

Friends of Ilkley Moor

Chair's Report to AGM 2026

What's gone well in 2025/6?

As with all organisations our year has been marked with both plusses and minuses, but let's look at the plusses first.

Middleton Woods

Last year we modified our constitution to allow us to take a formal interest in those areas of woodland, owned by BMDC in the Ilkley area. In previous years we had done some work (most notably on the steps up beside Heber's Ghyll). This year there has been a step change in the amount of activity we have undertaken. This has mainly been in Middleton Woods. We were able to support BMDC's 2025 declaration of Middleton Woods as one of eight new Local Nature Reserves in the District. Working with interested parties Steve Parkes drafted a management plan for the woods. We decided that the main priority should be a 'Bluebell Recovery Project'. To this end we have been working on the main routes and encouraging their use rather than the myriad small paths that developed (particularly during Covid). This should help the bluebells to recover.

The work has been in the wood to the east of Curly Hill. Substantial work was done on clearing the steps and paths that lead down from the upper entrance to the wood and most recently in surfacing the path that runs from the Lido (behind the Olicanian Cricket Club) to the main entrance opposite the suspension bridge. This path was surfaced many years ago, but had become a muddy slough. It is now possible to walk, dry-shod, the whole length of this path. We intend now to progress by surfacing the other main paths in the wood. This is a very long-term project. There is no great financial cost but in terms of hard labour it is an enormous task. We have a very active group of volunteers, but even with a large volunteer group the work of digging away the accumulated mud, moving several tonnes of hardcore in wheel barrows, and laying and compacting it is very strenuous.

As noted above our aim is to produce a network of well surfaced paths, so that visitors will want to stick to them, and not walk on the minor paths, thus enabling the bluebells to recolonise areas where they have been destroyed by trampling. In addition, we have been laying brash and putting up notices asking visitors to stick to the principal paths. Sadly, a lot of these notices have been uprooted (probably by one individual) but we shall persist. We believe we have overwhelming public support when people understand the rationale for our work.

There was a particular problem where (young?) persons had constructed jumps and berms for a bike track. We undid their work and put up notices. We are glad that those notices and that work has been left undisturbed. We are quite clear.

Middleton Woods are a place of astonishing beauty in the bluebell season. It is not an appropriate venue for a dirt bike track.

Tuesday Volunteers

We have a group of about 30 volunteers for our Tuesday work parties and on any Tuesday about 20 of them will be found hard at work. The routine tasks involve draining and cleaning the paddling pool, in summer strimming around memorial benches and painting with wood preservative. Clearing excess vegetation from around the Tarn, re-surfacing the historical network of paths, constructing new steps and cross drains to improve the drainage on paths. The tasks are endless, and now we also have the work, outlined above, in Middleton Woods. Without our dedicated volunteers none of this work could be done. The reason we have such a high reputation in the district is a testimony to their hard work and dedication. It would be invidious to name individuals – our Tuesday volunteers are a team (led and supervised by BMDC Countryside Service) and as such they do us great credit.

Other practical volunteers

Our Tuesday volunteers are not the only ones working on the Moor. I must also mention the work parties organised by our splendid Project Officer, Tracy Gray. These are less frequent, but often involve parties from commercial organisations who want some practical tasks to involve their staff in team building. In this way we have had, for example, large groups out on the Moor taking part in the back breaking task of planting sphagnum plugs for blanket bog restoration.

Litter Picking Volunteers

Our other large group of volunteers, that can be seen around the town in their FoIM hi-vis vests, are our litter pickers. There is a small hard-core group that go litter picking nearly every day and a larger group who participate in the monthly Community Litter Picks (on the last Sunday of every month). There is a strong competitive edge to their litter picking – to see who can pick the greatest number of bags of litter in any month. This self-motivating group of volunteers has had a huge effect. It is my firm belief that Ilkley, through their efforts, is significantly more free of litter than comparable tourist towns. They have a large WhatsApp Group and a significant presence on social media through their ‘Litter Free Ilkley’ Facebook Group.

Our litter picking volunteers do not confine themselves to Ilkley Moor but are active throughout the town and along the A65. I believe that, in their hi-vis vests they act as a tremendous recruiting sergeant for FoIM. It cost about £35 to equip each litter picker. We provide them with the best quality of litter picking equipment. We are proud to fund them and we think that they, like our Tuesday volunteers have done much to burnish our reputation as one of the foremost ‘Friends’ group in the area.

What we could do better

For several years now, we have had two concerns about the use of the Moor. We have made representations to BMDC and, to date, have achieved little. Those two issues are the use of the Moor and the woodlands by commercial dog walkers and the creation of new, and fast, downhill routes by mountain bikers. We do believe that the new National Nature Reserve designation should allow BMDC to be a great deal bolder in tackling both these issues.

It is our belief that Bradford should introduce a licensing scheme for commercial dog walkers. Such a scheme would require the dog walkers to sign up to a Code of Conduct covering such matters as the maximum number of dogs on a walk, picking up dog faeces, keeping to the main footpaths, and keeping dogs on a lead during the bird nesting season. We believe that responsible commercial dog walkers would be happy to sign up to such a Code of Conduct and would recognise the commercial advantage in being able to state that they were licensed by BMDC. One of the difficulties raised by Bradford has been the issue of enforcement.

The same issue of enforcement has been raised when considering whether Bradford could control cycling on the Moor. It is our belief that the growth in downhill cycling is outstripping the ability of BMDC to resource or manage the impact of these tracks. We consider the constant objection from BMDC that they do not have the resources to enforce any regulation on dog walkers or cyclists to be a red herring. The vast majority of people in this country are law abiding. The reason why the majority abide by the law is not the fear of a policeman at every street corner but a sense of social obligation and belonging in a community. We believe that if Bradford introduced regulations to control commercial dog walkers and to control those who create new downhill cycling routes on the Moor, then, although there would be a few who would disregard such regulations, the majority would abide by them.

We continue to push for such controls. When the political changes in Bradford (following the recent election) have been resolved, we shall attempt to engage with the relevant politicians. As part of our armoury for raising the issue of the creation of new downhill cycling routes on the Moor, we are undertaking a detailed drone survey to identify the many cycling routes on the Moor and to provide a baseline against which changes can be monitored. That will enable us to speak with authority on the subject.

The bigger picture – blanket bog

The large-scale vision for Ilkley Moor, that we continuously strive to advance, is its vital role in carbon capture and storage, and its role in natural flood prevention. Both these roles are encapsulated in one thing, the protection and expansion of blanket bog on the Moor. In the past, the whole of the top area of the Moor will have been covered in blanket bog (the existence of peat soil on the Moor is a testimony to this). In the recent historical past there was sufficient

blanket bog on the Moor for sphagnum moss to be collected on Heber's Moss for wound dressings in the First World War. By the time FoIM was created, the area of thriving blanket bog had shrunk to a few hectares on Crawshaw Moss.

We know that there is no finer method of carbon capture and storage in the entire world than blanket bog. A given area of blanket bog, just 30cm deep (and it grows at about a millimetre a year) has captured as much carbon as the same area of tropical rain forest. Unlike trees that capture and store carbon for a few hundred years, blanket bog, in effect, can store carbon in perpetuity. And not only does blanket bog play a vital role in the fight against climate change, so also, it has a vital role in slowing the run-off of rain from the Moor and thus reducing the risk of flooding in the surrounding river valleys.

It is our duty to protect and to increase the area of blanket bog on the Moor, by blocking drainage ditches, creating 'leaky dams', and by planting sphagnum plugs. That is our fundamental task and we are proud of what we have achieved. In the last two years our volunteers have planted many thousands of sphagnum plugs on the Moor on both sides of Keighley Old Road, where formerly blanket bog once thrived. We are attempting to undo the damage done by former drainage works on the Moor. We need to monitor how successful this planting has been (especially in view of some of the very hot dry weather we had last year). We hope that in years to come, blanket bog will once more thrive on the top of the Moor with all the inestimable benefits that will provide.

Our Finances

You will have our Treasurer's report that show the precise details of our financial state. It is extremely healthy. One of the reasons we have been able to achieve so much is that we have in addition to our members' subscriptions received a number of generous donations and bequests. And I must pay tribute to our Project Officer Tracey Gray who is an expert on fund raising. It is due to her efforts, over the years, that we have made a number of successful applications for substantial grants from such bodies as the National Lottery and the People's Post Code Lottery. Without her expertise we should be, financially, much poorer.

Challenges for 2026/7

In the recent past there have been two significant changes and, as yet, we do not know how they will impact on Ilkley Moor. The first is the creation of the new Bradford Pennine Gateway National Nature Reserve and the second is the recent election and the change that has brought about in the political complexion of BMDC.

National Nature Reserve

Possibly the most significant event in the history of Ilkley Moor since 1873, when William Middleton failed to obtain an Enclosure Act, happened this last year when Natural England designated the new Bradford Pennine Gateway National

Nature Reserve (of which Ilkley Moor is now the largest part). As yet we do not know what practical effect this will have on Bradford's management of the Moor, but we note that Bradford now has an 'Extended Biodiversity Duty'. In fulfilling that duty Bradford must:

Consider what it can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity. This is known as the "first consideration".

Agree policies and specific objectives based on that consideration

Act to deliver the policies and achieve these objectives and report on them

Reconsider/review those actions at least every five years

We are uncertain as to whether one of Bradford's policies, namely the permitting of unrestricted cycling throughout the new National Nature Reserve, can be considered by BMDC as being consistent with that "first consideration". FoIM do not oppose cycling on Ilkley Moor, but we have consistently argued that cycling should be controlled by being permitted only on authorised routes. These routes could then be properly engineered and maintained to mitigate against erosion etc. We know that cycling is a concern on other areas of the new National Nature Reserve and we think that Bradford could control cycling, throughout the National Nature Reserve area, by way of a Public Spaces Protection Order. However, we do not know whether the new administration in Bradford will be inclined to pursue such a policy.

Political Changes in Bradford

There may be other areas of concern across the totality of the new National Nature Reserve and we hope to engage with BMDC when the new Portfolio Holder concerned with the National Nature Reserve has been appointed. As of now, we do not know how the new administration will organise the various portfolios or who will be the lead councillor so far as the National Nature Reserve is concerned. Given the uncertainty of how and when a new administration for Bradford will be formed and whether, in particular, some of the newly elected councillors will regard protection of the natural environment as a priority, there have to be doubts about the funding and status of Bradford's Countryside Service. For the record, we should state that FoIM has the highest regard for BMDC Countryside Service and it has been our mutual co-operation that has allowed us to play such a positive role on the Moor and in Ilkley's woodlands.

Your Committee and your Office Holders

I have stressed in this report the wonderful work undertaken by our volunteers. I fear that one thing those many volunteers do not consider is that the existence of their groups is underpinned by the structure of a committee and office holders. Without volunteers to fill these roles, the opportunity to take part in these interesting practical tasks would disappear. Like many other organisations we find it difficult to recruit new committee members and even more difficult to find new office holders. Any healthy organisation needs to continually refresh its

governing body. This year we are very pleased that we have been able to find an excellent new Membership Secretary in the form of Mike Brumfitt and we are very happy that Jolyon West has taken up the tasks formerly undertaken by our ex-Publicity Secretary, Barry Wilkinson. We are also extremely happy that we have a probable candidate to take over as Secretary from Mike Pilling. Incidentally, we should record our thanks to Mike for his work as Secretary. He has been a stalwart and it is only due to his domestic circumstances that he feels unable to continue.

This brings me round to the subject of the Chair. I have stated publicly that I think now, that in view of my age, FoIM needs a Chair who can be more actively on the Moor and engaged in volunteer duties, but for all that, I regret to inform you that no candidate has been found (and we have been making discreet approaches to people to try and find a candidate). So, I am prepared to stand for another year, but I do hope that in the not too distant future we can find a candidate as I do not want to die in harness. And the qualifications required? An ability to chair a meeting and a certain amount of *chutzpah* for dealing with the press and others who enquire about the Moor.

Owen Wells
Chair, Friends of Ilkley Moor
12/5/26