Chorlton Voice Bulletin, May 2nd 2021 – Ryebank Fields

This bulletin is dedicated to an update on the Save Ryebank Fields campaign.
This local campaign is growing. Nancy Green and Hazel Gibb have contributed the following information for Chorlton Voice members. We have not seen any planning applications yet, but will let you know if we do.

For more information see https://www.saveryebankfields.org/ or Facebook https://www.facebook.com/groups/FriendsofRyebank/ or Twitter @ryebankfields

"Ryebank Fields is a diverse wild area, teeming with wildlife, home to 65 bird species and a wide range of mammals, including protected species. In total there are around 1400 trees on the Fields including some rare specimens. A native black poplar, Populus nigra ssp. betulifolia, otherwise known as the 'Manchester' Poplar, a clone of one of the UK's rarest trees has been identified through DNA analysis. The Forestry Commission have noted that this tree will encourage and support a host of other wildlife to thrive. These trees are key in the fight against the cruel effects of a changing climate as they can help reduce pollution, and decrease the city temperature. They are also a valuable asset in the management of our local flooding problems as they play a vital role in soaking up rain water.

The Fields have for a long time been a haven for local people, especially families, people exercising and dog walkers, and this has been especially important since lockdown. Over many years they have been used for Community events – picnics, concerts and celebrations. Located in Manchester, with boundaries with Trafford on the north and west side, they are regularly used by residents of both Trafford and Manchester and are complemented by Longford Park which is next to the Fields. It should be noted the two venues are very different. We are privileged to have this wild greenspace on our doorsteps, and it is our duty to protect it for future generations to enjoy.

Historically, the Nico Ditch, an ancient earthwork, crosses the Fields. Up to the late 1920s, a brick works was situated adjacent to the Fields, with clay pits running alongside. It's unclear exactly when the brickworks closed but it was around the late 20s/early 30s. After its closure, the Fields were used as an unlicensed tip from the mid 1940s to mid 1970s. Although there are no records available, it is clear that this resulted in a range of toxic substances buried below the surface. However, the Fields were capped with topsoil and in the 1970s Manchester City Council gifted them to Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) (then the Poly), as sports facilities. In 1996, MMU abandoned the Fields in this function, and tried to obtain planning permission to build houses there. This was rejected, including at appeal, partly because of the traffic problems and pollution that such a development would generate.

At present, MMU are once again planning to sell the Fields to a developer to build housing, and are currently making a choice out of a group of applicants. The ethical aspect of making a considerable profit from a gift from the people of Manchester is obviously not a consideration for MMU. Furthermore, the previous issues which won the appeal, traffic

congestion, access issues, parking and pollution would create even greater problems for our local community in 2021.

There is a great deal of local opposition to MMU's plans, mainly focussed on the local community group, Friends of Ryebank Fields. At a time when green spaces in inner city areas are so necessary and in such short supply, building on a greenfield site, which the Fields have been classified as, completely goes against any green agenda or plans to combat climate change. In Manchester City Council's (MCC) recent citywide Local Plan consultation 44% of all respondents asked for Ryebank Fields to be officially designated as a Local Green Space. MCC said in their feedback that this was the "single biggest message" to come out of the consultation. Friends of Ryebank Fields have a vision and a plan for the Fields to keep them as a naturally rewilded area, where local children and schools can conduct outdoor practical classes and where outdoor events to celebrate nature can take place."

Rare Native "Manchester" Black Poplar tree discovered at Ryebank Fields.



South Manchester residents fighting to save a city green space from being sold by MMU for development are overjoyed that the Forestry Commission have identified a rare native black poplar tree on the boundary of Ryebank Fields and Longford Park. It has been confirmed as a *Manchester Poplar (P. nigra ssp. betulifolia)* which is a clone of one of the UK's rarest trees.

Black Poplars were mass planted in Manchester from the 19th century onwards due to their unique ability to resist the smoky polluted air of the city and thus became known as Manchester Poplars. At this time Manchester was known as Cottonopolis, with its multitudinous mills casting their dust and grime over an ever industrialising landscape. Manchester Poplars were planted to combat pollution and were heralded as the climate solution of the times.

They are extremely difficult to identify and require DNA testing by Forest Research. Healthy leaf samples are necessary and as it was winter time the Friends of Ryebank Fields and the Friends of Longford Park took cuttings which were propagated indoors to stimulate growth. The cuttings produced red catkins, indicative of a male tree which is a positive sign as the Manchester Poplar is a male clone. Once leaves formed these were sent to the Forestry Commision for DNA testing and the results were confirmed.

Sadly Manchester Poplars are now very rare as they were hit by a virulent airborne disease, "poplar scab" in 2000 all but wiping them out in Manchester. It is difficult to produce viable seedlings and so this tree, which is integral to our city's heritage, is in imminent danger of dying out. Other remaining specimens can be found in St John's Gardens, Alexandra Park and Crumpsall Park.

Poplars also promote biodiversity as they provide food for the caterpillars of many moths, the catkins provide an early source of pollen and nectar for bees and other insects, and the seeds are eaten by birds. Our Manchester Poplar must be protected, not only for its intrinsic value, but because its presence will also encourage and support a host of other wildlife to thrive.

Spokesperson from the FORF Tara Parry states “We are extremely worried we may lose our Manchester Poplar. Due to MMU’S development proposals it is at high risk. The tree’s roots are vulnerable as extensive excavations will be required in order to remediate the land for development as it was a former landfill site. Manchester city Council has refused to even assess the tree for a Tree Preservation Order. And even where planning conditions exist, trees are often lost as ‘collateral damage’ during development.”

City of Trees https://www.cityoftrees.org.uk/news/blog-manchester-black-poplars-tall-tale-how-city-got-it’s-very-own-tree Julie Ryan FORF 07887 721557