**Friends of Darwen Cemetery**

**AGM Working Party Report**

**28th June 2023**

This report summarises the work carried out by the volunteers during 2022 and the plans for 2023.

I would like to formally thank the volunteers for all their hard work throughout the year.

**2021 SUMMARY**

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| Saturdays | 24 sessions | 621 hours |
| Thursdays | 46 sessions | 982 hours |
| Total | 70 sessions | 1603 hours |
|  |  | £20,651 equivalent |

The volunteers have continued to build on the work carried out since the group was established in 2010. The following formal areas, including those created by the Friends have been maintained and improved as required.

The Nature Garden.

The Ashes Memorial Garden.

Prickly corner.

The heather bed.

The WW1 memorial wall.

The main entrance and Cross of Sacrifice.

The Military Section

The Ashton Memorial.

General maintenance has continued throughout the site. The following activities have been carried out at regular intervals to help keep the site attractive, and safe for visitors.

Trees and shrubs trimmed to keep roads and grave sections clear.

Invasive plants chopped down or removed. (Brambles, Brides Wort and Himalayan Balsam)

Fallen trees cleared away.

Self-seeded trees chopped down.

Path edges cleaned and repaired.

Drains and gutters kept clear and running.

Sunken graves filled.

Privet and Rhododendron hedges clipped.

Suckers removed from the Lime trees.

Gates and maps cleaned.

4 Sessions were dedicated to the grave maintenance scheme, averaging approximately 35 graves. A maximum of 40 graves has been set due to the current number of volunteers and to ensure the work to tidy them can be carried out in one 2 hour session. Grave maintenance sessions traditionally end with drinks and cake, by way of thanks.

Sessions were carried out in:-

March (for Mother’s day)

June (for Father’s day)

September

December (for Christmas)

Thursday volunteers continue to maintain and improve specific sections. The following sections continue to be worked on.

 Section A (Ron)

 Section K (Lynda and Peter)

 Section 2 (Anne)

 Section 5a (Alan)

Headstones have been re-erected, grave kerbs re-instated and grass mowed.

The responsibility for the grass cutting remains with BwD Council. The council agreed to try and cut the whole site at least twice a year, which would ensure the grass is a reasonable length throughout the growing season. This allows for safe access to grave sections for volunteers and visitors. Some sections, those easier to mow were kept to a reasonable standard however others were allowed to become overgrown with Fern, Willow herb and Bramble. (more about this in the 2023 plan).

Our thanks go to Sammy McCusker and her staff, at BwD Council who continue to support FODC despite very tight budgetary and staffing constraints.

Special Projects

Section G received some specific attention during 2022. The area opposite the Memorial wall is used by the general public to view remembrance services and other events, however there were a number of fallen headstones and other trip hazards. The Trustees therefore agreed to pay for several days work by Jason Price to re-erect the fallen gravestones. This work continues into 2023. With the assistance of Jason, the volunteers also created some steps adjacent to the Richard Westhead bench to allow for easy access from the main path onto section G. the steps were completed just in time for the November remembrance services.

**2023 PLAN**

During 2023 we will be holding 25 formal public working parties on the following dates:-

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 7th January | 21st January | 4th February | 18th February | 4th March |
| 18th March | 1st April | 15th April  | 29th April | 13th May |
| 27th May | 10th June | 24th June | 8th July | 22nd July |
| 5th August | 19th August | 2nd September | 16th September | 30th September |
| 14th October | 28th October | 11th November | 25th November | 9th December |

As in previous years the formal Saturday working parties will continue to be complemented by weekly informal Thursday morning working parties, which commenced on the 12th January.

All working parties will run from 10.00am till 1.00 pm unless, by exception, extended hours are required for specific tasks.

2023 has brought new challenges for the volunteers

Darwen Western Cemetery covers approximately 20 acres and includes some very steep and challenging terrain. Many hundreds of headstones are still laid down and buried under accumulated soil and vegetation. At the time of writing this report, unfortunately the grass cutting regime has slipped which means that large areas of the Cemetery are covered in very long grass. It is therefore difficult and dangerous at times to access some grave sections. However, it is acknowledged that the council staff are currently part way through a major cut.

Volunteer numbers are slightly down on 2022 and the average age of volunteers is rising, many being above retirement age.

I therefore propose for 2023 that the working parties concentrate on looking after the gardens and other areas which FODC have created, already improved or use for public events. With one exception, Section H, see below.

**Maintenance -**

Regular, recurring jobs which can be planned and approximately scheduled well in advance.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Grave Maintenance SchemeSpecial Gardens, (Ashes, Nature, Prickly corner),Cross of sacrifice, and War memorialsPaths and Roads, to and from Formal Gardens and main roads as time permitsTreesPrivet Hedges –Sections 1 and 6, Heather BedHimalayan BalsamJapanese Knotweed | Maintenance will be carried out at four dedicated working parties during the year, 18th March, 10th June, 16th September & 9th December.Rhododendron hedges clipped and kept tidy.Flower beds weeded and replanted as required.Gravelled areas weeded and raked.Lawned areas cut and kept tidy.Gutters and hard areas maintained and cleaned.Gutters and drains kept clear.Sucker growth from Lime trees removed.Trimmed and shapedWeeded and trimmed.Weed suppressant chippings added when availablePulled up as soon as the plants become large enough to handle.BwD council to be notified. |

**Restoration –**

Targeted activities intended to bring existing or former features back into acceptable condition.

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| --- | --- |
| Section G  | Continue to get headstones re-erected and grave kerbs reinstated. |

**Development and special projects –**

Section H – FODC were approached by several members of the public, complaining about access problems on Section H. This section is situated on sloping ground just to the south of the main entrance and contains many (possibly hundreds) of fallen headstones and sunken graves. Apart from a strip adjacent to the main path and a few paths through, this section has not been cut or strimmed for many years. The volunteers agreed to tackle the 6 feet high brambles, ferns and willow herb, and by the end of May 2023 had cleared 4/5th of the section. This work, which took several months made it safe and accessible for the council to strim. However, as at the 28th June this has not been carried out and the section is once again inaccessible.

I would like to request the Chairman and Trustees to formally complain to BwD Council, the cemeteries office and local councillors of our huge disappointment. All complaints from the general public are being directed back to the council.

Thank you.

Jill Marr

Trustee and Working party coordinator