

Friends of Spencer Park and Recreation Ground: AGM, 5 October 2015
Chair's Report, 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, Paul Smith

The last year saw major decisions affecting Spencer Park which disrupted what we had hoped would be a gradual process of renovation and renewal. Nevertheless, Friends continued to play a significant role, with many successful initiatives. It is on these that I want first to focus.

During the year 2014–15 the Friends organized a number of activities and events in the park:

Volunteer gardening – 460 hours in 22 sessions

24 April – Snowdrop planting on the Recreation Ground

15 April – Easter Egg hunt and planting; c. 30 children attended

3 May – Earlsdon Festival: tennis and bowls, c. 100 people attended

5 May – Earlsdon Festival: stall, tombola etc raised £150.

1 June – Big Lunch – c. 200 people attended; tennis and bowls

Cake sale at Bands in Park 22 June and 24 August, £84 raised

28 August Trees in Park – no one turned up

10 September – Bug Wall built with the help of the Park Rangers.

15 November – Crocus planting on the Recreation ground with 12 young people from The Challenge

The membership of the Albany Crown Bowls Club grew to about 34. Members played on the majority of afternoons and evenings.

During the year, including over the winter period, misuse of the park and its facilities was negligible. This was a very welcome comparison with ten years ago, and tribute to the efforts of the pavilion staff, community-support officers, and local residents. The snowdrops and crocuses bordering Spencer Avenue announced the coming of spring. More have been planted beside the path. The garden in the west border is very attractive and continues to be improved. We removed more Spanish bluebells.

A major issue was the delay in the installation of the children's play area, for which we had obtained the grant of £50,000 from WREN in November 2013. Preparatory work by Coventry Council revealed asbestos pollution in the foundations of the old tennis courts; this was followed by discussions as to how best to deal with this. The issue was unresolved by 31 March 2015.

By October 2014 the impact of the Friends was clear and we were optimistic as to our future hopes and plans. Soon after we heard, indirectly it must be said, that the Council, because of the reduction in its grant from central government, was discussing savings, with the option of closing the flat green. No consultation was offered at this stage. By the time the statutory process of consultation was underway in January 2015, such options had become *de facto* decisions. The flat green had already ceased to be maintained to same standard, the tennis courts and crown green were to remain but not open to the public, and the pavilion was not to be staffed. Our proposal to reduce costs and increase revenue was never considered. We situated our argument within a broad perspective of the role of parks in promoting physical and mental wellbeing, and its proximity to the new Friargate development.

There then followed a period of during which Friends had to come to terms with the decisions the nature of the process, and the implications for the park's future. In particular, from being simply a Friends group, we were confronted by the need to campaign to defend the park's facilities and to consider taking a more direct role in its management. A petition was launched against the cuts (which continued into the next reporting year). At the same time there were further delays in installing the children's play area. Nevertheless, we planned a range of activities to be held in the park during the summer. We entered the new reporting year with both positive and negative legacies.

One minor point: we have moved the AGM forward a month from last year but I think that it will help the process of reporting and planning if it is held in April or May of each year.