

Walberswick Common Lands Charity
REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF TRUSTEES
April 2024

Chair

1. I was re-appointed Chair of the Trustees with effect from 1 January 2024 (having started in that role on 1 January 2023).

Accounts

2. At their meeting on 28 March 2024, the Trustees signed off the Charity's accounts for the year ended 31 December 2023.
3. The general income for 2023 was just under £20,000 lower than for 2022 (but only £1,000 lower than for 2021). This was largely as a result of an expected decrease in the covenant from Walberswick Car Parks Limited. The covenant for 2023 was £40,498 (down from an exceptional £68,403 for 2022). This does not reflect on any adverse performance by WCPL, but from a resumption of the normal rates policy and a resumption of normal running costs. Our thanks to the Directors for their work over the year. Thanks are also due in particular to Victoria Cowley for all of her work as Operations Manager, and our best wishes to her for her future plans.

Incorporation

4. The process of establishing a corporate trustee continues. This has been considerably slower than we had anticipated or hoped for. This is primarily a result of the Charity Commission wishing to reach certain policy decisions (applicable to corporate trustees generally), rather than specific issues relating to the Charity's own position. At the time of writing, we appear to be very near to the point of conclusion.

Trustees

5. We are delighted that David Pelly and Hannah Sutton have been re-appointed as trustees.

6. The appointment of the Revd Russ Gant to the Sole Bay Ministry means that he will be taking up the position as ex officio trustee from April 2024. We look forward to him joining us.
7. As ever, our clerk, Matthew Wetmore, continues to provide us with invaluable support, insight, and recollection.
8. I pay tribute to the work of my fellow trustees. They all work on an entirely voluntary basis, and put in long hours in order to ensure that the Charity's purposes are met, in particular through the maintenance of the Charity's land and in the relief of need, for the benefit of the inhabitants of the village.

Environmental Stewardship

9. A substantial proportion of the Trustees' time is spent on considering the management of the land and property for which the Charity is responsible. This includes the Common, but also the Town Marshes (running alongside the River Blyth) and some of the marshes and reedbeds running alongside the River Dunwich.¹ Much of this land holds a designation protecting it, reflecting the particular value in the wildlife and biodiversity in this rich area. As well as falling within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, much of the land is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Ramsar Site (wetlands of international importance).
10. Our vision is to steward the land in a world-class manner, following a nature-first philosophy, with the support of the village community and partners. We seek to explore priorities and then agree, deliver and monitor a stewardship programme which will protect and enhance the Charity's natural capital for the village and its wider communities. We do this by differentiating the various land types and areas for which we are responsible so that we can then plan their stewardship appropriately. We work with experienced contractors and partners in an environmentally sustainable manner. We are initiating and trialling formal monitoring systems, promoting safe and inclusive practice, and seeking further and stronger community interest in this diverse and accessible landscape.
11. The Charity has been the beneficiary of a 5-year Countryside Stewardship Agreement through Natural England, a key partner. This includes a detailed scheme setting out expectations as to the work required on the relevant land. In 2023 the Charity received over £30,000 in funds, the use of which is restricted to the stewardship of the land to which it relates. The current agreement finished at the end of 2023, and the Charity fully discharged its obligations under it.

¹ A fuller description of the land can be found at <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/walberswick-common-lands-charity/>

12. The Trustees were delighted that a further 5-year agreement has been reached from January 2024 and this will provide the Charity (and in turn the wider community) with significant benefits. We are grateful to our agents, Durrants, for their support in this process. The cost of the environmental stewardship work that we undertake is covered by these restricted funds, and any shortfall made up from the Charity's unrestricted funds.
13. We were very grateful for the work done on the land by our contractors, Paul Denny and Robert Mortley. Paul has taken up another opportunity and, whilst sorry to lose his skill and knowledge, we wish him well in his new job and thank him for his hard work over many years. We have brought in a new contractor, and we are confident that the team is fully engaged with the particular needs of the fragile ecosystem on and around the Common, including the continued fostering and protection of precious nesting sites. The Trustees are acutely aware of their responsibilities in this respect and monitor closely all of the work that is done on the Charity's land. It was precisely this care that was recognised by the renewal of the CSA.
14. We are particularly grateful to Andrew Lewis, who has undertaken a high definition drone survey of the Charity's lands. This provides an invaluable tool for monitoring their development.
15. Another focus of our work has been on the reedbeds. We have replaced the sluice and this has allowed for more sensitive, and essential, control over water levels.
16. We have also been able to use volunteer groups for specific projects, such as the clearing of Bennett's Copse, and we are grateful to the hard graft of all of those who have helped out in this way.

"LionLink"

17. The proposals in this respect continue. We were happy that National Grid Ventures realised the hopelessness of the originally proposed landing site. However, we are deeply concerned by the proposed alternative and, like many, registered our objections.² We will continue to do so and seek to work with other local bodies (including Walberswick Parish Council) and national agencies to press for a sensible, sustainable alternative.

Heritage Hut

18. A new Heritage Hut committee was formed in June 2023 to further the objectives of the lease, to inform and educate people in and around Walberswick about the village, its history and

² <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WCLC/New-Website-Documents/WCLC-LionLink-Response-to-2nd-non-stat-cons.pdf>

people, and to promote the Heritage Hut as a venue for small meetings and wider artistic use.

By way of example:

- (a) August saw Alexandra Lewis's photographic exhibition of lone wild swimming on a fixed date in time. This involved three Walberswick residents and was very well received.
 - (b) In September we participated for the first time in the national Heritage Open Days initiative with a Treasure Trail of clues in key locations around the village. More than 35 families pre-registered for the two days while others, intrigued by the sight of enthusiastic map-waving youngsters, turned up spontaneously to participate. Thanks to Caroline Wright for her ingenious clues, Emilie Dadswell for her inspired graphic design and artwork, Helen Riches for gorgeous paintings for the bookmarks and to all who generously volunteered their time to help out on the days.
19. The Committee's enterprising plans for 2024 continue.
 20. The Countryside Trust has continued to bring disadvantaged children to enjoy and use the facility as part of its field trips. Regional schools and those specifically attended by young from the village have been invited to use the Heritage Hut as part of their summer term educational activities.
 21. We are grateful to village groups who continue to use the venue for their meetings, including WPC, the PCC, the Scroll Advisory Group, and WALL ('Walberswick Against LionLink') and we are keen to encourage wider community use. The Heritage Hut is also the depository for the village archives so carefully curated by the History Group.

Charitable activities

22. A core aspect of the Charity's purpose is the grant of relief to those in conditions of need, hardship or distress. This is done by individual grants or loans, and by general grants to charities and organisations that provide support (either generally or specifically) for villagers.
23. In 2023, the Charity made grants in excess of £40,000. These included:
 - (a) The Sole Bay Care Fund, in relation to the vital support that it offers within the village.
 - (b) Payments are made to state schools attended by village children.
 - (c) A contribution to the Village Hall, which allows for subsidised hire charges for local users.
 - (d) The hire of the Village Hall to allow the Post Office outreach service.
 - (e) Ongoing support for the provision of the free mini-bus that runs villagers to Norwich.

24. In addition, the Charity supports specific activities, such as the annual Easter egg hunt.
25. The Trustees welcome suggestions as to appropriate charities and organisations it might support in the future. More information about how the Charity can assist individuals in need can be found on our website.³

Conclusion

26. For well over a century, the Charity has sought to be a force for good within the village of Walberswick. That encompasses the land that we manage and the grants that are made, but also a wider engagement with the needs of the community. By way of example, little of the sea defences – so heavily impacted in the storms of Autumn 2023 – fall within the direct control of the Charity, yet we seek to do all that we can to identify mechanisms for their protection and remediation and to work with the appropriate agencies to achieve this.

Richard Leiper KC

12 April 2024

³ <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/walberswick-common-lands-charity/grants-and-benefits/>