



The Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum

Rose Lane, Oxford, OX1 4AZ | 01865 610303 | friends.administrator@obg.ox.ac.uk

Annual General Meeting at 6.30pm on Thursday, 6th July 2023

St John's College Garden Auditorium, St Giles, Oxford OX1 3JP

Apologies were noted from Caroline Boisset. 71 members and 5 Directors attended.

Chairman's Report

Sarah Taylor

Welcome to St John's College. We are very grateful to them for hosting our AGM this year in this wonderful auditorium.

Things have largely returned to normal post COVID, although there is no doubt that the cost-of-living crisis triggered by the invasion of Ukraine is unsurprisingly affecting our Friends, and visitors to the Garden and Arboretum, as much as the rest of the population. Membership numbers have drifted off a bit in recent months as people tighten their belts.

Nevertheless, the events team, as ever chaired by the indefatigable Seonaid Danziger, has continued both to provide support to the Garden and Arboretum with their events and to organise our very own Friends' events. The former takes the form of a cake stall and occasionally a tombola at the Spring and Autumn Fairs at the Arboretum. Our cake stalls frequently raise some £800 and sell out rapidly. If any of you here is a keen baker, or knows of keen bakers, please do spread the word: we can never have too many cakes. Even I, a non-baker and non-cake eater if there ever was one, have been persuaded to contribute. Also, if you are ever having a clear out of unwanted presents or ornaments or toys or books, do please put them aside for the tombola. Again, we can never have too many prizes and every little helps.

Last year, of course, saw the delayed celebrations of the Garden's 400th anniversary, with a fortnight packed with activities. Our own contribution was having membership stalls on three of the days and an evening of entertainment, All About Trees, in aid of the Paths Appeal, with music and a spellbinding storyteller. This raised over £6,000, a fantastic achievement for which I thank Seonaid, Rebecca Mather and many others.

The New College opera evening which took place last night continues to be an enjoyable and fruitful event, raising around £6000 a year with sponsorship as well as ticket sales. Thanks to Anne James and Cathy Stewart and their team, the cloisters always look stunning with flowers donated by a host of friends.

I think our flagship event, exclusive to Friends, is the viewing of the May morning celebrations from the privileged standpoint of the Garden. Volunteers appear at 4am to set up – and we are grateful to the Garden this year for providing lighting – collecting croissants, making gallons of coffee and generally welcoming people when the Garden opens at 5am. This year, we had 300 people attending the magical event and we raised £4500.

All these occasions require a great deal of work and preparation, and I am deeply grateful to all our many volunteers who devote so much time and energy to making them a success. They are of course also great fun.



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The Garden Visits team, Harriet Bretherton, Pauline Combes, Jane Annett, Diana Naumann and Jane Thrift, have again produced an exceptional menu of gardens for Friends to visit. We are very fortunate to have such a dedicated team who revel in finding new and interesting sites to visit and share with you all.

Helen Potts and Claire McGlashan have continued to knit the Bobarts Patrons team together with visits and tours out of the ordinary. Helen is about to retire to spend more time with her grandchildren and to pursue other interests. I am immensely grateful to her for all that she has done, and for her support to me personally over the years. We are looking for someone else to help in this important role. It is immensely rewarding, and I do hope that one of you might know of an enthusiast who could take it on.

The Danby group continues to meet for fascinating insights both into the Herbarium's collections and the Garden's work, always helped by Rebecca Mather's exceptional canapes. Again, I would welcome someone to help me take this unique collaborative group forward – unique because it supports both the Garden and the Biology department of the University, a reflection of the increasing collaboration between the two entities.

All of you, the members of the Friends, have helped in the past year, with the cost of the 400th anniversary celebrations, with new railings for the Arboretum, with lights, soil, planters and a humidifier for the glasshouses, with more plants for the hardy collection at the Garden and with expenses for staff to travel on knowledge exchange trips both in the UK and abroad. As always, we are key in helping with things that are arguably difficult to fund raise for but are crucial for the good order of the Garden and its staff.

The thing which has been most occupying my time and energy in the last few months has been organising the first step in the change of control of the Friends. In the thirty years of their existence so far, the Friends have provided much needed financial support – having raised some £3m – and have also at times been friendly critics and drivers of the Garden. The Friends charity has been a huge success. However, as I have said before, running a 3000+ membership organisation is, in these days of increasing regulation and bureaucracy, becoming quite burdensome for a group of volunteers, however dedicated. This is further complicated for the Friends by the fact that our administrator, for all sorts of good reasons, is an employee of the University. As you will have read, having taken legal advice as to the best way to achieve this, we are proposing, with your approval, to replace the current board of trustees with one consisting of members of the University. This change in the board of trustees is intended to put effective control of the day-to-day administration of the Friends in the hands of the Garden. It is not intended to bring to an end the hugely valuable financial contribution that the Friends make nor the involvement of so many of us in organising events and spreading the word about our beloved Garden and Arboretum.

What has really persuaded us that now is the time for change is that the Trustees believe that the Garden, under Professor Simon Hiscock's leadership, is moving in a really positive direction. The University is fully supportive in a way it has not always been to date – as witnessed by the fact that the new Vice Chancellor, Professor Irene Tracy, launched her Vice Chancellor's Guild, celebrating and thanking major donors, at a glittering occasion at the Garden last month. The Friends were also invited to attend as major donors in their own right. The Garden is also becoming much more involved in the academic work of the University. Professor John Geddes, who also happens to be the chair of the University Visitors to the Garden, is keen on researching the relationship between outdoor green spaces and wellbeing- or rather, as I prefer to call it, Brain Health. Dr Chris Thorogood is collaborating with numerous departments within the university, as well as colleagues elsewhere, for his research into biomimetics, including the structure of Victoria lily leaves and the mechanism by which pitcher plants capture their prey, for his research into how aroids attract pollinators with different smells, for his work on the parasitical orobanches (a collection of which are now



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growing in the Lower Garden) and in particular the genus *cistanche*, for his classification and conservation work in the Canary Islands – I can go on and on. At the Arboretum, Ben Jones has conducted fieldwork in Ethiopia and Japan and has brought back seed specimens of endangered Japanese trees species to raise at the Arboretum. He has also engaged in an exchange of rare cherry trees, sending some to Japan which were extinct there and soon to receive back a collection not already present in the UK which will be exclusive to the Arboretum. Simon too, despite his all-consuming responsibility for the management of the Garden, continues his important work as a plant geneticist, specifically on ragwort and sorbus. He is very sorry not to be here tonight, but he is in Singapore in furtherance of his mission.

There are exciting plans on both sites, for new glasshouses at the Garden and for a Visitor Centre at the Arboretum, both being given priority for development within the Gardens, Libraries and Museums department – rejoicing in the mnemonic of GLAM.

As I step down as Chairman of the Friends charity, I want to pay tribute to my amazing fellow trustees. They have worked tirelessly to ensure that the Friends run smoothly, that we support the work of the Garden as is our remit, that all the events we organise are successful. They have given me invaluable support during good times and the occasional frustrating times such as GDPR, Covid, database changes and temporary lack of an administrator. Throughout all these hiccups, the Friends organisation has sailed on, I hope with no discernible disruption. I have been most fortunate in benefitting from their loyalty and friendship. Hemlata Bountra, our treasurer, is retiring completely from the Friends, after sterling service, Anna Nasmyth, our Secretary, is now mainly living in France and Austria so is understandably stepping down. Thank you, Hemlata and Anna for all your work as officers over my years as Chairman. Helen Potts is also retiring as I explained earlier. The common thread through all their plans is spending more time with their grandchildren! The rest of us continue to be involved for the time being. However, we really need new and, dare I say it, younger blood, on board and I urge you all to join us and to persuade others to give their time and energy in supporting our wonderful institution.

You will have gathered from the way I have been talking that all the activities currently undertaken by the Friends are set to continue. Most importantly, we have a major fund-raising project to complete. We now have £264,000 to go to reach our target of £750,000. Do spread the word amongst your friends about the importance of access for all to the beautiful space and fascinating plants at the Arboretum. I love walking amongst trees, and I believe passionately that everyone should be able to do the same. Please help to make this possible.

Thank you, everyone, for your loyalty and support over so many years.

Sarah Taylor then asked if there were any questions.

- A member raised a question regarding the Friends volunteers. They said that although they understood the reasons for moving the charity to the University, they were concerned that the volunteers should continue to be nurtured in the same way, since they were their life blood of the Friends, and that the fantastic work done by the board of trustees should continue. Sarah Taylor said that she had insisted that the Friends volunteers remain with the Garden and Arboretum and the University had agreed to this. She reassured them that a number of the current trustees would continue with volunteer work for the Friends. Chris Thorogood welcomed the question and said that the way to look at the move was as a “silent change”. The architecture of the Friends would remain the same.



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- A member was concerned that the appearance was of a University “take-over”, with the new trustees not representing diversity on the board. They noted that the Friends should be more diverse in general and that this too should be reflected on the board. Sarah Taylor said that this was something the board was well aware of and that both the Friends and the Garden were working hard to increase diversity. Chris Thorogood said this was a very pertinent question. The Garden were not proud of this but it was not through a lack of intentionality. They had been making bold strides towards engagement with more diverse groups of people through community engagement officers.
- A member was concerned that seven trustees were retiring to be replaced by two. Sarah Taylor noted that Simon Hiscock would remain as a trustee and that other roles would be replaced by a Friends Committee, to be newly set up. Only three officers are officially needed by the Charity Commission: Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary.
- A member asked why it was not possible yet to book tickets for events on line. Diana Naumann, from the Garden Visits team, said that it was now possible but a number of Friends still preferred to pay by cheque, so they were in the process of working out a system fair to all.
- A member said that the Arboretum was a wonderful wild space and was concerned that the paths might negatively influence this. Where were the paths to go and what would they be? Sarah Taylor said they would be made of self-binding Cotswold gravel and that some areas would be opened up, such as Ben Jones’ planting for the Japanese collection, but that other areas, such as the bluebell wood, would remain “wild”. She emphasised that the role of the Arboretum was as a collection of rare and unusual trees. Chris Thorogood said there was a balance to be struck between the aesthetic and the practical and that thought had been given to this. The member hoped that perhaps a good-sized plan with updates could be placed at the Arboretum and Sarah Taylor thought this a good idea.

Since there were no more questions, Sarah Taylor handed over to Chris Thorogood who read a message from Professor Hiscock.

From the Director of Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum

Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum, I am so sorry I cannot join you this evening at this significant AGM, which marks the beginning of a new era in the history of the Friends, who have been and continue to be so critical to the success of our treasured Botanic Garden and Arboretum.

I would like to begin by thanking Sarah Taylor, Chair of the Friends, and the Board of Trustees for their devoted hard work over the years, which has helped make the Friends organization the success it is today. Of the various metrics of success, income generation is often used, and since its inception in 1992 the Friends charity has raised nearly £3M for OBG – a fact rightly recognized by the new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Irene Tracy, by inclusion of the Friends in the newly formed Vice-Chancellor’s Guild, which had its inaugural dinner at the Botanic Garden on June 15th. The ongoing fundraising campaign for new paths at the Arboretum is testimony to this unflinching support and has so far raised over £500k of its £750k target.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the Friends Board of Trustees and the many volunteers for their support for me since I arrived as Director of OBG on this very day, July 6th, eight years ago. I was



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appointed on a promise of ‘transformation’ and continues to be my vision – to make OBGa a world class botanic garden and arboretum worthy of the best University in the World. This vision was embraced wholeheartedly by the Friends Board and I am grateful to former Chairman Richard Mayou, for giving me so much wise advice and guidance in those early days, as did Chair in waiting Sarah Taylor and her husband Bernard, who made me feel that everything was possible – even those long-overdue new glasshouses! They will happen!

Financial support from the Friends has enabled many transformative projects at the Garden and Arboretum since 2015 and I would like to reflect on a few of them: firstly transformation of those dull suburban allotments in the Lower Garden into the ‘Plants that Changed the World’ display; transformation of the dilapidated exhibition room into the Herbarium Room; restoration of the Serpentine Ride at the Arboretum (still in progress); reconfiguration of the dated taxonomic beds into the 21st century APG Order Beds which represent the modern DNA-based classification of the flowering plants - I could go on, but these examples show just how important Friends funding has been and continues to be for this road to transformation.

I therefore welcome this new era for the Friends and want to reassure all Members that the Friends organization will be in good hands as its operations merge with those of OBGa. Even though the Board of Trustees has changed today, the dedicated volunteers, notably members of the Friends Forum, who work so tirelessly encouraging membership, organizing events and garden visits, will continue, and I will ensure their voices and those of the Friends as a whole are heard by OBGa through a new Friends Committee, the format of which is currently under discussion with key members of the Forum.

Our journey of Transformation is a long one and the big projects - new glasshouses and associated infrastructure at the Garden, and new paths and a Visitor & Learning Centre at the Arboretum - are still to be delivered. Together, we (OBGa and the Friends) will make this happen. Thank you.

Treasurer’s Report

Hemlata Bountra

It has generally been a good year for the Friends with a full program of activities which were very well supported by the members. Total funds raised were £292k (previous year £284k), an increase mainly due to donations for the Paths Appeal. Grants to the Garden totalled £74k. This left us with reserves of £309k, some of which are restricted for the Arboretum paths. Cash at the bank and on deposit as at 23rd February 2023 was £815.7k (previous year £349.9k) of which funds committed but not spent accounted for 489k, restricted funds for the Paths Appeal £131.2, leaving “free cash” available for grants of £165.5k.

The main sources of income in 2022/23 were membership fees which raised £134k, followed by donations of £76k, most of which were for the Arboretum paths. Gift Aid reclaims added another £28k. Income from events increased to £27k as a full and varied programme of garden visits was planned, so thanks go to the garden visits team.

Membership decreased from 3,470 to 3,218 which is disappointing but I am pleased to report the current numbers are looking better and every effort is being made to recruit members. The Danby patron group launched in 2018/19 is well supported and now has 20 members.

The Arboretum Paths Appeal, launched in 2019, has to date raised in excess of £486k of which £55k has been received directly by the University. The target is £750k.



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Projects supported last year included: enhancing collections, staff professional development, support for 400th Anniversary celebrations and Arboretum railings.

Other matters: 82% of Friends are now paying fees by direct debit; 86% of Friends have registered email addresses and 29% receive the Newsletter by email; fees increased on 1st March 2022 by 4%-5%, the next increase will be on 1st March 2024; the new database allows online membership and eventually bookings for garden visits; and total visitors to the Garden and Arboretum in 2023 was 204,403 (previous year 181,330). The Friends continue to benefit from the very considerable volunteer work of the Forum and other members.

The Friends have raised £3.35m since 2005, a terrific achievement.

Hemlata Bountra then asked if there were any questions.

- A member asked why the restricted funds for the Paths Appeal were being sat on. Sarah Taylor said that if they were spent now, the National Lottery Heritage Fund would not match fund.
- A member asked if the spending and allocation of grants would change when the University took over. Chris Thorogood said that a lot of thought goes into the allocation of grants and that this would continue, with the same oversight, policies and procedures that the members would want. There is a common goal and this would not change.

Since there were no more questions, Sarah Taylor moved to the formal business of the meeting.

Resolutions

Resolution 1. Director's Report and Accounts

That the Trustees' Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 28th February 2023 and the Accountants' Report be received and adopted.

Peter McCarther proposed the Resolution and Helen Potts seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

Resolution 2. Appointment and Remuneration of Reporting Accountants

Wenn Townsend, one of the leading Oxford based firms of accountants, have proved very efficient as well as reasonably priced, charging us £1,400 to examine our accounts.

That Wenn Townsend be re-appointed Reporting Accountants to the Company for the period until the conclusion of the next Annual General Meeting, and that the Directors of the Company be authorised to agree the remuneration of the Reporting Accountants.

Jane Carlton Smith proposed the Resolution and Ian Battersby seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.



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Resolution 3. Election of Directors

The meeting will appoint new directors of the Company. Following the approval of the resolutions below, it is intended that Hemlata Bountra, Seonaid Danziger, Rebecca Mather, Anna Nasmyth, Diana Naumann, Helen Potts and Sarah Taylor will resign as directors of the Company.

- a) To elect Professor John Geddes as director of the Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum.
Helen Potts proposed and Cathy Stewart seconded. There were two votes against the Resolution but the vote was carried by a majority.
- b) To elect Mr Marius Apetrei as director of the Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum.
Anna Nasmyth proposed and Seonaid Danziger seconded. There were two votes against the Resolution but the vote was carried by a majority.

Any other business

Helen Potts thanked Sarah Taylor for her leadership over the years and for overseeing the transition of the Friends charity to the University. She quoted a past chairman, Richard Mayou, when he said that the important thing was to look forward and not back, and she proposed a vote to “The Future of the Friends”.

Bernard Taylor said he wished a formal vote of thanks to be officially recorded, on behalf of the members, for all the volunteer committees of the Friends, past and present, and the work that they had done.

The Chairman declared the 2023 Annual General Meeting of the Company to be closed.

Following the AGM, Dr Chris Thorogood, Deputy Director of the University of Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum, gave a talk entitled “Growing the Ungrowable”.

The meeting concluded at 8.00pm and was followed by drinks.