

**Meeting between WDC and Friends of St Mary's Lands
Town Hall
3rd November 2021**

Introductions

WDC:

- **Andrew Day**
- **Chris Elliott**
- **Liam Bartlett**

FoSML:

- **Sue Weston**
- **Mari McFadden**
- **Linda Bromley**
- **Kate Pittel**
- **Andy Cowlard**
- **Jenny Cowlard**

Linda B – points out that the agenda item 'Benches' isn't on the agenda. Looking forward to a constructive meeting. Asks that we propose a chair.

AD is happy to chair.

Agenda item 1

Presentation on the fencing and alternative solutions

MM – introduces herself, starts the presentation with Linda B operating the slides:

No connection with FOML until Feb. While walking on the Common, saw the fence going up – started speaking to people walking in groups and they were asking what was going on. The survey came about because she felt it was important to give the people a voice.

There were 117 replies to the survey. It was computer generated and everyone's replies are there, spelling mistakes and all. It wasn't just a bird survey – it was about the use of the whole land.

Citation 5.6 A previous survey was conducted by Henrietta Westergarde in 2019. Scientifically well written and quite rigorous. Dog walkers were seen using the paths through the area. This was

an older survey – there were roped off areas with a gap in the middle so that people could walk through.

Section 8 – demarcation of sensitive areas. There are some myths – one is that skylarks nest in long grass, not true. Another is that dog walkers cause a nuisance in SML – not true. I am a dog walker myself – I don't see anyone misbehaving on the land. She hadn't seen a dog warden in 15 years.

HW encouraged dialogue and discussion.

In our survey – we asked 6/7 straight-forward questions. MM runs through the questions. One of them asks who put the fence up? General consensus was the council – and it was apparent that there was some bad feeling about it. Most only knew about it by word of mouth – not good politics.

Next slide: shows the area we're talking about. Our survey was commissioned to look at the success of the fencing. The map doesn't tell us anything about where the birds were spotted or whether the findings from the council report were from the first or second visit?

Surveying skylarks isn't an exact science. My background is in botany and my degree was in environmentalism.

A slide shows the line of the fence which is outside of the fenced in area. Dog walkers walk outside of the area. If that's where dog walkers walk, then they're not disturbing them. Only 3 skylarks inside the area.

MM shows the boundaries and marks out where the birds were spotted.

Also, there are concerns about the firm that conducted the survey. ASW Ltd. Company was only formed at the end of March 2020 – and the survey was done a few days later.

MM cites reasons why skylark numbers are being reduced – from the Common Bird's Census (CBC) and the British Bird Census (BBC). Optimum height for grass is 30 to 50 cm (gets out ruler) and shows that measurement is up to her knee. But the height of the grass behind the fencing is more than 4 ft.

Skylarks avoid vegetation over 60 cm high.

- **Four sources have quoted the same thing. During the survey, people were asking ‘where are the skylarks’. After the end of May/first week of June and for rest of nesting season, there were none spotted in the fenced off area at all. They can’t nest in vegetation that high – we ask that you look at different solutions.**

Shows the image of what it looked like in Feb. Shows the two sides – one where the fencing was and the unfenced side is still perfect for skylarks.

[In the survey], people accepted measures to protect ground nesting birds. But we offered alternative suggestions to plastic fencing. The plastic fencing was the least acceptable.

Alternatives could be:

- **Professional signage.**
- **Wooden marker posts**
- **Regular monitoring**
- **Mown paths**
- **Hedge planting – although this would take away from the look of the land**

MM’s report is rigorous with a lot of data, offered a lot of solutions. We’re making a suggestion: contact the dog walking fraternity, get people on board. MM has a degree in Environmental Science so she knows what she’s talking about.

AD – indicates that Liam B will take it away, take a close look and respond in due course.

Agenda item 2

Status of Working Party

Linda B – asks why were there no draft minutes from the meeting in January?

AD – replies that the WP is suspended at the moment and has been since February.

Linda B – emphasises that the meeting was in January, yet there have been no draft minutes circulated, despite asking on several occasions.

AD – we're looking at the constitution of the Working Party, that's why all minutes have been suspended. There have been no decisions taken as yet – we've not taken a decision about whether there should be a dog walking representative on it.

Linda B – says there are no terms of reference for the Working Party – AD agrees.

LB – what about the plans to extend the fencing to a wider area. Has that been decided?

Liam B – no decision has been made yet – we need to digest Mari's presentation.

KP – the report released to the press recommended that if the area was widened, there should be 'a new consultation' – although one didn't take place before the last fencing was erected.

AD – agrees emphatically that there should be.

AD – we want to make sure that the WP represents all stakeholders and that it's democratic.

Linda B – we used to have 2 reps on the WP – agreed by councillors in the exec report in 2014. Then it was reduced to 1 – the reason given by CE was one of them represented the Warwick Society. We want to request that we go back to having two representatives on the Working Party.

AD – we're reviewing a number of our working groups at the moment. We want the WP to be properly constituted and therefore made up of

properly constituted groups. That's why we've been asking about the constitution of the FoSML. We need to know who these groups represent and how they operate.

Agenda item 3

Locked gate on cycle route

Linda B – it's been locked frequently. One of our members was emailing one of your officers who was coming back with all kinds of odd answers about radar keys etc. Now it's broken.

CE – we had to use a contractor and it was locked because the contractor failed to visit. They were meant to open it in the morning and the Jockey Club would close it at the other end of the day.

The gate needs to be locked at night because of people in the evenings – kids – on motorbikes getting access to the Common. We didn't want to have to lock it. That's the reason.

Liam B – asks us to contact him if it happens again.

Linda B – it wasn't in the original route in the mMasterplan. It's a permissive path and the racecourse say they are under no obligation to let it be used as a cycle route.

CE – if you look at the plan and the Masterplan – the cycle route would have gone through the car park. We negotiated with the racecourse to use that path to make it safer. Went through it with county councillors to make sure it worked for cyclists. The point at which it connects with the car park – where it connects with canterdown – that's where the motorcyclists are getting on to the Common.

It's a permissive route – but it's not a dedicated right of way. That's something we'll do if we can. Our priority was to improve the access and make good the missing link in the cycle route – this was the next best thing. It's not perfect, but we've done the best we can.

[Some discussion with AC about the gates and where it is].

CE – there's more than one gate and people get confused. The main problem is where the cycle path goes across the end of the car park and connects with the canterdown – the public right of way goes diagonally across and there are two gates there.

CE – it would be nice not to have gates – and we'd welcome other solutions. We don't want to restrict people's access. Opening and closing times – should be 7 til 7. We'd rather not talk about locked gates at all. Trying to offset the behaviour of a minority.

Linda B – believes the surface wasn't acceptable for cyclists.

CE – disagrees. It's not perfect, but it was signed off by WCC.

Agenda item 4

Impose speed limit round the inner surfaced track

Linda B – a vehicle nearly knocked someone down – and a dog was almost killed.

[Some discussion about what vehicles and whether this is on race days or just generally].

[Consensus that it's the vehicles used by the racecourse and on days when there's no race meeting, just general use of the track].

CE – there's supposed to be a speed limit of 5mph.

Linda B – there certainly isn't.

Agenda item 5

Gog Brook pathway

Linda B – it's a well used path and beautiful walk and cuttings have been thrown into the brook putting it at risk of flooding.

[Some discussion about the condition of the path].

Linda B – the rail adjacent to Gog Brook could be taken back by a few feet – hedge is overgrown. It was a very valuable walk esp during lockdown.

MM – Gog Brook is overflowing making that path impassable. People who wanted to walk there had to go all the way round because you can't cross the racecourse at that point.

AD – talks about flooding everywhere because of heavy rain.

Agenda item 6

Parked cars on grass alongside Bread and Meat Close and on the Common overnight after race days.

Sue W – organisers of events have been directing people to park on the grass alongside Bread and Meat Close.. WDC have already agreed to let organisers know that it's not appropriate, so thank you

for that. LB raised the issue of cars parking overnight after meetings which is not allowed – this will be monitored.

AD – we will check in after race meetings to make sure it's not been happening.

Liam B – we'll check and confirm – it shouldn't be happening.

Agenda item 6

Litter

Linda B – we've asked for extra bins. Esp during lockdown – bins were overflowing – and there is still a litter problem in Jubilee Wood.

AD – agrees it can form part of the review (to Liam).

Agenda item 7

Benches

All agree that the ground around the benches are getting too muddy.

AC – what's needed is some kind of hardstanding. At previous meetings the use of wood bark was brought up but we mentioned then that it would have to be maintained. With hard slabs, they won't get muddy and you don't have to maintain them – they're self-cleaning, self-maintaining etc.

AD – agrees.

Liam B – good point, getting too muddy.

We also asked for extra benches.

AD – we need to give you a time limit for getting those slabs in and and update on the benches.

Linda B – Colin Burden was going to meet with us particularly over the benches but it never happened.

We also requested signage but the finger post is missing and there are no signs for the rights of way.

AC – I didn't read the presentation in full, but what can we do going forward to get them nesting. In the 60s, there were plenty of birds there.

MM – simply demarcate the area. Leave it open for foxes and rabbits – allow nature to keep the grass in tussocks. Get the

schools involved – get some proper posters up. Lot of good work going on at Priory Park etc. There are ways of doing it.

AD – we'll give it a full review and thanks for your time for compiling it.

MM – I saw around 50 skylarks take off in September – I won't mention where in case they fence it off. Male skylarks take off vertically, but females don't and babies need to be able to fly out of the grass. If it was demarcated it could still be a conservation area.

AC – if it's demarcated as a conservation area, WDC will still be fulfilling their legal obligations.

AD – agrees.

MM – remove the fencing, let nature get through, put up nice wooden posts. How high would the posts be? Tell people – this is where you walk your dogs off lead, on lead. Most dog walkers and pedestrians will comply.

MM – I'm talking as a dog walker, but also as someone who wants to conserve nature. The two aren't mutually exclusive. You could encourage people to walk in certain places.

AD – we're not taking your survey flippantly.

[Some discussion about signs – not having the ones we expected].

Linda B – the WDC rodent officer advises not to feed birds as they attract rats. The bird seed put down did exactly that and there was a huge problem. Many dead animals have been noted including a dying fox nearby. We don't want any more poison put down.

AC – makes a suggestion for the next WP meeting that Mari makes another presentation on our report.

AD – there are a number of things to be resolved first.

SW asked AD if LB should be our first point of contact if we have issues and he confirmed that this was the case.

[Meeting ends].