

Report to Cowes Town Council 6 October 2010

Last reported 8 September, much happened in between.

Better news I hope this time.

The Isle of Wight Council left Northwood House on 30 September, by arrangement when final reading of meters was carried out. Trustees are working hard to take charge of all aspects of their new responsibility. The support of the public is extremely welcome – our eyes and ears, and sometimes our helpers too. We are trying hard to get our message of action across but it is very disappointing to get unwarranted and misguided criticism. We are very pleased that two new advisors are working with the Trustees – commercial and legal based.

It is the Trustees' intention that the House continues to be a registered venue for weddings and other civil ceremonies, as well as private functions, and will therefore be retaining its marriage licence for the time being. Although initially Northwood House had been removed from IWC website as being a registered venue, this has now been reinstated. Negotiations of a confidential nature are being or have been conducted with more than one contractor – more below.

Meanwhile the Community Hall users are being accommodated as far as possible with no changes. However, once running costs are known, it may be necessary to raise the rates charged to ensure that costs are covered by income. This is one aspect I have asked this Council to consider taking on the responsibility for managing – it is after all the Hall for the Community and it is being used by CTC tonight.

The Bowls Clubs are working together to be self supporting in their area of the park. The Trustees are very happy for them to continue and will assist them in any way they can.

Facilities in the Park have now been winterised, as normal. Unfortunately there was some vandalism and graffiti on the toilet block in the park, and we ask that police presence reflects the need for vigilance. The security guards have already made their presence known to the police and to park users.

The Car park toilets have been or are about to be mothballed. It is not anticipated that they will reopen under the Trust's auspices. Any body which wishes to take on responsibility for them can contact the Trustees for a licence on the basis that they meet all costs connected with the facility.

The children's play area where the swings are is still in use, and will be inspected in line with professional advice. The trustees do not consider this facility is central to their policy and would like the facility to wash its face. I have previously asked CTC for assistance here and I repeat that request. As an alternative CYTC may be able to use their good offices to find a £1.5k sponsor for the Children's Play facility. As Trustees we have to cover insurance, regular inspections as well as maintenance and repair. No guarantee is given that this can continue. Much depends on the outcome of the revenue raising schemes/plans which are all in their infancy.

Arrangements have been agreed for grass cutting and leaf sweeping this winter, and plans are being made for some extra sweeping to be done by volunteers. The public may have to get used to a slightly rougher look to the park but the trustees are confident we can manage a reasonable level of upkeep for the immediate future. All suggestions are gratefully received. The lead shown by the Bowlers who are prepared to take responsibility for their own facility is a good example.

The dog and litter bins are currently being maintained, and Trustees will be considering how this service may be maintained after 27<sup>th</sup> October. Information on the cost will be available shortly but we believe we can show that it can be done properly at a much reduced figure of £3k to that previously charged by IWC to the Trust for this service.

Trustees have not yet received all information on costs of maintaining the street lighting in the Park, but indications are that this will be large charge on the Trust's very limited income. These paths are used by local people to get from a to b, not just for pleasure in the Park, and it would be a wonderful gesture of public benefit if this Council were to fund the lighting going forward. The alternative of turning off the lighting is not something the trustees want to contemplate. Yet again as another alternative if CTC were able to use its good offices to find sponsors for the lighting that would be a possible solution.

Somebody said to me the other day, 'They should get rid of that Town Council representative on the Trust of Northwood House; they don't do anything to help.' That's me of course. I was able to explain my efforts, but the perception remains that Cowes Town Council is not sufficiently proactive at the moment in the affairs of the house and park. It has been said that CTC wants to help but with respect we have not seen a single concrete proposal of assistance from CTC. It should be understood that I have never known such a prolonged and at times immensely frustrating period of hard work with problem after problem rearing its head. I am not a representative of CTC on the Board of Trustees. Having been appointed I am advised by the Trust's legal advisers and by the Charity Commission that it is my duty to carry out the role to the best of my ability. It should be understood that the workload on all the trustees has been enormous and we are only coping because of the amount of help and assistance we are receiving from persons who give of their services without having any axe to grind. I wish I could report on practical assistance received from CTC.

After my last report when my request for financial assistance from CTC was turned down, I was pleased that this Council had contacted IWC for information on various costs related to the park. Unless providers can be found to take on costs of facilities enjoyed in the grounds of Northwood House, the Trustees may have to permanently close them because we have no funds to subsidise them. I have in mind the toilets in the grounds, the tennis courts, the hut and putting area and the other areas mentioned specifically in this report.

Prompted by our Mayor's report critical of Northwood House in the current issue of the Beacon we had a meeting to talk over the issues faced by the Trustees when I showed him just one of my files, 2" thick, of legal correspondence exchanges between the Trustees and IWC since 30 April this year. I asked for more support from this Council, my nominating body. I hope I will now receive it.

Support from the Friends of Northwood House and Park is very welcome and they are progressing various ideas at the moment.

Negotiations with a professional operator of car parks to work on behalf of the Trustees are at the detail stage. The Trustees opened discussions with more than one operator and have chosen a favoured contractor based on the best return to the Trust. IWC has been advised that the short term licence arranged with the Trust may be terminated by the Trustees, as agreed, before it expires at the end of the year. It is planned that the Rotunda area will be properly managed as a short term car park, with charges. Currently it is used by long term parkers without charge. Some cars and vans park all week, making it impossible for people visiting to find a parking space. IWC permits will not be valid in either car park and the IWC have been advised several times not to issue anymore.

Trustees have been in discussion with several potential providers of interim events in the House, which they hope to determine this month. This is to enable the house to continue functioning as a venue, generating income and also avoiding the closed up feeling that unused properties soon acquire. We have chairs, tables, crockery available for use as required. A heritage exhibition will be held here for 3 weeks later this month.

The Registrar's have left their offices in a very clean condition, with only some fresh paint required. Information on what rental income could be generated by different parts of the house is being sought.

The Feasibility Study is underway by Knight Frank to assist in identifying a sustainable future for the Northwood House Estate with reference of course to the deed of gift and the later scheme details of which the Trustees are obliged to follow, to the exclusion of any other interest they may have.

Following the Trust paying for House insurance (over £22,000) from July this year, the provider has conducted a full survey of the property and was satisfied on all aspects, including the security arrangements put in place by the Trustees.

This council has a considerable amount of material stored in what was the caretaker's flat, and I am assured that this will be cleared soon. Papers as well as artefacts and pictures, just waiting for a Cowes Town Council office!

The Trustees have asked for detailed information from IWC concerning a property within the grounds. IWC has today asked the Charity Commission to release it from its role as Custodian Trustee – regrettable at a time when issues remain concerning Accounts and the legitimacy of some charges levied by IWC on the Trust. A further issue yet to be addressed in detail is the area of Trust land used by Medina Housing outwith their registered title. I hope to be able to report on progress in these issues in future reports.

Which leads me to:-

Councillor Walters raised the subject of this Council occupying office space in Northwood House as its right and without charge.

I am told this suggestion has been aired before, as some of you will probably recall. But, as this was before my time and to be sure, I have asked for legal advice. Therefore:-

The Trustees wish me to inform Cowes Town Council that following legal advice and advice from the Charity Commission we are advised that it does not have entitlement to the use of the Trust's facilities without charge. However the Trust will look carefully at any sensible proposals CTC puts forward for a lease or licence of any part of the House at a return which is in keeping with the Trust's function.

Meanwhile the Trust repeats its request that CTC takes over some of the responsibilities for the facilities offered by the Trust within the Grounds and funds the same for the benefit of the Cowes community.

ANN THWAITES 6 October 2010\*