

Chair's Annual Report for 2024 AGM

BDCH's objective is "to maintain conserve and enhance our community's heritage". Currently we focus on natural heritage while Biggar and District Civic Society continues to focus mainly on our built environment. The two bodies work closely together.

Passing of Gerard Weiner in September 2023

BDCH owes a huge debt to Gerard's vision and energy in creating BDCH and securing Little Mitchellwood as a community asset. A fuller tribute was in our October newsletter.

Agreed priorities for 2023:

- Increase the accessibility of the path network on Biggar Common.
- Improve the signposting of other parts of the BCPN.
- Undertake significant maintenance work in Little Mitchellwood and the Old Quarry – hedge trimming and replacing the wooden steps.
- Install the swift nesting boxes which we bought.
- Take forward the Symington to Biggar multi-use path, either in partnership with SLC if their levelling-up bid is successful, or with our local community if SLC do not get funding.

Paths on Biggar Common

The issues identified on the Hillridge to Huntfield and Biggar to Cormiston paths have been discussed with the relevant landowners, and we now have their agreement to take appropriate action to improve the accessibility of these paths.

The main issues on the Hillridge to Huntfield path are a broken stile, poor waymarking on a short section, and broken gates. Solutions have been agreed, the landowner has offered help with moving materials. A bid for the necessary funding has been submitted to Biggar CC. If this is successful, we hope to have the work completed by spring 2024.

The issues on the Biggar to Cormiston path are more complex. The most difficult is flooding and bog at one point. We are seeking quotes for remedial work from local contractors. There is also some flooding and difficult access through old stock pens. We are again seeking quotes for remedial work to the drainage and have costed and agreed the necessary work to create a simple route through the pens. If we can obtain sufficient funding, we also want to cut back brushwood vegetation which has overgrown a section of the path – this is now too well established to be removed using only hand tools.

If we are successful in completing this work, the next section of path which we hope to tackle is Hillridge to Springfield.

Signposting

An additional signpost has been installed on the Bizzyberry path, and damaged signposting on the Pyatknowe path repaired.



Little Mitchellwood and the Old Quarry

We have replaced the steps in the Old Quarry and helped Micah and “Little Things” Forest School with additional tree planting. We have also undertaken work to maintain the paths and to facilitate the use of the woodland.

Symington to Biggar multi-use path

This has had a roller coaster year. The route was included in South Lanarkshire Council’s proposals for a “Clydesdale Way”, the focus of their bid for Levelling Up funding. We postponed further action pending the outcome of this.

The initial bid was rejected, so we then began investigating options to establish a preferred route and find funding. Unexpectedly, at the end of November, the Levelling Up funding bid was granted, and so we are now back to talking to the Council about how we work with them on this project.

Other Activities

Path maintenance

We were successful in bidding for funding for a heavy-duty battery electric brush cutter from SSE Renewables Windfarm Fund, and this has been bought and used to maintain several local paths, including Pyatknowe, Little Mitchellwood, and the church path in Symington.

Cowgill Ridge Path

Although not part of BCPN, the path up Cowgill Ridge is well used both by locals and visitors to the area. It is also part of the SLC Core Path network. The landowner locked the gates during Covid in response to irresponsible behaviour by some people – this including quad biking and leaving gates open allowing stock to wander. He has agreed in principle to the installation of self-closing pedestrian gates, and SLC has kindly given us 2 gates for this purpose. We hope soon to finalise arrangements with him for installation of these gates.

Swift nesting boxes

As noted last year, there has been a dramatic decline in the swift population in Biggar. A grant from South Lanarkshire Community Fund allowed us to buy 6 swift nest boxes. These have now been installed around Biggar, but too late for the 2023 nesting season. We have now obtained a grant and placed an order for another 6 nest boxes.

Biggar Water Restoration

We have re-established contact with this project. There had been changes in personnel and we had “fallen off” the contact list. A concept report prepared by CBEC was used as the basis for successful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

SEPA have offered funding for the next phase of technical design and Cbec eco-engineering specialists have been appointed to undertake this, programmed to be complete by December 2024. As part of that, Tweed Forum, who are managing the project, intend to undertake face to face community engagement. We will be involved in this.



Donation from Biggar Ramblers

We wish to thank Biggar Ramblers for their generous donation of £300 towards the Bizzyberry Path improvements. This was marked by a plaque installed on one of the benches on that path.

Planning and the Historic Environment in Biggar

Mike Chad has agreed to represent BDCH on this SLC working group, although the group has yet to meet.

Membership

We have continued to increase our membership slowly, partly thanks to the QR signs which we installed on the signposts at the access points to the Biggar Country Path Network.

We have found it impossible to take advantage of the offers of help with practical activities from volunteers this year because of the difficulty of providing adequate Health & Safety arrangements. Chain saws are not volunteer friendly. We had hoped to involve some volunteers in litter picking, but in fact users of Biggar's paths and woodland leave so little litter that this has not been necessary. What we need most are volunteers with experience of path repair and maintenance, and the skills to negotiate with farmers and land managers.

We are therefore proposing at this AGM to combine "members" and "volunteers" into a single category of "supporter" which better reflects reality.

Funding

Funding is discussed more fully in the Treasurer's Report, but I note that while we are successful in bidding for funding for our major projects, it continues to be difficult to find money for our routine running costs – e.g. web-site hosting, insurance, membership fees, auditor's fees etc.

Proposed Priorities for 2024

Our draft priorities in the coming year are:

- Complete Phase 1 of the improvements to the Biggar Country Path Network (BCPN) on Biggar Common.
- Begin next phase of improvements on Biggar Common
- Continue to maintain Little Mitchellwood and the Old Quarry, and other parts of the BCPN.
- Install the next 6 swift nesting boxes.
- Take forward the Symington to Biggar multi-use path, either in partnership with SLC, or with our local community.
- Establish systems to fund our routine running costs – through fundraising events, increasing donations from supporters, and including elements of running costs as part of our project bids.

Conclusion

BDCH has made a significant contribution to our local community. We are now in a strong position to see significant developments over the coming year, following lengthy discussion and negotiation in relation to a number of projects.

BDCH can only succeed through the hard work of trustees and committee members, and the support of you, our members. All the committee have contributed, but I am again especially grateful to Graeme our treasurer and to Andrew our secretary.

David Chalmers (Chair)