

Raising awareness of the historical, natural and amenity value of Markeaton Brook including all brooks from Hulland Ward, Langley, Mackworth, & Quarndon into Derby Centre



Friends of Markeaton Brook/University of Derby – Breathing Places Project

In December 2007 the Energy and Environment Manager from the UoD approached Friends of Markeaton Brook concerning the possibility of working together to gain a grant from BBC Breathing Places to do environmental work on the Sturgess Fields. This followed shortly after Derby City Council refused an application by the UoD to build a road across the fields, against which decision the University stated, in a broadcast by Radio Derby, that they would not appeal. We were told that the idea to work with FoMB had been put forward by Vice Chancellor Professor John Coyne when it became clear to him that UoD could not apply for grant funding themselves and needed to act in partnership with a voluntary group.

We agreed to the partnership working, with some caution, because it was always possible that UoD had understood the importance of this area to Derby residents and were prepared to respect their views. With much help from our partners, WildDerby, we completed an application for a grant. Changes to this were insisted upon by UoD who were clearly as nervous of us as we of them, and the title Sturgess Fields Nature Trail was coined.

Our intention was to create a nature trail with an explanatory leaflet for the use of local residents, and as an educational aid for local schools and UoD's own students. We envisaged erecting bird and bat boxes in existing trees, work on which was to have been carried out before the nesting season in 2008. The tree work was also a necessary part of site management to ensure cover from the UoD's insurers for people accessing the fields. We were to plant a number of young trees to enhance the wild life corridor and to eventually replace diseased, dead and dying trees on the site. A simple wooden bridge was to be placed over the brook to link two strands of the brook to replace a bridge of scaffold planks installed by local residents. The bird and bat boxes and the bridge were to be supplied by the Probation Service. In this way a large number of people would be involved with the site, and a function of the Friends Group was to provide a Warden Service to engage with the public and to ensure that the few less responsible users of the site were to be given every opportunity of understanding the benefit to all in using the site in a proper manner. A compelling part of the grant application was that of changing hearts and minds over the use of the Sturgess Fields, particularly we hoped, that of the UoD, who never seemed to have grasped the incredibly importance that this area has for local residents and Derby people in general as an area of natural beauty and amenity.

As we noted on our website, we had our difficulties in working with UoD but believed that we were approaching an understanding of each other's positions and we were working on compromise. Unfortunately after making the application for the grant, the UoD appealed against the decision not to grant permission to them to build the road. This put the FoMB and other Partners into a situation where on the one hand they were attempting to work with UoD on an environmental project and on the other opposing the Appeal put forward by UoD to develop the site in question.

FoMB is a community group in the WildDerby partnership because wildlife benefits people

In June 2008 we were told that our application for the grant had been successful and the committee decided that they would go ahead with the project in spite of what was seen as the UoD's duplicity. An Environmental Management Plan was commissioned, and Groundwork were commissioned to work with local schools promoting site visits and to produce the Nature Trail Leaflet in conjunction with WildDerby and students at the Uni.

The Uni provided notice boards, intended to be used by the Wardens to inform users of the site about current events, and provided also Litter and Dog Waste bins which they placed basically in a circle around a field not used as sports pitches which the Uni felt to be appropriate as a 'Nature Trail'.

In September the Energy and Environmental Manager left to take up a new post elsewhere. The post was not filled and the person we were expected to work with was the one who had signed the Appeal for the road. FoMB were informed that they would not be allowed to access the site, which effectively stopped the Warden function. Tree work had not been carried out as promised and therefore the erection of bird and bat boxes provided by the Probation Service was not going to happen in time for Spring 2009 and the nesting season. UoD have also decided that the proposed footbridge was in the wrong place and in the wrong construction and that the funding provided by the project could be redirected into a bridge of their choice and siting. The project was also informed that the Nature Trail Leaflet could not be produced in the time scale required by the project. The group was informed that UoD could not sanction the planting of trees. At this stage it became clear to us that we would be able to meet neither the timescales of the project or the more intrinsic values and we contacted the funder for advice. They were understanding but required the return of uncommitted funds to redirect to a more successful project.

Shortly after this UoD's planning application to further develop Sturgess Fields became public, without any advanced warning to us. The application was to site portacabins to use as changing rooms for the sports fields. This was the second time during the life of the project that UoD had attempted to develop the site that we were engaged upon in environmental work with them. We met with UoD to walk the site with the Environmentalist to discuss his management plan and it became very clear that the UoD's Project Manager's interest in the site is limited to restricting the use by local residents and talked constantly of erecting fences to keep out the public. The Project was designed to deliver community engagement but since the UoD's attitude is one of social exclusion there is no chance of the project benefiting the numbers of people originally envisaged.

Accordingly the Committee of Friends of Markeaton Brook have informed BBC Breathing Places that funds will be returned to them. Our partners UoD and WildDerby have also been informed that we, as fund holders and responsible for the timescale of the project have withdrawn from what we feel is an untenable position.

Committee
Friends of Markeaton Brook
24.03.09