



Annual Report

October 2024 – September 2025

Facts about the Countryside Park

Covers 2.3 square miles
(1480 acres)

Located between Bexhill
and Hastings, providing
vital green space between
two urban areas

Huge community asset:
nature on your doorstep

Network of footpaths for
recreation, including
Greenway: suitable for
cycles and horses

A very important area for
wildlife, including extremely
rare animals; providing a
wildlife corridor between
urban areas

The largest area of reedbeds
found in Sussex, located in
Filsham Reedbed and nearby
Glyne Gap Reedbed

2456 recorded species of
fauna and flora



In summary a variety of habitats, including the following
UK priority habitats: ancient woodland, hedgerow,
reedbed and lowland fen, flooded meadows, lowland
grassland, river, coastal vegetated shingle, intertidal.



Introduction

The Friends of Combe Valley have completed another successful year maintaining and improving the natural space of the Combe Valley. Working alongside the Combe Valley CIC and Groundwork South, we have enjoyed developing The Community Garden around the Discovery Centre, which is now establishing itself to be a place to enjoy the natural green space.

Diary of Events held in the Park and around The Discovery Centre, including Thursday work party activities.

October

Presentation to Councillors and Council Officers

Another set of presentations highlighting the good work undertaken and the opportunities arising in the Park was given by the Friends, Groundwork South, and Combe Valley CIC. These were given to several councillors of both Hastings and Rother Councils who wish to give their support to the park.

November

Completion of the new roof and rain harvesting system on the green container

Courtesy of an East Sussex County Council grant, a rainwater harvesting system was installed on the new tool container roof. This now feeds four large water vats for watering the community garden and trees.



January

Installation of new signs around the Park

The final 25 new updated metal signs were finally installed around the park to replace the outdated and damaged ones.



February

Improving the outdoor green woodworking area

The green wood working behind the tool container has been fitted out with poles to attach a cover for all-weather working. The installation of a shave horse and vice bench enables the working of felled and coppiced wood to create park benches and various woodland crafts.

In collaboration with The Custom Cafe, used coffee grounds were regularly collected and added to the compost bins to enhance the compost.



March

A Litter pick and path clearance along the disused railway took place, checking the condition of the picnic seats and tables, sadly revealing that many need to be repaired or replaced. A quick survey also revealed that many dead ash trees needed to be felled. The appropriate council was contacted and the felling completed.

A quick survey along the path revealed the presence of Brimstone, Peacock & Red Admiral butterflies, a green woodpecker, hairy caterpillars, marsh frogs, swans, a Cetti's warbler and Hemlock Water Dropwort. amongst other flora.



May

Discovery Centre outdoor tables and new all-weather rubber matting

The large picnic tables were given an overhaul to reduce their size and painted in bright colours to make them more family-friendly. Also, initial preparation of the ground for rubber grass matting around the picnic tables.

Later, we were lucky to be given support by Cappagh Browne, civil engineers. Their volunteers gave time, expertise and a mechanical excavator to lay and peg down over 100 1x1.5m rubber grass mats. We were very grateful for this help to make the area a safer, drier area in winter. At the same time, they excavated the path on the east side of the car park, removing all the spoil from the site. Cappagh Browne put us forward for a grant by Enterprise Mobility to help with future needs.



June

The Great Big Green Week

In June, we held our fourth and most successful Great Big Green event to increase awareness of the Park's role as a green space and its importance in developing a bio-diverse and healthy natural environment, with an emphasis on adapting to future climate change conditions. We were joined by over ten green and nature-inspired groups from surrounding towns, including Groundwork South, Crowhurst Environment Group, Standup 4 Nature, Church-in-The -Wood Community Orchard, Energise Sussex Coast, Ore Community Land Trust, Sussex Ornithological Society and others.

This year was centred around swapping, so books, clothes and plants were on offer to swap or donate. Visitors were also offered soothing hand massages by 'A touch of Gentleness', who bring joy, connection and peace back to the heart of the community. Peter and Cliff made and presented a wooden bench made from coppiced wood to the Beach Garden Project along Western Parade, Bexhill.





July

Donation of a TV screen by Hastings Direct

Hastings Direct donated a large TV to the Discovery Centre, which will allow better presentations and video conferencing in the centre, including the AGM.

A BBC Sussex and Surrey reporter attended the Discovery Centre to interview and record Cliff, Peter and Julie for the Make a Difference awards, for which the Friends had been nominated and who successfully made the finals, achieving a Highly Commended in the green category.

Big Butterfly count: Friends also took part in the 2025 survey. 6 separate surveys recorded 10 species. Results for the whole country available at the following website:

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/big-butterfly-count-results-2025>





August

Hastings Direct community volunteer day

Several employees from Hastings Direct joined us for the day to remove large thistles from the Friends meadow, dig holes for poles which were to be used for the 'walk the plank' team building game. They also tested the game with great hilarity.

September

Open Day Pirate Pete's Treasure Trail

Another successful open day welcomed residents and visitors of Bexhill, Hastings and St Leonards to the park, showcasing our activities. Visitors were encouraged to join the Friends and become volunteers in the park. A Pirates treasure trail took children and families around The Community Garden, finding activities to do en route, including a bug hunt in the Friends meadow organised by Emma of Groundwork South. Families enjoyed a team-building game of walking the plank.

The children had a mini version too.

Over 60 people attended and we gained 1 new member, with many offering to volunteer.



The Community Garden

– in conjunction with Groundwork

The Friends have now constructed and erected nine new rustic benches from locally coppiced sweet chestnut. These are located throughout The Community Garden and provide several very welcome places for visitors to rest a while to appreciate the beauty of the space, including one that was placed in the new Beach Garden, Western Parade, Bexhill Seafront.

Five new signs have been erected, welcoming visitors to The Community Garden.

The mixed native hedging and trees around The Community Garden continue to grow with constant weeding, mulching and watering, especially during the dry summer months. The tree line between the middle and third tier also continues to be watered and mulched.



Maintenance of the paths, raised beds, tree nursery and throughout the garden has regularly been undertaken by the Friends and Groundwork South volunteers, resulting in a good biodiverse colonisation of flowers, fauna, insects and small mammals such as voles. The gardens are regularly visited by hunting raptors resting on the newly installed standing pole and fence posts.

Along the western edge of the Friends Meadow, several bays of sweet chestnut post and rail fencing in traditional Sussex style have been erected to create a feature.



Elsewhere in the park

Due to the increased amount of time being spent creating The Community Garden, less time has been spent around the Combe Valley; however, the Haven Copse and Combe Hedge, at the eastern edge of tier three, have been maintained with weeding, cutting and clearing of the surrounding grass, replacement of saplings, mulching and watering. Although watering at this more remote location presents logistical problems.

Managing Ash Die Back within the “Long Wood” continues along with the cutting up and removal of fallen trees on the dismantled railway, clearing and cutting back vegetation on footpaths, litter picks around the park and along the beach.

A group of volunteer gardeners continue to repair, paint and plant up the raised beds with a selection of seasonal flowers and herbs, which are much admired. The original beds have been supplemented with additional raised beds maintained by Groundwork volunteers. A supply of vegetables and fruit has been most welcome, resulting in jam and fruit pies enjoyed by all.





Nature Detectives

Emma Ramsden, employed by Groundwork South (Sussex and Surrey) (GW) on behalf of the Combe Valley Countryside Park CIC (the CIC), continues to provide sessions in the park and along the Beach for families. FoCV volunteers also contribute their time and effort to these sessions.

Creative Mondays

New to 2024, and thanks to The Big Lottery and Groundwork South, various regular creative craft sessions have been held every month for families to attend for quiet and reflective crafts.

Social Evenings

These have continued once a month, including fun card nights and a well-attended fish and chip supper.

Presentations & Other Events

Cliff and Julie have given slide presentations about the Combe Valley to a Ladies' lunch club, Bexhill 100 and the Wonky WI groups, all of whom appreciated the hard work undertaken by all the volunteers in the park to sustain a beautiful free open green space, available to all. Donations were received by all three groups in thanks.

Stands displaying marketing materials were manned at St Helens Wood open day, Ocean Symposium and Church in the Wood events.

BBC Make A Difference Awards

Julie, Cliff and Virginia attended the BBC Sussex and BBC Surrey Make a Difference awards at Lingfield Racecourse to collect a highly commended award (Green category) on behalf of the Friends. This was a prestigious event attracting hundreds of nominations.

Future Plans

Training for the Water quality sampling project within the park, supported by Strandliners, will be undertaken.

Bee project – working with Groundwork South to create an area of bee-friendly plants to attract specific bees.

Developing plans for the lower tier and tier three.

Walks, surveys and education events.

Warden Service

The warden service continues more informally since there are fewer incidents, which contributes to a more peaceful park.

Community Police

An increase in liaising with local community police officers has resulted in more frequent site checks and the community police meetings being held at the centre.



Volunteers

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:

Conservation work about 2,200 hours, including the regular Thursday mornings and numerous other tasks around the park

Other events – about 500 hours over the events set out above, the social evenings and events in partnership with GWS for the CIC

Wardens – this has not been formally recorded: currently, 6 wardens walk regularly in the park and deal, as appropriate, with any information received about the park.

Administration, Peter, along with chairing the committee, continues to deal with car park and security issues. William, alongside Secretarial and Treasurer duties, has been dealing with planning and other legal issues. Julie has been organising events, managing Facebook and web pages, and Karl has designed our posters. This all amounts to an additional 1,200 hours during the year.

Overall, about 3,900 hours during the year, with a dedicated band of volunteers, now numbering around 50, and we continue to welcome new volunteers and all their help is much appreciated.

Julie Willard's individual fundraising has continued through her annual plant sale and also via her sewing group, which now regularly uses the Discovery Centre weekly.

Theresa and Lindsay continue their support by providing tasty refreshments for the volunteers after the regular Thursday Sessions and providing lovely homemade cakes for the events.

Members & Subscribers

We have 58 fully paid-up members (42 with recurring membership) and 171 newsletter subscribers. We are very grateful for all these contributions to our work.

Bulverhythe Recreation Ground

Discussions, consultations, and reports continue to be held to preserve the area as a space for both formal and informal sports, as well as recreation and biodiversity enhancement.

Upper Tier

Ongoing consultation for the extension of the community garden further into the east recreation ground also continues.

Funding

We are grateful for all the grants and time provided by organisations to support the excellent work of the Friends (East Sussex County Council, Hastings Direct, Cappagh Browne). We also continue to work closely with the CIC and Groundwork South (Sussex and Surrey), in implementing funding which they obtain to continue making the Countryside Park a place for all.

Conclusion

It is good to report that although challenges continue, we have been able to contribute to the development of the park with the CIC and their agents, Groundwork South. We thank all the volunteers in whatever capacity who give up time and energy throughout the year to keep the park in a healthy condition.



For more information about **Friends of Combe Valley** visit www.friendsofcombevalley.co.uk

Friends of Combe Valley is a Registered Charity (in England) No: 1163581