

Chairman's Report

Review of the year

Welcome to the Royal Paddocks Allotments virtual AGM, one of the many innovations we have had to adopt due to Covid-19. The lockdowns and restrictions we've faced for most of this year have curtailed our traditional activities but have also inspired imaginative responses, while making most plotters even more conscious of the value of having an allotment.

Our thanks are due to Anne Wingrove and the café volunteers, who kept on going until the lockdown in March. The number of people asking when the café is going to reopen shows how popular it is, but it would be irresponsible to risk the health of the volunteers and plotters by opening again until it is safe to do so. There is a message from Anne at the end of my report.

Thanks also to the Social Committee for an excellent Seedy Sunday, followed by a fascinating talk on water harvesting by Ben Wilkins. Jenny Bourne has written a resume below. Lockdown and social distancing came into force shortly after Seedy Sunday, which meant we couldn't hold our other social events. However, ingenious alternatives have been organised. Ross Moss ran a very successful virtual Plant Sale, helped by Olivier Maurin, Martin Scotton, Jenny Bourne and other growers, while Hilary Griffiths is exploring ways in which we could have a 'non-social' Xmas social – we'll keep you posted.

Other activities continued throughout the year. Ray Hulm and his team look after the pumps, Ashley Catto and his helpers unlock and lock the main gates every day, Karen Saywell and her helpers have kept the inspections going and Martin Scotton devoted October (and much of November) to handling the rents. We all owe these people a big debt of gratitude, as we do to Andrew and Susan Saunders for their work on the fedge and live hedge, Ben Wilkins and Chris Pocock for looking after the compost toilet, Jon Anderson for the bee area, Stuart Wisdom for providing pallets, all those who mow and tidy communal areas, etc, etc.

The inspection team has modified its approach to take account of the pandemic. While some have been spending more time on their plots than ever before, others – especially the vulnerable – have had their access severely limited. Karen and her inspectors are well aware of this, and nobody's tenancy will be at risk due to Covid circumstances beyond the plotter's control.

One of the most heartening things over the past year has been the efforts of so many plotters to help neighbours who have been unable to visit their plots regularly. I'm aware of many who have put in an impressive number of hours weeding and planting on neighbours' plots, and there are probably many more I haven't heard about. To list names would take up a couple of pages, so I'll limit myself to saying well done and thank you all. And thanks to everyone for following the Covid precautions listed in the notice on the gate: it's not just our own safety but that of more vulnerable plotters we need to think of.

I'd like to thank all the members of the Plotters Committee for the time and thought they have devoted to meeting the challenges we face. I don't think we have ever had such a busy year. And special thanks to David Lainchbury and Dylan Baxendale, who are standing down this year:

they have made a huge contribution over many years and they will be greatly missed. We have two new faces among the candidates for the committee this year – please do cast your vote, since we need at least 40 responses for any AGM decisions to be valid. If all the candidates are endorsed, for the first time ever there will be a majority of women on the committee!

On a less positive note, there have been several reports of fruit and vegetables being stolen from plots. Please remain vigilant and don't let people into the allotments unless you are sure they are plotheholders. Do contact the committee if anything like this happens to you.

The year ended on a positive note with work on those roads that were not touched last year. This was done by Scott (foreman of last year's works), who has taken off the central crown where this was causing problems for cars and cyclists and put chippings on those places prone to flooding. Many thanks to John Hourigan and Gray Rigge for their daily co-ordination and trouble-shooting with Scott.

Overall I think this has been a year of positives for the RPA, which have helped to lighten a difficult year. We have a thriving and friendly community and this is reflected in the way in which people look out for each other.

Incinerator

After much thought and debate, which included advice from Jason Andrews, the Environmental Health Pollution Manager (Air Quality) for Richmond Council, the committee has decided – by a 2:1 majority – that we shouldn't get a new incinerator. This may come as a surprise, since until fairly recently it was probably assumed by most plotheholders and committee members that we would inevitably replace the old incinerator. The committee had previously decided on a replacement but did not vote on whether we needed an incinerator at all.

There are a number of factors behind this new decision. Many committee members believe that we should now look for cleaner, greener solutions, such as drowning pernicious weeds like mare's tail, putting longer cuttings in dead hedges and burying diseased plants. There was concern that the incinerator would be abused – when we allowed bonfires, most people burned only dry organic matter from their plots, but there was a significant minority who brought stuff from home to dispose of, burned non-organic matter and lit smoky fires that affected other plotheholders and neighbouring houses and roads. A further factor is that should the council order us to stop all burning, which it can do if we are judged to be creating a statutory nuisance, then we could have potentially have wasted £2,500 or more in association funds on something we could no longer use.

However, there were also strong arguments put forward for getting a new incinerator. People argued that there is a place for burning some organic matter that cannot be composted, and noted that the incinerator we had in mind (the Proburn Midi - <http://www.proburn-incinerators.co.uk/waste-incinerator-range.html>) is far more efficient and less polluting than the old brick chimney. Plotheholders have observed the bans on bonfires and the old incinerator, which gives grounds for optimism that a new incinerator would not be abused. It was also felt that it would cause upset if we reversed the policy that the old incinerator would be replaced, and that

support for the ban on bonfires on plots was contingent on the understanding that there would be a new incinerator.

This has been one of the more difficult issues to be tackled by the committee in recent years, and the divergence in opinion between committee members is probably reflected among plotholders as a whole. Policies are only workable if they are supported by most plotholders.

Our Constitution allows for an Extraordinary General Meeting to be called if requested by 20 or more members, with a minimum of 40 members needed to attend for the EGM to be quorate. Therefore, if we get at least 20 messages – either emails or notes posted in the shed letterbox – by 4th December opposing the decision not to buy a new incinerator, we will organise an EGM or more likely provide a suitable alternative in view of the current Covid circumstances.

Centenary

Next year is the centenary of the Royal Warrant from George V and there are several projects underway to celebrate this. A history of the RPA is in the works (please see below for a message from the authors); a weathervane will be created by Jem Negus for the seed store building; there should be commemorative bags and tea towels; and the area where the ornamental apple tree near the gate used to be will be spruced up (a replacement apple tree has already been planted).

Other projects are under consideration, including an exhibition of finds on people's allotments, special jam labels, a heritage fruit and vegetable category for next year's Autumn Social (fingers crossed), a centenary quiz, commemorative cards, improvements to the hard-standing area outside the café, new water collection systems, etc. If anyone wants to get involved, either with practical help or ideas, please contact the committee.

David Harnden, Chair, Plotholders Committee
November 2020

A Message from the Café

The Café had a great start to the year, with busy Sundays all the way through the winter, and some new volunteers joined the team. However, all came to an abrupt halt at the end of March like everything else in the country when we went into lockdown.

The Café has been closed since and whilst we have had a lot of enquiries as to when we will reopen, unfortunately it will remain that way until government restrictions are relaxed enough for us to practically open again. We have all missed the Café, not only for the delicious homemade cakes, but the community spirit. Let's hope we don't have to wait too long as the volunteers are looking forward to welcoming everyone back soon.

Anne Wingrove

A Message from the Social Committee

We held our first and only ‘official’ social event this year days before lockdown - Seedy Sunday just squeaked in on Sunday 15 March. A cold morning for buying seeds and coppiced hazel stakes, registering for the Pumpkin and Sunflower Autumn Show competitions and enjoying a hot drink and cake. More people than usual turned up for the main attraction that day – a talk and practical demonstration by Ben Wilkins on ‘Rainwater Harvesting and Beyond’. It was an hour of non-stop technological ingenuity, summed up by one admiring plotholder: “Ben’s talk was hugely popular and a fascinating event. I had no idea there were so many hidden underground workings on the other side of the allotment and so much mysterious technology, not to mention the 8 water storage cylinders. How I get by with a watering can and a few visits to the pump I now do not know, though I guess that it is relevant that I do not ever aspire to a prize winning plot or wiring diagrams in a lighted shed! But Ben’s talk was nicely judged and humorous and he marshalled the large audience around his plot with good ringmaster expertise.”

In May plotholders Rose Moss and Olivier Maurin stepped in to organise a ‘virtual online Plant Sale’. A group of us provided the plants and Rose did a brilliant job of contacting buyers and delivering chillies, tomatoes, beans etc to plots in a socially distanced and efficient way. Many thanks to Rose and Olivier for leading on this.

We decided to go ahead with the Pumpkin and Sunflower competitions for those already registered. Nick Baylis measured and calibrated the sunflower entries in situ -- many thanks, Nick. The winners received their rosettes and certificates by post. The Pumpkin Competition was a socially distanced and low-key event on 13 September that should have been the date of the Autumn Show – hot and sunny all day! A comparatively low turn out of entries were weighed and results announced to a small, socially distanced group, who selected this year’s ‘People’s Pumpkin’ award. The winning pumpkin came in at a 38.5K worthy winner, well done, Julian Maczko, plot 32f.

COVID-19 has meant a fallow year for social events and a break for the Social Committee who plan and organise these and all the volunteers who help to run them. Energies have been diverted meanwhile into planning next year’s RPA centenary events and commemorations. This has already borne fruit with the planting of a new tree to replace the ornamental apple at the front entrance.

Thanks to all who’ve been involved during this unprecedented year in keeping at least some aspects of our RPA community and social life going, with social distancing being the key focus.

Jenny Bourne

A Message from the History Book Authors

Good progress has been made despite the challenges of the second wave of Covid. Plotholders Janet Baylis and Susan Saunders are leading the project as writers and editors, joined by Jenny Bourne (writer and Plotholder Committee representative), publisher Jacqui Jackson, and photographers Katie Downham and James Bell. Cleve West, Chelsea Flower Show multiple Best in Show winner, has agreed to do the foreword.

The book will tell our story from the early struggle to obtain the site and the signing of the Royal Warrant to our thriving community today. There will be themes including: major projects (Seed Store and lockups restorations, tracks and compost loo); pumps; social events; and environment and nature.

We have already had more than 40 expressions of interest in the book. If you are interested and haven't contacted us please do so by email plotholderscommittee@paddocks-allotments.org.uk. It will have about 100 pages, with colour photos and we are aiming to sell it for £10.

Finally, we'd like to hear from you if you have interesting photos from before the Millennium. Katie is scanning old photos for possible inclusion in the book. Please post through her letterbox at 34 Church Grove (opposite the gates) in an envelope with your plot number and contact details on the front, plus any relevant details such as what's happening in the photo, who is in the photo and the date it was taken. Katie will scan it and return it to you.