

MINUTES of the Sixteenth Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Hagg Wood held at the Reading Room, Dunnington, on Wednesday 28th May 2014.

PRESENT Dr Margaret Atherden, Chief Executive of PLACE, speaker, David Mayston, Chairman, Alan Worsley, Treasurer, Linda Maggs, Secretary, Tony & Elaine Hudson, Michael & Diana Dunn, Alan Briers, Olwyn Fonseca, Michael & Janet Clarke, Tony Conway, Angie Creswick, Sandra Laws, Peter & Wendy Crosby, Joan & Ken Turner, Derek Utley, Steve & Sue Ashby, Helen McPherson, George & Pat Staniland, John Rodwell, Nigel Emery, Jane Granville, John & Margy Vernon and Brian Poulter.

APOLOGIES from Canon and Mrs B Pearson, Wendy Worsley, Diane Conway, Mr & Mrs East, John Maggs, Judith Smart, Pam Nyman, Ian & Lita Black and Jennie Stopford.

MINUTES The minutes of the fifteenth AGM, 29th May 2013, were accepted as a true record.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

David welcomed our speaker, Dr Margaret Atherden, and everyone to FHW 16th AGM. David said FHW had survived and enjoyed another busy and successful year, with 18 people attending the last working party in the wood. The carpet of bluebells continued to expand, early this year after the mild winter, thanks to the work of the working parties, with the help of TCV (The Conservation Volunteers). We had planted more trees in the Jubilee Area and around the crater, including rowan and hazel, chosen carefully to attract the birds as well as being attractive in their own right. We had just enjoyed a wonderful dawn chorus in the wood, followed by breakfast, as well as excursions to the Cold War Bunker and to the Castle Howard Festival of Wood. During the year we had 2 interesting lectures, Chris Spedding talking about bees and Terry Smithson, of the YWT, about the work of his organisation. The subscriptions of the society stay the same, offering good value for money and David urged members to renew. David had just been appointed to a new FC Advisory Committee, formed to look into the management of the public body estate, which could, in future, look into the buying and selling of woods. In the past, things in public ownership have been passed on to other bodies, leading to 'sell-offs on the quiet'. Hagg Wood is very precious to us and we will remain vigilant to keep the wood in public ownership.

We always welcome new members to join us in our activities and to take part in our working parties, cutting back rhododendrons and brambles and other necessary tasks. One of the highlights of our year is our annual New Year Dinner, organised by Michael Dunn, which is always an enjoyable event.

David thanked the members of the Committee for their involvement and Linda thanked David for his continued dedication as Chairman. The audience clapped in appreciation of David's efforts.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Alan W presented the FHW Accounts and said they were in a healthy position. The deficit equalled the amount of money spent on the work by the TCV. The membership subscriptions, helped by donations, paid for the insurance and items purchased for our work in the wood. There were no questions. Alan felt encouraged by the efforts of FHW in improving the biodiversity of the wood – during the dawn chorus we had heard 3 warblers: Black Cap, Willow Warbler and Chiff Chaff within a hundred yards, a great improvement on previous years. Alan expressed how important donations were and thanked people for their generosity.

ELECTION OF THE COMMITTEE

Members nominated for election: Alan Briers, Michael Dunn, Olwyn Fonseca, Tony & Elaine Hudson, Linda Maggs, David Mayston and Alan Worsley. They were duly elected. David said there were two unfilled place on the FHW Committee and we would welcome offers from any member who would like to volunteer.

ELECTION OF THE INDEPENDENT EXAMINER

Alan asked if his son could be appointed as the independent examiner and the meeting approved.

ILLUSTRATED TALK BY Dr MARGARET ATHERDEN, WILD FLOWERS ON THE EDGE

David gave a warm welcome to Margaret who said her talk was about the wealth of wild flowers on North Yorkshire's road verges and the importance of their future conservation. The history of road verges went back to Roman times, the road from Bainbridge to Oughtershaw being an impressive example. Early roads like the Hambleton Drove road, designed to take cattle to market, were wide with broad verges but most roads were muddy with uneven surfaces and it was not until the Turnpike roads that major improvements were made. The Parliamentary enclosures in the 18th and 19th century saw the development of new roads, usually 40 feet wide in rural areas, up to 100 feet on major roads and when they were converted to tarmac surfaces the centre was resurfaced with wide verges left on either side. So, the story of most of our road verges, was only two centuries old.

Verges provided a boundary zone between the traffic and the adjacent fields and were sometimes safe for walkers and horses to enjoy. They were a haven of wildlife, including about half of North Yorkshire's flora. They may be considered in zones, providing a suite of distinct habitats: the splash zone, where only the toughest species like knotgrass can survive, the short grass zone with species such as buttercups and daisies, the long grass zone which allows taller flowers to grow and maybe provides cover for smaller mammals, the drainage ditch forming a habitat for amphibians, dragonflies and wetland plants, the hedge bank, which contained woodland species and plants such as primrose, and maybe a dry stone wall which could provide a haven for lizards and plants such as ferns.

Margaret and friend, Nan Sykes, following a lifetime interest in wild flowers, had started a comprehensive survey of North Yorkshire verges in 1985, when there was less traffic on the roads and when more verges were cut regularly. Now only A/B roads are cut regularly and it is more difficult to spot a good verge. They had devised a colour coding system, Red: best, Amber: Quite good, Yellow: Better than average, Green: Average, Brown: Sea of mud, eg walked along by cattle, Mauve: Heather moorland, closely grazed. The whole of the NYM National Park had been colour coded; these were not fixed categories but could change with changing circumstances. The geology/soil of the countryside led to a variety of vegetation.

Margaret then went on to illustrate, with beautiful photographs, the varied verges in different parts of North Yorkshire. Deciduous woodland was once the most dominant vegetation type over the area but now the woodland verges acted as substitutes and contained flowers such as primroses, violets, bluebells and wood anemone. Mountain everlasting, *Antennaria dioica*, was found – a WOW moment. Perennial flax and broad-leaved helleborine were also found. If they can compete well then they may survive.

The Hambleton survey started in 2002 and continued to the present day. Poppies and meadow cranesbill were found in abundance in that locality. Corn marigold, an arable weed, occasionally survived when there was not too much competition. Elecampane, a rare species, grows in one spot in Hambleton. The Vale of Pickering was redeveloped marshland and had been intensively farmed so the verges were not particularly rich. The Howardian Hills were much richer, especially the verges near Hovingham, where primroses, knapweed broomrape, pyramidal orchid and reed canary-grass were found. On the edge of the Wolds, knapweed broomrape was noted, a great find as it is a relatively rare species. On the Wolds themselves, clustered bellflower (which likes chalky soil), wild mignonette, common spotted orchids and greater knapweed were recorded. Different areas of Yorkshire have different geologies and soil, leading to the different characteristics of the verges. The Yorkshire Dales have mountain pansy, bloody cranesbill and melancholy thistle in abundance. Nidderdale was explored 2012/13: 23 good verges recorded with monkshood found near the Druid's circle.

The FC had become much more green and was now one of the best organisations for conservation. Viper's bugloss and common cottongrass were found in Dalby Forest with moorland flowers in Cropton Forest. The management of verges was extremely important, ideally with the enhancement of biodiversity in mind. They were traditionally cut by lengths-men, slowly/methodically, with hand tools performing a good job. The NYCC Highways Dept now managed A/B roads with subcontractors/farmers hired for the smaller roads, cutting the grass to fit in with the farming calendar. The timing of the cutting was crucial and at the moment there was the danger of verges not being managed at all or relying too heavily on weedkillers and huge machines such as ride-on mowers and huge flail-mowers. Disturbances, such as roadworks/pipeline-laying, needed to be carefully managed to protect rare species such as orchids. Salt on roads was another issue which needed consideration. Species such as reflexed saltmarsh grass, Danish scurvy grass and lesser sea spurrey were found in increasing numbers along roads which had been spread with salt. The best management involved not only tiered cutting of the verges but also raking away the 'arisings' (the cut vegetation), so that the soil composition was not unduly enriched. Another recent development was the planting of trees or bulbs by local parishes or landowners. Wild daffodils were preferable to cultivated ones; some introduced species such as Himalayan Balsam and Japanese knotweed, had devastating consequences, as they smothered the growth of indigenous species.

Climate change will bring about some winners/losers but Margaret emphasised Professor John Lawton's message of Connectivity – it was critical that vital links and corridors were preserved for plants and insects to protect the health of the whole ecosystems. Verges play an incredibly important role in this, linking up surviving grasslands, woods and wetlands, forming a wildlife network across the countryside. Margaret explained how members could get involved in managing and recording verge plants, encouraging our flora.

David thanked Margaret for a stimulating talk, beautifully illustrated and presented, and encouraged members to buy her book.