, with probably rather less incidents than in the past. Many park maps get distributed by the wardens increasing the awareness of its beauty, size and opportunities.

Volunteers

As has been reported many times the activities outlined in this report rely on volunteers and their contribution is substantial. The following are the totals, from our records and estimates of time spent on:



- i. Conservation work around 2100 hours, including the regular Thursday mornings and numerous other tasks around the park and helping the local scouts to build bird boxes and bug hotels.
- ii. Other events – around 500 hours over the three events set out above, the social evenings and events in partnership with GWS for the CIC
- iii. Wardens – around 950 hours over the year with 7 wardens until September.
- iv. Administration, including dealing with calls about security and planning issues around 1000 hours.

Overall around 4,500 hours during the year, with a comparatively small band of volunteers. We continue to welcome new volunteers and all their help is very much appreciated.



Path clearing, New Orchard tree planting and installation of a new kissing gate.

Recognition Awards

We were delighted that Cliff Willard's substantial contribution to our work was recognised with his award as a volunteer of the year by Rother Voluntary Action at their AGM in December 2022.

Members and Subscribers

Currently we have 97 online mail subscribers and 53 fully paid members. This includes 26 who have set up a regular annual payment which comes to £266 a year. We are very grateful for all these contributions to our work and would like to encourage more members to set up a regular payment through our webpage or by standing order.

Thank you, Thank You, Thank you to all our supporters.

Issues affecting the Park

Unfortunately the park continues to attract problems: there is some antisocial behaviour, unauthorised overnight campers and still too much litter is left behind, but more importantly a continued pressure as development proposals threaten the park.

Bulverhythe Recreation Ground:

HBC withdrew planning for 192 houses on lower flood plain. Future plans - possible new reed beds linking Filsham reed bed and Glyne Gap marshes, Souther Water involved but this will be a slow process.

Pebsham Farm: Sold to a development company over a year ago. This information comes from the land registry, but no planning applications has been made to date.

Biffa Site: Sold by Biffa in early 2022 and leased to 1066 M/C training, a company who are providing a service to local people, particularly the young adults and most of the training work takes place away from the site so it has little impact on the rest of the park. We supported their planning application and expect to work with them in the future to increase sympathetic wilding of the surrounding area using local species.

The golf academy: the proposal for a driving range on the upper tier of the Bulverhythe Recreation Ground was reported last year. The developers apparently dropped that idea, but have now suggested that it should replace the Discovery Centre and take up the top half of the middle tier. They have also proposed as an inducement to Hastings BC that they would install an all weather football pitch, which in essence would be a plastic covering and flood lighting to enable it to be used all year round. Apart from the loss of the facilities of the Centre and destruction of the work we the



Friends with the CIC and GWS and others have done over the last few years, the proposal would be very damaging to the park and the environment generally. It does not appear to be in the interest of local residents. We hope that the whole scheme will not be proceeded with within the park.

Glyne Gap

RDC have refused permission for a drive through Starbucks cafe. We, along with local business and residents made strong objections.

Antisocial behaviour

Reference has already been made to the problems of litter in the park. There was also an attempt by travellers to take over the field round the Discovery Centre as they did in the summer of 2022. Fortunately the presence of our chair, Pete Clarke at the time plus the increased security in the form of raised beds and posts deterred them and they went elsewhere.



Use of the park by trail bikers continues, however one such user was caught by the police and the bike was confiscated.

We hope that 1066 M/C training will help provide a place for the bikers to ride safely and without disturbing other users of the park.

Funding

Having had several successful grant applications, we are consolidating our work with the funds we have. A grant we did obtain this year was the Police Property Act Grant which assisted the operation of the successful Great Green Day. We also received contributions of food and drink for events from Tesco and Iceland.

A special thanks is due to Julie Willard, who for the last three years has run a plant sale from her home raising money for Friends of Combe Valley

Conclusion

Although there are many challenges ahead for the park, we believe that Friends of Combe Valley have provided a vital service in helping to make the park be better known, better used and in better condition. We thank our members, supporters, grant givers, Groundworks, CIC, Trustees and all who attend our events allowing our open, caring community to grow.