



FRIENDS OF GRAPPENHALL HEYS WALLED GARDEN

www.friendsofgrappenhallgarden.org.uk

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FRIENDS

In 1997, Grappenhall and Thelwall Parish Council (G&TPC) was part of the Grappenhall Heys Walled Garden Conservation Charity that was set up to persuade English Partnership (EP) (formerly Warrington New Town, and owners of the garden) that the garden was “worth preserving and protecting”. As an offshoot of this charity, a Friends organisation was formed and more than 100 people signed up as members. It could not be very active as access to the garden was limited to a few open days each year.

On 1 April 2005, G&TPC took ownership of the garden from EP, appointed a Garden Steward, and opened the garden for 2 afternoons a week. In March 2007, G&TPC appointed a Gardener/Manager; at the same time it re-launched the Friends of Grappenhall Heys Walled Garden (the Friends) to “support the garden by co-ordinating gardening work, showing visitors around the garden, planning events in the garden, and researching the history of the estate”. Around this time, the number of opening afternoons of the garden was increased to 5 days – Wednesday to Sunday.

Volunteers from the Friends were on duty as garden wardens during the week to answer any questions or show visitors around, but, due to the low number of visitors on weekdays, this was discontinued. A number of Friends did volunteer to help in the garden on Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings – “Any member can turn up to gardening volunteer sessions at the times shown overleaf and non-members can also join on arrival. There are some tools at the garden, but it will often be useful if you can bring your own along.” (quote from the Newsletter of Summer 2007). From September 2007, volunteers could also work in the garden during opening hours on any day.

A number of events were held in 2007, including Easter activities, a members only Cheese and Wine Evening, a Bat Walk, Apple Day and a Christmas Fayre. Following the appointment of an Events Co-ordinator, in the following years the number of events was increased, so that, eventually, one was held on most Sundays from Easter to October (mainly aimed at children and families), plus the Christmas Fayre in November. Lots of Friends’ members volunteered to run and/or help at these events. These became very successful, with many local residents attending, particularly those for children. New events included making bird boxes or bat boxes, a Fun Day, Picnic in the Park and Bird Watching. Running alongside these events there were horticultural activities such as workshops on planting hanging baskets, pruning shrubs and trees, making Christmas wreaths, etc.

In 2008, as well as running events, the Friends opened a basic café, initially on the first Sunday of each month and at events. This was run totally by volunteers and became extremely successful, and renowned for its homemade cakes. (See separate history sheet on the cafe).

As more produce was grown in the kitchen garden, and whilst the volunteer gardeners took some it for their own use, an outlet was needed to sell the surplus rather than throwing it on the compost heap. It was agreed it should be sold on Sundays to garden visitors, and eventually a special cart from which to do that was purchased by the Friends. During the week, produce could be purchased from the Gardener/Manager, or by putting money in an honesty box in his absence.

In 2011, the Friends decided to convert to a charity as this would open up more possibilities of obtaining grants for spending on projects in the garden.

When the garden was transferred to G&TPC, with an endowment, the interest from which was to maintain the garden in the condition in which it was transferred, money was included to demolish the ruined glasshouses. However, G&TPC and the Friends agreed that they should be regenerated, provided Lottery funding could be obtained. To this end, a working group made up of Parish Councillors and Friends was formed to apply for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The Friends agreed to put the surpluses from the café, and also eventually the produce sales, at the disposal of G&TPC to assist in the matched funding required – we donated £25,000 to this end in March 2013. Once the HLF had agreed in December 2012 to fund the glasshouse regeneration, and work was to commence in 2013, most of the Friends' activities had to cease temporarily as there were no usable facilities for the café or the public, including toilets.

On completion of the glasshouses, the Friends donated £12,324 towards equipment for the café. The programme of events recommenced and continued until Spring 2018. The café reopened in September 2014, but unfortunately, the Friends was unable to provide sufficient volunteers to carry on running this, so alternative ways had to be sought by G&TPC. An outside, commercial, operator was appointed by G&TPC in 2016 to run the café.

In early 2018, G&TPC, at the request of the café operators, instructed that the sale of produce on Sundays be moved away from a prominent position in the community glasshouse. The alternative position decimated the sales, and, consequently, responsibility for produce sales was handed back to the garden. At the AGM in May 2018, a number of Trustees resigned due to the treatment meted out to the Friends by G&TPC, with a number of new Trustees voted in to replace them. The new Trustees were to meet with G&TPC to try to repair relations. At an Extraordinary General Meeting held in September 2018, a G&TPC representative stated that G&TPC wished the Friends to continue; those members attending agreed that the Friends should continue and a liaison committee with G&TPC to further discussions was formed. However, following a complaint to G&TPC and the café operators from a member of the public (who also happened to be a member of the Friends) regarding locked fire exits, G&TPC decided that the relationship between the Friends and G&TPC had been damaged, despite the fact the Friends had not been involved. Consequently, at a Special General Meeting held in January 2019, the members of the Friends agreed that there was no chance of any co-operation with G&TPC or the café operators, and agreed to wind up the charity, with the remaining funds being distributed to the garden as and when needed. The charity would be deregistered once all monies have been expended.

Due to the pandemic in 2020/2021, the funds were not finally distributed until October 2023, following which the Friends was deregistered as a charity.

During the whole time of the existence of the Friends, all members of the Executive Committee/Trustees were volunteers. At no time has any of them been paid to carry out this task, other than to be reimbursed for any costs incurred on items initially bought out of their own pocket for the garden, running events, etc.