

Friends of Pitts Wood

Friends of Pitts Wood formed in March 2003 to help care for a small, hidden area of semi-natural ancient woodland in the middle of a deprived urban community in Quinton, Birmingham. We came together as a result of a desperate cry for help from Woodhouse Junior and Infant School.

The half hectare woodland was part of their school grounds but following curriculum pressure and staff changes, the woodland, which had once been regularly used by teachers and pupils, was no longer seen as a resource. The wood had become abandoned and as a result was being used by local gangs for drug abuse, drinking and other anti-social behaviour. Dogs were roaming from unsecured back gardens and the wood was badly fly-tipped. The final straw came for the school when police cars screeched into the playground during playtime with sirens blazing to chase a burglar who had escaped through the wood.



The School wanted rid of the worry but no other council department was prepared to take it on. The school had already established that the cost of securing the site properly would be around £80,000. The only entrance to the wood was through the school grounds so it was not publicly accessible. Local residents whose children had been to the school, had fond memories of when classes used to be held out of doors. Before it became

overgrown with laurel and holly the wood had been full of bluebells in spring. Everyone knew how valuable the wood was as an education and community resource but it would need a lot of money and work to make it safe and inviting.

From that first meeting with staff, governors, local residents, councillors and council officers, a group was formed to look at taking on management of the site whilst keeping it in council ownership. One of the parents at the school also happened to be a NOF funding advisor for the City Council, and she took on the job of securing some funding from Doorstep Greens for a feasibility study and generally motivated, encouraged and supported the group. We also managed to get funding for a Ranger from our local country park to help one day a week with the project.

We started by clearing out as much of the fly tipping as possible so we could get a better idea of how we could fence the site properly. With help from BTCV we cleared two skip loads of household rubbish and there was still more to take out! We finished the clearance with toasted marshmallows and baked potatoes on a camp fire.

Now at least we could get into the wood without climbing over rubbish and we started to tell people about what was going on with a display in the local library. Spurred on by the need to spend our Doorstep Green grant before the deadline Siobhan arranged for a consultant to carry out consultation with schools, groups and local residents and we asked Groundwork Birmingham to prepare a "vision plan" for further funding bids. In June this year we were excited to have a visit from Birmingham City Council Chief Executive and a posse of senior officers. Dressed in suits and sandals, they gamely wandered through our beautiful wood and listened to our plans. Their visit gave a real impetus to the group – we now had the City Council supporting us at the highest level and doors started to open.



In the meantime we applied to join the Community Woodland Network and were very pleased to receive grant aid to support the Committee and hopefully make our task less daunting. We lost our Ranger for a while but now have support again through Chris Wishart, Quinton Outreach Ranger, who has helped with taking down some dangerous trees and opening up glades by removing laurel. This has enabled the school to start using the site again and some lunchtime sessions were held in the woodland in the summer.

Throughout all the turmoil, our Chairman Bob Chambers has continued to keep the moral of the group high. Bob has lived next to the wood for many years and has championed its value to the community as an amenity and education resource. Our local Community Police Officer, Bernie Flynn has also been a huge support to the group. Besides attending every meeting and advising on local contacts, Bernie has taken the lead in securing the boundaries by writing to every house holder and offering to replace their fence if needed. About half of the residents have responded and Bernie and Ranger Chris will be door knocking to ensure that everyone that needs to has a new, secure fence. We are still looking for more funding to completely fence the perimeter.

Our persistence has paid off. We have recently been awarded some extra funding from the City Council and are about to start on creating a new public entrance with an attractive gate to the woodland so that we don't have to interrupt school life. Our group is gaining new members at every meeting and news of our project is spreading fast. The Local History Society have researched the history of the wood and found it was owned by the Penn family of Pennsylvania fame. We are planning an open day in December to show people how much has been done and to invite their ideas for the wood.



Its amazing to think how far we have come in the last 18 months but it feels like the project is really going to happen and the wood is truly recognised as an important part of the local landscape.



Visit by the Chief Executive , Chief Officers and District Team

Sue Cooper
Treasurer Friends of Pitts Wood
November 2004