

Royal Paddocks Allotments
Annual General Meeting

11 November 2010

Chair of the Plotolders' Committee Report
Bob Trevillion

Good evening and welcome to the Royal Paddocks Allotments 2010 AGM.

David Harnden, who started the year as Chairman, resigned the position in February 2010 after doing a sterling job during a very busy time in the life of the allotment site. I'd like to thank him for his efforts and continuous good humour. I'd also like to thank Ashley Catto for his tireless efforts on behalf of the site. He is not standing for re-election this year and will be greatly missed.

It has been an interesting growing season this year: warm start, late frost, then Saharan dryness. I'm sure a number of people have longer arms than they started out with after months of continuous watering. Not the best conditions for growing traditional British vegetables, although not so bad for the more exotic fare. We must again hope that next year will be better than this year, the perennial hope of the plotholder.

Since February it has been a quieter time on the site than the previous year, but unfortunately we had our fair share of problems - with vandals and break-ins during the summer months, and the police attended on three occasions. On one occasion a plotholder was forced to go around the site in order to avoid a number of vandals in order to get to the gate and call the police. She was undoubtedly scared but equally brave, and waited in the street for the police to come. In addition, "trespassers" have been challenged on site, claiming they had entered through open gates and were entitled to enter as they had not been specifically denied entrance - not a valid defence of trespass but one that shows us again that security only has to fail once for things to go wrong.

We are still a largely safe area, most of this occurring during the school summer holidays. What is not so "harmless" is the theft of fruit and other produce (particularly pears and gooseberries) which occurs on an annual basis. I'm sure you all agree that after a season of nurturing and tending to crops, it is soul destroying to have them disappear literally overnight, and another season has to pass before you will have a chance to harvest again. Unfortunately, unless these thieves are caught in the act, there is little that can be done, though I don't doubt there are some of us that have very particular ideas about what should be done. But it does remind all of us to at least keep our eyes open to those people who are out of place or behaving strangely. I would ask all plotholders to be careful who they let in. All plotholders have their own keys; if not, and they are visiting someone, the person they are meeting should be the one to let them in. Just remember: if you don't recognise someone don't allow them access.

A brief update on the old Seed Store Café building

We have been looking at ways to restore the building and have had a structural engineer's report so that we may make any decision on the basis of the integrity of the

existing building. Roughly half of the building on the right-hand side could be strengthened and rebuilt, though the left-hand side would need to be demolished as it is unsafe. Unfortunately, the rear wall of the building is the Bushy Park wall and has been fire-damaged to the extent that Park Authorities have told us they are going to rebuild it – not, however, until May/June next year (2011 at the earliest).

This means that we cannot go ahead with any rebuild till after then. We are looking at a flat roof (details on display), but this would still cost approx £30,000+ and would still need planning permission from Richmond and clearance from Conservation bodies so we may still need this time. However, we have a number of people offering their expertise on building matters, as well as external funding, so things are looking up - and thank you to these people.

Following last year's start on managing the wildlife areas, we have reached a stage, following Dr. Reeves' advice (Royal Parks Ecologist) that we should clear a third of the current bramble area annually to encourage regrowth. This is a heads-up to those amongst us who enjoy a good bonfire. This will need to be done early in the year before the birds begin to nest but after any hibernating animals are awake.

The monthly workdays continued throughout the season. A number of pumps were sunk and most are working well. Some general maintenance jobs were also undertaken so a well-deserved thanks to all those regulars who turned up and got stuck in. However, fewer ploholders turned up as the season progressed, and we were left with just the regulars. It appears from some of the feedback we have had that a regular fixed date (first Sunday of the month) does not suit a lot of people. We may look at having workdays when specific work is needed and get a team together at a mutually convenient time. It may be useful to log the work required on the website and arrange a date between those people who respond. Let's see how it goes next season.

Website

Talking about the website, you are probably all aware by now of the new website set up this year. It seems to have been well received and all contributions are welcome - and necessary if it is to be current and up-to-date and relevant to the site. Those with internet access can find out most things that are going on by logging on. There are also sections that provide the same information that is on the noticeboard and shed. Those without internet access will still be able to get written copies of information in the shed by the pedestrian gate, as usual.

Thanks to all those who have made it happen. Allied to this is a more efficient email system that allows us to contact ploholders faster and more effectively, and is being made greater use of.

Cultivation

The standards of cultivation at the allotments have generally remained high, but we may be seeing a reality check on those who wanted plots, enthused by the encouragement of Jamie Oliver, River Cottage, and Gardeners' World, who all seemed to magically grow amazing crops purely by wishful thinking. It was apparent in the case of a few new ploholders who thought that it could be fitted in between a busy job, young children, etc., etc., only for them to find that something had to give. Unfortunately for them it was the plot.

We all know that this is not the case and it in fact requires a commitment of both time and effort. I would like to say to those who have just taken on a plot, although you probably have already found out for yourselves, there are plenty of people who are more than willing to offer advice. There is an old joke: ask two plotholders their advice and you will get three opinions. But if you need help or advice do ask; there are a lot of people here with years of hard-earned expertise who are willing to share it.

As a result of this, and unfortunately a number of cases of illness on the site, we were able to let more plots this year than expected - although the waiting list is still in the region of 55, with a wait of about 2 years.

I'd like to end with the plotholders hope: it's bound to be better next year.

Bob Trevillion