

Friends of School House Lane Orchard Management Plan 2024

Parks

28 November 2024

Friends of School House Lane Orchard Management Plan, 2024

This site is managed by the Friends of School House Lane Orchard.

Site description and history

School House Lane Orchard is a former school playground that has been converted into a community green space and orchard. It is managed by the Friends of School House Lane Orchard (FSHLO) in association with the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames' parks and open spaces department.

FSHLO was formed by local residents in 2006 to conserve the site's flora, fauna and wildlife habitats as a community resource and promote its use as a place for the enjoyment of nature. We organise voluntary maintenance and conservation work for the benefit of the local environment and community and raise funds to support this work.

As well as being an amenity for local residents, the Orchard provides a convenient and pleasant route for pedestrians, dog walkers and cyclists due to its situation between two cul-de-sacs and proximity to a railway footbridge leading to Bushy Park. Unsightly chainlink gates were removed, the path resurfaced and entrance signs installed in 2007 to make the site more welcoming. Grant funding was used to purchase and install two benches. These measures have resulted in a significant increase in regular daily visitors, of all ages.

The main area of the site is a central green space used as a play area, for picnics and as a community meeting place. It is surrounded by mature and new trees and shrubs. The south-east corner features a bed with flowers and grasses to provide more colour throughout the year. The southern border has denser planting to shield the site from the adjacent railway line. Composting facilities have been set up along the northern border.

A botanical survey identified a large number of native species. To build on the existing stock of fruit trees, new plantings focus on edible and native plants, which provide a handy food source for neighbours and wildlife. Trees include two varieties of apple, cherry, crab apple, quince, damson, mulberry, pear, rowan, Victoria plum and walnut.

We have introduced herbs, including a bay tree donated by a local councillor. In 2009-10 a spring bulb and herb bed was laid along the western path. This was supplemented in 2011 with lavender to add fragrance as people pass. In 2015 we planted three new fruit trees: a cherry, damson and pear. We bought a second shed and a new mower.

To replace rusty, broken chainlink fencing, dead and live hedging was installed along the main west and north borders in 2010 by FSHLO with help from The Conservation Volunteers. The live hedging consists of a variety of native plants, including blackthorn and hazel, and the dead hedge provides a place for cuttings, a wildlife habitat, and is much more attractive than its predecessor. The northern dead hedge was completed in 2011, expanded in 2012 and new stakes were installed in 2015, 2018 and 2021/22 to strengthen and extend the hedge.

Measures to encourage wildlife include our focus on planting native and edible species, the dead hedge, bird boxes and a log pile. Wildlife includes various garden and woodland birds (nuthatches, goldfinches, waxwings and greater spotted woodpeckers are amongst those that have been seen), pipistrelle bats, foxes and the occasional visit by a tawny owl.

In mid-December 2014 we received 1,000 free bulbs (narcissi and alliums) from Taylor's Bulbs via the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. The greatest concentration of bulbs was in the south-west bed, but these were moved to make way for the new flower/ornamental grass bed and replanted round the edges of the Orchard and along the path leading to Bushy Park Road.

In 2016 we had meetings with Yvonne Kelleher, head of Richmond's Parks division, Craig Ruddick, the Council's Trees officer, and Portia Baker, landscaping consultant to the Council. The results included:

- A long-term Vision Plan for the Orchard, which was submitted to the Council.
- A specific Vision Plan for the Trees.
- A significant proportion of the main grass area was turfed, kept watered during dry periods and additional grass seed sown throughout. The grass is now thriving.
- A new, enlarged flower bed was created and planted in the south-west bed, to provide contrast and colour for much of the year.
- Two new benches were installed to protect vulnerable areas from football players.

The focus in 2017 and 2018 was on maintaining our assets. We bought new poles to reinforce the dead hedge and worn areas on the grass were reseeded as needed. In 2019, we worked on the flower bed by the entrance from School House Lane: we refreshed the soil with compost from our bins, and set in concrete the attractive tile edging to the bed (there had been an attempted theft of the tiles, prevented by vigilant neighbours). We cut back vegetation growing too close to the path. Worn grass areas were again reseeded and the compost bins rebuilt.

2020 and 2021 were dominated by Covid-19. We managed to keep up our maintenance of the Orchard while observing the restrictions in force at the time. We decided to shrink to a core team of six for our monthly work sessions, while other volunteers increased their activities during the rest of the month, such as picking up litter. Overall, we kept the Orchard looking cared-for and attractive, despite many more people using the Orchard during lockdowns.

We carried out pruning in the winter/early spring months, and we worked with Richmond Council to remove two apple trees, which had died from fungal disease. Two new saplings, an apple and a medlar, were planted.

We expanded our activities in 2022. We leafleted around 120 houses in the streets surrounding the Orchard, and this has resulted in a number of new volunteers, including two families with young children. The extra help was very welcome in carrying out our usual tasks – litter-picking, weeding, thinning, pruning, etc – as well as projects such as: creating a circular bed around the base of a crab apple tree, with ornamental edging, and planting borage, thyme, wild carrot, grasses, calendula, nigella, wild geranium etc; and sowing yellow rattle, in the above bed and in the main wildflower bed on the railway side, to suppress grass and allow wild flowers to flourish.

A member of our core group (a graphic designer) has created a plan showing the layout and planting of the Orchard, which is displayed in the notice board to help visitors appreciate the wealth of diverse shrubs, grasses, flowers and trees. The notice board has been cleaned and the cracked plastic window replaced. We have re-treated the shed side the board is on.

A bat box, owl box and bird box were put up in the Orchard trees in 2022, with expert help from Habitats and Heritage, while the Council's contractors raised the crown of the walnut, mulberry and a sycamore. We put in sturdier posts to support the dead hedge on the north side of the Orchard and defined the west-side flower bed with ornamental edging. Around 60 hedge whips (hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, cherry plum etc) were given to us by the Mayor's Trees for London programme, which we used to fill gaps in and extend the live hedge.

In 2023, the number of volunteers turning up each month continued to grow. We decided to follow the council's example and let areas of the grass grow, with only two cuts a year, although we kept the central area and the areas round the benches regularly cut all the year. We also resowed areas of grass that were getting thin, and had a concerted effort to dig up alkanet in the lawn and flower beds (on the advice of the 2023 Green Flag inspector). We have created a wildflower area around a plum tree, and in December 2023 planted several hundred miniature alliums, winter aconites and crocuses, given to us by Richmond Council. During the year, the council replaced a dilapidated bench.

Community social events

In normal years, the group holds two annual events for the local community to celebrate the Orchard and to raise funds for our annual insurance and future work. These comprise a summer party – with stalls selling cakes and drinks, a raffle with prizes donated by local businesses, Morris dancing, table tennis and entertainment provided by local musicians – and Christmas carol singing, with mulled wine, hot chocolate, mince pies and gingerbread men.

Site management and maintenance

Volunteers meet monthly on Saturday mornings all year round and at other times on an *ad hoc* basis to carry out practical work as required. This mostly involves planting, pruning, tidying and mowing. We compost, recycle and re-use green waste and other rubbish as much as possible, via leaf-mould production, compost bins, the dead hedge and Council recycling collections. The group works closely with Habitats and Heritage and Richmond Council.

Finance is provided by the Council, grant organisations (see below) and our own fund-raising activities. In addition, local residents have donated funds, equipment and plants. A good range of tools has been purchased using the grant income, as well as 2 sheds for secure storage.

The FSHLO publicises the Orchard, events and activities via:

- its website <http://e-voice.org.uk/fshlo/>
- Facebook
- an email mailing list
- occasional newsletters and fliers distributed to surrounding houses
- a Friends noticeboard near the School House Lane entrance
- Habitats and Heritage
- an Annual General Meeting each spring/summer
- press releases.

Future objectives

- We will continue efforts to expand our activities and the number of volunteers in 2024.
- Volunteers and interested neighbours will discuss how much of the Orchard should be regularly mown and how much left to grow wild.
- We will look at water butts for the sheds.
- We hope to organize a summer party.
- We will continue to resow worn lawn areas.
- We will continue to make compost.

Schedule of events 2024

- 14th Green Flag Community Award application.
- Strengthen the dead hedge.
- Leaflet surrounding houses again to boost the number of volunteers.
- Maintenance work on the sheds.
- Continue to work on the compost.
- Hold an AGM in early summer.
- Summer party, if possible.

Monitoring and review

The monthly work mornings are used as an opportunity to review developments and make plans. We receive feedback and suggestions from local residents who may not currently be active members of the Friends during work mornings and at or after community events.

We maintain our contacts with Habitats & Heritage and also with Richmond Council's park department. This provides an additional opportunity to review our progress and seek advice.

The chair's and treasurer's reports are presented at the AGM.

Applications for grants and nominations for awards provide an opportunity to review progress and when successful validate our work:

- Awards for All grant awarded 2006
- Nominated for a BTCV Green Hero Award 2007
- Richmond Council for Voluntary Service Community Award 2007
- Grassroots Grant awarded by Thames Community Foundation 2010
- Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in association with Taylor's Bulbs of Holbeach 2014
- Mayor's Trees for London programme 2022
- Community Green Flag Award awarded 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023.