

## 35th Annual General Meeting Minutes Zoom (Covid-19 Government restriction)

Meeting recorded and available to view via eNews and website

Attendance: 65 members  
36 proxy votes received voting with the Chair

### 1. Welcome

The Chair, Mike Mintram, welcomed members to the second virtual FOWA AGM, then introduced Mike Coe (CEO), Martyn Smith (Finance Trustee), Andrew Smith (Arboretum Director) and Mark Ballard (Curator).

*“Clearly, the impact of COVID-19 has been significant and we will be commenting later on how it has affected FOWA and the arboretum. Suffice to say, we now remain confident that FOWA and Westonbirt will survive and indeed thrive during these challenging times”.*

### 2. Minutes of 2020 AGM for Approval

Martyn Smith proposed to accept the minutes, seconded by Martin Green (Trustee). Approved by the meeting by virtual poll.

### 3. Introduction from the Chair

2020 was a year like no other in the history of the charity, with COVID-19 dominating our operational response when we would have been celebrating our 35 years as a charity; the safety of our staff and members and visitors taking priority. The closure of the arboretum was a challenging and uncertain time for everyone alongside our need to support key work at the arboretum. Staff had to adapt to home-working, made even more challenging as we migrated to a new membership management system (database). Mike Mintram thanked the staff for embracing new ways of working and growing charity revenues. He went on to thank our Forestry England (FE) colleagues for ensuring the safe reopening of the arboretum when Government restrictions lifted.

For the first time in our history, we reached 36k members. Funding was designated to the Quarantine House, Coppice Shelter, path, signage and car parking works; all improving the visitor experience. The shop delivered a near break-even position despite the challenges, and significant growth is expected in 2021. In partnership with FE, we are working on the masterplan aspirations for the 10-year Vision – to be a world leader in trees, inspiring people through education, participation and conservation. This will be achieved through investment in people, infrastructure and visitor engagement. The charity is gearing up to deliver a significant increase in activity to support the arboretum. Finally, he thanked you – our members – for your continued support, which in turn allows us to support Westonbirt despite the tragedy of the pandemic.

### 4. 2020 Report and Accounts Review

Martyn Smith summarised the 2020 highlights. Please see the Annual Report for details. Our financial position is healthy and the accounts received a clear audit from Bishop Fleming. Income was £1,637k, expenditure £1,341k, giving a net income of £296. At the year end, unrestricted funds were £1,117k, restricted funds £54k (total £1,717k) and cash in the bank was £1,639k (N.B. membership income is received before it is released to the statement of financial activities, which flatters the cash balance).

Membership income is our biggest income by far and, despite COVID, was 3% up on 2019. Not surprisingly, donations and legacies were down on last year. Shop income made its first appearance and other income included COVID grants and the furlough income.

FOWA grants to the arboretum in 2020 were well down on 2019, mainly due to the inability to move forward on projects. Access rights payments were lower due to the arboretum closure. Fundraising costs were lower due to inactivity and support costs were higher due to both the move to the new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system and increased expenditure on IT infrastructure to allow staff to work from home.

Restricted funds were mainly for the Quarantine House and Community Shelter. Unrestricted funds are from general donations and have unspecified purposes, and from this we designated funds for the four specified projects to support the Arboretum Development Fund. Had it not been for COVID, much of this would have been spent in 2020. *(General funds of £321k have to be held under charity law).*

## **5. Approval of Bishop Fleming as 2021 Auditors**

Use of Bishop Fleming as 2021 auditors has been proposed by Mike Mintram and seconded by Veronica Morriss (Trustee). Approved unanimously by the meeting by virtual poll.

## **6. FOWA 2020 Review**

As the 2020 AGM took place late into the year, much of last year was covered then as well as 2019. Mike Coe welcomed members both present and on catch-up. The year's goals included the new CRM (Raiser's Edge) and integrate an ePOS system for FE to improve member on-site experience; to develop ambassadors and influencers on-site; to encourage digital magazine take-up; and to support development of the master planning. During site closure March-June, membership numbers and income dropped to a worrying level. However, there was a significant recovery, ending the year with an 8% growth! COVID negatively impacted on Great Oak Hall operations. Some staff were furloughed and general administration affected; eg we were late filing our accounts with the Charities Commission due to miscommunication, although they were filed early with Companies House. Our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary summer celebrations had to be postponed. Tree adopters and other tours had to be cancelled. There was a huge shift to online applications due to lack of volunteers on site to process forms; the infrastructure for this had to be built from scratch and was integrated successfully into new technology. On the rare occasion that you forget to bring your membership card, we now have the facility to check your membership at the Welcome Building.

### ***Q – What has my membership money has been spent on this year?***

The Quarantine House and Community Shelter are expected to be completed during 2021; funding for the Coppice Shelter is set aside; we funded young student arborists. Engagement and Learning staff are funded by you via the Arboretum Access Rights Payment. Other ongoing projects include a climate system in Propagation. By far the biggest is development of the master plan, which we will come on to later.

Changes in the FOWA Team include the addition of gift shop (FOWA Enterprises Ltd) staff managed by Alistair Williams. Julia Bartlett joined us as Supporter Services Team Leader. Mike Coe thanked members for your continued messages of support and appreciation of the physical and mental wellbeing that the arboretum offers.

2021 will see FOWA and FE continuing to work closely in partnership for the master planning work and 10-Year Vision, which Andrew Smith will elaborate on below.

## **7. Arboretum 2020 Overview**

Andrew Smith presented visitor numbers for 2020 showing, after reopening in June, that we welcomed more visitors each month with the advance booking system than the previous three-year average (apart from October), which overall is on par with a normal year. It is expected that visitor

numbers will be significantly increased in autumn 2021. Despite early financial concerns, the year's income finished on budget, thanks also to Enchanted Christmas going ahead. £80k of FE funds were diverted to the Community Shelter. Government support schemes e.g. reduced rate of VAT, business rates relief and furlough were also important. He paid tribute to FE and FOWA staff for operating without the usual support of the volunteers; the great news is that volunteers are now starting to return.

Our new catering provider, Fosters, took over in January from Calcot. We now have a grab-and-go Pantry, Smoke House with wood-fired pizza oven and remodelled restaurant, The Kitchen. Fosters pride themselves on using locally-sourced ingredients.

Andrew reported that FE received almost £200k of Department of Culture, Media and Sport Heritage Recovery funding in October. The majority of this has allowed us to secure the services of five consultancies to work on different elements of the master planning: Visitor insights (visitor engagement); sustainability (including a waste audit and energy use analysis, with the goal of being carbon zero by 2033); third-party funding; site events and; an action plan to realise the Vision. In summary, the areas identified so far are in the plan are: Trees & biodiversity, Science & research, Green infrastructure, Visitor welcome, Learning & interpretation, Skills & diversity, Building operational capacity and Staff & volunteer space. This is different to the Forest Design Plan, which Mark Ballard will talk about later. Assessment criteria will rank these projects in terms of fit with the Vision, addressing financial and operational considerations.

We expect to have a dossier of projects by priority by the end of June. A key step will be a spatial plan, the optional use of Silk Wood House and land and addressing how we can celebrate the bicentenary in 2029.

## 8. Silk Wood Ash Project

Mark Ballard started by showing his appreciation of all your support of the Tree Team and went on to highlight the challenges of Ash dieback since 2015 and its rapid decline. Visit [www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/fthr/pest-and-disease-resources/ash-dieback-hymenoscyphus-fraxineus](http://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/fthr/pest-and-disease-resources/ash-dieback-hymenoscyphus-fraxineus) for details.

Silk Wood has undergone a clear felling operation of its ash restoration 15 years ago. The timber has been sold and this covered the cost of the contract. As safety is paramount on site, the only alternative to removing the ash would have been to cut off Silk Wood to the public. In effect, we have lent nature a hand by speeding up the process of trees that would have failed anyway. He praised the contractors for their care and attention and efficient operation of a Forest Harvester. Visitors continue to be engaged with the work undertaken by way of detailed interpretation on the perimeter fencing, for which there has been no adverse feedback.

Mark went on to explain the necessity of an approved Woodland Management Plan that maps out the area and categorises each section. We have 61 hectares of Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland/Ancient Replanted Woodland plus 22 hectares of coppice. Around 50% of restocking takes place naturally whereas we actively look to put broadleaves back in to the other 50% in conjunction with our colleagues and partners. This takes into consideration future challenges of pests and disease, climate change etc. He cited *Pinus heldreichii* from a seed collecting trip to southern Italy as a prime example.

Regarding the New Forest Design Plan 2021-30, we have been in consultation throughout May at high-level management. It covers the management and intended use of all land at Westonbirt (arboretum, Downs and woodland). To see the full document, visit [www.forestryengland.uk/forest-planning/westonbirt-the-national-arboretum-forest-design-plan](http://www.forestryengland.uk/forest-planning/westonbirt-the-national-arboretum-forest-design-plan). 3 major development areas were identified as part of the future master planning for separate consultation; Silk Wood House, central office hub and learning zone and the area around The Sleights; also Jackson Avenue. Mark showed the landscape components on a map, reassuring that the arboretum, woodland and Downs areas will remain intact. In total, we have 253 hectares of land. Another map highlighted the Grade 1 listed area. He finished off by citing our tree statistics as of April 2021; 15,120 specimens, 1,804 species, 2,713 number of taxa, 304 genera in 101 families, 136 TROBI Champions, 786 trees in 125 species on

the IUCN Red Data list of species in danger, 123 trees planted autumn 2020 to spring 2021 (46 unique taxa of which 41% are wild collected origin) and the tallest tree – *Abies grandis* (Grand Fir) 43.5m.

## 9. Questions

### **Q – Will the membership donations stay at their current affordable prices?**

Mike Coe - We can all agree that membership is incredible value. The planned increase for last year was appropriately delayed to due arboretum closure, so there will be a modest increase this year and next year. Costs have increased, and we wish to fund the master planning work. Alongside this will be a gate fee increase.

### **Q – To visit as a member, do I have to bring my membership card?**

Mike Coe – Our CRM system, Raiser’s Edge, does allow FE Admissions staff access to check membership for those exceptional circumstances when a member genuinely forgets their card. However, our policy is that yes, you do need to bring your card. If you have lost it, please let us know and we can issue a replacement.

### **Q – How does people utilizing Westonbirt for dog walking support the Arboretum’s mission?**

### **Q – Could well-behaved dogs be allowed to enter the Old Arboretum at quieter times?**

### **Q – Would you consider implementing dogs on a lead at all times and limiting one dog per visitor?**

Andrew Smith – We introduced red, green and amber colour-coding to make our policy clearer on site and to better manage visitor expectations. As these expectations vary, our policy aims to achieve a happy balance. Our recent insights research identified 15% of visitors being people with “dogs on the lead” whereby the dog is the focus when planning trips.

### **Q – Would you advise leaving a few ash just in case they show resistance?**

Mark Ballard – Yes, best practice says that if you have ash trees that look healthy then we should, so before clear felling we marked them up, although not many. We will monitor them and 3% may show some genetic tolerance.

### **Q – Will the felled trees be turned into items that can be bought from the Westonbirt Arboretum Shop?**

M Coe – We are working with Westonbirt Woodworks for products that can be made using the ash. Mark Ballard confirmed that there is no problem in using diseased ash timber.

### **Q – When will members be able to freely come and go from the Arboretum without having to book slots?**

Andrew Smith – We are keeping this under review. We’re expecting to keep the system in place for 2021. Research shows that members generally would like it to be kept in place long term – it has helped us manage peaks and troughs especially between 11am-2pm. In fact, we have been able to get more people through even though it has felt quieter and calmer. Other heritage sites such as the National Trust are also considering keeping the system. Usually, you can book midweek visits on the day.

**Mike Mintram closed the meeting 7.07pm**

Signed by Chair (as a correct record)	Date Signed
Issued by L Smith Issued on	