

Steyning Community Orchard

Statement following letter circulated to Cllrs about Orchard Expansion.

The Steyning Community Orchard was established in 2014 and is run by a Steering Group of 9 local people (listed at the foot of this message).

Our first project was to re-establish an orchard in the top Eastern corner of the MPF. This had been an orchard owned and run by Lewis Wood, from the 1930's into the 1960's. We have met older residents who say they remember scrumping apples, pears and cherry plums from this orchard in their youth. This area was purchased by SPC and added to the existing MPF we believe sometime in the 1970's.

Apart from grass cutting, this area was then just left alone. The 1987 hurricane felled many of the remaining fruit trees. So by 2014 when we started work here, there were just 9 apple trees remaining, all in poor condition. There were also many self-seeded cherry plums growing into each other. Both sides of the old orchard had been taken over by scrub including bramble, nettles and elder. In some places, this extended 20metres into the MPF from the hedge line, especially on the allotments side.

This part of the MPF has never been a 'playing area'. Apart from the scattered fruit trees that were here in 2014, there is a considerable slope from the Newham Lane end down past the proposed orchard extension towards the keep fit equipment, making it unsuitable for games of any sort. It was a forgotten, unloved and unused corner of the MPF until we started work here.

Since 2014, we have carried out many 100's of hours of voluntary work in groups and individually; cutting down, clearing, chipping (some at our own expense), removing rubbish, planting bulbs and wild flowers, strimming, and not least planting 31 new fruit trees (all bought by Steyning residents who also attended and helped with the plantings with their families and friends). Our collection of 14 Sussex variety apple trees, is we believe, the largest in the county. We have trees here that are so rare, they are not held in the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale. We know of at least 6 more Sussex varieties that we could still add, making the collection even more special. All these trees are on MM111 rootstocks, that will produce standard traditional trees that can have a lifespan of well over 100 years. We have discovered and registered two new Steyning apples, including Steyning Scarlet, of which there are now 10 trees growing in Steyning. Through our wildlife surveys, we know that 6 species of bats use this as a feeding area and highway from their roosts.

So the MPF Orchard is developing into an important traditional orchard, (of which there are few remaining), as well as becoming a valuable community asset that can only improve with time. It will also contribute to so many of the important environmental issues we are facing such as local food production, increased biodiversity, improving wildlife corridors and tree planting.

We have 500 followers on our Facebook page and 300 signed-up Friends to our Newsletter. We have published an item in 10 of the 12 monthly 'Your Steyning' magazines since late 2014. We have held 6 Apple Days and Wassails, with the most recent of these attracting 500 and 200 people respectively. Both these are now large community events for Steyning that are well supported and enjoyed.

We have held many educational visits from Cub Scouts, Rainbows and Brownies etc in the orchard.

As well as planting trees in this orchard, we have have planted or sold over 100 further fruit trees that are now growing all over the Steyning area.

In all our interactions with people using the MPF, and that we have met at all of our events since 2014, we have never had a single adverse comment about the Community Orchard or our activities on the MPF. Without exception it is positive, congratulatory and supportive.

The writer of the letter discovered this himself, when he approached a family picnicking near the orchard to ask if he could photograph them to support his case for challenging the orchard extension. The Mother approached one of our Steering Group afterwards saying she was quite disturbed by him, and did we know who this man was? She said that she refused him the picture and told him that she fully supported the Orchard and was quite happy for it to extend to where they were sitting.

We are one of the few groups who use the MPF, who regularly attend Amenities meetings and give regular reports on our activities on the MPF. We could hardly be more transparent in what we do. Before we carry out any work, or plant anything, we seek Amenities approval first. We recognise the MPF as the most valued Open Space in Steyning and because of that take our responsibilities here so incredibly seriously. We would never consider doing anything that would harm the MPF or affect others' use of it.

Earlier this year, during one of our reports to Amenities, it was suggested that we presented a plan to Amenities Cllrs showing our proposed final outline of the orchard, with current and future tree positions marked. We were very happy to do this, as it would then enable us to plan this work over the next 4-5 years. We looked at the topography and position of the existing trees and drew a line in what seemed a logical position. It keeps the orchard within the upper eastern portion of the MPF, still on the slope and 13 metres from the first of the fixed keep-fit benches.

The plan was presented and unanimously agreed by Amenities on 25th May 2020.

Because Amenities Cllrs are familiar with the orchard and our previous plans, it wasn't deemed necessary to provide a location plan for the orchard within the MPF. But as this has been requested through full Council, it has now been added. Lack of a scale was an oversight and is now included on the map.. (See attached documents.)

On the basis of this agreement, we have begun the planning to plant 4 new trees next February. The trees are on order from our specialist nursery, and two of the next four tree donors from our waiting list have already been told that their trees have been allocated and will be ready for them to plant next year.

We hope that this fuller explanation of what the Community Orchard is about, will help Cllrs understand the context of the extension to the orchard as shown on the plan.

SCO Steering Group

Alec Harden
Roger Brown
David Buckett
Sarah Sullivan
Bob Platt
Simon Zec
Ronnie Reed
Janet Holter

Richard Hopkins

Appended pictures.

1. Revised (with scale) MPF final orchard map.
2. Aerial photo of the whole MPF
3. Aerial photo of the Orchard area of the MPF





