

Malvern Community Forest Annual General Meeting, April 2019-March 2020

Chair's Report

The end of March is not only the end of our financial and governance year, but also the time when many of our tree- and woodland-based activities come to a seasonal end, leaving our newly planted trees and hedges to grow, coppiced trees to re-emerge, fruit trees to blossom and put forth fruit ready for picking in autumn. Meadows, rides and paths need our attention but less energy than our 'creating and managing' activities, so the late spring and summer months are for reflection, planning and AGM's.

April 2019 saw the first big disruptions of Extinction Rebellion and School Strike protests putting the Climate Crisis – and its sibling Biodiversity and Soil crises – into the public realm as never before. From then on, trees and woodlands began appearing on many more agendas though over the following months their pivotal role in addressing the crises was disputed by wetlands, NFU-sponsored grasslands, and upland peat bogs. Another shift occurred in the May local elections: an alliance of parties, including the Green Party, took control of Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) and the Labour Party and allies took control of the Malvern Town Council (MTC). Both Councils declared Climate Emergencies, including a mention of working with Malvern Community Forest by MHDC in their meeting.

Our 'Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Policy' was well received. The Malvern Hills AONB and Worcestershire Wildlife Trust approved it, and saw it contributing to a Biodiversity Development Planning Document for the South Worcestershire Development Plan Review. The Worcestershire Local Economic Partnership was positive, and the Wyre Forest Community Land Trust asked to meet to share ideas and approaches.

As a consequence, we have been invited to consider tree and woodland projects by local organisations and to be involved in environmental issues. We participated in the Climate Emergency Meeting in the Cube in July; attended a meeting with MHDC in August and were invited to be on their Environmental Panel which met at the end of September, and to participate in their Green Fair in October. We were invited to become involved in the MTC Environmental Panel, which meet monthly, and led to more invitations to be involved in projects. At the same time, one of our existing partners, Madresfield Estate, invited us to take on a coppicing project at a wood near West Malvern. It was an exciting prospect, requiring us to recruit local support to give us the large amount of volunteer time it would take. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get the necessary support and we were unable to go ahead.

The biggest impact on our own projects came with the mild, very wet and then very stormy autumn/winter. After a great autumn harvest for Abundance, the Halloween Cuillins session was rained off; Townsend Community Wood was flooded and knee deep in mud putting an end to the ride/footpath improvements as well as our activities; multiple Prospect sessions were cancelled; and subsoil destined for the Link Station hedgerows was too dangerous to collect and handle, requiring us to buy some in.

And last but not least, Covid-19 arrived in February, leading to the follow up MHDC Environment Panel on their Destination Zero policy being cancelled as a non-essential meeting at the beginning of March. In the final weeks of March, all activities other than essential work got 'locked down' altogether. In retrospect, perhaps we could have promoted voluntary work like ours that provides a much needed and urgent positive response to the climate, biodiversity and soil/habitat emergencies as being essential work.

We have found it a challenge to recruit new members and volunteers to build further momentum, despite our profile being higher and our public presence more obvious. That said, we have retained members and volunteers and the Trustees wish to thank you for your continuing support. We have attracted grants, whether applied for or the surprise £800 donation from a UK Software Engineering Team working for an international payment platform; and our projects have continued, as can be seen from their Annual Reports and through our quarterly Project Newsletters available on our website.

We can hope that the reported lockdown interest in the natural world will continue and can extend to active involvement in its protection. There are no alternatives to the rapid shut down of fossil fuel use to prevent run-away climate heating in the remaining 10-year (and decreasing) window we have. Even then, the climate will still be overheated for up to 300 years and reducing existing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will be essential. Increasing the number of trees, woodlands and other ecosystems takes up carbon as they grow, and we need to plant now and on a massive scale to start that take up. We also need to keep the carbon locked up, by turning trees into enduring objects, from buildings using only cross-laminated timber to furniture to household articles, whilst planting yet more trees in their place.

Our new TreeAction project is aimed at responding to these joint needs in a way that we hope will appeal to individuals, groups and communities. We are establishing our own tree nursery to provide trees for planting in our projects and those of other groups. We also want to recruit people across Malvern to set aside a small space in their own garden or communal areas to sow and plant trees seeds and seedlings to grow on for planting in accessible green spaces. We are currently working with a developer and local councils to keep the carbon locked up longer in trees felled in permitted development by keeping their timber for community use. We started on both of these new ventures just before lockdown and are looking forward to developing them over the coming months.

Ken Timms
Chair, Malvern Community Forest
June 23rd 2020