**Westmill Family and Friends Group AGM**

**Saturday 16th November 2024 2.30**

Present: Mick Gifford, Rosemary Savage, Martin Savage, Ceri Williams, Eve Williams, Karen Lane, Jacqueline Collins, Pam Smith (?) Sue Smart (Sue Smart Gardens),

Joe Heapy (CIC), Adam Twine (Site Manager and CIC) David Birley (Chairperson and CIC), Liz Rothschild (Manager and CIC), Sue Rees (Minutes Sec)

Apologies: Dave Richardson and Ann Durnell

Minutes of the 2023 FFG Minutes were accepted.

Matters arising: will be addressed during this meeting.

**Chairperson’s Report -David Birley**

Many thanks to Funeral Volunteers.

Thanks to - Karen Lane for her management of the Post Boxes.

Thanks to -Sue Smart for her input into the ‘Design plan for the future of Westmill Burial Ground’.

Thanks to Dan Gill for his work in ensuring that there is an up to date Digital Mailing List of Westmill Family and Friends. There had been a problem with people being ‘dropped’ off the list and not receiving Westmill updates/newsletters etc. The issue was raised last year (2023) by the ANBG (Association of Natural Burial Grounds). All is now resolved.

Also thanks to Dan for being a Funeral Helper and covering for Liz Rothschild when she is not in the Office.

Beccy Norman has now moved to Warwickshire, computer based, working from home. Thanks to Beccy for continuing to carry out her role “from a distance’.

A training session was held earlier in the year for Funeral Helpers to be able to assist Families ‘lowering’ their family member into the grave. After the training more Funeral Helpers felt more confident in being able to assist and not have to involve Funeral Directors.

Congratulations to Karen Lane on becoming a Child Bereavement Counsellor.

Liz Rothschild had two books published:

Outside the Box and Weathering the Storm.

Thanks to Adam Twine for all the ‘unpaid work’ he continues to undertake around the Burial Ground.

Joe Heapy welcomed as a new member of the CIC (Community Interest Company)

**Manager’s Report - Liz Rothschild**

This year the numbers are a little lower than last year with 35 funerals to date This has decreased from last years 39, but is only slightly lower than previous years with 2021 after Covid being lifted, being 37 funerals. There has been the expected swing back to favour burials over ashes, with 23 being full burials and only 12 were for ashes interments. As always we expect that there will be further bookings for ashes and burials and we have five funerals booked in over the next few weeks.

 The price has remained the same this year. £950 for a Burial and £475 for an ashes interment. I anticipate that we may need to look at raising the price again for next financial year to accommodate another staff pay increase for helpers in line with living wage, but also to stay in line with the nearby competitors, as well as ensuring all of our increasing expenses are covered.

 Aside from the burials we have also completed 21 reservations this year, which has reduced from last years 26. I expect this will be due our change in the Terms and Conditions and implementing a minimum age requirement.  There have been several enquiries still about pre-reserving for those who do not have the criteria met of knowing someone here/ being diagnosed with a life limiting illness, so there are many who are aware of us and have the information they need to hold a funeral here at a later date and have been informed to write their wishes about being interred with us and keep this with their important documents.

 Currently we have 426 people who have been buried or interred with us (113 are ashes and 313 are burials) and another 358 associated pre-reservations or for those living with a life limiting diagnosis. Of our completed reservations 62 are ashes and 296 are burials.

Most funerals have at least 2 Westmill helpers present as pretty much all require the bier and chairs to be put out as well as parking and assisting families/funeral directors.Most funerals take the form of a gathering in the roundhouse and a gathering for interment at grave side. We have had a few memorial gatherings and celebrations of life at the burial ground and have been asked this year to host a grieving event for bereaved black families who are members of the Manjonzi foundation.  This is likely to happen this year.   A significant number of families use our bier and are either responsible for bearing and lowering with our guidance or do so under the instruction of a funeral director. We have invested in new chairs for the funerals which are not only more compact to store but are metal framed to ensure they are stronger as in previous years we had faced our previous plastic chairs becoming brittle and snapping when sat on which became a hazard to the public using them.

 We currently have 11 active helpers listed who are paid in line with living wage at £11.44 per hour. We do have 2 helpers who simply wish to volunteer their time and do not ask for payment (even when we offer!) We thank every one of our helpers who help us to provide a warm welcome for the friends and family coming to funerals and to also prepare and be sure that everything is set up and running smoothly for each one.  We held another very successful training day this year which included instruction on how to assist families in bearing and lowering and also revision of how we do things. We agreed to buy uniforms for everyone to keep including some T shirts with our logo and new light waterproofs to ensure every helper has a uniform that fits them well.  Colin Crook and Maggie have also been up regularly to the burial ground doing a full overhaul of the bier, repairing the pulling shaft, the wheels and other elements as well as given it another protective coat of oil.  We are very lucky to have them especially given the boiling hot weather they were working in on at least one occasion.  All they would accept was an ice cream by way of thanks!  We are also very grateful to Dan who has been covering for us when Liz cannot cover her usual hours in the office and meeting with families up at the burial ground along with the fantastic Karen who she has also been our unofficial caterer for many events providing plenty of cakes and treats for everyone attending.

 We have had great feedback from friends and families who have attended funerals here at Westmill. Many commenting on how they are grateful to be able to take the time they need rather than be rushed. A couple had mentioned about the accessibility for those with mobility issues and we do always offer for them to dropped into the burial ground itself rather than having to park in the car park and walk the further distance in, in hopes that it will be easier for them attending a funeral but also for those visiting a friend or family member, the 3 gates for entrance provided will always allow them to be close enough. Some have also mentioned dog excrement which we are on the patrol for regularly and provide dog mess bags for staff to remove from site if they do find any, as well as new signage up at the burial ground.

**Office**.

We have fully implemented What 3 words and with the help from our Ground surveyors, they have created a map that covers all the plots up at the burial ground so that we can see each plots, best 3 words to use to provide to families. We are in the process of adding these to our Excel database as well for ease. Becky is also working on a new database to help with keeping track of the burial plots available and this will come into effect when Liz and Adam have finalised the Burial Ground landscape design with Sue Smart. Becky has now moved to remote working which has caused the burial ground office to not be as open as frequently but these new days and times have been marked online. She is available on the telephone and email on Mondays and Wednesdays 10am-1pm and Liz is in the office on Mondays 10am-1pm.

 **Marketing**

We have not invested in any marketing but did use free publications from local areas to advertise our open day.

 Our Social media presence is still active and engaging for those who “like” and “follow” our facebook and Instagram accounts. This helps to promote the burial ground to a different audience and increase our presence throughout the local area. Facebook remains the most popular form of medium. We currently have 389 follow the facebook page, which has increased from last years 355 and 199 who follow our Instagram page, which has increased from last years 159. Posts have been a combination of pictures of the burial ground, blogs from Liz and sharing posts from other relevant charities social media pages and businesses regarding death and funerals. Promotion on local community pages has helped to increase our follower count and resulted in people contacting us to arrange burials and interments. It has also proven to be a good way to engage with those who have a connection to us with things going on with the burial ground and with what the burial ground looks like at various points throughout the year. Posting has not been able to be as frequent as in the past due to Becky working remotely and not being able to take any pictures to post as she used to. If people can help by taking a picture when they go up and sending it to the burial ground email, it would help a lot with engagement to show what the burial ground is looking like and a different perspective.

We do have a question about how people found us on our forms to monitor where to put our efforts with regards to marketing.

 Those who come to us have normally found us through web searches or from funeral directors. Those who decide not to use us, have commented that they either were hoping they would be able to pre-purchase (our guidelines of connection to the burial ground or life limiting illness), or they have mentioned that they prefer somewhere further away from traffic, or in a larger burial ground.

We feel pleased that local people have a range of choice locally – each burial ground with its different approaches and our experience is that some people come to us and choose somewhere else but equally often people come to us having seen the others and select Westmill. So it feels like a healthy situation for people looking for green burial in this area.

 **Events**

The coffee mornings that we discussed stopping last meeting have had a regular if sometimes small attendance which increases when we do an activity.  Those of us who come regularly feel that they clearly have a value - the conversations we have are wide and varied and so we plan to continue them this year.  A big thank you to Karen and Pam who have kept them running by opening up early and ensuring we have milk etc to share with our visitors when Liz was tied to the office.  The Easter basket morning was well attended as was the leaf-making session and the tree now has several more additions with more coming when we have finished them. Don’t forget that the ever popular Norah is back in December to make more willow stars with which to decorate your home or your graves or both.   Mince pies and mulled wine too. Not the last Friday of the month when we are closed but on the 20th.

 This year we finally did as David has been long suggesting and planted snowdrops in the green hence they were not on your lists this year because we think they will establish better that way.  We plan to repeat this process again this year and just need to find a date for the diary.  We can also offer some plants for you to put directly onto graves if you join us at that planting day.  The main plan is to line the avenue with snowdrops and we hope the results of our work will become obvious this February when they bloom.  Thanks David for both the idea and the snowdrops.   The planting was well attended and is clearly worth repeating.

 The Open Day this year was well attended possibly partly due to us saying goodbye to Becky before our move so next year we plan a different approach.  A work party in the morning followed by a chance to be shown some of the wildlife and plant delights at Westmill by Peter Philp one of our Friends and Family group members and an expert on such matters. Date tbc.  Adam is going to produce a list for us of plants to remove so we can help him with the regular invisible work he does to avoid certain species dominating. We want to know your big five Adam please.

 The Memorial gathering was again well attended and worthwhile although Liz is keen to involve other readers next time and also feels we must charge a set fee as our donations did not cover our costs.  Do people think £7 is fair?

Friends and Family day is always popular but we feel we need to review how we organise the planting morning as it is a disproportionate amount of work.  We suggest that next year we send out the list to the nursery and FFG group and ask people to order directly.  We will then just put in our own order for the site responding perhaps to some of Sue’s requests as we plant for the future.

Thanks to the FFG group lunch gets organised by volunteers and we thank David for spearheading this.   And the AGM is always helpful to get a steer from our members about how to move forward or hear the airing of concerns.

We plan to change what we do with the postbox to encourage more letters for it to come in.  Last year we discussed how often it should be brought out and so it only joined us at the memorial gathering and only received a few letters.  We plan to put a post box on the fence for people to leave letters whenever they feel like it and then to transfer them to our lovely box in the office and then burn them ritually each year at the memorial gathering.   We just need a kind volunteer to repaint our postbox and transfer it up there.

 At the end of Liz’s Report there was a discussion about payment for the September Memorial Evening because of the costs involved. Coffee/Tea/ Cake, materials to make Lanterns. Mixture of opinions. To charge or not to charge. More discussion needed.

Suggested a donation is given of ????

**Three Little Words**

The Burial Ground has been ‘mapped’ using ‘Three Little Words’. A map has been produced to show how the sectors of the burial ground have been given ‘names’ so graves are easier to locate.

**Bulb Planting**

This is a big job to organise which in the past has been managed by Beccy. The process needs to be streamlined - further discussion needed.

**Post Box**

The ‘mobile’ Post Box and contents is managed by Karen Lane. Suggestion that there could be a permanent all weather Post Box located in the Burial Ground. This would need to be emptied at regular intervals and the contents sensitively ‘dealt with’.

**Site Manager’s Report - Adam Twine**

Expenses - Trees

              Post and Rail Fence

Complaints about Dog Poo onsite could be Badger or Fox

Sign asking for Dogs to be kept on leads/picking up dog poo

Sue Smart Gardens - Design plan for the future of Westmill Burial Ground – key points

 • Timescales: The expectation is for the burial ground to become less active over the next 5-15 years as it reaches capacity. The design needs to be flexible and low maintenance (ie. ‘future-proofed’)

• The vision for the site is that it would become an **informal mini nature reserve**, offering an oasis of calm, for the family and friends of those buried there, and also for anyone seeking a moment of tranquility. In view of this vision and the Westmill ethos, native plants will be used to provide year-round food and habitat for as broad a range of wildlife as possible

• The existing layout of the site will be retained; the central avenue will continue to draw people towards the memorial stone, with colourful spring bulbs and wildflowers, as well as some additional native shrubs such as spindle bushes to provide beautiful autumn colour. We have already made a start with the snowdrop planting day earlier this year, and we will build on that in future years.

• The site looks out over White Horse Hill and the Ridgeway – this vista will be kept as it is, with just the addition of a few small native shrubs to soften the boundary and provide additional habitats for wildlife

• A key requirement will be the addition of more seating around the site.Likely to be a mixture of simple log benches and an additional seat with a living willow canopy (see below) to provide some shelter on windy days.

 **CIC Report**

Adam welcomed Joe Heapy as a new Director. Joe will bring new skills to the team.

Finances - the latest Financial Report and be found at:

[**Green Woodland Burial Site Oxfordshire Wiltshire | Westmill Woodland Burial Ground**](https://www.woodlandburialwestmill.co.uk/about-us)**made the changes**

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2024 shows a loss of £2500

2023 showed a profit of £5000

**Reasons for last year’s loss:**

2024 had significantly fewer Funerals

Supporting sponsor to the 2023 ‘Kicking the Bucket’ Festival in Oxford. The festival is part of the outreach work of the CIC and would also increase the awareness of the Burial Ground locally.

Costs associated with What3words survey and mapping.

Running costs of the CIC need reducing as we also increased our prices in 2024.

Directors of CIC meeting in January to discuss finances.

Long Term - Adam and his Sister Jane are part owners of the Burial Site. As a CIC there is a Lease for 40 years and then going forward the Burial Ground would become a Nature Reserve.

Local Conservation Organisations have been approached to take control:

The Wildlife Trust

Watchfield Parish Council

The Woodland Trust

When the Burial Ground is ‘full’ £50,000 is available for the future management of the Burial Ground. This money is in a Triodos Bank Savings Account and is steadily growing

Continuing to explore the prospect of Watchfield Parish Council taking over the running of the Burial Ground. Leasehold/Freehold.

A timescale needs to be agreed and a plan to future proof the site needs to be agreed.

Continue running Events as part of the negotiations. Aim for the Burial Ground to become a protected Green Space

Election of Officers.

Pam Spencer - Vice Chair?

Committee voted in enblock

David Birley

David Richardson

Karen Lane

Jacqueline Collins

Ann Durnell

Liz Rothschild

Adam Twine

Sue Rees

AOB

David thanked everybody for attending

Website needs attention in terms of updating and being able to find documents

Meeting closed at 3.50pm

Date of 2025 AGM

November 22nd 2025 at 2pm

TBA

Memorial Evening

Summer Open Day

Snowdrop Planting - 15th March 2-4pm ???