

THE NEW FRIENDS OF LOWNDES PARK

APRIL 2007

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first newsletter of the New Friends of Lowndes Park. As with all things new this will no doubt improve with time but I felt that now was a good time for a broad overview and some introductions.

My name is Michael Rowan and I have agreed to set up a Friends group in response to the advice given by the Heritage Lottery Fund on the outline bid submitted by the Town Council to fund the Lowndes Park project.

Part of that advice was that the park needed to demonstrate that it had an active Friend's group and a friend of mine who was a consultant on the Lowndes Park bid suggested that as a Chesham resident, I should get involved.

The reason he asked me is because I have a long history of working with a range of Friends groups that goes back to 1983 and continues today with the Friends of the park that I currently manage.

I have also led on two successful major applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 1996 and 1998 and oversaw the implementation of the works of the former.

I took over my latest park in October 2003 since when we have won three successive Green Flags with increasingly higher scores (see below for more information on Green Flag) and are entered for our fourth this year.

EARLY DAYS FOR THE NEW FRIENDS OF LOWNDES PARK

I have been enthused by the response of people to the park and when the Friends Group was formed we rejoiced in two members, (my wife and I) but very soon other people who loved the park and wanted to help joined us.

We now have over 40 members and my aim is to get 101 members so that I can inform the Heritage Lottery Fund that we have over 100 members. This sounds extremely credible and I will be constantly asking you to help with the recruitment of spouse's partners, neighbours and friends in order to achieve this.

Many of you reading this have already introduced several new members so I do not think that our target of 101 is unachievable, merely ambitious.

Already our range of members is very impressive (Heritage Lottery Fund are quite rightly keen that such groups have a wide cross section of the community as members. We have a good balance of men and women, we have members in their 90s and some that are 16 and 17. We have members that are from the Muslim community and members from the none Muslim community and we have members with disability. This is important as it demonstrates that we represent a wide view but also because it allows us to consider the needs and views of a broad cross section of park users and equally importantly none park users. (The latter to investigate ways of making the park appealing to a new audience)

NEXT STEPS

When I started this in January I set myself a timetable and so far I am just about on track to achieve this. (Please do not think that this is the norm, but, by some lucky coincidence, we are on track.) By the end of May I would like to have held our first annual general meeting and become formally constituted and to have elected a committee to carry out the work of Chair, Secretary, Membership, Treasurer etc

Charging subscriptions

We need to charge something for membership in order to pay for postage and printing costs etc. We need to keep these low so that people do not find it a barrier to joining but we will need to raise some funds for operating costs. Also if we do not charge membership we are not a Friend's group merely a group of people who have in effect signed a petition, and that is unlikely to impress the Heritage Lottery Fund. However with many people on e mail we can keep our costs down. I am therefore suggesting that we make a charge of £2.00 per household (because we will only send one copy of the newsletter). £1.00 per household for those that have retired, and no charge for those under 18. I hope to put out 3 or 4 newsletters a year so I hope that you can see we are not going to become rich anytime soon.

The one thing that we cannot afford to miss is the September deadline. The Olympics and the need to fund it have drawn significant sums from a variety of government-funded organisations including the Heritage Lottery Fund. HLF have announced that they will have enough money to fund projects that are already approved but this means that there will be more competition for what is left. Put very bluntly this means that HLF will be looking for reasons to reject bids and it is up to us not to give them any reason.

So the task is bigger and more difficult than when I set this up in January but that happens in life and I for one would rather try my hardest and not succeed than not try at all because it was too difficult. (Clearly my preferred option is that I try and it is very easy!)

So for this reason I am keen that we hit the September deadline.

We have a steering group and this needs to drive the project and set a time line so we can understand what needs to be done and by when. The New

Friends of Lowndes Park (NFLP) have a seat on this group and it is your views that we shall be representing.

My main aim is to get a full time park ranger working in the park so that people have a point of contact. Someone they know by name and someone who they can report problems to. There is plenty of evidence that having a park staffed is essential to making it feel safe.

Everyone seems agreed that this is a good thing and should be supported but there are other issues that do not have universal support. The provision of a new park building, which would host a variety of functions, not least, somewhere to house the park ranger is set for a lively debate. An avenue of trees is another suggestion that needs further consideration as once again opinion is divided. What cannot be allowed to happen is for the debate to stifle action and to take so long that we miss the September deadline.

GREEN FLAG

The town council has for the first time entered Lowndes Park for the Green Flag competition. This is a government sponsored competition run by the Civic Trust and is loosely based on the blue flag for beaches. There are two elements to the competition. The first is the submission of a management plan which is assessed against a set of criteria and the second is a site visit made by judges to assess the site against a similar set of criteria. One of the criteria is around community engagement and that is where the Friends will make a contribution. Judging is usually around May June (possibly late April) and we are told the date that the judges are coming –May 10th. So I will be issuing a call for all hands on deck to help spruce up the park and make sure that it is gleaming. We should know if we have been successful in July and there is an award ceremony in August that is been held in Leeds this year. We get feedback from the judges that will identify areas that are lacking or that are weak as well as a numerical score and even if we are not awarded it in the first year it does give us a target of improvement to aim for.

If we are successful we are expected to fly the Green Flag in the Park so that people are aware that the park has reached the required standard. The award only lasts for one year and then the park must re enter and be reassessed. This ensures that standards are maintained which I am sure you will agree is a good thing.

SHORT TERM, MEDIUM TERM AND LONG TERM

Have we got anyone amongst our membership that might be persuaded to design us a logo? The logo needs to be something that we can use on letterheads and notices and even this newsletter. A view across the park to the church? The park in use? The bandstand? Geese on the pond? If any kind person could volunteer to devise such a thing you would have my undying love. (Well perhaps that is overstating it but you get the point.)

What about a web page can anyone out there help set one up?

I would also like to set up regular, (probably monthly) volunteer sessions to undertake some practical work in the park. I am not sure what we will do yet it

will to some extent depend on how many people step forward. I realise that some of you have joined just to support the park and not to get dragged into volunteering. Please don't worry you are every bit as important to what we are trying to achieve but some people want to get more involved and that is great too.

Much longer term, we could, if there is enough interest, visit some other parks to see how they do things but that is probably for next year or the year after.

Don't forget winning the money is the beginning rather than the end of the process.

Please, please if you do nothing else come to our first meeting. I will send out a separate note of the date but it will be towards the end of May. I can think of nothing worse than standing alone in an empty room, so even if you wont do it for the park do it for the dignity of a fellow human being.

Also please do your best to recruit other members and I promise to stop nagging once we reach our target of 101

I am aware that I have made this sound like a one-man operation but nothing could be further from the truth. I am indebted to the Town Council, and to Ron, Ken, Javad and Collette and of course whoever persuaded you to join the Friends.

Without your ongoing support we will fall at the first hurdle - but that doesn't seem to be the Chesham way of doing things and It certainly isn't mine!

So as a Friends group we look as though we have a busy time ahead of us

I look forward to meeting you soon

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