

Chair's report for the AGM 13 Sep 2022

But for the recent drought, the year since our last AGM would have been quite a successful one in the gardens, but the group faces challenges – mainly in recruitment to the committee but also in re-organising its finances and setting them on a more sustainable footing.

The pruning day

The year began well with a pruning day mainly focussed on tackling the beech hedge behind the school which was straggly, overgrown and infested with brambles. The school had encouraged parents to attend, and as a result we had a good number to deal with the hedge and to start on pruning some of the shrubs on the eastern edge of the lawns. With good attendance, the day was a success socially as well.



These tasks have to be carried out fairly regularly to maintain the gardens and we shall be holding another such event in the coming months, and we hope that you will come to that event -- and bring others with you.



Even the children did their bit.

Willow fences

At the time of the last meeting, it was proposed to erect new willow fences around at least some of the shrub beds to protect the shrubs from compaction and erosion, and to allow some under-planting to flourish. So at the end of the year we invited members to a 'forest club' day in Abbey Woods to collect material for the proposed willow fences That was entertaining but very slow work, especially as those attending for the benefit of Mycenae Gardens were very few.



When in January some more of us gathered to make the fences under the tuition of Stephen Stockbridge, it became apparent we needed more people and much more material.

Fortunately, we were able to obtain more material from the Ecological Park in the Greenwich Peninsula. That did not solve the shortage of people. At a second 'fence-making' day, I found myself hammering in stakes on my own until I persuaded two of the GSS pupils to help, and was later joined by my wife and two other members. In all, we were only able to complete two fences over the two days. Whether we want more is an open question, but an academic one unless we can muster more people to help.



The results were attractive, but the fences have been progressively reduced as willow strips have been removed, presumably by children for use as playthings. That was to some extent anticipated, but it means that, again, this fencing will need some further work to maintain it. We hope to revisit the Ecological Park to collect material, but will still need a few more people to help.

The Mycenae Arboretum

We have long recognised that there is a remarkable variety of trees in the gardens, and have made some attempts to highlight that variety, notably with the 'Tree-sure Hunt' at the ParksFest events, and a less successful attempt to map them.

In the depths of winter, at a time when many trees lack leaves or fruit and identification of the trees is most difficult, two of the council's expert tree officers visited for an hour or so and identified 36 varieties of tree in the main gardens alone. That gave us the basis (and confidence) to order suitable labels, and earlier this year we held a 'Tree Party' to celebrate the trees and the labelling of each species. This has been widely welcomed, but a few of the labels have already been lost or broken, and will have to be replaced.



Renewal of trees and furniture

During the year the council planted a 'handkerchief tree' and installed a bench in memory of victims of covid, and later planted a crape myrtle to replace a robinia that had to be removed as it was growing next to the northwest corner of Mycenae House and undermining the wall to the basement area. The crape myrtle is doing particularly well, and has even been flowering during the drought.

Some of the tables in the gardens and the bench under the maple have suffered repeated vandalism (despite being repeatedly and expertly repaired by David Jervis). Mycenae House has replaced some of the tables with sturdier versions made out of recycled plastic. With the help of a generous contribution from a member, the Friends have bought a similar replacement for the bench under the maple.

The drought

The drought has caused damage everywhere, and many shrubs and trees in the gardens have suffered. The lawn appears non-existent. Fiona Machen and I recently spent a morning cutting back the philadelphus (and removing brambles) in the hope of saving the philadelphus from drying out entirely. We shall have to see how far all this recovers, but we have lost at least one, possibly two, of the rowans planted a few years ago. The third rowan seems fine and has been producing fruit. These rowans were among five young trees that we have been watering during the drought. The difference in outcomes for these rowans (despite watering) may be due to relative position of the three trees. The one that has survived best is shaded for longer during the day.



Will this rowan recover?

The drought has made soil-conditions worse, and to cap it all the Council refused to deliver wood-chip. Members will recall that woodchip was recommended by the council's Parks Department some years ago to reduce compaction and erosion that might threaten the trees. They have failed to supply it for the last couple of years despite numerous requests and recently refused to deliver it on the grounds that

"I understand the problem at Mycenae Gardens but the site is essentially a playground, and it would be difficult to deliver enough woodchip to address the extreme compaction and constant footfall. Any woodchip is quickly kicked around and ground into the soil, doing little to ameliorate conditions.

Due to stretched resources I'm afraid delivering woodchip is no longer something the Parks department is able to do".

We protested to our local councillor, Leo Fletcher, and a single load of woodchip mulch was delivered a few days later, but (at the time of writing) much more is needed. The reference to 'stretched resources' is of course understandable, and we have heard that the Parks Department is prepared to deliver woodchip to paying customers. It would be regrettable if that approach were to cause the Parks Department to ignore the council's own parks.

The challenges

Finances

There are two issues here. The first is that the HSBC has started charging organisations such as ours £5 a month to have an account. That would have depleted our meagre funds quite rapidly, so we closed our account and have arranged for Mycenae House to hold the funds for us while we look for a replacement free bank account. Mark Johnson-Brown of Mycenae House has undertaken that search, hoping to use Mycenae House's existing relationship with Barclays Bank to obtain an account for the Friends there.

The second issue is that the Friends funds are indeed meagre, and (more importantly) that we have not set up a system to raise funds or to provide a regular income. The requirement is not huge, but we frequently have some small expenses and occasionally larger ones (such as the purchase of the bench). This has been covered so far by residual funds in the account and by *ad hoc* gifts from individual members. This is not sustainable, and we need to have some sort of plan for a sustainable future. This will be particularly important if indeed we have to start paying for woodchip.

Recruitment

We need more members to participate in the group events, and more who can contribute to the running of the group. In both cases, the more people there are, the easier and more enjoyable it is. The well-attended pruning day was a pleasure; hammering in fence posts on my own was a chore. The intermittent and irregular nature of our calls for help is perhaps a problem: we could do with ideas on how to involve our membership more regularly and with confidence that the work will be shared.

The same applies to the committee. I am currently doubling up as chair and secretary, and occasionally updating the website. Fiona Machen is both our gardening expert and handling social media. It would be good to share out these roles. We were fortunate to have Fiona Machen and Vera Shuvueva join the committee last year, but we need more. Much of the work requires no special skill, although we currently could do with help and ideas on web and social media and in setting our finances on a more sustainable footing (see above).

New members of the committee are needed not only to deal with current issues but also to provide continuity in future. The current members of the committee will not always be around, and we need some new members (elected or co-opted) coming through. My own plan was to retire as chair a couple of years ago, but my replacement had to retire after a very short time in post. A new chair and fresh ideas are needed. Please step forward to be elected to the committee and/or encourage others to do so.

Mark Barnes

Chair and secretary of the Friends of Mycenae Gardens