

DEVON RURAL SKILLS TRUST

Minutes of Annual General Meeting held at The Dolphin, Bovey Tracey on Wednesday 12th July 2017 at 7.30pm.

Present:

Jonathan and Frances Ansell, Richard and Beth Finnemore, Dave Dingle, Bob Tildesley, Mick Godfrey, Bruce Baker, George Pidgeon, Richard Hooker, Nick Dawe, Mitchell Fawcett, Bridgitte Graham, Gavin Graham, Mark Joynes, Dave Stanton, Chris Stanton, Di Smurthwaite, Rachael Banyard, Alan Cooper, Jeremy Weiss, Laura Tunstall, John Barber, Gary Moore, Frank and Lyn Wells, Chris Baker, Ross Gray, Martin Turner, David Halpin, Justin Clifford, Don Gaskins, Sue Halpin.

1. Minutes from Last Years AGM

Minutes from last year's meeting were accepted by the membership and will be archived.

2. Chairmans Report

A big thank you to Di Smurthwaite who has retired as secretary for the Trust and been replaced by Laura Tunstall. Also a big thank you to Mick Godfrey who has retired as Course Booking Officer and has been replaced by Jeremy Weiss. Both are still on the committee and are actively involved with the Trust.

Jeremy and Richard Hooker has created an online booking system for courses through the DRST website. Richard in particular worked on the website whilst Jeremy is now dealing with the bookings. A majority of the bookings are now online but there is still the option to book on the phone. A big thank you to both for their hard work.

The general direction of the Trust for the following year will be to focus on improving instructional techniques and on improving the training scheme, which has been on hold for some months whilst the committee have looked at restructuring it, mostly due to a large trainee drop out rate.

3. Finance

Three trustees have been added: Jeremy Weiss, Laura Tunstall and Chris Baker.

There is an overall deficit this year (£1507), with investment in trainees being the biggest expenditure. Followed by a new DRST laptop and website set up costs. A first aid course was run for committee members, trainees and regular helpers but this is only required every three years.

Membership income was down roughly £1000 from 2016.

The Trust received a large donation for the hedgelaying competition. The net spend of the competition was roughly the same as last year.

4. Practitioners Report

DRST continues to represent members and practitioners across the County and beyond who are engaged in a wide range of rural skills. Overall the past year seems to have been a good one for our practitioners with regular work coming in and with an increasing number of enquiries from people seeking advice and information

As well as their day to day work practitioner members have been regularly involved in instructing and helping out on our regular Saturday courses and in teaching our trainees in a variety of skills and demonstrating at Summer Shows.

It's really good to see that people who have passed through our apprenticeship and training schemes over the years are now well established and earning a living from the knowledge they have gained through the Trust's activities.

Our more recent trainees are now beginning to use the skills learnt to carry out paid and voluntary work and to instruct on courses. Training days in boundary skills are now very much in a work situation which is excellent preparation for when they start working on their own.

It's encouraging that several of our current Committee members are ex trainees who will be the backbone of the organisation in the future.

As usual there seems to be plenty of work in both hedge laying and stone walling.

DRST members have been involved as competitors and judges in a variety of hedging competitions during the winter. These have included the National - held in Cheshire in October, the Blackdown Hills contest near Axminster in March, the countywide Devon Hedge Group contest and our own successful competition held at Loddiswell in November.

This year's National Hedgelaying Championships are being held at Stourhead in Wiltshire on the 28th of October. The venue is within easy travelling distance and the event is well worth a visit.

It is also good to be able to report that the Trust has continued to maintain its growing contact and cooperation with other like-minded organisations in the South West - particularly with the Blackdown Hills Hedging Association, Devon Wildlife Trust, Basketmakers South West, Devon Hedge Group, the National Trust and Rudolf Steiner School at Dartington.

5. Membership

Maximum membership didn't exceed 200 addresses, there has been a drop in subscriptions. There were 194 before April, despite this the drop out rate has been lower than usual with 26 non-renewals. The Trust currently has 168 members. This will increase through Autumn/Winter as people subscribe as they book courses.

Jeremy and Richard Hooker have been looking at setting up online membership subscription that would automatically renew each year.

Thanks to Brigitte for new boards (for shows), she wondered whether it would be possible for people to subscribe at shows? Which had been discussed at last year's AGM, but the logistics are proving a little difficult.

6. Training Scheme

The training scheme has suffered a bit of a set back this year with a large drop out rate. The scheme was suspended in April just as Magnus finished with only Laura Tunstall continuing, who has now completed the scheme.

The committee intend to restart the scheme in the Autumn. There are currently four individuals who have expressed an interest in becoming trainees.

7. Courses

It appears the membership aren't really attending courses, new members are proving essential to keep numbers up on the courses. This year there haven't been great numbers on the courses, usually the stonewalling courses fill up very quickly but haven't over 2016/17.

Some of the courses don't bring in an income such as hazel hurdles, as there's no landowner donations. A financial assessment of the courses show that they do produce a surplus, although one this year made a loss.

Mick has now relinquished his role as booking officer, he was initially concerned about not speaking to course attendees on the phone beforehand but now sees the benefit of having moved the bookings online, as it reduces the work load for the bookings officer. Jeremy is happy with how the new system is working and so far all feedback has been positive.

8. Publicity

Chris Baker has now taken over from Max McAdams who is moving to France. A big thank you to Max.

9. Appointment of Officers 2017/18

Membership happy for current officers to continue in their roles.

10. Hedge Competition

This year's competition will be held at East Fingle Farm Drewsteignton on the 21st of October - where we ran a hedging course back in March. The format will be the same as usual with Novice, Intermediate and Open Classes competing.

We are having a preparation day on the Saturday before the contest to get everything set up. Helpers would be appreciated.

On the day we will need people to take care of the car parking. As parking space could be restricted it would be good if you could share lifts.

Mick Godfrey and Don will be going back to Ham Farm in August to judge the regrowth on last year's hedges.

MEMBERSHIP DISCUSSION

11. Training Scheme

It was put to the membership that the Training be permanently suspended but a unanimous vote was passed that it continue.

Jeremy has taken over as Training Scheme Officer, he spoke anonymously with current and former trainees to gain as much feedback as possible. He presented his finding to the committee. The key change to come will be that the scheme is split into three phases rather than two. The new third stage will be a year attending and helping on Saturdays which will allow the trainee to develop further skills, with the intention of being added to the practitioners list and learn teaching skills in mind of later becoming an instructor. Beth questioned the purpose of the third phase and Jeremy pointed out

that it acts as a carrot for the completion of the scheme, that trainees will be included on the practitioners list.

It was suggested that there might be more skills added for trainees (not courses), such as gate hanging.

A new log book has been developed and the previous one was considered too bulky. Proficiency tests will now be considered as an essential part of the training scheme. The committee have been discussing testing parameters. The committee have been looking at the testing criteria for other organisations (such as the Dry Stone Walling Association) for inspiration.

Mitchell asked about the dropout rate which Richard Finnemore confirmed as roughly 50% since 2013.

12. Instructor Qualifications/Development

Linking in with the training scheme, trainees will be assessed on their potential to become an instructor, as some may be suited to teaching groups whilst others may be better suited to one on one training days.

Brigitte asked about a “body of recognition” for qualifications, so far, there hasn’t been one. The Trust itself is the only organisation that recognises the skills of the trainees. Previously, NBTC and Lantra have been looked into but they aren’t fit for purpose. It was suggested that Duchy and Bicton could be approached. The committee will look at finding an appropriate body to affirm qualifications.

The committee have been discussing the issue of instructor development over the past few meetings. Initially there was talk of sending instructors away to other organisations but that proved too problematic.

Alan Cooper has been working on new assessment criteria. He has come to the conclusion that there should be Saturday instructor training on courses, that an experienced mentor could observe and debrief a “trainee trainer” at the end of the day. A vote was put to the membership and it was agreed that Alan’s plan be implemented.

Rachael suggested that there be a teacher training day for current instructors.

13. Instructor Fees

It has been suggested that instructor fees for Saturday courses be raised to £125. Mick’s look at the course income figures suggests that it wouldn’t be necessary to raise course fees to do so.

It was discussed that a second instructor be paid but this would most likely result in a course fee increase which is not something the membership thought was a good idea. Frank Wells pointed out that Coppice Group courses cost £40 and they struggle to get bookings. Although Brigitte pointed out that some organisations charge much more (i.e. £75) for their courses, to which Don responded that the DRST must keep costs low so that there are repeat bookings. Richard Hooker pointed out that the Blackdown Hills offer 1 instructor to 2 pupil tuition on their courses at a cost of £45 for each student, instructors are paid £80. The issue of paying anyone other than the instructor was raised by Jeremy as there is a lot of voluntary help on courses, but those volunteering are in a position to give up their time for free, mortgages paid off etc. Currently it isn’t a problem as there is enough voluntary help but there will come a time when people retire.

A vote was put to the members to raise the instructor fee and it was agreed to be raised to £125. “Old Lags” who attend on course days as agreed with Jeremy to assist the instructor, will not be charged a course fee and will be able to claim mileage for attendance at the rate of 30p per mile.

14. Skills Magazine

Nick Dawe has been printing and posting the magazine through the school he works at but will be retiring soon, the quarterly edition of Skills will need to be printed elsewhere, inevitably it will cost more. The issue is whether or not to update the newsletter with glossier paper and colour photographs at a far more substantial cost or keep it as it is at less of a cost. The increase will be roughly £100 without changing the quality of the print. As the DRST has the online edition of skills it has high quality photographs available online. A vote put to the membership resulted in the Skills paper edition remaining the same.

15. AOB

Brigitte gave a show report. She and a few individuals attending several local Agricultural shows throughout 2016. She asked there be a few more individuals to help with the stall. They cover a variety of skills including basketry, wheelwrighting, bee skep making and chair seating. The summer is not the time to demonstrate hedgelaying, and unless the show has an on-going demonstration of a stone wall build (such as at Totnes and Yealmpton) the costs of haulage make field boundary maintenance impossible. The DRST came third in the most attractive display at category at the mid Devon show. Brigitte asked that there be a breakdown of what course attendees could expect, preferably through photographs to display at the stall. The DRST is repeatedly asked back to the shows every year so they must be doing something right! Brigitte bought along the new banners which were discussed at the last AGM.

The committee will discuss shows for boards through the autumn/winter.

George Pidgeon announced the Devon Hedge Week from 21st October.

Jonathan Ansell asked that “old-lags” be informed as to when they’re needed on courses.

Mick Godfrey and George Pidgeon voiced their concerned at the personal touch being lost with booking going online.

16. Meeting Close and Raffle

