

FRIENDS OF WARNEFORD MEADOW

ANNUAL REPORT 2012 – 2013



The first top cut in over a decade

Company No. 8235285 + 35 Hill Top Road, Oxford, OX4 1PD

For friends of Warneford Meadow, 2012 and 2013 have been years of waiting, of frustration, of worry about the future of the Meadow, but also years of achievement; and we end 2013 in a confident mood.

This is Friends of Warneford Meadow's annual report to members and supporters for its first year as a company limited by guarantee, from 1 October 2012 to 30 November 2013. Because our previous Annual Report was published in May 2012, information is also given about events earlier in June to September 2012.

For anyone who doesn't know it, Warneford Meadow is seven hectares of grassland and an orchard planted in the 1940s. It is hidden behind the houses of Hill Top Road and the Warneford and Churchill Hospitals and bounded on the east by Boundary Brook and Southfield Golf Course. Public footpaths follow its edges and there's a well-used path across the middle.

The Meadow was bought by Warneford Hospital in 1918 to protect it from development and provide food and therapeutic outdoor recreation for patients. The hospital farm closed in the 1960s, but the Meadow was grazed or a hay crop taken until the 1980s. Local people have long used the Meadow for recreation – walking, blackberry picking, and children's games. In recent years, it was neglected by its owners, the NHS, and began to run wild. It has developed a varied ecology typical of unmanaged grassland, but this is threatened by advancing scrub.

Friends of Warneford Meadow (FoWM) was set up in autumn 2006 as an informal association to resist proposals by the NHS to sell the Meadow for development. We were strikingly successful in achieving our initial main objective. Following a 16-day informal Public Inquiry in 2007 and 2008, at which 25 local residents gave evidence, Oxfordshire County Council upheld their Inspector's recommendation and in April 2009 voted to register the Meadow as a Town Green. The NHS sought judicial review, but in April 2010 the High Court ruled against them, allowing registration to proceed. FoWM raised over £60,000 to meet the costs of legal advice and representation throughout the four-year campaign. Registration protects the rights of local residents to use the Meadow for informal recreation, and precludes almost any building on the land.

However, although the Meadow was protected, it was still owned by the Department of Health (DH) who, it would seem, had largely lost interest in it now it had no value as development land. FoWM and others had lots of ideas about how the Meadow could be enhanced for the benefit of local residents, hospital staff and patients and others, but had no power to implement them.

We entered into a lengthy correspondence with DH about our plans for the Meadow and raised the suggestion that the community or a local charity might acquire it. Eventually, in August 2011, DH told us that they had decided to sell the Meadow. This aroused the fear that any new owner might be even less benign and might still seek to overturn the Town Green registration.

Meanwhile DH agreed that FoWM volunteers could undertake some work: to try to stop the Meadow and orchard from becoming overgrown; reduce the spread of brambles, bullace and invasive species such as Himalayan Balsam; and more generally to restore its recreational, environmental and aesthetic value. However, discussions proceeded slowly, in part because of our concerns about liability and insurance. In practice some small-scale work was done, mainly scrub clearance.

Preparations for the planned sale moved slowly. DH had to establish first that no other NHS body wanted the land, then that neither local council wanted it. We were told that community groups would have a privileged opportunity to consider whether to bid for the land, but without knowing the likely price it was hard to make much use of this information.

During this waiting period, the Government published proposals to change the law on registration of Town and Village Greens, in a way that would have prevented the Meadow from being registered, on the grounds that a planning application had already been submitted when we made our application. FoWM, along with the Open Spaces Society and others, submitted detailed arguments against the proposals based on our recent experience. However, our representations were disregarded, and, if section 16 of the Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013 had been in force in 2006, we could have protected the Meadow only via the planning process – probably unsuccessfully.

Finally, in June 2012, the Meadow was advertised for sale. As expected, we were told that if a community group expressed interest in buying it, formal marketing would be delayed until at least December, though it remained unclear whether a community bid would be given any priority if a commercial bidder offered more. We duly submitted an expression of interest.

We contemplated whether to bid to buy the Meadow. How much would it cost? Could we raise the money? Could we look after it? The area around the Meadow doesn't have a parish council or other statutory neighbourhood organisation which, if it existed, might have been the ideal owner. We concluded that if possible we should work in partnership with an existing body with greater resources and expertise, and we entered into discussion with Oxford Preservation Trust and other conservation charities. However, we also had to prepare for the possibility of buying the Meadow ourselves. Both for this reason and so we could enter an agreement with DH to do work on the Meadow without risking individual liability, we concluded that FoWM – set up in 2006 as a wholly informal body – should become a legal entity, ideally with charitable status.

With lots of help from specialist solicitor Tessa Hennessy, we established Friends of Warneford Meadow as a "company limited by guarantee" on 2 October 2012. More on what that means later. The company's objectives – essentially to protect and enhance the Meadow, for the benefit of local people, hospital patients and staff and other users – are wholly charitable in law, although we have not yet sought registration with the Charity Commission because our turnover is below the appropriate threshold.

The licence agreement was finally signed in mid-December. This allows us to mow the Meadow, clear scrub and invasive weeds, prune the apple trees, create informal footpaths, plant trees, provide bins for dog waste – most of the things we might want to do in the short term. The landowners retain "occupier's liability" in law, and remain responsible for any surgery required to the large trees, maintaining the bridges over Boundary Brook etc.

On 29 January 2013, the Meadow was finally offered for sale. "For Sale" signs went up, and we were sent a comprehensive package of sale particulars by DH's agents Savills. Sealed bids were invited by 18 March. We still had no clue how much DH were expecting, and whether any speculative buyer might be interested.

Then, on 4 February, the bombshell. We received an e-mail from Savills to say that Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (who had taken responsibility for the Warneford Hospital from the former Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Mental Health Trust) were interested in acquiring the Meadow, but would need time to consider. The offer for sale was withdrawn.

FoWM's Directors were relieved no longer to have to decide within seven weeks how much to offer for the Meadow and start trying to raise the money. Long-term ownership by a NHS

Trust working in partnership with FoWM might well be the best way forward. However, the Meadow's future was once again uncertain. We immediately started trying to establish contact with Stuart Bell, the Trust's new Chief Executive, to find out when they would decide, and what they planned for the Meadow.

We met Stuart Bell in early April, and were impressed by his enthusiasm for working with the local community, and for developing the Meadow as a resource for patients and staff at the Warneford and Churchill Hospitals and for the new Maggie's Centre now being built after a long delay, as well as for local residents. However, it was not until 26 September that the Trust was able to confirm that they had formally taken ownership of the Meadow from DH. (NHS Foundation Trusts are separate legal entities who may own land in their own right: just possibly a cause for concern following the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which enables greater private sector involvement in the NHS.) Since then, on 16 November, a group of FoWM Directors met with Claire Dalley, Director of Property, Strategy & Services for the Trust, and her colleague Paul Ceglarek. Again we found them keen to work with FoWM and the local community at large. Claire confirmed that the licence allowing FoWM to work on the Meadow would remain in place. It is still very early days in terms of developing FoWM's and the Trust's proposals for conserving and enhancing the Meadow; but we hope that the bureaucratic and procedural hurdles have now been cleared, and the only remaining constraints are – as always – time and energy, besides of course the need to consult the local community and others about how they see the future of the Meadow.

Meanwhile we have made some progress with looking after and beginning to improve the Meadow and Orchard after a quarter-century of neglect. Following earlier scrub clearance in the orchard, in March and April two well-attended working parties, supervised by Mick Ganly, cleared a large area of brambles in the western corner of the Meadow. (Not that we have any intention to eliminate the brambles: there was a splendid and much-picked crop of blackberries this year.) In April we paid a contractor, Dennis Ward, to give most of the grassland a top cut for the first time since the 1980s. (Around 20% was left uncut, mainly the wetter north-eastern part, to retain a mix of habitats.) It was generally agreed that this improved the appearance and in time it should make for a more varied ecology.

In July, a group of volunteers pulled up Common Ragwort, mainly in the centre of the Meadow, and we think largely eliminated it: although ragwort is pretty and hosts the cinnabar moth, clearing it is essential if we are to sell a hay crop, one of the main ways we hope to finance our work. Alison Leaf conducted a comprehensive survey looking for any reptile population – lizards, slow-worms and grass-snakes live in the nearby Lye Valley – but none were found on the Meadow. In September the grass was given a second cut, and more work was done in the orchard in preparation for Apple Day. Apple Day itself had to be postponed because of heavy rain, which was particularly unfortunate because 2013 brought such a prolific crop of apples. At a "mini-Apple Day" a fortnight later some tasty juice was pressed by Rupert Griffin as usual.

Although we have done useful work already, FoWM now look forward to working with the Trust to develop in more detail our ideas for a medium to long term strategy for the Meadow, about which we can then consult local residents and others. Ideas are welcome, but we will also need volunteer labour and we hope the Trust will provide support and some resource towards the work we wish to undertake.

Meanwhile Friends of Warneford Meadow, the new company, has continued to operate very much as previously. The Board of Directors (which has now met eight times) consists of:

Directors: Sietske Boeles; Andrew Carter; Anne Copley; Chris Dunabin; Graeme Salmon; David Sutton; Andrew Wilkinson.

Co-opted: Paul Deluce; Joy Hendry; Kate Whitworth-Jones.

We have gone on keeping supporters informed of progress through our e-mail list, besides the website - <http://www.friendsofwarnefordmeadow.org.uk> – and door-to-door leafleting of the neighbourhood. However, the new company was set up to be a membership organisation, with the Directors subject to re-election by the members. We shall very shortly launch a membership scheme, and we look forward to as many neighbours as possible and others subscribing.

FoWM's accounts for the period from the establishment of the new company to 30 September 2013 are appended to this report.

We have come a long way from seven years ago, when it seemed probable that one of east Oxford's last unmanaged green spaces would be lost to the community. There remains much to do, more than we envisaged when the campaign began. Developments in 2013, however, let us plan for the Meadow's future on a more secure basis than at any time in recent memory.

The Directors
Friends of Warneford Meadow
(a company limited by guarantee, company number 08235285)
December 2013



Tackling the ragwort, July 2013

Friends of Warneford Meadow Ltd

Accounts for year to 30 September 2013

| INCOME | | EXPENDITURE | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| transfer cash from FoWM * | 60.75 | Mowing | 1,410.00 |
| Transfer from FoWM * | 1,887.25 | Web site | 95.00 |
| Beyond Magdalen Bridge donations | 71.00 | sunds | 198.24 |
| Open gardens | 555.00 | Total expenses | 1,703.24 |
| Total income | <u>2,674.00</u> | Excess income over expenses | <u>970.76</u> |

Balance Sheet

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Bank balancet 30/9/2013 | 910.01 | Bank balance 2/10/2012 | 0.00 |
| cash from FoWM* | 60.75 | Excess income over expenses | 970.76 |
| | <u>970.76</u> | Assets at 30/9/2013 | <u>970.76</u> |

* NOTE: FoWM was setup as a limited company on 2 October 2012
The previous unincorporated association, FoWM, agreed to transfer all its assets to the new incorporated company

G L Salmon, hon. Treasurer,