

GERTIE GALES ALLOTMENTS AGM 2023 Minutes

Committee Members attending:

Stuart Armstrong (Chair, Site Manager, Treasurer)
Les Curwood (Lettings, site inspections and website)
Evelyn Grounsell (Secretary)
Gilli Shorey
Kate Knight
Bob Shepherd

Committee Apologies:

Roger Howard

Plot-holders attending:

R. Smith
Alex McKie
Pamela Madge
Allison Alderman
Mark Lamont
Mike Jones
B Jones

Apologies:

Portishead Town Council: Councillors Churchill & Preston
John & Sally Dutton
Peter & Geraldine Higgs
Lesley & John Cotterell
Steve Loble
Alison Willows
Gill Curwood

The meeting is held at 1930 on Tuesday 17 October at the Folk Hall, Portishead. The Secretary opened the meeting, introducing the committee officers as there were new faces in the room.

CHAIRMANS REPORT including Treasurers Report and Site Management Report

1. Stuart Armstrong Chairman opened the meeting with a narrative report on site business and associated matters, having continued also as Treasurer since the last AGM, and as site manager since the post was vacated in November 2022.
2. The new top shed had been delivered and work on this had been completed.
3. He believed that Portishead Town Council (PTC) understand the scope of their responsibilities. For example PTC looks after the water pipes biennial hedge cut, and Gertie Gales (GG) look after the troughs, and also the grass, and manage the Tenancies.
4. Stuart felt that the committee was cumbersome and needed looking at in the future.
5. During the year a plot-holders forum had been set up on the GG website, and a Facebook page that was being used.

6. All plots have been let, with a couple of relets.
7. The hedges need to be addressed as the planned cuts by PTC seemed insufficient. And how we use mowers, and the mowing needs thinking about.
8. As of this year all loans have been repaid to PTC. These had totalled £3500. Potentially therefore there could be a surplus of income over expenditure, possibly £700. But note PTC will provide GG with no more grants. It is time for the next chapter.
9. Stuart said he might produce a financial statement later.
10. Water is a big bill currently £501 (with possibly £40 more to come before the water is turned off for the winter.) 3 years ago the bill was £340. Stuart advised that difference is increased usage which he thought might be due to increased cultivation of plots.
11. Rent paid to PTC is £1000 and he thought that rate was unlikely to increase for 10 years. The rent had been negotiated down from £1500 some years ago. Stuart spoke about the rent paid to PTC by 2 of the other 3 allotment sites. North Weston pays £650, Beach Road £250.
12. The manure has no cost to GG as money is collected from plot-holders before the order is made. (This is a very big job Stuart said and plot-holder comments about the manure being delayed are wrong as it was not ordered until later in 2022.) Wood chippings are also “free”, being left by various local gardening contractors.
13. A hedge cut cost £300, and the first contracted grass cut cost £180.
14. Mowers: second hand mowers have been purchased for mowing by plot-holders and the policy is that they will not be serviced. We take a chance, but a basic service costs roughly £70: the same as a second hand mower.
15. Cash donations for petrol were £45, and £90 had been spent on petrol.
16. Donations from plot-holders towards the shed totalled around 3600 and met GG’s cost towards the shed (after the grant from PTC).
17. Income from plot-holder is approximately £2700, and there may be more from re-let of plots. A balance of £340 is expected.
18. A few years ago it was suggested that GG might build a reserve of £2000, possibly £3000.
19. Insurance might be worth discussing, but may be difficult.

AGENDA ITEM: Past Minutes & Matters Arising

20. Evelyn Grounsell Secretary (for meetings) asked to review the minutes for good form and to support routine bank requirements for change of account signatories.
21. Corrections:

The minutes omit the names of committee members without one of the 5 officer posts. Evelyn had added those and Stuart and Evelyn signed the change. CHANGE SIGNED.

The minutes omitted the name of a reviewer of GG accounts, and there was no record that one had been nominated for 2023. Evelyn recalled an older man indicating that he had seen the accounts. Stuart advised that Evelyn imagined this and that the GG accounts had never been reviewed. Evelyn asked if we should add this role to the item “election of Committee members” to follow. Such a role is normal across clubs and associations. Stuart said it would be a waste of time as no one would volunteer. NO ACTION.

It was notable that there was nothing in the minutes to confirm that Stuart had the authority

to choose and commit to purchase cost of the shed, and a correction might give Stuart cover. Stuart saw no need. NO ACTION

22. Matters arising: Shed progress. This was covered in the Chairman's statement.

LETTINGS REPORT

23. Les Curwood, Lettings & Site Inspections Officer, provided a report at Annex A.
24. Les summarised activity.
25. Applications for plots are lower than at the COVID peak when everyone had time and a wish to be outdoors, but current applications provide a reasonable stream of tenants for plots as they become available. There are 11 on the waiting list (including 3 who asked to defer to later) and 4 tenants wish to expand to from ½ to full plots.
26. Earlier on the year Les started splitting vacant half plots to make manageable plots for the tenants. There had been a number of tenants coming and going with 24 plots let from the waiting list. Note that from the waiting list, 6 had been removed for failing to emails and text offers; 9 had plots elsewhere in Portishead; and 5 had changed their minds.
27. Vacant plots arose from 2 terminations and 22 tenants had given up: moved; family reasons; health.
28. The average wait for a plot is approximately 6 months.
29. The waiting lists for Portishead North Weston, Beach Road, and Lower Down allotments were discussed, and their waiting time was thought to be similar.
30. Some problems re the private Sheepway and new Bristol allotments were discussed, but had no crossover for Gertie Gales. Sheepway rent is £200 per annum and being farmland allows sheds. Those have become extensive such that North Somerset Council had reportedly become concerned about use by illegal immigrants.

SITE INSPECTIONS

31. Please refer Annex A for detail.
32. To sum 89 of 120 plots (1/2 and full) are in good condition, with October showing improvement post the summer holidays. 4 plots can be described as WIP, 20 dug but weedy, and 5 appeared to have little or nothing done.
33. Les considered that the June 2023 inspection rated very good, with 4 plot-holders being given a "hint" to progress work and 2 being given a 1st warning about plot condition.
34. By July several were "weedy" and one 2nd warning and 1st warning were issued, and a number of hints.
35. At mid-August, one 2nd warning and one 1st warning and a new "hint" were issued.
36. By October there had been some overall improvement regarding weeds on site as tenants returned from holidays and winter digging had started. One 1st, two 2nd warnings and 2 hints had been issued.
37. To questions about how GG compares to the other 3 Portishead sites, Stuart suggested that North Weston had problems with root spread from planted trees, and the site was not well drained. Beach Road is scenic, but the soil quality was questioned. And Lower Down

Allotments was said to have a very strict manager (and always got top awards from Britain in Bloom "Its Your Neighbourhood scheme").

38. Evelyn commented that Portishead in Bloom will the 2023 awards at a special event that coming Friday. She had accompanied the RHS judge around GG site early in August: this was GG 2nd year entering the competition. Stuart advised that he had already checked the result. GG has moved from 4 Stars "Thriving" in year one to 5 Stars "Outstanding". (Copy of the certificate is at Annex C. Note just 30% of award points are for horticulture.)

GERTIE GALES WEBSITE

39. Les Curwood also manages the website.
40. The site continues to get 2 or 3 hits a day. No suggestions had been made for additions to the website. Links to other sites had previously been suggested but were considered problematic.
41. The forum incorporated by Les via the website earlier this year for use by plot-holders had 44 people signed up. No use was being made of this at present.

SECRETARY REPORT

42. Evelyn Grounell (meeting secretary) had originally added this item to being forward a procedural motion to allow continued access to GG bank accounts: our only 2 bank signatories, Stuart Armstrong and Bob Shepherd were resigning from the committee, and Stuart is giving up his tenancy. As change of signatories had been outstanding since Nov 2022, Evelyn had visited HSBC Gloucester & obtained up to date information on how to change and extend the scope of signatories such that the task might take under a month.
43. RESIGNATION: Given family news just today, Evelyn announced she must resign the secretary post. Evelyn apologies to plot-holders that accordingly this news could not be advertised any wider than the committee pre-meeting. She has many years on site, and has ideas about improving both horticulture and inclusivity, she would like to share: inspired largely by the site visit by the RHS in August. A Secretary Report is at Annex A.
44. Evelyn also spoke about how it was both unfair and made for poor resilience that Stuart and Les carry out so much of the management of GG, carrying out multiple officer roles, with no deputy and little back up. Indeed Stuart stated in the AGM 2022 minutes that Stuart and Les carried GG through COVID largely without committee involvement. This year's committee had little opportunity to take on tasks during the past year and that needs to change to ensure both resilience and continuity of the site.
45. She noted that the Terms of Reference (TOR) on the website bore no relation to actual duties at this point. For example the secretary has no access to records. The out of date document makes responsibilities unclear. And the dated lists of duties have it is known put off people who have useful skills plus time to offer.
46. Evelyn found agreement within the room: at this point in time, and to allow more plot-holders to be involved, most useful for now is for people to offer the time they can and their skills as ordinary committee members – and then working as team, fit individuals to useful GG tasks.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS and COMMITTEE MEMBERS

For information: the PTC Constitution provides for up to 15 members: 5 Officer posts, one PTC councillor and up to 9 other GG plot-holders. All committee members must stand down and be re-elected.

Nominations received: Letting Officer, Les Curwood; 4 committee members at para 53.

47. The Chairman Stuart Armstrong confirmed with Les Curwood that Les was content to remain as Letting Officer and managing GG website for 2023/2024.
48. Stuart Armstrong announced that as Evelyn Grounsell was standing down as Secretary he would not resign his tenancy and remain to become Secretary.
49. Stuart noted that Mark Lamont was present. In July 2023 Mark had indicated an interest in the Chairman post. Stuart asked if Mark remained interested and confirmed him as Chairman.
50. Stuart advised that he planned to make arrangement for the Treasurer at a later date, and did not seek further interest from the room, although previous interest had been shown in July. Treasurer post remains vacant.
51. The Secretary raised the 5th officer post, Site Manager (whose duties Stuart mentioned previously could be transferred to the Chairman post - Committee Meeting April 2023). That meeting had not reached an agreement and we have no motion here to take to PTC to change the constitution. Site Manager post remains vacant.
52. Stuart then advised that he considered the bigger committee too unwieldy and would move on to AOB. Les Curwood reminded Stuart that members without office help make a quorum. And the Secretary advised that not only does the Constitution allow plot-holders to be members, she held a list of existing and new committee members who had been properly nominated prior to the meeting. Stuart agreed to the list being nodded through.

53. Elected:

Chairman: Mark Lamont
Secretary: Stuart Armstrong
Treasurer: unfilled
Lettings Officer: Les Officer
Site Manager: unfilled

Roger Howard
Kate Knight
Gilli Shorey
Pamela Madge

PTC Councillors Churchill and Preston

AOB

54. Stuart raised 3 items for decision not on the agenda: Rent, Mowing and Boundaries.
55. RENT FOR NEXT YEAR. Stuart stated his proposal that the rent rate remained at 2022/23 levels due to his projected surplus. The meeting concurred. (However next item para 56 below that will add an additional £5/£10 for next year.)
56. MOWERS & MOWING. As Stuart said earlier, GG has been purchasing 2nd hand mowers for plot-holders to cut grass, and those are not maintained as that was as costly as a second hand mower (£80). Brand new machines cost a fortune, and may attract shed break-ins. What needs to be done in future?
57. The debate ranged back and forward,. Various points were made, refuted and agreed:
- a: The mowers are around 10 years old and some last better than others, and it is a “pain” to keep fixing them. A guess at average life was 18 months.
 - b. Plot-holders abuse the mowers – inter alia - running over rough ground; fail to clean grass out of use; check that for grass blocking before use, tighten screws such that belts are broken, mowers fail. There are instructions on this with the mowers.
 - c. Lighter weight mowers are held in the top shed. Heavier mowers i.e. self-propelled at the bottom shed, with the aim of helping to mow up the hill. This has caused a problem for some plot-holders.
 - d. DECISION: All women at the meeting, and reportedly their older neighbours had problems starting the mowers. This had been raised before, but the gentlemen on the committee had believed that those raising the point needed to read the instructions more closely.
 - e. It was admitted this time that the heavier and self-propelled mowers are much harder to start, and it was proposed that any future buys will provide smaller lighter 2nd hand mowers.
 - f. Stuart made the suggestion that the paid professional Spring cut might be extended to up to 6/8 paid cuts. The contractor would be willing. This would lessen the effort maintaining mowers, the dependence on plot-holders and lessen the H&S risk where some plot-holders fail to maintain paths. This would also assist those with hidden disabilities to continue their tenancies.
 - g. DECISION: The incoming chairman proposed that a trial year addressing those issues might be appropriate, and Stuart thought that an additional rent of £5/£10 (½ plot/full plot) would raise £800 to cover the costs. It was agreed that the additional charge would be made; that the mowers would be left available to plot-holders, but allowed to run down over the year; and the professional contractor into cut the paths up to 8 times in 2024.
 - h. The meeting suggested that there will be plot-holder pushback on this decision, but Stuart was happy to take that as plot-holders should be coming to meetings if they want a say.
58. BOUNDARY MOWING. Stuart advised that cutting back around the edges of the site had cost an unplanned £200 because it had been necessary for the contractor to use a brush cutter instead of a mower. This was needed because of the blackthorn in the hedges throws up very tough suckers over a fair distance. Also brambles. That might not have been noticed amongst the nettles. Stuart asked if we wanted to leave the boundaries to spread wildly, or not?

59. The downsides of abandoning managing the boundaries was discussed such as increasing the costs when paths become badly encroached, or when vehicles access is required (e.g. hedge cutting). Suckers have already reached at least one plot. On balance the meeting felt that if boundary mowing is kept up through the year, there would still remain wildlife cover within both the older hedgerows and the additional young hedges planted by GG over recent years.
60. DECISION: It was agreed to mow regularly down both sides of the site, and across the spaces at the top and bottom of the site. This decision can be reviewed in 2024.
61. FACEBOOK and FORUM. Stuart brought up the Facebook Page and Website Forum and thought those might be left as they are. Those are for tenants to communicate amongst themselves and he was surprised how responsible plot-holders were being. (Note: This is a closed group and posts can only be made when plot-holders ask to join the group).
62. SOCIAL ACTIVITY. Stuart mentioned the “social side” of GG and felt there was no real desire for this and so no need for a “social” lead on the committee.
63. MANURE: 3 plot-holders had requested this be raised as AOB. This task always lay with Stuart because he had access to GG bank account. He had wanted the new committee to take on the task, advising that this was the hardest job on site: collecting the money; chasing the farming contractor; arranging delivery. Stuart remarked that although plot-holders had been complaining, arrangements would be taking place no later than last year, when delivery was made in December 2022.
64. SITE ENVIRONS: It is probable that houses will be built beside GG site. Expect the boundary hedge to be removed.
In conversation, Stuart advised that the executors of for the elderly gentleman who owned the adjacent field had sold the field to Portishead individuals for £10K. (Plot-holders will be aware that the field has recently been re-zoned for housing within the North Somerset Council (NSC) Management Plan). He went on to say that the farmer using the field had contested ownership in the High Court, but lost.
Stuart understood that field, alongside a further field, had been quietly removed from the green belt area and that outline housing plans are underway. Improved access to the field would be needed and he believed that might be achieved through purchase of part of the adjacent Show Field.
65. The meeting was closed at 2110.