

Newton's unsung heroes

This month we start a series focusing on those people who work quietly behind the scenes to make Newton St Cyres a more pleasant place. They expect no remuneration or even recognition – just the quiet satisfaction of making things better for all of us. We kick off the series with probably our most famous landmark, the Arboretum.

Anyone who has made their way down the winding footpath that takes you to Daffodil Valley in the Arboretum will appreciate the wooden handrail and stony path that makes negotiating the steep pathway that much easier.

For that, thank Ron Nethercott and Courtney Ware, volunteers who spent two months putting down the path. “There was nothing there before,” says Ron. “It’s steep there and the work involved laying down the path, carrying all the stonework, and putting in the railings.”

It’s one of the many jobs they have carried out as volunteers to keep the Arboretum looking its best. From clearing fallen branches and obstructed paths, to strimming, making the directional signs, clearing bins or fixing wobbly bench legs, there is plenty to do.

“I can find something to do every time I come up here,” says Ron. “There is always something to do right through the year.”



Ron, Courtney and Marg

Ron, Courtney and his wife Marg are members of the Friends of the Arboretum, a volunteer group set up in 2010 to manage the open space on behalf of the Parish Council. In fact, the trio has given so much of their time to the Arboretum that they were made Honorary Life Friends in 2017. They work closely with David Vallance, the head warden, who organises the other volunteers and oversees the Duke of Edinburgh awards scheme, a programme of self-development for young people who do volunteer work in the Arboretum.

The Friends of the Arboretum operates on a purely voluntary basis and relies largely on member subscriptions, donations, grants and fundraising to keep going. While working parties carry out special tasks such as planting seasonal bulbs, most of the day-to-day work falls to Ron, Courtney, Marg and David.

“When I first started, there was more work than I could manage,” recalls David Vallance, whose head warden role is voluntary. “I knew Ron and asked if he would like to be involved, and he brought along Courtney. They do the strimming and clearance work and I do the paths and organise the volunteers.”

Go to the Arboretum any morning and most likely you will find Ron and Courtney there. During one morning visit, I found them in full battle gear with hard hats, earphones, gloves, protective eye-wear and trimmers, busily cutting back a section of overgrown grass and weeds. Other days there will be other work to do, such as clearing branches from paths, mowing the grass and even turning tree trunks into furniture.

“There was a conifer that came down, and instead of letting it go to waste, we made three seats out of the tree trunk,” says Ron. “Another stump used to be a yew tree, so we made a seat out of that for the kids.”



Volunteers Strimming

An early undertaking was to renovate the ramshackle shelter that sits along the Boundary Path. “It was a wreck,” says Ron who, along with Courtney, cleared it out, put in a new roof and turned it into a sheltered seating area where visitors can enjoy the views across the fields.

While Marg doesn’t do heavy work such as strimming, she often helps out with loppers and trimming back sawn off branches where the pair have been with their chain saws. To help them in their work, they use their own machines such as the shredder and trimmers and took a safety course on chain saws.

Marg is also the unofficial archivist of the Arboretum and carefully records and photographs the different species of plants and any major works that have taken place, then puts the photos and descriptions into albums. She now has 12 albums with over 2,000 photos. “It’s a record of what is going on here,” she says proudly.

It’s clear the trio enjoy their work and get along well. “If one of us is doing a job, together we can get things done in no time,” says Ron, who does most of the talking for the group.

When asked if they are all gardeners, they laugh and admit to sharing an allotment near their homes where they grow vegetables. “Court likes his gardening and has got green fingers, but I haven’t. I just put it in the ground and if it don’t come up, it don’t,” says Ron, 74, who was born and raised in Newton St Cyres and was an agricultural engineer until his retirement.

Perhaps Courtney's green fingers may spring from the fact that he is a former farm worker and has a good feel for the land. Born 81 years ago in Winkleigh, he moved to Newton St Cyres with Marg in 2000. In August, they will be celebrating 51 years of marriage.

It is hard to believe that the Arboretum, which is owned by the Quicke family, was once neglected and over-run with nettles and brambles until its restoration was taken over by the Parish Council under an agreement with John Quicke. "It was derelict for 40 years, and everything was so overgrown. You couldn't even walk through it," says David. "There were no real paths or anything at all."

Today, most of the brambles and nettles are long gone and a network of paths snakes through the 3.5-hectare site. Creating and cutting the paths was the work of David Vallance, who talks about it with quiet satisfaction. "I created the paths, so I like to keep them maintained," he says as he shows me a map of all the pathways that wind their way around the Arboretum.

One of them is Tim's Way, a special all-weather path that runs through the heart of the Arboretum with a surface that is suitable for wheelchairs and push chairs. It is named after a long-time Newton St Cyres resident, the late Dr Timothy Packer, who made a bequest to the Arboretum.

To improve wheelchair access at the entrance to the Arboretum, major work was undertaken a year ago to widen the entry gate, alter the railings and create a small garden to greet visitors. That work was overseen by David and there are future plans to link Tim's Way to the main road path.

The son of a farmer, David did not go into farming the soil himself, but worked in the farming industry at J. Bibby and Crediton Milling before moving to Newton St Cyres in 1967. It was his love of gardening that led him to volunteer for Arboretum work. He is also a keen cricket fan. While, at 84, his playing days are behind him, he is fit and spry and still umpires three matches a week during the season.

When they established the Arboretum in the 1760s, the Quicke family planted several unusual specimens of trees over the years. Says David: "When I first started I didn't know anything about specialty trees." Today, the Arboretum boasts many unusual trees, including deciduous conifers such as the Dawn Redwood and Swamp Cypress, along with Holm Oaks, acers, elms, black walnut, bamboos and magnolias and many species of plants and flowers. There is even a 150-year-old monkey puzzle tree.

With many of the trees over 200 years old, it is inevitable that some will fall down or have major limbs fall off due to age or decay. That is when the professional tree surgeons will be called in to take them down. "A lot of the Holm Oaks are about 100 years old and coming to the end of their life," says David.

Fortunately, the resident tree expert Vaughan Gallavan, who used to work for the Quickes in Sherwood, is on hand to provide crucial advice on all tree matters including working out planting plans and often doing the tree planting himself.

One of the difficulties of such a large space is labelling. While many trees are labelled, time, and wear and tear have meant some labels are missing, chewed up by squirrels or overgrown. Improved labelling is on the volunteers' to-do list.

Most visitors behave responsibly when visiting the Arboretum, but sometimes children can't resist climbing the trees. "I tell the kids that these aren't just any old trees," says Ron. "A lot are specimen trees that have been especially planted and are not common. We want people to enjoy them. We don't want have to fence them off."

The Arboretum remained open during lockdown despite the volunteers having to suspend all work during the first emergency measures. Of course, lockdowns didn't stop the Arboretum foliage from growing, and so our fearless trio of Ron, Courtney and Marg decided during the second lockdown to get back to work to keep on top of things. To make sure they don't overlook anything, there is a rota of Friends volunteer wardens who inspect and report any problems they may find.

Friends of the Arboretum estimate visitor numbers doubled compared with previous years as it provided a much needed open-air respite for people trapped in their homes for long periods. Some of the paths even got three times wider because of the increased foot traffic, according to Ron.

Lockdown also brought more four-legged visitors, which led to increased use of the dog poo bin that is kept by the entry gate. The delightful task of emptying it every two weeks falls on Ron and another volunteer, Cathy Yate. "There are more dogs in the village now compared with before and we get about 10 kilos every week, and have to dispose of it," Ron says.

While Ron doesn't mind people bringing their dogs, he does have an appeal to those who don't clear up after them. "Toddlers are inquisitive and don't know what they are picking up," he says. "There are also times when I am strimming or mowing the lawn and I get splattered. It's not nice."



David Vallance at the Jubilee Way

August 2021

One of the most unusual things occurred when the Arboretum first opened, says David. “I found four areas where tramps had been camping. There was no sign of them, but they left a mess that I had to clean up. The Summer House wasn’t fenced at the time and they could have chosen to sleep in there, but they didn’t. I never found out who they were or where they went. “

Most members of the public probably aren’t aware of the immense amount of time and work that goes into the upkeep of the Arboretum. “There is a lot of work here that nobody knows about,” says David. “They see it but they don’t know that someone has done on it.”

It may be a picnic table needing repairing, a wobbly bench leg needing righting or putting up nest boxes for robins, blue tits and owls – all things that David has done and much more. He also works with volunteers for the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme. “I have seen through two lads from the village who have done their bronze, silver and gold, which requires them to work up to 52 hours to get their badges,” David says.

Do they ever tire of working in the Arboretum? “I sometimes moan about it but I still come up here almost every day,” says Ron. “Even if there is no work, I like to come here and look around and usually have a pair of secateurs in my pocket, so if I see a tree branch overhanging, I will cut it so people can walk through. I just like to see it tidy.”

While the Arboretum is beautiful all year round, Ron, Courtney and Marg agree that spring is their favourite time, when the daffodils, bluebells and magnolias are in full bloom. “When you strim and everything is nice and tidy, and when you see all the daffodils and bluebells, you think it was worth it,” says Ron. “I like to think that if we didn’t do it, you might not see all of that. That is the beauty of it.”

Ann Quon Cordingley

Youth Tournament

The Rec hosted the Five-a-side youth tournament on the weekend of 10th and 11th July.
The event was a brilliant success.

