

**FRIENDS OF
BLYTHE HILL
FIELDS**



Chair's report, 2023

Annual General Meeting, Tuesday 21 November 2023

The Friends of Blythe Hill Fields exists to represent everyone who lives around or uses Blythe Hill Fields. Our purpose is to deliver sustainable improvements, for the benefit of the whole community, that increase people's use and enjoyment of this beautiful open space.

2023 has been a busy and productive year for the Friends, and my second year as Chair. We hosted another successful Festival on 2 July and made good progress on several significant park improvement projects.

Everything we do is run entirely by volunteers. I'd like to say a huge thank you to all of our Committee members, supporters and occasional volunteers, who give their time and skills so generously, in so many ways. You are the heart of our community.

Friends Committee 2023

Chair, Mike Williams

Vice chair, Rich Ibell

Secretary, Dani Bizley

Treasurer, Sailesh Patel

Head of Festival, Kevin Sutton

Volunteer Coordinator, Catherine Walsh

Committee members:

Graeme Crow

Jo Miller

Jim Smith

Katherine Hughes

Helen Raggatt

Nicholas Taylor

Alice Casey

Inma Ferrer

Festival 2023

The Festival is our most important event each year and a highlight of the community calendar. We're proud that it is free, open to all and delivered entirely by volunteers.

This year we had a magnificent, mostly sunny day, with our stages filled with more diverse local acts than ever before, more stalls, providing space for local businesses, charities and community groups than ever before, and more exciting activities and events than ever. The Friends provided all the usual core activities, including the raffle, the Friends tent, history displays, a BBQ and a plant and cake sale – as well as branching out with some new ideas, including an improved layout, which improved flow, and a pilot for a new Friends' beer tent, which has the potential to raise extra funds for future park projects.

We are grateful to Hunters, our headline sponsor, for their ongoing commitment to the Festival – they have generously renewed their support for another five years – and they also bring so much more than just funding, becoming involved with a true sense of community spirit. Taylored Lofts and The Blythe Hill Tavern have continued as our most loyal regular sponsors and we were delighted to welcome two new local sponsors this year, Campervantastic and Ballers Sports Coaching.

Our Head of Festival

So many people help make the festival a success - Dani, who leads the stalls team; Catherine, who co-ordinated our volunteers; Rich, who pioneered the beer tent; Sailesh, who looked after payments; Josh, the quiet impresario of the main stage; Oli, who has taken the reins of the Woodland Stage, Inma, who kept us visible on social media; Jane, who secured so many raffle prizes and nobbled some new sponsors; Jo, who ran the case and plant sale, Jim, who continued to support with the truck, despite being unable to drive, Nicholas, who brought years of knowledge and experience and shared local history, and last but not least, Helen, Katherine and Jo, who emerged over the hill like the cavalry at the end of the day to help with clean up. I'm sure I've missed some key people - my apologies.

But special thanks to Kevin Sutton, our outstanding Head of Festival, who has led the event for the second year running. It's a big job, covering not just strategy, compliance and oversight of all of the Festival's moving parts, but also the less glamorous job of gap-filling whenever there's no-one available to lend support.

This year we did have volunteer shortfalls in several key areas, including a few key 'portfolio owning' roles, such as Environment and Recycling (Bins) and Logistics (Van driver), as well as the Kids' Tent. This meant that it fell to Kevin to fill more than his fair share of gaps in 2023. He did so with real grace, but it does raise the question of how we continue to keep the Festival sustainable in coming years, as the demographics of our area continue to tilt toward there being more working families, who are often short of time.

The Festival is a big and complex event and one idea we are exploring is whether we can take a more modular approach, which would enable us to drop certain parts, if it turned out that there are no volunteers available to deliver them. Another is to split the role in two, with a Head and a Coordinator to provide support with details. Yet another is to strengthen and document the job descriptions around key portfolio roles, to improve sustainability and

handover, while also ensuring that both the volunteers themselves and the Head of Festival have a clearer understanding of the key tasks required.

Kevin has already done substantial work in this area and will no doubt be sharing his ideas in the run up to next year.

Sharpening the focus on community

Lastly, we're looking at ways to sharpen its focus as a truly *community* Festival. It is so well run that people often mistake it for a commercial festival, so we're interested in exploring ways of shifting how people perceive what the Festival stands for, moving away from what might at times seem like a commercial 'service' model, with local people as consumers, to a more participatory model, where a greater proportion of participants are co-creators in the event. Recycling offers a potential example. In the past, recycling required a tightly managed army of volunteers to pick up after everyone and sort bottles, cans and dirty waste on the day. Could we shift this to a more participant-led model in future, with more more prominently located Euro recycling bins, clearer messaging around our values – 'We recycle!' – and, hopefully a greater degree of both participation in active recycling – as well engagement in ideas of environment and sustainability as core values of our community.

Alongside this conceptual shift, we are also hoping to refresh the Friends and Festival branding this year, to help keep it relevant and deepen people's sense of connection with both the event and their role as participants in the community. Jo Miller, our outstanding graphic designer, developed the current brand by drawing graphic inspiration from the Kibbo Kift and the Woodcraft Folk, remarkable social innovation movements with roots in our local community. We're excited to see how she builds on this idea.

Being a busy working dad himself, Kevin has decided to step down as Head of Festival. We're incredibly grateful and we wish him well. Kevin has generously offered to support and guide a new person once they are in post.

Help us find a new Festival leader

Kevin's departure means we are urgently seeking a new Head of Festival for 2024. To enable us to meet the required lead-in times, we need to appoint someone to this key voluntary role by the end of February, otherwise the Festival can't go ahead next year. Please get the word out!

Greening Fund

In early 2022 the Friends was awarded two grants from the Greening Fund, one for a new noticeboard and the other for establishing a new older kids' trim trail.

Signage

Building on the success of our outstanding entry signs, installed last year, we're exploring a range of different signage options. This is being ably led by Graeme Crow, our resident signage expert. One option is to create a series of moveable 'Digital bug posts'. These would be hardwood posts with built-in holes and other materials to accommodate solitary bees and other insects. Each post would have a letter and a QR code which would link to the website and provide information about a new projects or other park developments.

Older kids' trim trail

The older kids' trim trail Subcommittee, led by Helen Raggatt, has developed a thoughtful and concise brief for the project. This sets out ambitious and exciting ideas for older kids' play trail, which will run alongside the existing playground and have a nature focus, while also being accessible for our diverse community. Their brief has been shared Lewisham Council, which has used it as the basis for their brief to suppliers.

At the same time, the Friends has committed to match fund the Greening Fund budget with £10,000 of our own funds to enable us to get more for our young people from this opportunity. We're looking forward to seeing progress and completion in 2024.

Our new Biodiversity Group

The Friends has a brilliant track record of park improvements in its 20+ year history, much of it laid out in Groundwork's excellent park improvement plan, which was developed together with the Friends in 2004. Among other things, our group helped to establish the existing meadows and planting trees and hedgerows around the park's margins. When I joined as chair, this focus on the park as a naturalistic open space was in a bit of a lull, partly due to the strange time around Covid as well as a necessary emphasis on the Festival in that time.

Connecting people with local nature

Considering an increased awareness of the climate crisis and growing in interest in biodiversity and 'rewilding', I was keen to re-establish this connection with green projects, with the hope of engaging local people who weren't necessarily interested in the Festival but were keen to be involved in nature, facilitating a new level of community custodianship of the park's plants and wildlife.

To this end, we set up a Biodiversity Group in the Spring, which would serve as a forum for discussion and planning of biodiversity projects and function a bit like an informal subcommittee of the Friends. The group met twice during the course of the year and our Biodiversity WhatsApp group now has more than 40 members.

At the same time, we have built strong links with Lewisham's parks team, including Peter Maynard, the Contracts Officer, Eszther Wainwright-Deri, the Ecological Regeneration Manager and Chris Thomson, the Head of green spaces at the park contractor, Glendale.

We have also made links with Nature's Gym, a community project run jointly between Lewisham and Glendale, which will support park projects with skills transfer and a team of enthusiastically committed volunteers. They will be running some engagement days on our behalf, starting early 2024.

Working with the Biodiversity group, and consulting with the community at the past two festivals, we have begun to develop an evolving Biodiversity Plan for Blythe Hill Fields, with a number of target projects well underway. [The current draft of Plan](#), which is available on our website, maps out a more intentional and strategic approach to ongoing biodiversity projects. Among other things, it provides an approved list of trees, offers guidelines on invasive species and establishes a policy for a minimum of 60% native plants.

Attracting new investment

These projects are bringing the added benefit of opening up new sources of funding for the Fields. This year our biodiversity work will bring in well over £30,000 of additional extra investment, alongside significant intangible benefits, including expertise, developing community knowledge and skills, involvement in Citizen Science and overall improvements to health and wellbeing from connecting with nature and being outdoors.

Crop circles? Planting trees, shrubs and meadows with Butterfly Conservation

The first project to get well underway is has come about through connecting with Butterfly Conservation who have a project called Big City Butterflies, which aims to develop wildlife habitats in London's green spaces.

BCB's Project Officer Steve Bolton has visited the site on several occasions, undertaking a site review, making recommendations for habitat improvements, hosting a community Butterfly ID walk and also donating several mature trees, wildlife shrubs and meadow plugs, worth several thousand pounds, to support our community wildlife efforts.

The Friends has contributed additional materials, including tree posts and watering systems, temporary rope fencing and additional wildflower bulbs and seeds, and we are holding two community planting days. The first, a meadow planting day, was held on Sunday 22 October and a second day where we'll plant large trees, as well as shrub blocks and meadows, is planned for Saturday 2 December.

These days will help boost the plant biodiversity and habitats on Blythe Hill, with species, such as blight-resistant Elm, being specifically chosen for their importance to at-risk species, such as the White letter hairstreak butterfly. We will be introducing Yellow rattle to the fields, a plant popularly known as 'the meadow maker' which helps boost biodiversity by weakening aggressive grasses and enabling other to compete. New shrub blocks will provide additional shelter for insects on our exposed site and the meadows have been planted into 'crop circles' or colonisation windows, which will gradually dissolve over time and, hopefully, self-seed greater richness into the surrounding meadows.

The two key zones for this work are the existing meadow patches on the north-facing slopes and a woodland meadow zone, which will run alongside Austin Close and create a new kind of habitat in the fields.

Blythe Hill wildlife garden

Hayley and Holly of H&H gardens have generously volunteered substantial levels of time and expertise to survey the site, understand our requirements and work with us to develop [a detailed plan for our new community garden](#).

The garden will become a key hub and place of enjoyment in this area of the fields. It links to the playground, the new trim trail and the fields beyond and includes wheelchair and pram accessible pathways to encourage people to move through the space and enjoy the planting. A couple of curved benches will provide shady space for tired mums and carers to sit and rest, while they watch their kids play. A series of bug posts and planted gabion baskets will complement the wildlife friendly planting.

This plan has been through two major rounds of consultation and development, with feedback from Lewisham and Glendale earlier this year. It is currently with Lewisham and Glendale for further review and we hope to progress things early in the new year.

Glendale has generously offered in-kind support to help us get the project underway, but it is likely we will need to source additional funding to help with prepping the site and purchasing plants.

The garden will open up significant new ways for the community to use and enjoy the fields, including getting involved in planting, contributing recycled materials for the gabions, helping to create bug posts, and simply enjoying the space. We have set up a Garden Group who will continue to oversee the project and also serve as our core committed volunteers, supporting both establishment and ongoing maintenance.

Tiny Forest

We're delighted that Blythe Hill has been selected as the site for a new fully funded Tiny Forest, which will create a small patch of wild nature about the size of a tennis court on the western side of the park toward Brockley View.

Tiny Forests, delivered by Earthwatch Europe, are an innovative way to 'rewild' small areas in urban spaces using the 'Miyawaki method'. This involves a site survey, review of historical native species, followed by soil preparation and intensive planting of up to 800 trees, shrubs and understory. This creates a mini forest that may establish up to ten times faster than standard planting techniques, providing a massive boost to local biodiversity.

Earthwatch visited Blythe Hill on 13 November to conduct their site and soil survey. Alongside the planting they make a strong commitment to community engagement and citizen science. With the help of Katherine Hughes, we are already beginning to reach out to local schools and community groups.

We are hoping to see more detailed proposals from Earthwatch in the next few weeks. This will include proposed layout options, recommended species and, potentially an outdoor classroom. The project will provide multiple opportunities for community learning and engagement, as well as the chance for engaged Friends to become involved as Tree Keepers, with responsibility for caring for and maintaining the site until the trees are well

established, which takes about three years. We're hopeful that our own Tiny Forest will be ready for planting before Spring 2024.

Finance

While detailed figures will be presented separately by our new Treasurer, Sailesh Patel, I'm pleased to report that the Friends remains in a strong financial position. While sustainability is vital, we have relatively low operating costs, so we are keen to take a proactive yet sensible approach to ongoing investment, partly to beat inflation but also to ensure that we put funds to work in service of improvements for our park community.

Governance

At our last meeting the Friends agreed some minor changes to our governance with the aim of ensuring we maintain a light touch and friendly culture, designed for busy lives, which does not burden people with too much granular detail and excessively long meetings, while at the same time ensuring professional, transparent and effective governance on behalf of our community.

Part of this has involved devolving more responsibility to informal subcommittees or working groups. These can meet as often as their purpose requires, developing discussions and taking action as needed. Their primary requirements are to deliver on their remit, while providing high level progress reports to the formal Friends group. The top level Committee will therefore meet less frequently, at just twice a year – once around May and then in November with the AGM. We currently have the following subcommittees or working groups in operation:

- Festival subcommittee
- Biodiversity group
- Older kids play subcommittee
- Garden group.

We will keep this structure under review during the course of 2024 and we welcome any feedback or suggestions. At the same time, we are exploring the benefits of creating clearer job descriptions and delivery requirements for key portfolio roles. The aim will be to provide clarity for all involved as well as more sustainable operations with effective handover.

Ultimately, the Friends is as much about getting to know your community and making local connections, as it is about our wider purpose – and people's work, personal and family lives must often often take priority. In that light, we are so grateful for the ongoing warmth, generosity and good spirits of everyone involved.