



Friends of Dartmouth Community Orchard

Short Report to Dartmouth Town Council: *December 2022*

1. The final point in our last report (April 2022) mentioned the Orchard's designation as a Local Green Space in the Neighbourhood Plan. Its designation is now confirmed as a result of the recent referendum. This is an appropriate moment to acknowledge the work that Peter Goldstraw and his small team did in writing the sections of the Neighbourhood Plan relating to Green Spaces and drafting the policies that will benefit the Dartmouth community for years to come.
2. The most significant events during the period since April concern the non-apple trees. For the late Queen's Jubilee in June, Captain Sarah Oakley together with the Mayor unveiled the commemorative plaques placed next to each of two trees - a Sweet Chestnut (Friends' donation) and Whitebeam (Town Council donation).
The other significant event was the major crown reduction of the great ash tree opposite the Ridge Hill entrance carried out by tree surgeons in the summer. Ash dieback had made the tree unsafe. This is merely the beginning of what will be an on-going (and expensive) process of reducing or removing diseased trees as more are affected both in the orchard and the wider town estate.
[An article on the origin and spread of ash dieback, *The Other Pandemic: ten years of Ash Dieback* by Louise Hill, the Defra lead for Ash, is in November's edition of *British Wildlife* (Vol 34 no.2). It may be of interest to Councillors given the impact that the disease is having and will continue to have for the foreseeable future.]
3. Generally, the Orchard continues in good health despite the extremes of weather – heat and drought in summer, very heavy rain and strong winds in autumn. The apple trees responded to the summer heat and drought by dropping immature fruit. Even so, there were still plenty of apples come harvest time. During the strong winds, an old tree in the western paddock toppled; another leaned heavily but is still very much alive. A third tree (a Pear apple – much loved by local pickers) was leaning and despite already being supported, its trunk snapped in the wind under the weight of fruit, but it should regenerate with new shoots, given time.
4. A comprehensive inventory of all the apple trees in the orchard is kept up to date as old trees fail and new ones are planted. The Town Groundsman has a copy, which is available to Councillors on request. For the record, there are currently 142 apple trees in the Orchard of 66 different West Country varieties, some represented by more than one tree. The trees are of widely differing ages, the oldest being probably more than 70 years old and the youngest being newly planted 'maidens' that are only 2-3 years old. Another new tree has already been donated for planting this season.
5. Early in October, a team of BRNC Officer Cadets finally finished laying down the all-weather path surface of the path around the western paddock and inserted two steps in the stretch through the woodland zone. This has been widely welcomed by those who regularly use the orchard throughout the year. We continue to be very grateful to the College for the enormous help we get from the Cadets.

6. The Town Groundsman's team removed the internal gates that separate the paddocks from the woodland zone. This improved access for those with push chairs or mobility issues. They continued to trim the path edges throughout the summer and, as the picking season approached, they also trimmed paths to and around the apple trees. In November, they carried out the annual cut of both paddocks. The Friends have started raking up the arisings, important for keeping the sward free of 'thug' plants and in good condition for wild flowers. There will be approximately ten working parties between October this year and March next, weather permitting. Tasks will include: continuing to rake up the strimmings, renewing the mulch around recently planted trees and pruning trees as needed, managing the hedges planted over the past 7 years so that they thicken out, carrying out various tasks to enhance biodiversity.
7. Increasing biodiversity is a key aim of initiatives at international, national, regional and local levels, and the Friends are trying to play their part by planting winter cyclamen and spring crocuses (for early pollen and nectar), putting up bat and bird boxes, including an owl nesting box (Tawny Owls regularly visit the Orchard), placing onduline mats at various places in each paddock (as reptile and amphibian refugia), creating two small dew-ponds, one in each paddock (to diversify the invertebrate life), and expanding our bee colony.
8. Our initial bee colony failed towards the end of summer. Pamela Nicholson took advice but the reasons remained unclear. By good fortune, we were offered two colonies available as a result of a house move. They were safely transferred to the Orchard from South Brent by Rob Harkness and are now well established. One possible reason for the failure was the siting of the hive in too shady a place, so it has been decided to move them to a sunnier spot, still in the western paddock, but on a new platform built by Matt Horan and his team. The hives will be transferred to the new platform during the winter months while the bees are less active.
9. With the essential help of Richard Roberts, we now have quotes for installing both water and electricity supplies to the Orchard. The total cost will be in the order £10,500. We are submitting a grant request to the Council and are trying to identify other sources for grants. While continuing to believe that installing these services is desirable both for the use of the Groundsman's team and for the Friends' community events like the Apple Pressing, we recognise that in the current economic climate, the Council will have other pressing priorities.
10. There was a Spring meeting for the Friends (approximately 30-40 attended) in the orchard to re-familiarise them with what the group is trying to achieve. Our Apple Day pressing in October produced a good deal of interest with approximately 70-80 people visiting, many of them taking active part. We used the occasion to unveil a new map and information panel designed by Rhiannon Pitten, a professional designer living locally, for our noticeboard at the Ridge Hill entrance. It makes a very welcoming display for visitors. Once again, we ran an apple pressing workshop on Children's Day at the Food Festival.

Finally, our AGM will be held on Tuesday 21st March 2023.

Peter Shaw on behalf of the Friends or the Orchard Committee
4th December 2022