

Friends of the Flitch Way and Associated Woodlands

Notes from Annual General Meeting

Date: Friday 6 May 2011

Venue: Discovery Centre, Great Notley Country Park

Following tea and cakes being enjoyed by everybody, the meeting was opened by outgoing Chairman Jim who welcomed all those present. Reference was made by Jim to the display of photographs taken by Andrew which showed the range of tasks done during the year by volunteers and demonstrated that bad weather was no deterrent to work parties taking place. Agenda items then followed, as below.

1. Elections

There having been no other names put forward, the following persons were duly appointed:

Chairman Stan Davies

Secretary Wendy Moss

Treasurer Margaret James

Committee members Andrew Bloomfield, Don Morecombe

2. Outgoing Chairman's report

Having been closely involved with the running of the group during his time as Chairman, Jim recognized and identified the amount of work put in by all members of the committee to help the group achieve its goals. The input from volunteers and members not on the committee was also acknowledged and Jim asked that any member interested in coming on to the committee or attending a committee meeting speak to Wendy.

Jim told the meeting that there were two potential projects in which he had a special interest which had not yet got off the ground but were still ongoing. The first was getting a railway carriage placed at Rayne Station which could fulfill several functions such as an extension to the café and providing display and educational facilities. A suitable carriage had not yet been found but enquiries continued. Costs were likely to be in the region of 40 to 50,000 for which grant funding would need to be sought. The other project was to re-instate or mark the former sites of Banister Green Halt and Stane Street Halt with signs and benches. Both projects would help make the site more interesting for visitors and highlight the railway history of the Flitch Way.

Chairman thanked everybody involved with the Friends during the year and felt confident that the group had met its aims and objectives.

3. Secretary's report

Wendy had produced a written report which was distributed to those present.

Wendy went through her report, adding further information where required. Under 'Maintenance Work', agreement had been reached for some work parties to take place without a Ranger in attendance and that had happened on a few occasions during the year. Claire Jones, one of the Rangers, was thanked for the work done on producing the leaflet/questionnaire for the wildlife walk between Rayne and Graunts Court. The Secretary asked for volunteers to help man the Friends stall during the summer at fetes in the surrounding area.

At Wendy's invitation, Val Blamire referred to the ongoing plant survey which was in its third and final phase. 3 days have been spent on surveying this year and more volunteers were always welcome, Val said. Several new plants have been identified and the Dunmow Cutting in particular had a good display as a result of work done by the volunteer work parties during the year.

Stan reported that, following the decision by ECC not to produce leaflets for individual country parks, the committee had decided to produce its own for the Flitch Way. A firm of design consultants currently had the leaflet for printing and Stan showed the meeting a draft of the document. It was hoped that printing would take place within the near future to allow the leaflet to be made available before the summer at places such as Rayne Station, Discovery Centre, Parish Councils, libraries etc. Pete said that applications for funding had been made to cover the cost of the leaflet.

4. Treasurer's report

A copy of the Balance Sheet was distributed, together with details of income and expenditure for 09/10 and 10/11 to allow for comparison between the years. Pete said that figures were slightly down over the previous year with expenses exceeding income for the first time. Grass Roots funding which had helped towards paying volunteers' incurred expenses had now ceased, Pete advised, and the meeting asked whether ECC grants were available to cover such expenditure. Steve Bunn replied that any such expenses paid through County would have to come out of his budget.

5 P3 report

A list of the work undertaken by the P3 group had been prepared by Ann and distributed to the meeting. Ann thanked Adam Jenkins for his continuing support for the group and also thanked everybody who had helped during the year. On behalf of Public Rights of Way, Ann thanked Andrew, Pauline, Pat and Linda for their survey of the 72 mile Saffron Trail which was almost complete.

A comment was made from the floor that nothing had been heard so far about the 'Associated Woodlands' contained in the charity's name. Garnett's Wood in particular was referred to in view of the frequency of work done there in previous years. Committee members responded by saying that it had become the practice for work parties to concentrate on specific sites for longer periods in order to complete specific jobs. That had had an effect on the team's ability to visit woodlands as much as in the past. The former work method had been to spread work parties over all the areas for which the Rangers had responsibility, the thought at the time having been that that was what the Friends wanted, ie to visit a variety of sites. On taking over, Steve had listened to the volunteers regarding work practices, the current system having come from that. Steve commented that some work would be done at Garnetts in the coming year but the ownership of the other woodlands for which he currently had responsibility was an unknown quantity.

6. Steve Bunn, Head Ranger

Steve said that he arrived in 2008 in a period of great change. He had a new team, almost all of whom were totally new to the country park and came into a new venture in the partnership with Braintree District Council at Great Notley. How that would work out was very much an unknown quantity and a huge learning curve for everyone. The successes they had had could not have been achieved without the Friends, Steve said. He had the largest group of volunteers in Essex and was aware when he took over of the fears the Friends had that conflict would arise from the merger of Great Notley and The Flitch Way. He hoped those fears had been allayed.

The volunteers came from a variety of backgrounds and experience and he and the other Rangers had nothing but admiration for the enthusiasm and drive which was brought to whatever task was put before them and which had enabled them to achieve so much, Steve said. Grants had been obtained to purchase equipment for use on the Flitch Way, over 20 miles of track had been cut back, structures had been installed and the plant survey organized and undertaken. The country park was understaffed and was under pressure to increase income and provide high standards, Steve advised, and the volunteers' input was essential in achieving targets. He gave thanks on behalf of himself and the other Rangers for all the hard work and said that he wanted to present 500.00 to the Friends for them to use in whatever way they saw fit.

Lesley Gillman asked whether any results had come from the recent survey of Flitch Way users. Steve said not.

Val asked whether ECC would make a contribution towards the cost of Sheila's flower survey. Steve agreed to speak to Val after the meeting.

John said that ECC paid P3 volunteers' petrol expenses and asked whether Flitch Way volunteers could be similarly re-imbursed. Pete said that he had given the form used to claim P3 travel costs to Tom. Steve commented that any such re-imburement was likely to come from his budget.

Don asked Steve whether he could give an update on the position regarding the use of Takeley Station as a tea room/café. While unable to go into any detail, Steve said that he was aware that discussions between interested parties were ongoing. That was confirmed

by Robert from the Station Café who said that he was guardedly optimistic of a successful outcome so far as his taking over the premises was concerned.

Tom echoed Steve's appreciation of the work of the volunteers with whom he he'd had a long association, saying that he had first joined the Flitch Way at the same time as the first volunteers had started.

Regarding the work programme for the summer, Tom said that it would mostly entail maintenance and small jobs. There was work to do around the station at Rayne and at least one visit to Garnetts for a light cut back. A pond dipping platform at Notley would be installed and seed collected from the wildflower meadows at the appropriate time. The large amount of timber stored at Notley would also need to be processed and bagged, the meeting was told. Although a formal work programme for the Autumn/Winter had not yet been drawn up, work would involve raking at Dunmow Cutting and continuing heavy clearance along the Flitch as well as work at Garnetts around the car park and clearing a butterfly ride. Further work would involve installing more benches along the trail if grant applications were successful.

7. Adam Jenkins, Public Rights of Way (PROW) Officer.

Adam introduced himself as one of 4 PROW officers based at County Hall. He presented an informative slide show explaining the background and laws governing the different kinds of public rights of way and showing examples of various years' definitive maps leading to the forthcoming digital version. Adam also referred to the role of the Parish Paths Partnership (PPP) and the involvement of the Flitch Way group in projects all over Essex and beyond. He said that 2500 metres of clearance work had been done by the group, 29 metres of bridges installed, along with 18 hand rails, 8 waymarker posts and 6 gates. Adam finished his presentation with a selection of slides showing the group at various sites.

8. William Chastell; update on route through Dunmow

William gave a background to the need for the track to be re-routed following the construction of the new A120 and the consequent break in the Flitch Way at Dunmow. A small group had been formed to look at various alternative routes and despite a variety of hitches which had occurred, there was some optimism that work on the first phase of the proposed route, from Buttleys Lane to Ongar Road, could start as early as this summer, it being mainly open countryside. A number of obstacles remained, however, not least of which are problems with landowners along other parts of the proposed route.

The meeting was brought to a close by the outgoing Chairman at 9.00pm