

FOTF AGM 2022 Chair's Report:

Friends has continued to support Forestry England as much as possible, with our regular volunteering activities.

These have included checking the walking trails at High Lodge and across the Forest; undertaking conservation tasks one Sunday a month; the day-to-day care of Lynford Arboretum two mornings a month and monitoring the non-scheduled archaeological sites across the forest.

Thetford Forest's Centenary was celebrated at High Lodge on 28 July and FOTF was there with a range of activities that attracted families and gave us the opportunity to talk about the forest and our work to help care for it. Our corporate members enjoyed the summer concerts as one of the benefits of their membership.

We held our 20th annual open day at Mildenhall Warren Lodge and were so pleased to have 87 visitors with most on site for at least 40 minutes. I'd like to thank Andy Carter; John Bowes, Frances Evershed and Alan Spidy for helping throughout the day - and not minding that lunch was delayed until 3pm as we had so many people to show around.

At Lynford Arboretum, we've taken on the task of labelling the 900 + trees with new scientific labels and metal tags. Our work has attracted a great deal of interest from visitors and enabled us to tell them about the scientific importance of the tree collection as well as about Friends. We'd like to record our heartfelt thanks to Forest Research's Chris Reynolds for his training, guidance and support.

Clare Tough and Mark Sullivan are the lead volunteers at Lynford and do a fantastic job organising of all the tasks. Clare has also been working with Chris Reynolds of Forest Research to ensure that the database and our tree labelling match !

Those FOTF members especially keen on archaeology have completed the archiving of the finds from the High Lodge Farmhouse Investigation, ready for deposit with Suffolk County Council's Archaeology Department. We installed an interpretation panel to inform visitors about the significance of the site as well. One unexpected highlight was when retired forester David Bacon identified a photo from the 1930s as definitely being the farmhouse – and went on to identify other sites in the collection of photos too.

To help care for the forest, we work with FE so we'd like to record our thanks to Nicky Russell, Joshua Heffer, Andy Pallas-Clark; Krysia Truscoe, Hannah Gibson, Callum Leslie and Megan Bradsworth in particular – and to Neil Kellett as acting Forest Management Director until very recently.

However, this wouldn't be a true report if I failed to mention that the committee is still very concerned about the future.

Some of you may remember that in 2019, Forestry England put together a Volunteer Management Policy which classifies all volunteers according to what they do and how much direction they receive from FE Staff.

In 2019, FE proposed that our contract was to be replaced with a Memorandum of Understanding but (the pandemic notwithstanding) only in July of this year were we presented with a 27 page draft partnership agreement instead.

Finding a date or dates to discuss this in detail with FE has proved difficult but we now have 7 November for our first meeting.

Some of the clauses may prove unworkable for us and having most of the work we do transferred to FE, would mean volunteers becoming FE directed and take away so much of what we do to care for the forest.

We'll keep you informed of negotiations and developments. In the meantime, I'd like to thank the present committee for continuing to be so dedicated in the face of this uncertainty.

As I didn't want to end my report so negatively, I thought I'd remind us all of the two awards we've been given – the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service and a Royal Forestry Society Silver Award. The citation included:

The Friends are efficiently run, effective in their aims and have good governance ---. This is an outstanding success story brought about by an equally outstanding organisation which works closely with the Forestry Commission in a mutually beneficial manner.

We hope so much that we can continue to do this.

Anne Mason
13 October 2022