

**FRIENDS OF THE RIVER CRANE ENVIRONMENT
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2010
REPORT FROM THE CHAIR**

Welcome and thank you for coming to our seventh Annual General Meeting. I am very pleased to say that 2010 finds FORCE in robust good health. Our membership is as large as it has ever been, at over 430 members, and our finances are in good order. So the first thing to say is a big thank you to our Trustees for managing the organisation so well and to our members for their continued interest and loyalty.

I also this year welcome a return to the fold for David Trigg. David was one of our founder members who, when he became a local councilor, resigned as a Trustee but remained as a co-opted member. Now that David is no longer on the council I am very pleased to welcome his return to the Trustees. I am also very happy to see that all our Trustees are standing again and that Ian Taylor will be continuing to perform, as a co-opted member, the valuable role of leading our volunteer programme.

It is a good job that FORCE is in such good health because this has probably been the busiest, and possibly the most challenging year, since we were formed. Our work is done very largely by volunteers, and it is very gratifying how many of our members, and others, have stepped up to become more involved in one or more projects over the last twelve months.

I hope to give you an overview here of three types of projects we have been dealing with over the last year – those positive activities being done by the council and others where FORCE has an active role; local development projects, which may either benefit or impact negatively on the Crane valley, and where we try to influence the developers and the planning function of the council to provide community and/or environmental benefits; and finally those projects we have been running and funding ourselves.

This time last year we were celebrating the award of £400,000 from GLA for the Priority Parks project and this has probably been the largest and most challenging project for this year. The first point to emphasise is that FORCE is not managing the project, although we do have three members on the steering group. This is the first project of its kind that Hounslow and Richmond councils have managed in partnership and it continues to be a learning process for all concerned. Progress has been slow but we are starting to see work on the ground, particularly on the Hounslow side of Crane Park.

There have been several encouraging aspects to this project; including the way that other projects have been attracted at least partly as a result of the work, including a new cycle path through the Hounslow side of Crane Park, and the new wildflower meadows at Hospital Bridge Road. There has also been an increased commitment from parks officers from both councils to the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of both sides of the park.

The Hounslow side of Crane Park is a little known gem; some wonderful scenery, magnificent old trees, lots of atmosphere but, until recently, very little used and very poorly treated by both the council and the public. The greatest challenge for the project will be to design and manage this part of the park so that it encourages more and better use, and so that any improvements are looked after for the long term. The early indications provide some encouragement, but we expect that this project will continue to require considerable time and energy over the next 12 months.

Running side by side with the Priority Parks project is the Crane biodiversity project, providing environmental improvements to various sites along the Crane valley, including Crane Park. This project is managed by Sarah Garwood and I will leave her to explain what she has been up to in her presentation to you all after the formal business is completed. Suffice it to say that we are very supportive of her work.

One great success from last year has been the ongoing improvements to the management and

facilities for Kneller Gardens, resulting in the new pavilion and the play equipment for older children and the increased use of the park by people of all ages. The work of the Friends of Kneller Gardens (including two shared Trustees with FORCE in Frances Bennett and Mike Day) has been a major factor in this.

The second type of project we have been involved with has been local development schemes, which may impact on the Crane valley, and there have been rather a lot of these over the last 12 months. FORCE is not against development per se and, each time a development comes forwards we look to review it in terms of how it will affect the open space and environmental value of the Crane valley. We also consider where there may be opportunities for incorporating improvements to the valley, for the benefit of the community or the environment, as part of the scheme.

We have been actively involved in discussions and negotiations with developers, and both Hounslow and Richmond councils, on a large number of schemes, including the RFU housing development, Mogden sewage works extension, Whitton School playing fields flood lighting, Feltham Marshalling Yards scheme, Twickenham station re-development and the Twickenham post office site. We have also submitted ideas to the current broad based review of planning in Twickenham.

These projects are normally developed over a number of years and they take a lot of time and patience to carry through to any successful conclusion. As an example, we started discussions with Harlequins RFU about its west stand development about eight years ago. An agreement was put together in principle soon afterwards but it was only this year that a sum of around £287,000 was transferred to the council for local environmental improvements as part of this agreement, and we are still in regular discussion with Quins and the council about how best to manage the two new open spaces transferred into public use.

The Crane valley park feasibility study, completed in the July of last year, has been of great value in providing a template for our plans, and to guide and inform others of how we would like to see things progressing along the Crane valley. 150 hard copies and 100 DVDs of the main report have been produced and most of these have been handed out to interested parties. Several hundred have also been downloaded from our own and other web-sites. If anyone would particularly like a DVD version then please ask a Trustee.

The third type of project has been the ones we do ourselves, and there have also been a number of these this year. The highest profile has probably been the exhibition, "My River Crane", which has been touring Richmond and Hounslow over the last six months. This has attracted lots of interest and has helped to raise the profile of the river valley. It is currently at Orleans gallery, its last scheduled stop, and we would be grateful for any suggestions as to where it may go next.

The "outdoor classroom" is a pack of around sixty lessons plans, covering all aspects of the curriculum and designed to get primary school children outdoors to do their lessons outdoors. We have designed the lesson plans for use in Mereway Nature Park and Kneller Gardens and have been working alongside local schools to encourage their use of these spaces for school work. Next week we are holding an inset afternoon with around 20 teachers from many of the local schools to finalise the pack and we hope to launch it by the end of the year.

The final FORCE project we have been working on is to improve the environment between Hospital Bridge Road and Meadway. We have, along with partners such as BTCV the Environment Trust and local schools, planted around 1500 metres of hedgerow along the fence-line and we hope, in the next few weeks, to finish the main parts of the project by the creation of new wetland areas.

We have been delivering the last of these projects through our regular volunteer days and the next programme of these will start this Sunday in Mereway Nature Park. A lot of our day to day work is in the ongoing management and slow improvement of these local spaces and I would like to give a

particular thanks here to the efforts of Doug Craik, another of our Trustees who you may have seen, if you rise around dawn, planting, weeding and tidying what is probably the largest garden in Twickenham!

As you can see from the list provided above there is a lot going on in the Crane valley already and many of these projects will continue over the next year or two. Our strategy will be to focus on optimising the outcomes from these ongoing works and not to start any major new projects ourselves over the next 12 months. We also anticipate more of a focus on the Duke of Northumberland's River next year, another wonderful yet under-used and neglected local resource. We are also aware of plans to produce a book on the history of the Crane valley and we look forward to helping with this.

So we do not expect the next year to be quiet and we hope, with your help and support, to be able to report on another year of small and cumulative improvements in 12 months time.

Rob Gray
Chair of FORCE
October 2010