

2025 Friends of Weir Wood Society AGM Minutes

The Society's 28th Annual General Meeting was held at Forest Row Community Centre on 7th March 2025.

The Chairman opened the meeting at 19:15 by welcoming all. He then reminded everyone of the AGM agenda and that copies of the 2024 Audited Accounts & 2024 AGM minutes had been emailed to all members.

He then advised that the accounts would also be displayed on a projector screen when discussed by the Treasurer. Some paper copies of the 2024 AGM Minutes were also available at the meeting for anyone wishing to refer to a copy. Members were also asked to sign in, so we had a record of those present. (26 members attended)

AGM Business

1. Apologies for absence:

Doug Roberts (Auditor), Peter Johnson, Shaun Taylor, Michael Balcombe, Mark Roberts, Andy Clews.

2. Approval of the 2024 AGM minutes.

The 2024 AGM minutes were accepted as a true record by a majority vote.

3. Matters arising from the Previous 2024 AGM minutes

Last year a member asked if we had any information about the construction work being carried out at the Water Treatment Works which had been going on for several years. At the time work completion was due in early 2025. However, in the last 12 months very little building work had actually occurred. The Chairman had recently revisited the Water Inspectorate website for further information and found there was now a new multi-phase plan for the site which had been agreed with Southern Water in December 2024. The work completion final sign off date for the new plan was currently January 2032.

4. Chairman's Report by Bob Johnson.

The Chairman advised that because of the Water Treatment Works timetable giving six more years of building work, potentially water levels in the reservoir would continue to be high. We had asked Southern Water (SW) to lower water levels to give some muddy edges, particularly during the summer months, for the benefit of the wildlife in general. Natural England had also previously reminded SW that they had a SSSI responsibility to encourage wildlife. Legally drinking water operations take priority over environmental considerations, so SW have argued in the past they have had an operational need to retain high water levels, but that was now hard to justify when the site would not be processing any public drinking water for years.

Another SW issue was the poor state of the existing boundary fencing which was their responsibility. SW agreed years ago on a renewal programme, but nothing had happened.

The Sailing Club had had an on-going dispute with Alan Catterall, the leisure activity owner, mainly over rent payments and contracts. The outcome was that the Weir Wood Sailing Club (WWSC) decided to permanently leave, and they had moved to Bough Beech. There would still be leisure sailing activities and other water leisure activities at Weir Wood as not all boat owners had gone, but the official WWSC racing events at Weir Wood were over.

The Sailing Club building was now in the process of being taken over and managed by Blacklands Farm Outdoor Centre who also had the campsite next to Whillet's meadows. Blacklands would now manage all the water leisure activities except fishing which would still be run by Brendan Lanigan.

Alan Catterall had advised that he wanted to make the reservoir more user friendly. The understanding was that the grassy area up to the fishing lodge would eventually become publicly open and some new seating at the grass area would be installed. A gate would also be erected at the fishing lodge to ensure that the general public would not be able to roam anywhere and everywhere around the site. Only fisherman and those on organised official activities would be allowed to pass the new fishing lodge gates.

Until the area was officially made public, our members were reminded they could still be asked to show an e-membership card.

Blacklands intended to open and run the Sailing Club kitchen in due course, (possibly from April 2025) selling teas & coffee & snacks, these would obviously be available to our members. Alan had also advised our Chairman that our Society could have free use of the Club House building, if we would like to hold any meetings etc. The Club House would not always be manned, so Alan had kindly provided the Chairman with a key to the building which could also be useful when we had work parties at the dam end, as it would give us access to a toilet if needed.

The Chairman then highlighted some of the work the work parties had carried out in the last 12 months. A lot of the work was routine, maintaining paths and general habitat maintenance. Improvements included work at Whillet's back meadow, clearing and opening up a glade pool and opening rear views and habitat near our reed-bed viewing platform. We had also carried out silt trap work at meadow pond.

We had carried out quite a lot of work directly to benefit members & the public. These included extensive car park pothole repairs, hide painting, new site signage, maintaining viewpoints, nest box repairs and renewals, replacing all the bird tables at the car park, bird feeders and carrying out the winter bird feeding program.

We had maintained the North Bank picnic area. Although not strictly our responsibility, we had cleared a drainage pipe under the North Bank footpath to the picnic area which had become blocked turning the footpath into a quagmire. We unblocked the pipe, dug out the inlet & outlet drainage ditches and rectified the problem.

The Chairman then thanked all the volunteers & ESCC Rangers for the fine work they had done, noting they were a friendly and helpful group, which had made for a happy working environment.

Finally, he thanked John for volunteering to take over the Newsletter role just after the last AGM. He felt John was doing a great job, and his new format was a major improvement on the old one.

5. Membership Secretary Report by John Edwards

John started by speaking about the membership numbers. At the year-end on 31st December 2024, we had 246 members which represented a small reduction in membership from the year end in 2023.

During 2024 we lost 40 members – 29 did not renew, 10 resigned and sadly one member passed away. On the flip side we had gained 26 new members during 2024. These were spread out evenly across the year rather than being concentrated around our Spring and Autumn Walks and Open Day as had been the case in the past. So far this year we had gained 2 new members and had one resignation as the member had moved out of the area.

He then went on to speak about renewals. Membership fees were due on 1st January and a reminder went out in early January with the winter newsletter.

To date 149 members had renewed which was 64% of members who were due to renew. He thanked everyone who had renewed promptly as this was much appreciated. He also noted members had been very generous with a total so far of £843 being donated to us over and above the membership fee, advising that we very much appreciated the loyal support from our members, we couldn't do it without them. He also reminded that it was never too late to renew.

John reminded that at the AGM last year we mentioned planned changes to our quarterly newsletter, when he became Newsletter editor. John had moved us from a 4-sided paper-based system to an electronic “e-newsletter” where we were no longer restricted to the four sides of A4. We now had more room to cover topics of interest, such as the results of our survey work, and we could include colour photos. Our Spring newsletter in April last year was the first in the new format and there had been three more since then. Feedback on the new style newsletter had been uniformly positive so we would continue to run with this.

6. Treasurers Report by Ian Hodgson.

Ian used a projector with slides to show the audited accounts. Ian had put out printed copies of the audited accounts on chairs at the AGM for members to refer to in case the figures on the screen were too small.

SLIDE 2 showed the financial position at year end 31/12/24. Noting that the Financial Statement was split into 3 parts – General Fund, Conservation Fund and the Balances.

SLIDE 3 covered all the balances and started with the bank balance as this was arguably the most important figure as it largely reflected the worth of the Society:

Starting Bank Balance - £9,744.11

Closing Bank Balance – remained healthy at £9,545.05

Ian then went on to analyse the key figures for this movement from the Income and Expenditure Statement:

SLIDE 2

General Fund:

- covered general and administrative expenditure primarily funded by members subscriptions:
- On the Income side it could be seen that subscriptions were in line with 2023.

- Expenditure covered largely printing, stationery, postage, insurance, and website costs.
- General Fund costs were higher in 2024 largely due to website costs. This was about timing as we were invoiced for the usual renewal costs in early 2024, with no costs incurred in 2023. Additional one-off website costs were necessary in order to change the website provider – the former provider having gone bust.
- Net position - General Fund deficit of £169.56

Conservation Fund:

- covered expenditure incurred for our conservation work and management of the reserve/SSSI, including various projects, and these were primarily funded by members' and other donations plus the annual contribution from ESCC.
- On the Income side our contributions came from donations (virtually unchanged from 2023 level), and the annual contribution from ESCC. Members donations alone contributed to 42% of our total income, generating a significant difference to the conservation work carried out by our volunteers – so a massive thank you to all of you who added a donation on top of your subs.
- Main expenditure items: boardwalk and new fencing, new reserve signage, nest box upgrading, car park surface improvements, and a new secure tool storage container.
- Note that there was no grass cutting expenditure in 2024 due to the extremely wet conditions in the meadows, an injury to the tractor driver, and mechanical issues with tractor equipment.
- Net position – Conservation Fund deficit of £307.43

SLIDE 3

The Balances:

The General and Conservation Fund deficits, just explained.

- Interest £292.93 – helped by higher interest rates and a conscious effort to move more core balances into the interest earning savings account.
- Ian said we still had a healthy Y/E balance of £9,545.05 providing a good contingency reserve for future needs

Change of Bank

The members were reminded that at last year's AGM an explanation had been given as to why it had been decided to change our bankers to Metro Bank. Essentially, Santander had treated us as a trading business rather than a society, with the consequential uncertainty of them blocking our bank accounts unless we could provide documentation about our non-existent "trading".

All our banking had been transferred to Metro Bank in January 2024 to accounts specifically geared up for clubs and societies like ours. Ian was pleased to report that the transition to Metro Bank had worked very smoothly and there had been no problems since.

Auditor

Finally, Ian thanked Doug Roberts, our regular auditor, for ensuring all our financial records and accounts were in order. Doug had kindly volunteered to stand again as our auditor for our 2025 accounts.

Ian then asked if there were any questions from the members, but none were raised.

Acceptance of the accounts & auditor.

The Treasurers report now finished, the Chairman asked for a majority vote by a show of hands for acceptance of the Accounts, and then acceptance of Doug Roberts as our 2025 Auditor. Both were accepted by a majority vote.

7. Website & Facebook Editor Report by Bob Johnson.

The Chairman advised that our website editor Tom Howard-Jones had been suffering from poor health for some time now and was currently in hospital.

Tom had decided, due to increasing ill health and age, that he now wished to stand down from any further Committee work involvement.

The Chairman proposed a vote of thanks to Tom who had joined the Committee as Website Editor in 2015 and had been our website editor ever since, seeing us through a difficult period when we had to rebuild the website. He later set up and managed our Facebook Group and he was the editor for our successful 25th Anniversary book.

He wished Tom all the best and hoped that he could now concentrate on making a full recovery.

One of our members, Linsey Gooding, who has a background in IT, had kindly volunteered to assist us with website updating whilst Tom was too ill to carry this out.

8. Election of Committee and Officers

The Chairman said he would therefore like to propose Linsey Gooding to become the Website & Facebook Editor. Linsey had agreed to join the Committee and was happy to take on this role, and had already been seconded by the other Officers. Linsey was a keen bird watcher and his background in IT would bring invaluable knowledge to the Committee.

Website & Facebook Editor - Linsey Gooding

Duly elected by a majority count show of hands. No objections.

The Chairman thanked all the Committee for their hard work and dedication in managing and running our Society. They had all done an excellent job in their respective roles which had made for a good team spirit within the Committee.

The existing Officers below were all standing for re-election with no new nominations.

Chairman - Bob Johnson

Treasurer - Ian Hodgson

Membership Secretary - John Edwards

Minute & General Secretary – Vacant. (Bob Johnson currently covered this role)

All the above were accepted with a majority show of hands approval. No objections.

Committee Members standing for election.

Peter Johnson had decided not to stand for re-election as he was now too busy with a young family and work, plus he no longer had time to visit the reserve and keep up with what was happening.

Peter had always been involved with maintaining our website in the past and, although he would no longer be on the Committee, he said he would still be happy to help out as an advisor on the website technical side if we should have a problem.

The Chairman said he would like to thank Peter for all the work he had done for the Society in keeping our website running.

The Committee members below were all standing for re-election. No new nominations.

Committee Member – Richard Allan

Committee Member – Phil Holland

The above were duly elected on a majority show of hands vote. With no objections.

9. Any Other Business - Any Questions:

The Chairman asked if there were any questions or other business anyone would like to raise. No questions or other business were raised.

Phil Holland advised members there was an article about some of our nesting birds at the back of the room if anyone was interested in seeing it during the interval.

The Chairman then spoke about some proposed dates for intended members' walks. He said that there would be two additional walks this year as it had been decided not to have our traditional summer Open Day this time. He said it was felt that the amount of work involved did not justify the benefits gained, therefore additional walks would take place instead.

The Chairman also gave thanks to the refreshment ladies Judy, Joy & Marie who served the refreshments at the interval before our Guest Speaker.

The AGM meeting formally closed at 19:50.

After the refreshment break at approx. 8:15 the Chairman introduced our guest speaker, Suzanne Kynaston, from the Wildwood Trust. Suzanne, who is Project Manager for the Pine Marten reintroduction project in Kent and Sussex, gave us an illustrated talk about the project and the progress so far.

The Chairman thanked Suzanne for a very interesting talk which was well received, ending with members actively involved asking questions.