

## **Friends of Princes Park contribution to improving the park environment in the last 14 years**

### **Princes Park, Toxteth, Liverpool 8:**

Princes Park is a Grade 2\* listed park designed by the famous Joseph Paxton (who later designed the Crystal Palace) and situated in one of the most deprived wards in Liverpool. It is an important example of a green haven in a city setting. It was the property of the Crown from the time of King John and part of the ancient hunting park of Toxteth, for centuries inhabited only by deer and their keepers. The current park was officially opened in 1842 and passed into public ownership in 1918.

During the 80s and 90s many Liverpool parks, including Princes, were sadly neglected. They became places where people were afraid to go; vandalism and littering were common. The beautiful boat house was burnt and the lake filled with debris, including shopping trolleys. Cars were driven into the park and set on fire. No new trees were planted and some, being old, died.

### **Friends of Princes Park (FOPP):**

In 2004 a group of local people and park users formed Friends of Princes Park to work towards improving the park for all its users and to improve its environment, providing the green lungs of Liverpool 8. Friends of Princes Park is a free voluntary group, open to all; a small registered charity, eligible for Gift Aid.

Over the last 14 years FOPP has held events in the park, including walks, picnics and fun days. With local young people, we have built a wooden Henge, a space where people can sit and reflect and look at the beautiful park. During all our events we have consulted local people on how they view the park and how they would like it to develop in the future. Many people told us how important the green space of Princes Park was to them and how lovely it had been in their childhood. Happily, the Friends group has several members who are very knowledgeable about wildlife and work with trees on a regular basis. So, over the years, as well as organising wildlife walks in the park, we have taken an active role in improving the park environment and ensuring it is a beautiful and peaceful place for people to rest and play and to enjoy fresh air and nature.

Thirteen years ago, therefore, we started a rolling plan to plant and care for trees within the park and to improve and create new habitats for wildlife. Crucially we have worked closely with the City Council and in recent years, Glendale, the City Council's green-space maintenance contractors, who have encouraged and supported our work. We hold regular tree and wildlife walks for local people to enjoy. 30-40 people regularly take part in our planting and tree work.

### **Tree planting, Tree Care and Habitat Creation in Princes Park.**

#### **Native planting:**

Over the last 13 years we have established 7 native woodland areas, planting more than 3000 trees, including oak, ash, beech, birch, aspen, mountain ash, apple, pear, thorn, willow and hazel; along with shrubs such as rose-hips and sloe and native wildflowers which naturally colonise the maturing woodland. We have also planted other native trees and more exotic non-native trees, individually and in small groups. The trees, shrubs and wildflowers have provided additional structure and wildlife habitat within the park. The conditions created have also allowed some plant species to establish naturally, greatly benefiting the invertebrate population and the birds and small mammals which feed upon them, along with those that feed on their fruit and seeds. Our planting has been supported by Liverpool City Council, The Mersey Forrest and the Woodland Trust.

### **Enhanced wildlife:**

The habitat created has encouraged nesting of blackbirds, song thrushes, robins, wrens and dunnocks. At least 12 new species have begun nesting in the park since we started our work. The number of goldfinches has hugely increased. In addition, these areas have provided foraging habitats for other species of bird which nest nearby, as well as other types of wildlife such as bats. These new, enriched, areas of vegetation have also provided feeding and resting areas for migratory birds, such as willow warblers, which stop off in the park during their long journeys. In the spring we regularly hear chiffchaffs and song thrushes, along with nuthatches and woodpeckers.

As the planted trees mature, they will enrich the habitat further and attract additional species. Due to the enhanced habitat the park has become a regular spot for naturalists, with groups such as the RSPB and Merseyside Naturalists doing bird walks. Two local primary schools have become Forest Schools, regularly visiting the park. A local social enterprise, Squash Nutrition, organises foraging walks in summer and autumn. A local community worker takes refugees and asylum seekers on nature walks as part of classes to improve their English. It has been shown that people living in a green environment with trees are likely to be calmer and suffer less stress.

### **Exotic planting:**

In 2012 we planted over 50 exotic species of the types originally planted by Paxton. We have created a plan of the trees, with QR codes, and researched their origins, so that people can find out more about them as they walk round the park. These trees include a group of conifers: giants such as the redwood and Atlantic blue cedar, all introduced to the UK in the 1840s as Princes Park was being laid out, and others such as American oaks, with their stunning autumn colour, crab apples, rowans and thorns, including Paul's scarlet thorn, introduced in the 1850s. The park also now has magical spring blossom from a number of different Japanese flowering cherries. There are some strikingly different trees from the southern hemisphere, too: southern beech and mimosa, trees from the orient including the foxglove tree and ginkgo, and ornamental variants of common natives such as the weeping beech, introduced in 1826, and the silver weeping lime, introduced when the park was opened in 1842.

### **Planting and Coppicing in 2017-18:**

This year we have planted trees around our tennis courts as part of our yearly planting activities. The free tennis courts, recently restored, are very well used by local communities, but are unsightly, being surrounded by high wire mesh, and face on to the children's playground and picnic area (created by FOPP). Some of the few surrounding trees have died. By partially screening them with suitable trees and shrubs we have contributed to the green lungs of Liverpool and to the park environment. The project will bring spring and summer flowering colours, leaf textures, strong autumn colours and differing heights and shapes at maturity, bringing a picturesque quality (originally intended by Paxton) to this area. The benefits will last for many generations and will be enjoyed by children playing there - children who so often in Liverpool 8 have barren pavements as the playgrounds of their everyday lives.

The planting will also provide a habitat for wildlife, including insects, birds, small mammals and fungi. All our plantings involve young people and provide an opportunity for them to learn about trees, wildlife and the environment. This year children from Year 5 at St Silas primary school, working with The Mersey Forrest and ourselves, planted two wooded areas beside the tennis courts. St Silas is a

Forest School, which visits the park regularly. The children particularly liked the many many worms we found. (See website [www.friendsofprincesparkl8.org.uk](http://www.friendsofprincesparkl8.org.uk) for photos).

The park is in a very diverse area of Liverpool and is well-used by groups from very different communities and of varying ages (including enthusiastic local tennis players). Liverpool has sizeable Somali and Yemeni communities, who use the park regularly. Many recently arrived refugees are particularly keen to use the tennis courts. All will enjoy the more attractive look of the courts and the beauty of the surrounding planting, which will provide a green, attractive setting for the foreseeable future. The shorter-lived trees and shrubs, such as sumach and Philadelphus have a life expectancy of 70-80 years. The longer life-span trees, e.g. walnut and Nothofagus, will potentially live more than 150 years and the native ash and hornbeam for 250+ years. We protect all our young trees with wire cages, as otherwise, sadly, they are susceptible to dog attacks. We have been supported by grants from the City Council, Austin Smith Memorial Fund and The Mersey Forest.

We have also coppiced three of our woodland plantations, to ensure healthy growth in the future. This is part of our ongoing tree care, in partnership with the City Council and Glendale. We have also planted over 500 mixed bulbs with local young people and a visiting youth group from Holland. Many local people of all ages are involved in our tree work, usually 20-30 people on each tree day, and we provide home-made soup and cake which is greatly appreciated.

## **The future**

### **Tree Planting and Tree Care in the Park:**

We have an ongoing programme of planting, both to replace trees which have died naturally or been blown down in storms, and to beautify areas which are still unsightly, such as those bordering on buildings recently built around the park. We also replace trees which have been the victims of dog attacks, happily now decreasing as the park is more and more used by local people. We also continue to enhance the park in other ways, e.g. bulb planting and shrub planting. To encourage even more people into the park and show off its beauty we will be holding wildlife walks, tree walks, picnics and festivals. In addition, we will continue to pick litter regularly, in conjunction with Princes Parkrun, a 5k run held in the park every Saturday, in which over 300 people regularly take part. The number of local wildlife and walking groups using the park continues to increase year on year.

### **The Lake and the Island:**

Over the next 18 months we will be working with the City Council and the Nelson Mandela Memorial group (Mandela8) to improve the environment of the lake and the island, which is currently very overgrown, and have been high on the list of our priority areas for improvement for several years. Funding for the lake will be provided by Liverpool City Council. This project will both enhance the environment for wildlife and provide a space on the island to reflect and learn about Nelson Mandela. There was always strong community opposition in Liverpool 8 to apartheid and racism in South Africa. When Nelson Mandela died we were planting our exotic trees with local people, and we dedicated them to him. This drew many local people to the park and a group formed to commemorate his memory. Mandela8 has recently received funding from UNI Global Union and from local people to create a space on the island for contemplation and learning. Plans also include a new bridge, funded by the Council – the original one disappeared many years ago. Nelson Mandela himself found great comfort in cultivating plants and trees when he was a prisoner on Robben Island. This beautiful place will draw more people into the park, not only for rest and recreation, but also to learn more about their environment and the life, work and ideals of Nelson Mandela. We look forward to a very exciting year in the park.

## **What local organisations say about us:**

Squash Nutrition:

"Squash Nutrition really values Friends of Princes Park and their work to maintain and enhance the park we all dearly love. They are a really friendly and hard-working group of people who have helped develop the park in a holistic way, that is responsive to both human and natural needs. We work with and alongside them on our park-based seasonal food events and workshops and look forward to continuing to develop this partnership in the years to come."

Sonia Basseby, Coordinator, Nelson Mandela Memorial Campaign (Mandela8):

"When Nelson Mandela died the Princes Park sunburst gates became a focal point for community commemoration. At the time FOPP dedicated the trees they were planting to him. People in the local community wanted to create a unique artwork/space to reflect on and remember Nelson Mandela. The beauty and tranquillity of the park lent itself to this project, which is going ahead this year."

Local (Princes Park ward) Councillor, Tim Moore:

"Friends of Princes Park have been instrumental, working in partnership with the City Council and local residents, in improving the park over the last 14 years and enriching its environment, making it a welcoming place for both people and wildlife."

Alan Smith, lead officer, park operations, Liverpool City Council:

"For many years The Friends of Princes Park have worked closely with Liverpool City Council, local community and other key organisations, to support the management, protection, development and improvement of Princes Park. The Friends Group have undertaken major planting schemes, have held regular volunteer days and run numerous community events. They fund-raise and acquire external resources to undertake the substantial work programmes which have led to significant habitat and landscape improvements. This includes planting more than 3000 trees. They also recently instigated the installation of a large wooden Henge, the park's new popular visitor attraction. All this work has been greatly valued by the Local Authority, Grounds Contractor, partner organisations and the local community. The involvement, guidance and support of the Friends group has been a key factor in successfully improving and reanimating Princes Park, which is once again a jewel in Liverpool's Parks Estate."

Katy Gardner and FOPP members January 2018