



Friends Of the River Crane Environment

Dear Friends,

Welcome to our spring edition. This is annual renewal time for our members and forms have been included with this newsletter. At the end of 2006-07, we had reached over 380 members, our highest ever. Your continued membership is vital to our success, and it is very encouraging to see the high percentage of year on year renewals. Particular thanks to those of you who have set up annual standing orders and, if our systems are operating correctly; you should not have received reminders. The renewal form includes details for switching to standing order if you would prefer.

As this is in effect the end of our year we thought we would put together a bumper issue, summarising our progress over the last year and identifying key objectives for the next. As always, we are keen to receive ideas and comments from our membership on progress and objectives. You will see below examples of where feedback has informed our projects.

Craneford Fields

FORCE has continued to make changes to the environment around Craneford Fields. The removal of dilapidated fencing around the West Field, along with the planting of new trees, has helped to change the character of this area. We are also hopeful that the Council's contractors have permanently amended their grass cutting policy, allowing meadow margins to develop, with the aim of encouraging a more diverse ecology along the edges of the fields. An informal pathway has appeared along the river edge and last autumn we planted large numbers of daffodils alongside it. We hope to continue with this project in the autumn.

We are currently planning to place a new carved bench, with a green woodpecker theme, in the West Field next to the river - hopefully in time for our Annual Open Day in September. We have been lucky enough to receive funding for this project from Richmond Civic Trust and EDF. It will be the second such bench in what we hope will be a series acting as a kind of hallmark to the green chain.

On balance, we are pleased with the appearance and use of the path through the wooded triangle and onto Marsh Farm Lane. There are however continued issues with litter and low level damage. We are countering this with subtle changes to the local habitat to promote woodland flowers and discourage littering.

This summer EDF contractors, working for the RFU, will be installing a new buried power line between the sub-station on the other side of the river and the stadium, cutting across the West Field. FORCE, along with the Council, has been in discussions with EDF with a view to minimising the impact of these works on the fields, and to agree minor improvements in mitigation of their actions. The latest information is that EDF will construct the trench from mid June this year and we can expect disruption for several weeks. They will make good the works such that the cable trench will not be apparent in the future. EDF have agreed, to part fund the new wood carved bench, and to pay for mirrors to increase security on Marsh Farm Lane.

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Harlequins

Harlequins have completed construction of their new East Stand, along with the housing, which helped to fund it. FORCE, along with the Council, helped to negotiate two green space improvements as part of this development.

One of these is the landscaping, and public use, of the green space between the new housing and Craneford Way. The landscape work is now largely complete and we are hoping to agree a date for a formal opening of this space in the near future.

The second improvement is to the boundary between the Quins' ground and the pathway along the Duke of Northumberland's River. The existing ugly concrete fencing will be removed and a new open fence erected on the other side of the Leylandii. This will provide a wider public way along this part of the path and provide an opportunity for future habitat improvements along the river. This work should also be completed over the summer.

Last year, Harlequins put in a planning application for a new South Stand to which FORCE submitted a formal response. There has been no news from the Council on this application in recent months.

There have also been several rumours in recent months about possible re-development of the Council Depot adjacent to Harlequins. As yet, we have no firm information on this and will continue to track the situation.

Mereway Nature Park

This time last year we were unveiling the fox sculpture bench on Mereway. Public reaction to the bench has been overwhelmingly positive and young children in particular are regular visitors "to feed the fox" on their way to and from school.

We are currently drafting a Management Plan for the Nature Park. When the draft is complete, we shall be posting it on our website and inviting comments and views from our members. This plan identifies the value and importance of the five key habitat areas within the park and specifies low level interventions and management practices to maintain and enhance these. We will be installing new signage over the summer to identify these habitat areas and provide more information on their value. When the draft is complete, we shall be posting it on our web-site and inviting comments and views from our members.

FORCE, through one of our members, has formed a link with Trafalgar School and we are working with the school and Richmond Environment Network to use the park as an outdoor classroom. This is particularly valuable for Trafalgar, as they have limited green space within their grounds. Three classes had initial visits to the site in the last week and held lessons on nature awareness and tree identification. Reaction from the children has been very positive, although there remain safety concerns due to the continued use of the site as a short cut into the back of the Council's Depot. We shall continue to work with Trafalgar, along with Nelson School in Whitton, to improve the educational value of this site. We also hope to persuade the Council to stop using this access route.

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Kneller Gardens

The management and appearance of Kneller Gardens continues to improve, thanks to the efforts of the Council, Prema, the park keeper and the Friends of Kneller Gardens, one of our key local partner groups. Unfortunately, six trees, some of them old, were lost in the gales in February. However, earlier this year, volunteers planted some 80 metres of new hedge along the railway. This will provide, in time, a screen from the trains as well as enhancing the environmental value of the green chain. We are also hopeful that the promised improvements to facilities, including equipment for older children and the refurbishment of the pavilion will materialise. We understand that the latter is dependent on the Council appointment of a project manager to oversee the refurbishment of this pavilion and five others in the borough.

Crane Park and Crane Park Island

FORCE has developed a good relationship with London Wildlife Trust at Crane Park Island over the last few years and a couple of our Trustees sit on their Steering Group. The island provides a great example of how the local environment can be managed to encourage diverse habitats and interesting species of flora and fauna. FORCE volunteer days have been held to help manage the island itself and to extend some of the good practice and habitat development from the island to other parts of the river corridor. Our work over the last few years, transplanting reeds and other wetland species, is going well and new reed beds are taking root along a couple of kilometres of downstream river bank. We are now looking at opportunities to build a kingfisher bank on the river, providing much needed nesting habitat, following their success on the island. FORCE and LWT will continue to open the Shot Tower in Crane Park on the 1st and 4th Sunday of each month from 1:30pm to 4:00pm. You are very welcome to visit.

This year we worked on the Mill Road part of Crane Park for the first time. This followed a request from one of our members. We removed sufficient rubbish to overfill a large skip, provided by the Council, and to lay down wood chip along a muddy pathway.

River Crane Cycle Route

We are very excited by a feasibility study for an improved cycle route along the River Crane, running through Crane Park and linking to the Thames at Richmond Half Lock in Isleworth. This is being undertaken by the Council, with funding from Transport for London (TfL). FORCE is a consultee to this process and we have suggested a number of changes to the existing shared pathways to improve safety and convenience for cyclists and pedestrians – as well as providing aesthetic benefits. We are hopeful that funding for these proposals will be available from TfL over the next couple of years and we will keep you informed on progress.

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Crane Riverside Park

This time last year we launched our vision for “Crane Riverside Park”, trebling the size of Crane Park and extending its boundaries along the river to link Hounslow Heath in the west to Twickenham Station in the east. In order to take this project further we would like to develop a management plan for which we must secure funding. The responses from Richmond and Hounslow Councils are very encouraging and we have received some initial monies to develop the project further. In recent months however, we have had several setbacks on funding proposals and need to raise some more funds to move the project forward. We are exploring other opportunities, and, additionally, we would be grateful for any suggestions from our members. We are also attempting to develop links with Hounslow Council and other community groups along the Crane valley.

Volunteer Days

We are currently completing our fourth year of monthly volunteer days, the season running from September to May. We will publish details of the new season in our next newsletter. This year, as well as our regular sites, we went to Moorhead Park to plant spring bulbs, Kneller Gardens, and Mill Road in Crane Park, as mentioned above. Our philosophy is to ensure that our regular sites benefit from upkeep and improvement, and to add new sites as the needs of existing sites reduce and/or our capacities grow. We are always happy to consider new sites for volunteer days and are particularly happy when, as with Mill Road, other local people get involved. Our hope is that these activities will encourage new groups of volunteers to emerge and take on more responsibility for their own patches.

FORCE Website

We have developed an extensive and informative website over the last couple of years. Recent pages include information on organic gardening, and there are also seasonal pages that give ideas of things to look out for when you are out and about in the Crane Valley. The website also has an up to date calendar of FORCE events.

Twickenham Fair

FORCE will have its usual stall at Twickenham Fair, on Twickenham Green on 29 May. Please come along and meet us, see our plans for the year to come and give us your own ideas and suggestions.

Annual Force Open Day

Last year's Open Day was our best attended yet, helped by both the lovely weather and the beer tent. We can't promise the weather this year but we will definitely have the beer tent, plus lots of other attractions on sites between Kneller Gardens and Craneford Fields, on Sunday 9 September. The Open Day is a fun, informal and informative occasion and we hope many of you can join us, along with your friends and family,

Regards,

Rob Gray (Chair of FORCE)

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