

Celebration and launch of Friends of Whirlow Brook Park Wednesday 23 June 2021

The Lord Mayor of Sheffield, Councillor Gail Smith, and Sir Jamie Benton Jones of Irnham Hall Lincolnshire were guests of honour at a prestigious event on Wednesday 23 June in Whirlow Brook Park, Sheffield. The event was organised by Sheffield University of the Third Age (Su3a) to launch the newly formed Friends of Whirlow Brook Park (FOWP). Those present also took the opportunity to celebrate 70 years since the park was opened to the public in 1951, as well as 10 years of dedicated work by Su3a in establishing a Commemorative Garden. The event also marked the opening of a new shelter in the park, as well as officially launching the Friends group. A lot to celebrate!

Sir Jamie Benton Jones, the 5th Baronet of Treeton, was accompanied by his mother, Lady Margaret Benton Jones. It was Sir Jamie's Great Grandfather and Grandmother, Sir Walter and Lady Madge Benton Jones (nee Fawcett) who lived at Whirlow Brook in the 1920s and 30s and established the lovely gardens there with the help of the RHS. When Madge died in 1938, Sir Walter moved to the family seat at Irnham Hall, in Lincolnshire. The house and gardens at Whirlow were acquired by Sheffield Corporation in 1946, through the generosity of the Graves Trust and Sheffield Town Trust for £15,000, with a view to making it a public park. Much work needed to be done before it opened to the public in 1951.

Sir Jamie, who is the current owner of the Irnham estate, had never visited his family home at Whirlow and was very excited to be able to learn more about the Fawcett side of the family. On arrival, Tom Smith, manager of Whirlow Brook Hall (which is managed by Vine Hotels) gave Sir Jamie and family, along with members of the Friends Group, a tour of the house which they loved. When the Lord Mayor arrived and several introductions made, lunch was laid on for the guests in the Oak Room. Afterwards, all guests walked down to the Commemorative Garden where the new shelter is situated and were welcomed by Brian Cave, Chair of Sheffield u3a. The Lord Mayor said how delighted she was to be there and to launch the Friends Group. She thanked the Su3a for all their hard work over the last 10 years and presented Alison Cowper, Su3a volunteer, with high viz tabards for all the volunteers. She also asked if John Bridgland was in the audience and to give a wave - he is the grandson of the Lord Mayor TW Bridgland, who opened the park in 1951. John was 7 years old at the time. She noted that the Su3a Commemorative Garden is an indication of what can be achieved when communities work in partnership with Sheffield City Council (SCC).

Next came the opening of the shelter. The Lord Mayor and Sir Jamie untied the ribbon and Sir Jamie spoke about the history of the Hall and his ancestors, and how pleased he is with all the work that Su3a have done and that the new Friends group has been launched.

"So having never been here before' Sir Jamie said," We have found it today and I have to say I have been totally blown away. I had no idea that it was so beautiful and so well looked after by the volunteers. Thank you also for asking me to be Patron of this merry gang of gardeners. I am very flattered and would like to accept that. I do have my cheque book with me to give you a small donation today."

Shelagh Woolliscroft, Chair of FOWP, who has been the driving force behind the Su3a Commemorative Garden and now the Friends Group added,

"We are delighted to welcome Sir Jamie and his family to his ancestral home and very appreciative of his support. We have asked him to become our Patron and he has graciously accepted. Whirlow Brook Park has been very close to my heart for many years and now that the Friends group is finally taking off, I am delighted that we can extend the work we've been doing in

the Commemorative Garden to the rest of the park and hopefully, parts of the Limb Brook too, in the future.”

She acknowledged the interest and support shown to date and stressed the importance of working in partnership with SCC, in cooperation with Vine Hotels and in collaboration with any agency that wishes to use the park for the good of the public. She thanked honoured guests for coming, thanked all the donors for making the shelter possible, and explained how FOWP will be landscaping the area around it. She outlined some of the plans that FOWP and SCC have for the park and invited people to join the Friends Group. Finally, Tom Smith, Manager of Whirlow Brook Hall, thanked everyone for coming and invited guests to take afternoon tea in the Hall, courtesy of Vine Hotels.

Sheffield u3a video group were there to record the event and there was also a musical accompaniment from ‘Cellar V’ a local band, who regularly practise in the park.

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