



National Nature Reserve

Annual General Meeting, 9th November 2017

Agenda Item 4: Report from the Chair

Introduction

During those long bygone days when I was paid for working, it was my rule always to try to write reports on a 'good news before bad news' or 'praise before criticism' basis. Looking back at my summary of 2016 for last year's AGM, I see that I was able then to stick to the rule, more or less.

However, this year I must sadly make an exception and begin by reporting that, since our 2016 AGM, there have occurred the deaths of two of our Members, Tony Hirst and Theresa (Terry) Gittins, both of whom contributed significantly to both the development and practical work of FoSC. They are missed and will be remembered for a long time to come. We are planning walks for 2018 that will celebrate the contributions that both Tony and Terry made to the Reserve.

After that sombre introduction, I'm sure that both Tony and Terry would now have expected me to get on with 'business as usual' for this AGM and I shall now try as briefly as possible to summarise what has been going on for FoSC since this time last year. FoSC is committed to working to conserve the Common for future generations¹, so I shall start with our Task Days.

Task Days

We have continued to work within the framework of 2 task days each month plus extra days to help with the sheep and to respond to other demands as they occur. Up to and including Wednesday 8th November, we have contributed more than 750 hours, more than 300 of which were tending the sheep; but down overall on last year. Specific examples include:

- The Line Ponds, where we have cleared a large area of silver birch encroachment, opening up the pond area to more light
- The Pillwort Pond, again a lot of work to open up the water surface with the long term aim of encouraging the conditions that will see the resurgence of Pillwort (more of this later)
- Near the foot of the Grand Canal we have erected a vehicle barrier to try to prevent 'cross country' drivers from ruining the glade environment along the drain banks
- We have cleared offensive graffiti from notice boards at King Rudding Lane and Five Lanes End
- The decking to the viewing platform at Concord Pond, which in addition to the wear and tear of years of use, has suffered vandal damage, has been renewed
- The annual survey of Marsh Gentians was carried out in September, when we identified a total of 83 plants – up from 2016 (34) but just short of 2015 (90).

¹ See the FoSC Mission Statement.

The list of achievements could go on - but it is also in the nature of the conservation work that there is always more to be done.

Our conservation partners Natural England are part of DEFRA², which I'm reliably informed has suffered greater 'cuts' than most other government departments. In this context, I believe that this makes FoSC's contribution significantly more important than ever.

Now the not-so-good news! Good though our achievements have been, the overall fall in output hours reflects lower attendances – a trend that we have so far been unable to reverse.

Events

- Common Chatter

Our quarterly social evenings have continued to generate some interesting conversations. Topics covered so far include attendance at Task Days, Skipwith's local history, food and euthanasia! Sadly, here too attendances have been falling; with our membership now standing at 63, the problem seems to lie with specific event participation rather than levels of broader support.

- Walks

There have been three since the 2016 AGM; the 'traditional' Winter Warmer, which was very well attended, with cars queueing out of the King Rudding Lane car Park! The Members Day 'Heritage Walk' walk in October, which, despite quite nasty weather, was also well attended, began to identify and discuss some of the changes that have occurred in the built village environment and on the Reserve. Earlier this month, the Fungi Walk, also now a tradition and well attended, enjoyed a cold but sunny afternoon walking around Sands Lane. Although late in the 'season', several interesting plants were found, including waxcaps, earth tongue and dog lichen (not actually a fungus, but interesting anyway!).

- Skipwith Village Fete

For some years now, FoSC has been happy to take part in this event, which acts as a catalyst for local social interaction while also raising funds for St Helen's church. Once again, the *Human Fruit Machine* (aka FoSC members) attracted attention throughout the day, entertaining young and old while also raising slightly more funds than last year for the church.

- Local heritage

Picking up on the *Making a Difference* theme of 2016, we have broadened the topic to explore the possibilities of looking at the ways not only in which the Reserve has changed, but also changes within Skipwith Village. Given that there is evidence of human activity hereabouts for more than 4000 years, we have initially focused down to begin to consider just the changes over the past 75 years – more or less.

So far, there have been two FoSC events in this context. A local talk and small display in June generated a good level of interest and identified an appetite for the possibilities of taking the idea further. This was confirmed when the October Members Day was linked to the theme of local heritage, with a more extensive display and a short walk/talk around the Village preceding an evening meal. We are now exploring with local people ways in which this encouraging start may be built upon.

- Pillwort Survey

As mentioned earlier, some of our Task Days have been spent in renovating the Pillwort Pond which is sited on a part of the airfield near King Rudding Lane. It is hoped that this has created suitable conditions for the future translocation of Pillwort, most probably from Strensall Common.

In July, Dr Barry Wright led a group of Yorkshire Fern Group members to conduct a survey of Skipwith NNR's ponds in an attempt to identify any existing Pillwort populations and to assess a total of twelve ponds as possible sites for translocation. No Pillwort was found, but

² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

the resulting evaluation identified six sites as “potentially suitable”, which is very encouraging. However, even better news was to follow soon after the circulation of Dr Wright’s report when specimens of this elusive plant were found on the southern edge of Horseshoe Pond by Mike Wilcox, while looking for Bryophytes! A very happy coincidence, and good to know that we still have Pillwort on the Reserve!

Looking Forward

So much for a snapshot of our activities since the last AGM! The environmental challenges for the year ahead will no doubt be at least as many and as various as what has gone before and we shall certainly also need to continue to address incidents of vandalism and criminal damage. Litter will also always be there to be picked up and silver birch there to cut down!

I anticipate that our working partnerships with the Estate, Natural England, The Freshwater Habitat Trust and local communities will continue to strengthen, particularly if budget constraints continue to increase. Good two-way communication is key to partnership working and I remain hopeful that we shall at last be able to re-introduce the quarterly FoSC newsletter as well as establishing our presence on social media.

There is no doubt that months between this AGM and the next will be another interesting mix of challenges and opportunities!

Finally, I should like to express my sincere thanks to all FoSC Members for their ongoing support, especially to those who turn out in all weathers on Task Days, to members of the Committee who are prepared to give up their evenings to advise me and generally keep me on the straight and narrow paths, but most of all to my fellow FoSC ‘officers’, Secretary Clare Batty and Treasurer Beki Hagger for patiently taking on such a large part of the many admin tasks involved.

John Hilton
Chair of The Friends of Skipwith Common National Nature Reserve.