

Since our last AGM in 2016, it has been rather an exciting year for Friends. In the midst of all the excitement, we've continued with all our 'usual work' – conservation to improve habitats; care of Lynford Arboretum; checking the walking trails at High Lodge and across the Forest; Meet and Greet at High Lodge; leading on Discovery Day and helping at events. I'd particularly like to mention the volunteers at the concerts this year as they had some challenging situations to deal with (not of their making, I hasten to add) and they used their initiative to quietly and efficiently prevent the problems from becoming much worse. I was really proud of them. Our 'special event' for members was a visit to the Battle Area which enthralled everyone.

As Alan mentioned, we haven't forgotten the need to remind government of protection for the Public Forest Estate with sustainable funding – crucial to ensure that the PFE continues to deliver public benefits, so important to us here in Thetford.

In May, we celebrated ten years of involvement at Lynford Arboretum, with guided walks by the volunteers and then a tea party, attended by almost forty people. We're helping FC with a management plan which should be beneficial for the volunteers and the site too.

The tea party was the last Friends 'event' attended by Jim Lyon who retired as Forest Management Director in June. Jim couldn't have been more supportive of us but we were absolutely delighted when Tristram Hilborn became the new East England Director. He has shown how fully committed he is to working with us and already we are beginning to explore more ways in which to develop our partnership.

I couldn't possibly give my report without mentioning 'warrens' and this year we've investigated the site of Santon Warren Lodge, though without finding any conclusive proof of a medieval building. We're planning a return to Reed Fen Lodge to do more there, early next year.

So – what has made 2017 so memorable – the evidence is here – two incredible awards !

The first is from the Royal Forestry Society, in recognition of our work at Lynford Arboretum. The RFS is the largest and longest established education charity promoting the sustainable management of woods in the UK. Terry Jennings, FC Establishment Manager, nominated Friends' volunteers at the Arboretum for the award as it had to be site-specific.

Two RFS judges visited the Arboretum with Terry Jennings and myself as Chair to learn about how it is cared for by the dedicated volunteers. They awarded Lynford Arboretum joint second in the Urban and Community Forestry Awards Category. They wrote:

*Lynford Arboretum is probably the most unusual community woodland ever visited by the judges – and it is truly delightful. In 2007 the Friends of Thetford Forest took over the management and this was clearly the best thing to happen to it as it is now the third most important arboretum in England as well as having Grade 1 Listed Parkland status. Located in what, at first, appears to be a fairly remote part of Thetford Forest, it soon becomes apparent that it enjoys a phenomenal level of use in no small way entirely attributable to the efforts of the Friends.*

The second award was announced on 2 June: the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service is the equivalent of an MBE and the highest award a volunteer group can achieve. It included an invitation to a Royal Garden Party so Dave and Sally Goodrum went to Buckingham Palace; we have the right to use the award logo for 'evermore'. The Countess of Euston, as the Lord-Lieutenant of Suffolk and therefore the Queen's representative in the county, presented us with the certificate signed by Her Majesty the Queen and the crystal at a ceremony here at Oak Lodge yesterday, attended by members of the Committee, volunteers and those FC staff who work most closely with us and it was an incredible occasion. The letter announcing our award stated: *The work your group does for the community was very much admired by the independent Assessment Committee, chaired by Sir Martyn Lewis CBE. This is a tremendous achievement for your organisation. We hope that everyone involved, and particularly your volunteers, feel immensely proud of the recognition that this Award represents.*

I'd like to personally thank all our volunteers for their commitment and enthusiasm and their generosity in giving so many hours of their time to the Forest. Those volunteers who serve on the Committee deserve a special mention as it is their dedication which has enabled Friends to thrive, supported by our wonderful partnership with the Forestry Commission.

Thank you.

Before I end this formal AGM, I'd like to read you the final part of the judges' citation for the RFS award.

*The Friends are active throughout the forest and have over 1500 paid-up members, run numerous events and have a philosophy that promotes 'enjoyment and understanding'. They are efficiently run, effective in their aims and have good governance which will guarantee a secure future. 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. It is clear that both organisations have the utmost respect for each other. We would recommend that all similar organisations with similar aspirations take time to see how effectively the Friends of Thetford Forest operates –*

*so we have a very positive endorsement to take us into the future.*