Annual General Meeting held at 7.00pm on Thursday, 30th September 2021
The Riverside Pavilion, St Hilda’s College, Oxford

Apologies were received but none were noted. 8 members and 6 Directors attended.

1. Chairman's Report
Sarah Taylor

It is only 8 months since our last AGM, but what a difference there is in outlook! There has been an explosion in activity since we have been allowed to meet in person again. Garden visits have resumed, including a very special visit organised by Esther Whiting to the Earl of Danby’s tomb in Dauntsey in this 400th year since he founded the Oxford Botanic Garden. We have held our first online raffle, which raised £3700, well worth the considerable effort, the Bobarts group of patrons have had a most successful three day visit to Norfolk, there have been two evening events for the Danby group and just over two weeks ago we had a 30th birthday party in the Garden for 200 Friends. Coffee mornings resume tomorrow, under new management. Cressida and Ian Battersby are taking over from Jane Annett who has run them for more years than I can remember and built them up into a hugely well attended monthly event. Next year, we are planning the return of our exclusive May morning view from the Garden, and, on 14th May, we are going to have our first plant sale for three years. This is our biggest fund-raising event by far and as far as volunteers are concerned, the more the merrier. We need people both to help organise the run up to the sale and to help on the day, so do please contact Seonaid Danziger if you would like to be involved.

And that’s just the Friends! The Garden and Arboretum have been very busy, with an increase in visitor numbers (which has led to a corresponding increase in our numbers, up by 10% since we last met), the beginning of the year-long 400th anniversary celebrations, things progressing on the plans to replace the glasshouses and an application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for the building of a visitor centre at the Arboretum. This latter effort is supported by our own Paths Appeal, which has continued to make progress, having now reached £315,000 or so. However, our target is £750,000, so we still have some way to go. I would love some help with applications to Trusts and ideas for fund raising, so again if anyone has any experience of these things and would like to help, please get in touch with me.

Turning to other Friends’ business in the period since our last AGM, we have had a change to our Administrator. Isabella Raeburn, who has contributed an enormous amount to us and whose praises I have sung to the rafters in the past, sadly left at the end of August to return to Magdalen College School. Whilst she loved the garden, she missed working with children and we wish her well. We warmly welcome in her stead Helen Elliott, who started at the beginning of this week. In the interim, Kay Taylor has kept things going, for which we are most grateful.

As far as your board of directors is concerned, we have had two resignations. Jane Annett, who has been central to the incredibly rich and varied programme of garden visits available to Friends, and as I said earlier has run the coffee mornings, has stepped down as director but continues to be involved on the side-lines; and Harriet Bretherton, also a key member of the garden visits team as well as our representative on the newly formed Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum. Harriet also runs the Friends’ Forum, the group which
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gives active volunteers the chance to hear in detail what is going on in the Garden and the Friends. She is very kindly going to continue in this role.

In their place, as you will hopefully confirm a bit later on in this meeting, we welcome Seonaid Danziger, who after many years of running the Newsletter and e-bulletin, has taken on coordinating both volunteers and events for us, and Diana Naumann, our important representative from the garden visits team.

There have been a few other changes in our organisation. Carol Maxwell has taken over from Seonaid in compiling the Friends’ part of the newsletter and our regular e-bulletins, much assisted by Franco Santersieri, the new communications wizard at the Garden, whose role the Friends support. Esther Whiting has left the garden visits team after much valuable input and Jane Thrift has joined. More people are joining the events group as we gear up to our return to normality: long may all this continue!

Our central role of course is to provide funds for the Garden and we are now able to contribute over £100,000 a year, which goes to support all aspects of the garden’s work, such as education aids, plants, interpretation boards, equipment, and, so important in this day and age, the communication role. Having never tweeted, face booked or instagrammed in my life, I am nevertheless in awe of the power of these tools to educate, promote and advertise.

As for the future, as I have said earlier, we always welcome more volunteers, not only for specific events, but to support the day to day running of the Friends. We have over 3600 members, and it is imperative that we provide a good service to you all, both to retain your loyal support and to encourage more to join. Our single biggest task for the immediate future is to complete the Paths Appeal. Many of you have been most generous already, but as I said at the Garden Party, we will organise many chances for you all to make a further contribution and of course more donations are always very welcome.

2. Treasurer’s Report
Hemlata Bountra

The 2020/2021 financial highlights: membership decreased from 3,402 to 3,296, a decrease of 3.1% with 10% non-renewal; total funds raised were £230k (2020 £361k); distributable funds generated were £183k (2020 £299k) after all costs, with £64k for the Paths Appeal; grants made to the Garden were £120k (2020 £133k); reserves carried forward were £306k (2020 £243k); the Danby group launched in 2018/19 now has 20 members (2020:18).

The sources of net income for 2019/2020 were 62% membership fees, including Gift Aid tax refunds; 12% events and visits, net of costs; 20% donations and appeals; 5% legacies; and 1% investment income. The grants were used for enhancing & developing the collections; further interpretation by Pia Ostlund; support for the Digital Content Officer; Arboretum temporary paths repair; Arboreturn awareness and signage; and support for 400th Anniversary events.

Looking ahead, there was £458.5k cash in the bank as at 28th February 2021 less minimum reserve of £30k (2020 £456.5k minimum reserve £20k). Funds committed but not spent were £148.9k (2020 £212.8k); Paths Appeal (restricted)£226.9k (2020 £163.2k); “Free Cash” available for grants was £52.7 (2020 £60.5k).

In other matters, 82% of Friends are now paying fees by direct debit; 86% of Friends have registered email addresses and 29% receive the Newsletter by email; fees increased on 1st March 2020 by 3%-4%, the next
increase will be 1st March 2022; The Friends continue to benefit from the very considerable volunteer work of the Forum and other Friends.

There were no questions so Sarah Taylor moved to the formal business of the meeting.

3. Resolutions

Resolution 1

That the Trustees' Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 28th February 2021 and the Accountants’ Report be received and adopted.

All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

Resolution 2 relates to the appointment and remuneration of the Reporting Accountants of the Company. Critchleys have audited the Friends’ Accounts since 2008 and the Directors felt that, in line with good practice, this arrangement should be reviewed. In the event, they decided to seek approval at the AGM to move to Wenn Townsend, another leading firm of chartered accountants in the Thames Valley. It is expected that Wenn Townsend will be slightly cheaper than Critchleys.

Resolution 2

That Wenn Townsend be appointed Reporting Accountants to the Company for the period until the conclusion of the next Annual General Meeting, and that the Directors of the Company be authorised to agree the remuneration of the Reporting Accountants.

Hemlata Bountra proposed the Resolution and Seonaid Danziger seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

The final resolutions relate to the re-election of Directors of the company. The Articles of Association of the Company provide that, excluding any Director appointed since the last AGM, at least one third of the Directors should retire by rotation each year. This year Sarah Taylor and Simon Hiscock retire by rotation and stand for re-election.

Resolution 3(a)

The Secretary asked that Sarah Taylor who retires by rotation, but being eligible, be proposed for re-election as a Director of the Company.

Anna Nasmyth proposed the Resolution and Seonaid Danziger seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

Resolution 3(b)

The Chairman asked that Simon Hiscock who retires by rotation, but being eligible, be proposed for re-election as a Director of the Company.

Hemlata Bountra proposed the Resolution and Sarah Taylor seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

Resolution 3 (c)
To elect Seonaid Danziger who, having been appointed a Director since the last Annual General Meeting, is proposed for election.

Sarah Taylor proposed the Resolution and Anna Nasmyth seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

Resolution 3 (d)

To elect Diana Naumann who, having been appointed a Director since the last Annual General Meeting, is proposed for election.

Simon Hiscock proposed the Resolution and Sarah Taylor seconded. All present were in favour and the Resolution was adopted.

4. Any other business

There was none.

The Chairman declared the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the Company to be closed.

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Following the AGM, Professor John Geddes, Chairman of the Board of Visitors of the Garden, Head of the Department of Psychiatry and WA Handley Professor of Psychiatry talked about his recent research in mental health and wellbeing.

The meeting concluded at 8.00pm.