

## 39<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting Minutes

2 July 2025 from 2-4pm in the Great Oak Hall including Arboretum Tours

### Attendance:

38 Members in person plus 5 Trustees, and 8 FoWA Staff.

*The AGM was followed by Arboretum Tours and talks from Forestry England experts.*

### 1. Welcome

The Board Secretary, Jo Cummings, welcomed Members to the 39<sup>th</sup> Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum AGM.

### 2. Overview of the year and summary of the charity's strategic direction – Martyn Smith, Chair of Trustees

Martyn Smith joined the Board in 2018 and became Chair in December 2024. He is a Chartered Accountant who has worked for a range of multinational companies including Dyson. He has worked for several not-for-profit operations including Elim Housing and he is a former Chair of the Association of Corporate Treasurers. He is currently a Trustee of Lilian Faithfull Care, Mindsong and Thames Head Singers, a Governor at South Gloucestershire & Stroud College and a member of the Audit Committee of Clare College, Cambridge.

Martyn's presentation:

2024 was a year of progress and restructuring. After a period of transition, the charity worked hard to remodel operations, increase membership, and plan for the future.

A surplus of £154k was achieved during the year with total reserves now standing at £941k. £400k of that supports the charity's policy to hold at least three months of operational costs in reserve. £135k is restricted to specific projects, £59k is earmarked for specific projects and the remaining £347k is held for as-yet unspecified Westonbirt projects. This surplus was achieved through modest growth in income, careful cost control and improved performance in retail providing a firm base from which to invest — in people, infrastructure, and future activity.

Income in 2024 was £2.4 million. Ordinary operating costs were almost £1.4m. The charity paid £762k to Forestry England for Arboretum Access Rights, allowing members to continue to enjoy free access to Westonbirt. £372k was awarded in new grants to support a range of projects at Westonbirt, though we benefitted from £115k of underspends from previous years' commitments. In total, with previously agreed commitments, the charity paid out £335,000 in grants and awards during the year.

While the headline surplus is important, it sits within a much broader picture of delivering meaningful public benefit through the work that we enable.

Membership and retail have also played a key role in our stability and reach. Membership grew by 8.3%, ending the year at just under 38,000 — the highest on record. This reflects the effort put into marketing and renewed attention on member retention.

Retail turnover reached over £1/2 million, and operating profit rose slightly, thanks to better sourcing, more efficient stock management, and licensing of new Westonbirt-branded products. The shop is now better integrated into the Friends' operations and continues to serve both a financial and engagement role.

The trustee board has led the direction and oversight of the charity's work this year. A number of trustees' terms of service ended in 2024 and outgoing trustees are thanked for their contributions to The Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum.

Trustee departures have provided the opportunity to welcome new colleagues with a varied set of skills in communications, IT and arboriculture which we have identified as being particularly relevant to the organisation in years to come. That mix has brought fresh energy and helped to diversify our thinking as a Board. A full Trustee skills audit has been carried out which supported new appointments and will inform our future recruitment and succession planning.

This past year, the Board focused on:

- Reviewing and strengthening our grant-making process — ensuring clearer criteria and better monitoring of impact
- Supporting the CEO and senior staff in developing a new five-year strategy
- Continuing to monitor key risks
- Working closely with Forestry England, including involvement in early-stage discussions about the long-term site plan.

The Finance and Risk Panel continues to provide detailed scrutiny of financial performance, investment, and risk. The Enterprises Board supports retail and commercial oversight. Together, these structures help ensure strong governance without slowing operational agility.

Everything we do links back to our charitable purpose. The Friends exists to support Westonbirt — by enabling access, funding conservation and education, and building connections between people and trees. In 2024, our funding supported:

- The Tree Conservation Manager, safeguarding biodiversity and global seed collection
- The Community Engagement Programme, helping groups overcome barriers to access
- Investments in inclusive play and interpretation, especially for families and schools
- A PhD programme focused on the health of *Tilia* (lime) species, run by the University of the West of England.

These are long-term investments. They reflect the care and ambition we bring to our role as a partner with the Westonbirt Forestry England team in support of this wonderful site.

We've also been looking ahead — with a clear strategy for the next five years.

Together with staff, trustees, and partners, we've shaped a practical, focused plan for 2025 to 2030. It identifies four main priorities:

- Deepening engagement with our members and supporters
- Strengthening our fundraising and communications
- Supporting Westonbirt's long-term development
- Building a resilient, capable charity — operationally and financially.

This strategy gives us the structure needed to plan, deliver and grow — without losing sight of what matters most.

I also want to acknowledge the strength of our partnership with Forestry England. Our work is most effective when we're aligned — and we thank Andrew Smith and his colleagues for their openness, collaboration and shared commitment to Westonbirt's future. This partnership is built on mutual respect, and it continues to be one of our most valuable assets.

I want to express my thanks.

- To our members for your support, your trust, and your continued involvement.
- To our staff team, led by Emma Griffiths, who've delivered excellent work in what has been a year of consolidation and change.
- To our Forestry England colleagues and volunteers for the time and care you give.
- To my fellow trustees for your experience, your attention to detail, and your commitment to governance that adds real value.

The Friends is in a strong position. We are financially stable, and have a clear plan for the future. As we mark our 40th year, we do so not just with pride in our history — but with clarity about our role today, and confidence in where we're going next.

### **3. 2024 FoWA Review Presentation – CEO Emma Griffiths**

#### **Partnership and Purpose**

It has been a successful year, and I'm really proud of what we've achieved together. As CEO, my job is to make sure the strategy we've set actually happens—through the work of our brilliant team, our partnership with the Forestry England Westonbirt site team and the army of volunteers that support them, and of course, with the support of our members. So today, I just want to share a few reflections on how we've been delivering on the ground—what's working, what we're learning, and where we're heading next.

#### **More than just a number**

Let's start with membership—because it really is the heart of what we do. We ended 2024 with just under 38,000 members, which is an 8.3% increase on the year before. As Martyn has said, that's the highest we've ever had. However, it's not just about numbers—it's about people choosing to be part of something they care about.

We've been trying out a range of new approaches—testing different ways to reach people, reconnecting with those whose memberships have lapsed, and looking closely at how we retain members over time. One of the things we have trialled is offering incentives: for example, encouraging direct debit sign-ups, and giving visitors who have paid full gate price a shop voucher equal to their entry fee if they choose to join on the day. And with the highest numbers for membership in the history of The Friends, shows that it is paying off.

But what really sticks with me are the stories. One member told us:

*"I belong to the Nordic Walking Group... watching the changes each season brings just makes me feel so good. Nature at its best—providing fun, friendship and fitness."*

That's why we do this. And looking ahead, we want to make it even easier for people to connect with us—so that membership doesn't feel transactional, but something you're genuinely part of. We want our members to feel connected to Westonbirt—the place that brings us all together.

We'll keep building on what worked well in 2024, and we'll keep trying new things too—especially around how we reach people and encourage them to stay. But just as important is how we stay connected. And by that, I mean finding more ways to involve you in what we do, sharing stories from the Arboretum, and making sure you feel part of the journey.

### **Income beyond membership**

We have also seen some really encouraging progress this year in our fundraising—particularly with trusts and foundations. We secured over £290,000 in grants, supporting everything from community planting and inclusive play to conservation and accessibility work. That kind of support doesn't just happen—it is the result of building strong relationships, telling our story well, and showing the real impact of what we do.

This year has felt like the start of something bigger and with it there have been some necessary changes within the team. We are laying the groundwork for a more ambitious fundraising approach across the whole organisation—re-engaging with past supporters, reaching out to new ones, and making sure we are ready to grow our impact in the years ahead.

And alongside that, our shop has really come into its own. It is now fully part of our operations, and it is doing more than just generating income—it is helping us connect with visitors in a different way. We have introduced new product lines, including Westonbirt-branded items and locally sourced gifts, and even secured a license to sell alcohol, which has gone down very well! But more importantly, we are starting to see the shop as a space for storytelling. It is a chance to share what makes Westonbirt special, to invite people to become members, and to help them take a little piece of the Arboretum home with them. Looking ahead, we will be exploring how we can use that space even more creatively—to engage, to educate, and to inspire.

### **Grant-Making with Impact**

This is where our support really takes shape—through the grants we are able to give. This is of course in addition to the AARP (the access payment which ensures the access rights of members to the Arboretum).

In 2024, we awarded £372,000 in new grants and paid out £335,000 multiyear grants. That funding has gone to some really meaningful work, including:

- Supporting the Tree Conservation Manager and a student arborist—investing in the future of tree care.
- Funding the Community Engagement Programme, which helps people who might not otherwise get here to experience the Arboretum.
- And supporting the Coppicers retain and hand down the ancient and skilled traditions of woodland management by funding the cost of an apprentice, training and tools. With this support she will be seen working away in Silkwood for years to come.

These are exactly the kinds of projects that show what we are here for. And as a team, we are staying really focused on making the most of every opportunity to bring income in—and on running things as efficiently as we can—so that we can keep putting as much as possible back into grant giving, where it really makes a difference.

### **Looking Ahead with Confidence**

So, as we celebrate our 40th year, I just want to say how proud I am of what we have built—and how excited I am for what is next.

We are in a strong place—financially, operationally, and as a team. But more than that, we are clear on why we are here: to support Westonbirt, to connect people with trees and to improve quality of life.

Thank you for being part of that journey. Whether you are a member, a partner, or a supporter—your contribution matters. And I am really looking forward to what we can do together in the year ahead.

#### **4. Minutes of 38<sup>th</sup> AGM 2024**

Minutes of the previous AGM were made available before the meeting and can be found on the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum website. There were no comments or questions.

**Outcome: The Minutes of the 38<sup>th</sup> AGM 2024 were approved.**

#### **5. Appointment of Auditors**

On the recommendation of the Board of Trustees, auditors, Godfrey Wilson were appointed for the coming year.

#### **6. Arboretum Tours**

Members enjoyed a conservation tour with Westonbirt's Curator, Dan Crowley, delving into the heart of what Westonbirt does as a world leader in trees – Dan pointed out rare trees that are threatened with extinction in the wild such as Acer Amamiense .

Members were also given an insight into the Arboretum's education programmes with Nia Crouch and Chris Meakin seeing firsthand how, together with Forestry England, Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum are inspiring the next generation.