Mission statement.

The Friends work to promote amenity and wildlife in Belair Park, West Dulwich and collaborate with other bodies seeking to preserve and enhance London’s public green space.

We believe that access to green open space and the enjoyment of areas nurturing a rich diversity of wildlife is essential for the physical and psychological (hence economic) well-being of the human community and that it deserves to be protected as a fundamental human right.

We recognise Belair Park to be an integral and significant component of the network of wildlife corridors that enable native species to interact across the urban landscape of South London. The health of habitats in the Park depends upon and, in turn, contributes to the health of adjacent habitats. We are therefore vocal in our support of projects to promote the ecological welfare of habitats across South London and beyond.

We come into contact, through the wide range of bodies who enjoy use of our Park, with a wide spectrum of humanitarian projects, aimed at improving conditions both in the UK and abroad and we promote these to our readership. Our recruitment policy aims to attract a membership that reflects the broad diversity of London.

A year of solid progress.

Martin Heath PhD, AKC, Chair, Friends of Belair Park.

2014 has been a year of achievement for the Friends and for Southwark managers, who retained the Green Flag award for Belair Park.

It has been rewarding and a privilege for my colleagues and I to serve the community through this voluntary sector organisation and to watch demonstrable benefits unfolding.
Flood relief works.

This year has seen major work undertaken in the Park to create a flood relief system.

It involved the creation of basins (the largest of which includes the lake and its environs, now surrounded by earth bunds) in which water from a severe storm of the intensity expected once in 75 years, would be detained for a sufficient period of time to prevent local storm drains from being overwhelmed.

This scheme should substantially reduce the risk of flooding in near-by Turney Road, Burbage Road and around the junction of Herne Hill and Half Moon Lane.

I participated in the extensive series of meetings, at nearby venues and on-site, between stakeholders and the London Borough of Southwark, consultants Mouchel and Thames Water. My role was to contribute local knowledge, to represent the opinions of stakeholders in the Park and to emphasise the necessity of preserving features of ecological importance.

In drawing up their plans, the engineers responded in a sensitive way to issues of amenity, aesthetics and ecology. These plans were presented in a public display in the Recreation Rooms adjacent to the Park and were outlined at the Friends’ December 7, 2013 AGM. After discussion, they were welcomed in a resolution passed by the meeting, subject to the understanding that consultation would continue. Southwark management intends to plant the earth bunds with masses of native wild flowers, a project which will enhance substantially the Park’s ecological status. Our thanks to Southwark officers John Kissi and Joseph Okai.
Dredging and re-modelling.

The northern end of the lake, where debris, particularly annual leaf litter, builds up, beside the bridge, causing intense stagnation, has posed a problem over a period of decades. Previous episodes of dredging have provided temporary respite from anoxic and malodorous conditions.

The purpose of the work carried out here in 2014 was to control the outflow from the lake during periods of extreme rainfall. The lake can now overspill onto its banks on both sides (including the ecology area to the east). The lake, often regarded as a visible section of the River Effra (whose waters are now mostly lost to the storm drains), is an artificial clay-lined feature, albeit fed by Effra ground-waters, created on a discernible east to west slope. The area beside the bridge was dammed and dug out to a depth of roughly 2.5 m. A gabion structure was then constructed at the bridge. During higher lake levels, water will leave the lake at a controlled and moderate rate through a pipe with a modest aperture.
Creating dry all-year access to lake area.

A new path, snaking across the E lawn and through the lake-side ecology area, has proven popular, particularly whilst the path along the W side of the lake is temporarily closed. Personally, I enjoy the serpentine feature, but some would have preferred a path that hugged the lake margin. The path is a clever piece of landscape gardening, and, to a viewer along the path around the E edge of the Park, it remains almost hidden. It is intended to provide year-round access to seasonally sodden areas. During wetter weather of recent weeks, it has developed puddles in places and this has been flagged up to parks management. I negotiated path work through the wildlife area with the contractors and parks management in the course of on-site meetings.

Photos right: Paul Highman (Dulwich area parks manager) meets with contractors.

Collaboration with New Leaf.

We continue a close and productive co-operation with New Leaf Educational Gardens, which offers education, training and employment to adults aged 16 plus. New Leaf is based immediately opposite the West Dulwich entrance to the Park.

Below left: The New Leaf shop. Below Right: Vinnie O’Connell (left) of New Leaf organises a volunteer day on the wildlife site with Sarah Crother, Safia Noor and Martin Sainsbury of the National Citizen Service.
Volunteer day re-claims ecology area.

The National Citizen Service is a Government-funded scheme for 16 and 17 year olds. Its website explains: “It helps you build your skills for work and life, while you take on new challenges and meet new friends . . . NCS brings together young people from different backgrounds and helps them develop greater confidence, self-awareness and responsibility. It encourages personal and social development by working on skills like leadership, teamwork and communication.” The Oct. 30, 2014 afternoon work session provided an opportunity to assess these statements objectively.

Teams of volunteers set to work to help reinstate the ecology area, which had been neglected during flood relief works, whilst others assisted in the New Leaf shop and garden beside West Dulwich railway station. I was impressed by the energy and determination with which the young people set to work and with the dedication of the supervisors who set the project up. At a reception that evening, I heard some very interesting stories from some of the youngsters about how they had, through being associated with the NCS, gained confidence to the extent that, once nervous of talking to others at all, they were now able to talk freely to their contemporaries, to the public and even the media. The NCS must be congratulated on making a significant and very positive contribution to the management of Belair Park.

My thanks to Paul Highman and Robert Roach of the parks management team for going beyond the call of duty and providing tools at short notice. We have sent a commendation of their work and that of Ecology Officer Jon Best, to Southwark Council.
Ministerial visit to Belair Park.
The Oct. 30, 2014 volunteer session was attended by the Minister for Civil Society, Rob Wilson (the MP for Reading East), whose responsibilities include the National Citizen Service and youth policy.
He spoke at length to the volunteers about their experiences with the NCS and the work being carried out that afternoon and he took away a positive message.

Other volunteer activities.
New Leaf founder Vinnie O’Connell (Treasurer of the Friends) organises a succession of corporate volunteer days, many of which have contributed helpfully to the management of Belair Park. Left: July 25, 2014. Mrs Daniela Stewart, Project Officer at the Southwark Volunteer Centre and her team have just completed a tidying operation in a container in Belair Park used by New Leaf to store second hand books.

Lost Effra Project.
We have collaborated with the Lost Effra project, funded by Defra and run by London Wildlife Trust officer Helen Spring (above left). This aims to encourage interest in the former River Effra and in practical water conservation measures. Above: Effra Walk led from Brockwell Park to Sydenham Hill Wood by local Effra expert Martin Knight and the Floodtide on the Effra event staged in Belair Park on May 18. Right: On Sept. 30, Martin Knight leads another Effra Walk beside the Ambrook, a tributary being restored in Sydenham Hill Wood by the LWT. On Oct. 23, author Tom Bolton talked to a packed audience in the Gallery Road Recreation Rooms in an event organised by the Dulwich Society.
David Nicholson-Lord - the loss of an invaluable ally for ecology.

It was with enormous sadness that we heard during this year of the death, following a lengthy illness, of David Nicholson-Lord (1947-2014). David had been a courageous, outspoken, knowledgeable and indefatigable champion of ecology. He had made a substantial contribution both to safeguarding Belair Park from ecologically and aesthetically destructive schemes and also to improving provision for wildlife in the Park. A journalist, writer and campaigner, David's works included *The Greening of the Cities* and the book about the making of the BBC's Planet Earth series.

Belair Park could not have had a better Friend.

Networking with the community.

Last year, a Big Fish slide was installed in the playground for younger children following a survey of playground users by Anne-Marie Braun and our Secretary Matt Reid. Sadly, it was soon destroyed by arson, but a new and popular climbing frame has replaced it. Consultations have taken place this year about a plan from the Dulwich Society for Southwark to install a zebra crossing across Gallery Road between Love Walk and the new gate into the Park. We value our links with All Saints Church, West Dulwich, a major community hub, whose ethos is pro-ecology and which brings together a wide range of bodies involved in community and global social justice issues.

We have been grateful for helpful responses from Cllr Peter John (Leader of Southwark Council), Cllr Barrie Hargrove (Cabinet Member for Public Health, Parks and Leisure) and Rebecca Towers (Parks and Open Spaces Manager).

Campaigning for other open spaces in Southwark.

During the last year, our relationship with Southwark has shifted (permanently, we hope) towards a deeper mutual understanding of the value of public green space and its ecological potential. The London Borough of Southwark has pursued the acquisition of areas of land adjacent to Burgess Park (which would compensate for the loss of the Camberwell Green orchard area) and has consulted the public about a plan to secure the playing fields of Greendale, East Dulwich, as a public park. The Friends have supported this plan and together with Nadia Mahmud-Salvisberg, I attended the formation meeting of the Friends of Greendale on August 7, 2014 and we expressed our support, on behalf of the Friends of Belair Park, for public open space and ecology.

The web site, constructed for us by Nadia Mahmud-Salvisberg, has proven an invaluable aid, not only in communicating with users of Belair Park, but in our broader campaigning responsibilities.

Below: Legacy of David Nicholson-Lord’s energetic advocacy (in conjunction with Angela Wilkes) on behalf of ecology; one of the extensive hedgerows around the E and N margins of Belair Park. March 23, 2014.
Launching a Friends of the Crystal Palace Nature Garden.

The sad saga of Crystal Palace Park has been one of mismanagement, accompanied by a breakdown of the process of civic engagement and compromised standards in public life.

The photograph above shows the tree-crowned hill top of Crystal Palace Park in its autumnal aspect, with the trees tinged with golds and yellows. This strip of Metropolitan Open Land in a public park is loved by many local people and is of key value to migrating birds, but it could soon be destroyed for a commercial development. In 2014, we launched a campaign to preserve this area of parkland and we have been grateful for support from local Conservative, Green, Labour and Lib-Dem councillors. We will seek to enlarge the campaign during 2015.

The hill hosted the successor to Joseph Paxton's 1851 Hyde Park Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition. The Sydenham Crystal Palace opened in 1854 and burned down in 1936. For a lifetime, the hill top has been enjoyed as open space, although developments have been proposed. A multiplex scheme (1997-2000), delayed by campaigners, collapsed due to the economic climate. The London Borough of Bromley then promised that no further consideration would be given to large buildings on the hill top. On behalf of the Friends and their sister body, the Ridge Wildlife Group, I participated in a succession of consultations and planning inquiries for over a decade and argued for ecological solutions, obtaining widespread support from other participants for a nature garden on the section of the hill top beside the TV mast (where a caravan park had once been located; long-neglected, fly-tipped and encouraging a convenient perception that it is land awaiting development). The resulting LDA Masterplan Design and Access Statement read: “At the Northern end of the Terrace, the existing ‘Nature Garden’ is incorporated into a series of ecological spaces, enhancing existing ecologies and creating opportunities for increasing biodiversity.”

This understanding was scrapped summarily by London Mayor Boris Johnson, who announced that the hill top must be handed over to a massive development from the ZhongRong Group. Trade with China and cultural links are not merely desirable, but essential. However, as explored in a C4 documentary, the Mayor’s encouragement of Chinese companies has been controversial. He has shrugged off questions about conflict of interest insofar as Tom Keady, employed by the GLA, involved in the tendering process, and chair of the evaluation process for Royal Albert Docks, left the GLA in 2012, taking up a post with ABP (the company involved in that development) 6 months later. He has also dismissed footage of a family in China returning to discover that ABP had demolished their home (ABP later claimed it had been vacant land) as irrelevant to considerations of whether this company should benefit from trade deals with the UK. In the case of the proposed Crystal Palace development, there was no competitive tender process in selecting ZhongRong, but the company expected even more. Speaking in a TV debate, Cllr Steven Carr, Leader of Bromley Council admitted: “through cultural differences the Chinese weren’t able to see what we could deliver legally here.” The project was sold to the public with the misleading claim that the new building would be an exact replica of the 1854 Crystal Palace (not permitted under modern building regulations, not required under the 1990 Crystal Palace Act and not demanded by Bromley) and that Mr Ni Zhaoxing of ZhongRong is so personally wealthy that he need not seek immediate financial returns from his philanthropic venture - which would, in reality, require at least 60% of his $1.3 billion assets (estimated by Forbes). Investors (they would, presumably, seek returns) would appear to be needed and there are fears that their venture would dominate our neighbourhood, causing, among other problems, perpetual traffic congestion. Saluting the struggle of Chinese dissidents to achieve a free and democratic system in China, I have raised the question of whether, if built, the venue might be made the focus of a long-term pro-democracy vigil, inspired by the historic anti-apartheid vigil outside South Africa House.

At their Nov. 29, 2014 AGM, the Friends of Belair Park voted to formalise a Friends of the Crystal Palace Nature Garden, initially as a sub-committee of our own association.