

Chairman's report

It's been a strange and challenging couple of years with a lot of disruption, such as not being able to hold an actual AGM last year. However, with the help of many people at the RPA, we've coped well – and most of us have realised just how important the allotments are as a sanctuary and a place of friendship – as well as a source of fresh fruit and veg.

While there has been much disruption and change, there has also been continuity in the activities essential to keeping the allotments running. I'm thinking of people like: Ashley Catto and his team, who unlock and lock the vehicle gates each day; Gill Hiley, who manages the waiting list and helps match plots with new tenants (24 plots were let over the past 12 months and the waiting list has 69 people, a huge increase from two years ago). There's Ray Hulm and his pump team, who keep the pumps working; Mark Buckley and Carol Dukes, who maintain our website and send out plotholder emails; Martin Scotton, who collects the rents each year; Karen Saywell and the inspections team; Ben Wilkins, John Hourigan and Chris Pocock who look after the compost toilet; Andrew and Susan Saunders for their work on the fedge and live hedge; Stuart Wisdom for providing pallets; and Ruth Walker for her work on the Orchard area in the south-west corner of the site.

Another welcome continuity has been the supply of free manure from Park Lane Stables in Teddington, which continued even when they had to relocate over the river to Ham. The stables have been through a very difficult year as most of you will know, although the position has improved recently and they are hopeful that they will be able to return to their Park Lane base. The RPA contributed £750 to their appeal to help them buy the Park Lane site, in recognition of the value of the manure they have supplied in the past and also to ensure that we continued to receive free manure, which we have. And the Committee was confident that plotholders would support this cause.

Covid curtailed some of our activities, such as the Sunday café, which had to close when restrictions were at their toughest. Anne Wingrove and her team were quite rightly concerned with protecting themselves and everyone else from infection, and so they only reopened when it was safe to do so and they had a new system in place to minimise risk. As I'm sure you know, the café is now providing an outdoor service, with a queuing system and will remain open until the Christmas café on Sunday December 19th – so do come. Not all of the café volunteers have felt able to return, so please consider volunteering yourself if you want the café to keep going. I'd like to thank Anne and all the café volunteers, past, present and I hope future.

At least the café's closure allowed us to give the building some TLC and have it redecorated, which was done to a high standard this summer by Antony Nevison-Smith, a plotholder. We also had a couple of work days, when we put in dead hedge stakes, repainted the notice board by the entrance, cleared ivy from the café walls, put up fencing around the incinerator and other essential tasks – many thanks to everyone who came along to help.

Covid also restricted social activities for a time, but the Social Committee swung back into action and in early October – after a year's break – we had the much-loved Autumn Event once more. And although this new Covid environment meant changes from previous years, it was as good as ever, if not better.

Many thanks to everyone on the Social Committee – and a special thanks to Jenny Bourne, who has done so much to enhance the social side of the allotments and is now stepping down as Social Secretary after more years in the role than she cares to remember.

The pandemic has also brought innovative responses from ploholders. Instead of the Christmas café, Hilary Griffiths organised a 'non-social' Christmas social last December, a socially-distanced outdoor event which offered a range of allotment produce for sale plus plenty to eat and drink – the only complaint being that the mulled wine ran out too quickly. So thank you to Hilary, Kathryn Teo, Ruth Walker, Chris Knight, Karen Saywell, John Hourigan and the other volunteers who made this event such a success and raised well over £400 for good causes – Kingston Foodbank, SPEAR and Macmillan's Nurses.

In May this year we had a well-monitored, socially distanced seedling sale, organised by Rose Moss with help from Olivier Maurin, Ruth Walker, Jenny Bourne and others. This followed on from Rose's Pots for Plots event in 2020, where the seedlings were delivered to people's plots. It was good to see customers back in person this year, with a long queue stretching down the track and everyone carefully keeping a 2 metre distance from the next in line.

Covid provided an opportunity for jobs that would be difficult to do normally. I'm thinking in particular of John Hourigan, who made the best of the café's closure to sand down, treat and revarnish all of the outside benches that are usually fully occupied each Sunday by café customers. And John has also done a lot of work on installing and protecting the new incinerator – for which, many thanks. I'd also like to thank Dan Johnson, who very kindly manufactured the splendid signs for the incinerator at no cost to the allotments.

2021 also saw some unusual activities. We received an invite to exhibit an allotment bed at the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show, which we took up thanks to Yasmin Allen's willingness to take the lead. Yasmin, Chris Knight, Anne Wingrove, Kathryn Teo, Rose Moss, Karen Saywell, Ruth Walker, Victoria Hands, Tracey Ballard, Bob McIntyre, Jenny Gilbert and Jo Nicholds, with the support of many others (including transport from Jenny and Jem), put in a huge amount of work in the planning, application, growing and setting up the plot. The RPA plot was a triumph and in my view the definite star of that section of the Flower Show.

The centrepiece of the RPA bed at the Show was the fantastic weathervane built by Jem Negus, which now stands proudly on the seed store building. It's an emblem not only of our centenary but of the impressive range of talents among our ploholders. Our thanks are due to Jem and to Gill Hiley who paid for the materials – and I'd also like to thank Jem for his work on the dead hedges and for taking over the management of the bee area from Jon Anderson.

The weathervane was made to celebrate the centenary of our Royal Warrant and was unveiled by Susan Saunders at the Autumn Event. A ceremony to mark the exact date of the centenary was held on June 30th this year at Crab Apple Corner, the new area created by Jenny Bourne, Gill Hiley and Bob McIntyre on the corner opposite the entrance, where the old apple tree used to be. Let's hope the new apple

tree, chosen by Ruth Walker, will delight us with its blossom in years to come, like the old one did. And thank you to those people for all the work they put into this public space.

Another marker of our centenary is the RPA History Book, a project led by Susan Saunders and Janet Baylis. This is a fascinating, very attractive book – but don't take my word for it, buy a copy tonight from Susan. Apart from Susan and Janet, great credit must go to Katie Downham, for photos and a huge amount of work in the closing stages of production, James Bell for portraits of plotholders and Ray Elmitt – not a plotholder but a local historian who gave us many hours of his time and expertise guiding us through layout and publication.

A celebratory service for our centenary was held in St John's Church in October, with Susan Saunders giving an eloquent and thoughtful address. In July, a joint team of RPA committee members and St John's volunteers participating in their 'Love Hampton Wick' programme, worked on six plots where plotholders needed support after going through tough periods.

And lastly I'd like to thank the Plotholders Committee. Covid has meant more work rather than less, as we've adapted to a new environment, and individual committee members have put in an impressive amount of work to keep the allotments functioning well. I'd like to thank our departing members – David Laughrin, who has been a brilliant secretary, Christine Thorpe, Bob McIntyre and Victoria Hands – and also the committee members who are standing again, as well as three new candidates. I would like to add my personal appreciation as chairman for all the support I have received from the committee and tenants – the chair's job would be impossible without that. I would also like to thank all those who have contributed to the allotments over the past year whose names I haven't mentioned – there just isn't time.

It's difficult to know what the next year will bring, what with Covid, climate change and everything else. However, the experience of the past couple of years suggests that the RPA will continue to flourish and will provide all of us with not just a refuge, but a way with connecting with the things that really matter.

David Harnden

November 2021