

THE FRIENDS OF RICHMOND PARK
MINUTES OF THE 2022 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Held via Videoconference at 11.00am on Saturday 23 April 2022

Roger Hillyer, Chairman, took the chair and welcomed members to the 61st AGM; the meeting again being held using Zoom technology. With about 80 participant screens, some hosting more than one member, he confirmed that a quorum was present.

Max Lankester had kindly stepped back into the role of Secretary at last year's meeting, on a temporary basis. During the year, Judith Pearson had been appointed as a new trustee and taken over as Secretary. Max had been elected to serve as a Vice-President for 3 years. Roger Hillyer thanked Max for his continuing contribution to the Friends.

Roger Hillyer said that the meeting would be in three parts, namely the formal elections and approvals, the chairman's summary and then questions. Voting would be carried out using Zoom polling, which enabled members to vote online.

Judith Pearson then explained that those attending had received the Agenda and the Summary Review of the Year with the regular newsletter and, in addition, those documents, together with the Minutes of the last meeting and the Annual Report and Accounts for 2021, were on the FRP website.

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Janet Bostock, Peter Burrows-Smith and Helene Feger.

2. Minutes of the 2021 AGM

Max Lankester proposed the acceptance of the Minutes of the last AGM held on 24 April 2021. The minutes were agreed.

3. Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2021

Hugh Deighton presented the accounts for the year ended 31 December 2021. The accounts had been examined and approved by Feltons Accountants in Richmond and were available in full on the FRP website, as part of the Annual Report and Accounts.

He summarised the four principal sources of income, namely:

- membership subscriptions, which had risen to £36,000 (including gift aid);
- sponsorship from Russell-Cooke and The Property Partnership, which had produced £5,000;
- sales, raising over £24,000 gross, £12,000 net; and
- donations (including legacies), which totalled nearly £4,500.

As a result of the income and the bank balance FRP were able to make grants of nearly £43,000 in 2021 to The Royal Parks for conservation projects. This was a substantial increase from the £34,000 donated in 2020 and brought FRP's total donations and grants to the Royal Parks to almost half a million pounds since 2011. The closing balance for 2021 was £168,500 compared to £194,000 at the

end of 2020, which was in accordance with plans put in place at the beginning of the year for an increased level of grants.

He summed up the financial position as strong and said FRP will continue to be able to make substantial contributions to the Park's conservation activities.

On behalf of the Trustees, Roger Hillyer proposed the approval of the 2021 Report and Accounts. The 2021 Report and Accounts were agreed.

4. Election of Officers

(a) Nick Coleman proposed Roger Hillyer for Chairman. Roger Hillyer was elected; he said that he was honoured to continue to serve FRP.

(b) Ron Crompton proposed Judith Pearson for Secretary. Judith Pearson was elected.

(c) Ron Crompton proposed Hugh Deighton for Treasurer. Hugh Deighton was elected.

5. Election of Trustees

Roger Hillyer said that there had been a number of changes in trustees during the year. He paid tribute to the contributions by retiring trustees. Steve Sandham, who had developed and grew the bulletin, website and social media and who had created the successful Adopt-an-Area litter picking scheme (AaA), had moved away from the area. Richard Gray had also stepped down after 11 years as a Trustee. Richard had led our marketing and mainstream media activities; he has now become a Vice-President, focusing on Friends-funded conservation projects and the Park's conservation and wildlife generally. In November 2021, Monique Sarkany and Nigel Sherwin had been appointed as trustees: Monique had taken over lead responsibility from Teresa Grafton for FRP's Discoverers activities for young families, and Nigel had taken over AaA. In January 2022, as well as Judith Pearson, Helene Feger and Lucy Tarleton had both joined as new trustees. Helene had taken over our press relations and Lucy had assumed responsibility for events.

Max Lankester proposed the following as trustees: Janet Bostock, Nick Coleman, Helene Feger, Chris Mason, Monique Sarkany, Nigel Sherwin, Lucy Tarleton and Vivienne Press. All were elected as trustees.

6. Appointment of Honorary Independent Examiner

Feltons had kindly carried out this function for some years, and were prepared to act in that capacity again. The Chairman thanked Richard Rhodes of Feltons for his work, which was carried out on a pro bono basis. On behalf of the Trustees, Roger Hillyer proposed Feltons as the Honorary Independent Examiner. Feltons were appointed.

7. Chairman's Report

Roger Hillyer paid tribute to the continuing support of all members, volunteers and trustees, who make the Friends the active and influential charity it is. Membership grew by 18% to over 3,800 members by the end of the year; volunteer numbers grew by 13% to nearly 300 volunteers; and new trustees and leaders had been recruited to join an already strong team. He added a personal thank you to Ron Crompton for his advice and support.

Roger Hillyer then reviewed what the Friends did in 2021, illustrating his report with photos and short films.

Lockdown and wet weather damage

First Richmond Park itself. 2021 started with national lockdown restrictions. With little else to do, visitor numbers to the Park increased and with heavy rain in the first few months of 2021, it was perhaps the worst time for the Park during the entire Covid period.

Restoration and investment

Richmond Park received record amounts of money from The Department of Culture Media and Sport's recovery fund and from the People's Postcode Lottery. Some of that work started in 2021 and it has continued since, including renovations to the Causeway at Pen Ponds, improvements to the Tamsin Trail (partly about Covid recovery but, in terms of managing waterflow, they are also a response to climate change) and significant repair work to the wall.

Litter in lockdown and Adopt-an-Area

Litter increased in lockdown, the AaA litter pickers could not start again until March 2021. This is now our largest team, including Duke of Edinburgh volunteers who make a real difference to Richmond Park.

The Visitor Centre and online sales

The Visitor Centre was shut for the first three months of the year but, with Diane Peake and Marilyn Watkinson and the volunteers successfully navigating various changing regulations and guidance, the Visitor Centre came back, with extraordinarily high sales, in the last quarter. Our online shop was again a key part of our sales, even though the work behind the scenes is less visible. The beautiful calendar, which Vivienne Press produces, not only shows off the beauty of Richmond Park, to remind everybody what we are protecting, but continues to grow in sales, becoming an increasingly key part of our overall income.

Skylark protection with our new patron

2021 was Clare Balding's first full year as our patron. And in March 2021 she helped with our campaign to protect skylark breeding areas, taking part in a film produced by Richard Gray. A short film of how BBC TV London News reported on this was shown. The numbers of skylarks held up reasonably well in 2021.

The Year of the Tree

With Covid and lockdown restricting activities, 'The Year of the Tree' was extended to 2021. Hundreds of people watched the FRP webinar on remarkable trees, which included Clare Balding interviewing Simon Richards and Gillian Jonasus. The FRP 'Walks with Remarkable Trees' proved popular with a reprint of set one. The smaller size of the Royal Oak print was made available in an attractive presentation tube. The Year of the Tree finished with a first –a booklet for children, 'Lets Discover: Trees and their Wildlife'. This featured Olly the little owl on every page. The Year of the Tree lives on with the Mark Frith print, the walks and the children's booklet. It has raised significant sums of money, but perhaps most importantly it has raised awareness, understanding, attachment and indeed affection for the trees of the Park.

Light and noise surveys

The Chairman noted that it was five years since the launch of the FRP film 'Richmond Park National Nature Reserve'. 560,000 people have watched it on YouTube - 1,000 people every day. So those

opening words of our patron Sir David Attenborough are familiar to many: *“Richmond Park: until morning, it’s the darkest and quietest place in the capital”*.

Accordingly, in 2021 FRP commissioned two separate independent expert reports into the light and the noise in Richmond Park. These now give a baseline of the conditions in the Park to enable us to talk with authority about what we are seeking to protect. The noise measurements are important in helping us measure the benefits of tranquility that the Park brings to people’s mental health. FRP are starting our own internal monitoring to supplement the external reports.

Signage

The Friends continues to work for better signage to improve visitor behaviour. Good signage is not a complete solution, but it can help. The Royal Parks accepts there is need to improve and have a project to improve signage. FRP volunteered to help with a survey to test location and tone. There was a wide variation by location - confirming the importance of location. The Royal Parks is continuing to develop signage guidelines and we are continuing our discussions with the Royal Parks.

FRP’s activities

Roger Hillyer summarised FRP’s activities as:

- educating people about Richmond Park.
- campaigning.
- volunteering in practical ways.
- raising funds for the benefit of Richmond Park.

Conservation grants

In 2021, FRP funded chestnut pale fencing and posts to protect dead wood and a further tranche of fencing for veteran tree enclosures and was the main funder of a tree and plant quarantine area in the existing nursery at the Isabella Plantation.

Looking forward

The Chairman noted the appointment of a new Park Manager. After a massive 25 years’ contribution, Simon Richards will shortly be stepping down as Park Manager. Paul Richards will be taking over. He grew up in East Sheen and has most recently been Head of the Parks Service at the London Borough of Hillingdon.

Other forthcoming issues include:

- Traffic trial announcement
- Crossings for pedestrians
- Queen’s Green Canopy: Platinum Jubilee Wood
- Roehampton Gate Café proposals
- Heathrow airspace developments
- Increasing visitor numbers
- Climate change

The Discoverers film

To close, a film was shown, produced by one of FRP's new volunteers, Bea Mansouri, who runs the Discoverers pages on the website. This featured Monique Sarkany, who now leads Discoverers, and the Beverley Brook survey team.

It is an example of how different teams, involving both new and experienced volunteers working together, mean the Friends of Richmond Park will continue to be an active, influential and successful charity.

8. Questions to the Trustees and discussion of matters of concern

Judith Pearson explained that the Trustees would aim to deal with all the pre-submitted questions first and then hope to move on, time permitting, to any additional questions that people posed during the meeting.

Traffic

Nick Coleman responded to a set of questions about traffic. Tony Edwards asked: "What is happening regarding the closure of the road between Sheen Cross and Sheen Gate, and the road between Robin Hood Gate and the Isabella Plantation". Christian Gastaldello's question touched on a similar point: "When will motorists be able to drive around the full perimeter of the park?"

Nick reminded the meeting of the context. The roads in the Park are private and the responsibility of The Royal Parks (not the Friends). The road closures are part of a trial and an announcement as to the outcome is expected next month, in May. We do not know for certain but anticipate that The Royal Parks will announce that the trial closures will be made permanent, not least because a significant majority of respondents to the consultation were in favour of the change. If that is the case, we expect that the temporary plastic barriers will be replaced by more appropriate wooden barriers.

Nick then moved to questions about possible future changes. Kate Benest asked how much support there would be for having a "car free" or "bicycle free" weekend, say once a quarter – this could be a positive to emerge from lockdown. Nick said that the road changes currently being trialled are the biggest changes since Robin Hood Gate was closed and the 20mph limit re-imposed in 2004. We expect that, should the trial measures be made permanent, The Royal Parks will want to let them settle in before making any more major changes. We can only speculate how much support there would be for these ideas but FRP are very aware that every change has winners and losers. For example, car-free weekends would mean reduced access for people with disabilities who rely on cars for access; whilst more cycling could make it harder for pedestrians to cross the road. FRP stands for balance between all Park users. We also support the Royal Parks' hierarchy of road users, which is wildlife, pedestrians, cyclists and cars in order of priority.

Nigel Kellow asked why ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) cameras had not been installed, as a mechanism for enforcing the ban on commercial vehicles and creating options for revenue generation from through traffic. Nick explained that ANPR had been actively investigated by The Royal Parks – there are some clear potential benefits but it would require legislation to permit their introduction and it is a slow, expensive and complex process to secure time in the Parliamentary calendar.

Finally, Christopher Campbell, on behalf of Richmond Park Cyclists asked the Friends to formally develop a visionary, sustainable transport policy that will cover movement within the Park, getting to and from the Park, through traffic and timescales. Nick referred to the legal charitable objects of FRP, that seek to balance the environmental interests and public benefit. These guide FRP's policies with regard to transport. He reiterated that FRP stands for a balance between all Park users; and supports The Royal Parks' hierarchy of priority for road users, whereby each group must not be disadvantaged by those lower in the hierarchy. In addition, FRP is in favour of reducing through traffic. FRP does not see the need for any more by way of policy, especially at a time when the biggest changes in a generation have not even been finalised, let alone settled in.

Branding

Rosemary Hadfield asked whether it would be worth rebranding Richmond Park as Richmond Safari Park, which might elicit the respect for the Park that is needed for a space that is not like a safe municipal park, but is actually a protected space and also contains dangers such as wild animals roaming free and lymes disease?

Vivienne Press said that FRP agreed that it is important that visitors realise that this is not a typical local park. There are a number of ways of doing this. Our preference is to promote the message that visitors are coming to a National Nature Reserve. Our Tread Lightly Campaign is part of this.

Indeed, we have been actively promoting these messages for the past 5 years – starting with the launch of our Film – Richmond Park National Nature Reserve. Vivienne then showed images of our publications to illustrate that Richmond Park is always followed by National Nature Reserve in the same size font.

Alongside this, three years ago, we conducted a survey and review of the signage in the Park, and are currently working with TRP to influence the new signage that they are preparing so that the Tread Lightly messages to take nothing away, leave nothing behind and respect the wildlife are clear to all visitors.

Wildlife Conservation

Richard Gray answered a series of questions on wildlife.

Christian Gastaldello asked " What progress is being made by the Park's team to prevent the spread of invasive fern?" Richard said that, technically, bracken is not an invasive plant in that it is a universally native plant in the UK. However, it certainly spreads rapidly if given the opportunity. The Royal Parks are aware of the threat to the acid grassland, which is a valuable habitat (not least for anthills) for which the Park is designated as an SSSI. It is not straightforward to stop the spread of bracken because it grows from underground rhizomes which are not removed by mowing off the top growth. The Royal Parks do seek to weaken the growth in certain areas by regular use of a roller pulled by horses. Understandably, The Royal Parks are reluctant to use chemical spray. It is also worth noting that a certain amount of bracken is welcome in that it offers protection for young deer in the birthing season and also cover for birds, such as stonechat, reed bunting and wrens.

Richard then turned to a question about dogs from Tricia Culliford : "Are you planning to repeat last year's ban on dogs off leads during the deer birthing period and if so what is the justification?"

Richard noted that this is a decision for The Royal Parks who had announced two days previously that it would be compulsory for all dogs to be on leads in all areas of the Park from 1 May to 31 July 2022, to protect both deer and dogs during the deer birthing season. He pointed out that The Royal Parks are not outliers in this respect – most deer parks, including all 12 or so managed by the

National Trust, require dogs on leads at all times. The season is a vulnerable time for female deer, who hide their young in bracken and long grass to conceal them from dogs and other perceived predators. There has been an increase in cases of dogs chasing deer in Richmond and Bushy Parks. During March 2022, The Royal Parks were alerted to an average of one such incident every day. It is not just an issue for out-of-control dogs; female deer are instinctively protective of their young and may be frightened and respond aggressively even to well-behaved dogs. Accordingly, dog walkers are warned that having a dog on a lead does not completely eliminate risk, and the safest option is to exercise dogs elsewhere during the birthing season.

Tim Thursfield flagged concerns about various creatures which he saw as potentially too numerous and troublesome. He asked what is being done by way of "vermin control", commenting that in his view there are too many grey squirrels and carrion crows. He also expressed a concern that parakeets are taking over nesting holes for native species. Richard noted that there are legal controls on killing or capturing wild birds and animals. It is difficult to target particular species for capture or killing and, in any case, all these three are present in large numbers in the wider area, so it would make no difference to eliminate a certain number in the Park, as others would quickly move into the Park from outside, to take their place. As to whether parakeets do out-compete native birds, there is some anecdotal evidence but, so far, no firm scientific basis for saying that they are a threat.

Environmental

First, Roger Hillyer took a question from Florence Mitchell about a local aborist who has been raising a petition against what he describes as a "ruthless pruning regime in Richmond Park". Has there been a reaction from the Friends of Richmond Park? Roger said that FRP have discussed this with The Royal Parks and believe they are taking the criticism seriously but do not accept it is valid. They have checked the maintenance of the trees to which he has drawn attention and entered into a dialogue with him. They offered to bring in an independent expert to review their work but we understand he declined. FRP do not see any reason to disagree with The Royal Parks' approach.

Next, Simon Taylor asked why there are not more dog waste bins in 'central' areas of the park. Roger said that The Royal Parks generally locate bins near car parks and/or entrances because that is where most dog waste is created. Other locations are possible provided they are near a road, to facilitate collection. If there is a suggestion of a particular location for a new bin near a road, then he would be happy to pass it on.

Tim Thursfield raised a couple of concerns about the impact of the cafés on the environment. "Why is there still a diesel generator pumping out toxic fumes from the Pen Ponds café?" Roger explained that there is no electricity supply to that location and The Royal Parks consider the cost of bringing it in would be prohibitive. Apparently, the generator was converted to biodiesel last year. Having said that, FRP agree that the current arrangement is far from ideal. Secondly, "Why are the cafés still using single use plastics, such as water bottles, cups, spoons, etc?" Roger said that FRP agree with the sentiment behind the question and he had discussed this with Simon Richards, the Park Manager. This is a timely question as the current catering contracts are being revised at the moment.

The final pre-submitted question: What habitat improvements, for wildlife, are planned for the future? Roger Hillyer and Richard Gray responded. Projects include pathway improvements (which protect surrounding habitats by concentrating foot/cycle traffic on the path), planting of a new wood near Ham Cross as part of the Queen's Green Canopy, measures to slow the flow and retain

water in the Park and the new planting of native hedging/scrub on the escarpment above Petersham Park (protection against erosion and a valuable habitat for birds).

Roger Hillyer then turned to some questions submitted via the Zoom chat function.

How effective do you think updated information about the Park is at reaching regular users? Roger acknowledged that there is always room for new ideas on communication and referred to the existing FRP member communications, in the form of newsletters three times a year and monthly emails. Emerging stories are featured on the FRP and The Royal Parks websites and on social media. The Royal Parks also put up posters in the Park – for example, in relation to the recent oil spill in Beverley Brook.

Has Richmond Park and/or the Friends a view on the proposal for a café in the toilet block by Ham Gate – there have been four submitted objections to the planning application? The Chairman said that the Friends were not aware of any planning application having been submittedⁱ.

Roger Hillyer thanked all for their attendance, and closed the meeting at 12.22 pm

ⁱ It has since been confirmed that an application for a Certificate of Lawful Development (not Planning Permission) had been submitted (and has subsequently been withdrawn) by The Royal Parks.