

BIDSTON & CLAUGHTON AREA FORUM 2.2.06

FLAYBRICK PRESENTATION BY JOHN MOFFAT, FRIENDS OF FLAYBRICK

Flaybrick Memorial Gardens are known to all here tonight I think, however you may not know much about the Friends of Flaybrick, or about our plans for it's future.

We both seek and need partnership with the community. Indeed our documents are headed, "Friends of Flaybrick, bringing Flaybrick back into the community".

Achieving that partnership will ensure that we deliver a re-vitalised Flaybrick that the community both wants and has need for.

A little about us –

We founded in 1993 and have developed a very solid group. We have 70 paid up members, Frank Field as Patron and Professor John Tarn as President. Professor Tarn sits on the committee which is responsible for the maintenance of Liverpool's cathedrals. We also have Alf Pant as a member; he is a Director of Ainsley Gommon, Architects.

We are a registered charity and an Approved Environmental Body, enabling us to access landfill tax funding.

What have we achieved?

We had the site name changed From Flaybrick Cemetery to Flaybrick Memorial Gardens – a much easier concept to sell to the public.

We had 14 sections of railing manufactured and installed along site walls.

We have eradicated drug/solvent abuse dens from the site.

We have a memorial inscription project which is recording every inscription onto CD rom, so far 2,538 inscriptions recorded. This will give us a strong asset in encouraging family history research at Flaybrick.

We run guided walks throughout the summer.

We have developed the site as an arboretum.

We have raised 10k from various sources.

What we have done exceptionally well is raising awareness of Flaybrick's importance at European and National level.

This has helped by having a professional web address www.flaybrick.com and a professional level web site to go with it.

This assisted us in gaining membership of the Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe, which includes 75 cemeteries from 18 countries. At their recent AGM in Berlin we were the only member group present from the UK.

Their guide to the Cemeteries of Europe puts Birkenhead alongside Barcelona and Bologna. The images and text were provided by us for the Flaybrick entry.

We will be hosting the 2008 AGM at the Wirral Museum. This will bring around 200 delegates from most European countries to Birkenhead over a period of 3 years. So we will be playing a significant part in Wirral's contribution to Capital of Culture year.

What are the problems?

Primarily vandalism, particularly during the early 1990's and recently, as a result of a gravestone health and safety check. This was implemented in October 2004 and many gravestones were hazard marked. Council staff then deemed the site unsafe to strom. The result was an abandoned, overgrown atmosphere with weak stones readily identifiable to vandals.

Subsequently, in a period of 1 year, 800 stones were kicked over, many of which smashed as they hit other stones. We see the health & Safety Executive's action as over reactive, with the laying down of stones generating trip hazards in any case. £20k has been set aside to cover the cost of the work and a safety officer is planned at £18k per annum. Yet all that was needed was to get Flaybrick's ground staff to target the clearly unsafe stones and take remedial action.

Of the vandalism itself, we had a saw taken on site to cut down a memorial tree; an attempt was made to dig into a public grave and the notice board stolen. We were unable to make any headway with the problem until Councillor Smith arranged a meeting with PC Buckman, Community Beat manager, ourselves, Wirral Borough Council and Councillor Smith. Subsequently a further 2 meetings were held and, as a result of increased police activity, the problem ceased in November. The meetings are scheduled to continue and the police are pushing for the installation of CCTV cameras and the planting of thorn hedging around the perimeters. They also feel that vegetation is excessive, stopping clear sight lines across the site.

This brings us to another major problem that we have faced. From 1993 we saw the need to clear vegetation and tried to tackle it ourselves, working many hours cutting back. It made very little difference, only when we employed A4E did we make any headway. Then work stopped as the council staff were unable to clear the bark generated by A4E. We then went off and raised £4k for a chipping machine, which the staff now feel is too small.

In order to preserve Flaybrick we need to bring life back into it and the current visitor rate is far too low for that. We estimate £18k per year, but with 75% of these visitors merely using Flaybrick as a cut through. Yet at 26 acres it represents about 8% of the total area of the North End and is ideally situated in this densely populated area.

Finally, we have the ruined chapels which convey a depressing image well beyond the site walls and into the local community.

What are our plans for the future?

In 2003, Nick Harding, Flaybrick's Ranger, proposed converting the chapels into a National Bat Study Centre. This will see the existing fabric retained and facilities built into it that will allow bats to roost in under floor areas and in roof spaces. The bats would then be studied by specialists, schools and the public via infra red cameras. The centre will have a lecture theatre and interpretive area. The project has 2 supporting strands.

Firstly, trees – we will show how many therapeutic extracts are derived from trees which the public can then see in the arboretum.

Secondly, family history – we will incorporate a computer point to allow access to our memorial inscription records. We will also offer lessons on researching family history.

Finally, the project will see the chapels 100 ft spire put back in place and illuminated at night to turn an eyesore into a focal point of what's best in the North End.

The total project cost is £1.5m.

Is the project sustainable? Yes.

We will get the visitors – there already, at the Tam O'Shanter Farm complex, only 75 yards away. Visitor figures have reached 100,000 and would climb to higher levels with the opening of the new centre. Clearly, young families coming to see farm animals will travel the short distance to Flaybrick to see bats. The complex already provides the toilet and refreshment facilities that the Bat Centre will need.

Staffing – 2 full time – funded by lotteries initially and then by Seed type funding. There will also be voluntary staff.

Running costs – WBC have agreed to offer a peppercorn rent.

Where will we get the funding?

We are in partnership with Ainsley Gomon, accredited HLF Architects and responsible for the Birkenhead Park Pavilion. They have produced this bid for the feasibility study costed at £14k. Subsequently, we have obtained a commitment from WBC to fund £4k.

Despite every effort, we have been unable to raise the remaining £10k due to the general close down of feasibility funding by the funding bodies. We could have applied for a project planning grant from HLF, but that would have meant placing the bulk of the bid with HLF. This didn't seem viable as HLF are already heavily involved at the Park. In addition, they would seek 5% at least from WBC.

Our plan was to complete the study and obtain funding from ERDF as the project conforms to their measure 23. With match funding from either Hanson, Onyx or Biffa as we are an Approved Environmental Body.

Recently, HLF awarded £4.82m to Arnes Vale Cemetery in Bristol, a project which does not have the level of future sustainability provided by our project.

Additionally, Lotteries have recently launched the People's parks Grant, which we see as a very good bet and we intend to submit a project planning grant application under this wing of lottery funding.

What other funding needs do we have?

We presently seek funding for the installation of 24 railings sections which will only cost £5k as we are employing the Lairds Trust to make them.

We also may need funding for CCTV infra red cameras at a cost of about £50k. We also seek funding for hedging which will cost £1k.

The co-operation of WBC?

It has been first class from the beginning. The National Federation of Cemeteries Friends has described our relationship as a model of friends/council co-operation.

They appointed the first council funded cemetery ranger in the UK in 1995.

They partnered us in hosting the National Cemeteries AGM in 1999 and will partner us in hosting the European AGM in 2008. They are working on a new management plan with us to replace the one we produce in 1994.

Above all, they fully support the bat Centre Project which suggests, more than anything else, that we will succeed in turning Flaybrick into a community asset.