

THE STORY (SO FAR . . .) OF A COMMUNITY-BASED LANCASTER ENVIRONMENTAL CHARITY: THE FAIRFIELD ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

This article traces the development of a volunteer-based Lancaster charity and uses this 'Fairfield Association story' to draw out the factors which have led to the charity's success, so that it may help others wanting to set up and maintain similar organisations. The authors have been trustees of the charity since its foundation. The article is chronologically based, describing each major project in turn. Important factors in our success are discussed at the end of the article.¹ The Association's charitable remit is: *The preservation, enhancement and maintenance of public areas and amenities in the City of Lancaster, in particular the Fairfield area, for the benefit of the public.*² Since 1996, we have raised more than £750,000 to support our work.

Beginnings

On a storm-swept evening in October 1995 a public meeting took place at the Friends Meeting House in Lancaster. The meeting had been called so that local residents of the rather ill-defined Fairfield area of the city (near and to the south/southwest of Lancaster railway station) could voice their concerns to City councillors and a local developer concerning the proposed sale to him of a small part of a green play-area. Such was the strength of local feeling that, despite the heavy thunderstorm and the fact that the entire play-area was only about a third of an acre, well over a hundred people attended the meeting, which continued well past its proposed close, with those attending making their anger very clear indeed. What had caused the kerfuffle?

The developer had bought a set of ten derelict garages next to the play-area, intending to replace them with houses. If this plan had gone ahead in its original form, probably no-one would have objected. The derelict garages were an eyesore and becoming unsafe. But after the purchase, a main sewer pipe was discovered under the apron to the garages. Supporting the new houses over the sewer would have been very costly and so the developer approached the City Council, asking to buy a small part of the play area. Those living nearby had assumed (inaccurately, as it eventually transpired) that when the houses in Sibsey Street, Wingate Saul Road and associated streets were built, early in the twentieth century, the play area had been given to the residents in perpetuity. They were furious that the Council had not consulted them in advance of the informal agreement to sell. When the extremely feisty meeting closed, nothing much seemed to have changed.

Fairfield Green children's play-area and the Fairfield Residents Association (1995)

After some to-ing and fro-ing, on 8 January 1996, a small group of residents formed the Fairfield Residents' Association, which would oppose the land sale as its first action. This inaugural meeting was followed by a public meeting on 1 February to gain local support. If we were to succeed, we needed to develop an alternative, more attractive proposal and raise significant funds (at least £17,500 plus legal fees) to buy the derelict garages from the developer.

Luckily, a young local landscape architect offered her services, free of charge, to create a new design for the whole play area, including landscaping, planting and moving the play equipment. This alternative proposal was eventually supported by the City councillors and the developer said that he was prepared to sell the land to the Residents' Association as long as he was not out of pocket. A deadline of December 1996 for the purchase was imposed and we began to raise the money.

By the time of the purchase deadline only about £5,000 had been raised. The rest of the money was lent to the Association, interest free, by local supporters. The developer agreed to demolish the garages and remove the rubble when the purchase had taken place. We took photographs of the demolition and sent a press release to the *Lancaster Guardian*, which gave the story front-page status.

The Association still had to find more than £12,500 to repay its loans and also needed considerable funds to improve the play area. So we became heavily involved in jumble sales, parkin selling at the City bonfire celebrations, Christmas carol singing, sponsored Cross-Bay walks and so on. The first Fairfield Association Fun Day took place in July 1996, and involved play activities for children, selling cake and other things, and using sledgehammers to break up the concrete bases left behind when earlier items of play equipment had been removed by the Council. Concrete breaking turned out to be a very popular activity! The cakes included a large rectangular sponge decorated with icing to look like the garages, which was sold a slice at a time.

A children's painting competition to design a logo for us was held, the entries being posted for examination on the derelict garage doors. The winning entry was used as our logo until recently, when we decided that its 'Save our Park' slogan and image had become too specific for the range of projects we are now involved in (Figure 1).



Figure 1 The Association's first (left) and present (right) logos

To improve the play-area, we put a bark-chipping safety surface under the play equipment. This involved moving together various items of equipment scattered across Fairfield Green. We also wanted to re-plant a hedge along one side of the green, put in some seating and erect a notice board for community use (Figure 2).

Improving Fairfield Green and becoming a charity (1996)

To improve the Green we needed to raise money from external sources. We soon discovered that raising funds from institutional sources was very difficult. Most institutions saw us as an unimportant organisation, which would soon disappear. So a bid for charitable status was undertaken, a process which turned out to be both arduous and lengthy. Our Constitution needed to be changed to accommodate the requirements of the Charities Commission, which, at that time seemed to see small charities as oligarchies of self-appointing trustees. We wanted to have a democratic organisation without trustees, with the aim of helping the community to be involved in local decisions. However, this was deemed to be too 'political' and so we ended up as an organisation which had trustees but devolved much of its decision-making to a management committee. We achieved charitable status in September 1996 and held our first charity AGM in July

1997. We were also getting well known locally and supported by many councillors and Council officers.

Improving Fairfield Green and Creating Fairfield Millennium Green and Community Orchard (1998-2000)

We had still not repaid all those who had lent us money to buy the garages, but were now a charity and we had achieved some small funding successes in our attempt to improve Fairfield Green. We were now also on much better terms with the City Council, whose play area we had extended and improved. Then, two Millennium-related opportunities arose. Firstly, the National Lottery had provided funds for the Countryside Agency to create a series of Millennium Greens throughout Britain. We asked for funding to create a Millennium Green in an area a few hundred metres from Fairfield Green. Now usually referred to locally as 'Fairfield Orchard', this area of 2.2 acres was owned by the City Council and leased to a local businessman-farmer. At first, we tried to persuade Millennium Greens (MG) to fund work on Fairfield Green and the proposed community orchard together, and the leader of the City Council supported us, telling MG officers that he was happy for the Council to lease the land to us at a peppercorn rent as long as the farmer agreed to give up that part of his more extensive lease. The MG officers were very keen on what formally became the Fairfield Millennium Green and Community Orchard, but were against helping to fund the play area. To gain the Orchard grant we would also need to find match funding for the £37,750 to be awarded to us by MG; but luckily we could raise some of that through volunteer help.

Then, the City Council itself announced a Million for the Millennium scheme, intended to encourage local volunteer groups and good causes in their work. We applied for and were awarded £21,000 for the Fairfield Green and Fairfield Millennium Green and Community Orchard projects. By 2000, we had repaid all our loans, extended and improved Fairfield Green and created Fairfield Community Orchard.

We created the new Orchard in the winter of 1999-2000 (Figure 2). We recruited a small army of Saturday volunteers and the local probation office provided us with a team of young probationers doing community service. We cleared the nettle and brambles across the site and then dug out an extensive system of footpaths. More than 100 tons of limestone had to be wheelbarrowed down to the Orchard from the end of Sunnyside Lane. During what was a very wet winter, new trees and bushes were also planted. The apple orchard, in particular, became a quagmire.

While clearing the brambles and nettles we discovered a number of stone gateposts left behind when earlier changes to the land had taken place. Some were moved to mark the entrances to the Orchard and the five largest gateposts were used to create a carved 'sculpture' near the main entrance. The Orchard, and indeed the rest of our approximately 55-acre nature reserve is largely maintained with volunteer help; and we now own a custom-built secure shed (with a green roof) to store our volunteers' tools and other equipment.

New Play Equipment for Fairfield Green (2004)

Although the Association had already improved Fairfield Green in a number of ways, the play equipment was now looking extremely tired. Much of it had been in place for fifty years and complaints had also been made about the bark-chipping safety surface. Dogs were using it as a toilet and the large brown area had made the green much less attractive visually. So we applied to the National Lottery Community Fund to replace the play equipment. To enable this, we persuaded the City Council to lease the rest of the Green to the charity, leaving us free to apply for Lottery funding for it. From 13 July 2004 onwards the Council has leased Fairfield Green to us on a series of ten-year leases for an annual rent of £1.³ The Council continues to mow the grass and cut the

hedges for us in the autumn. The National Lottery awarded a grant of £68,000 and we created a new play-area with two sections: one for toddlers and young children (with a fence around it to keep dogs out), and one for older children. The Council had some money left from an EU grant for cycle paths, and decided to spend £9,000 of it to establish a tarmac cycle path on the line of an informal footpath along one edge of the Green, making it part of a more extensive proposed cycle route. We installed a wheelchair-accessible roundabout to support the efforts of the nearby Alexandra House, which provides respite care for children with special needs.

When the new play-area was opened, it became an instant success, and we have worked hard to maintain it ever since. By 2014 the green wetpour safety surface was already wearing out in places and had to be replaced at a cost of approximately £20,000. Various items of play equipment have also had to be refurbished or replaced and other infrastructural repairs have been needed. More minor repairs and replacements are carried out by our volunteers. Many people are unaware that the Association maintains Fairfield Green at considerable ongoing effort and expense. But those who do know, including the Council, very much appreciate our work. The Council monitor the play equipment quarterly for us. In 2005 we changed our constitution to guarantee that the strip of Fairfield Green the charity owned would remain a permanent green space. Then in 2012, the whole of Fairfield Green became a QEII Field in Trust. This status, given to mark the Queen's Jubilee year, guarantees that Fairfield Green will remain a green play-area in perpetuity.

Fauna: Our first farmed nature reserve (2011)

On 8 December 2009, the City Council Cabinet agreed to support a proposal to give farmed nature reserve status to the 16 acres of land now known as Fauna, on the grounds that it and the farmland between it and the Lune estuary was effectively a 'green lung' of countryside that stretched from the Lune estuary to less than half a mile from the city centre. This was the first step in the project to create the Fauna nature reserve. The farmer who leased the land from the Council (and who had earlier relinquished the Fairfield Orchard land) was amenable to giving up his lease on the Fauna fields in favour of the Fairfield Association as long as his cattle continued to graze the fields; but detailed negotiations between him, the Council and others needed to take place. Transfer of the lease was completed in early 2011, for 30 years from 1 January 2011. Once again, the City Council had been generous, and we signed a grazing licence with the farmer for the same period as our lease, in recognition of his previous stewardship of the land and the assistance he had given in agreeing to relinquish his lease. He had already created a herd of fine White Park heritage cattle, which still graze the Fauna fields, and some of the adjacent Flora fields south of Lucy Brook (Figure 2).

Our interest in the Fauna land prompted Lancaster Girls Grammar School (LGGS) and Fairfield Allotments Association to consider their interests too. The Allotments Association was given extra allotments by the City Council, thus reducing the size of Fauna slightly. LGGS already owned a parcel of land within the area which the farmer was leasing from the City Council, and which he leased from the school too. A land swap was arranged, so that LGGS could eventually enlarge their playing field (an intention so far unrealised). This new field contained a seasonal pond on its western edge and the school agreed to let us include it as part of the nature reserve. In return, we paid for a fence around it (now called School Pond), to separate it from the rest of the field.

Our Fauna plan involved installing a permissive footpath for people to enjoy the reserve, running from the northernmost entrance to Fairfield Orchard, along the north and north-eastern boundary of the Fauna land, to the north end of Cromwell Road. We installed new wooden fences and gates around all of our fields, with barbed wire fencing inside the wooden fencing (to keep the White Park cattle from accidentally breaking it).

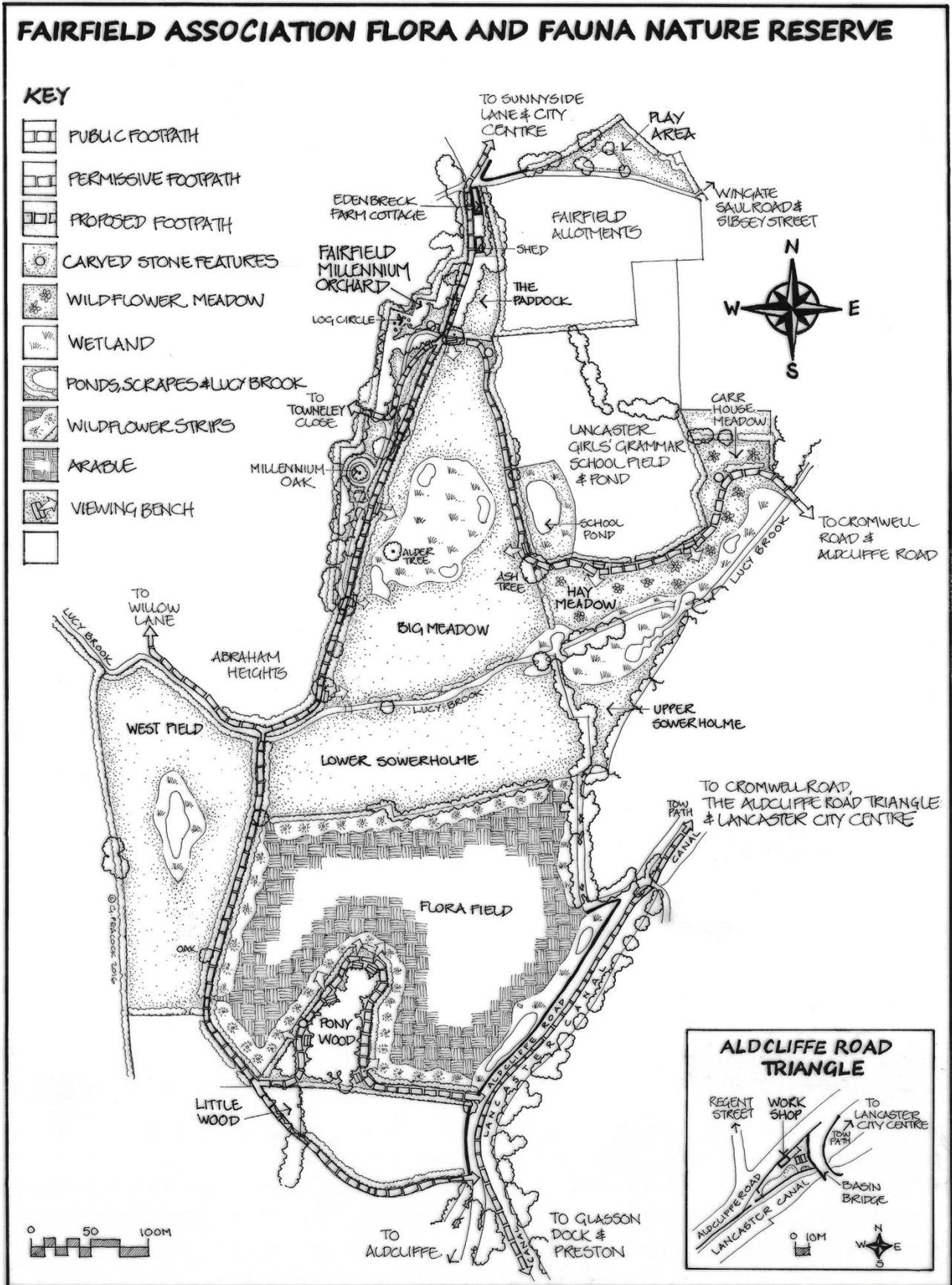


Figure 2 The Fairfield Association's lands

An abiding problem for us has been the DEFRA stipulation to farmers to remove the ragwort (which is poisonous to livestock) from their fields, which we do by hand. The ragwort is extensive and, five years in, we think (hope!) we are beginning to get control over it. In our first Fauna year, using a small army of volunteers, we removed a volume of ragwort equal to the size of a house; and the annual labour involved in ragwort removal is still significant.

The overall Fauna plan involved the creation and development of two lowland meadows, various fields for grazing and a wetland reed bed (now called Upper Sowerholme, as the general area including it was originally called Sowerholme, because of the acidity of the soil). The biggest grazing field (Big Meadow), next to the public footpath running alongside the eastern edge of Fairfield Community Orchard, contains a large area of rushes which was already the winter habitat of a population of visiting snipe. To encourage the snipe and other wetland birds we blocked a land drain (under what is now Alder Pond), backing water up across the area of rush as far as School Pond in the LGGS field. We also created a number of ponds and scrapes.

Fauna is now the most significant snipe habitat in North Lancashire. In winter 2012-13, our highest flush count revealed 95 snipe, 100 in 2013-14, and 160 in 2015-16. Other wetland birds (and indeed bird numbers generally) have also increased, in both quantity and kind though their overall numbers are smaller and so less reliable.

In addition to the financial and other support from the City Council and LGGS's agreement over School Pond, we have been given much essential planning advice and practical and financial support from the RSPB, the Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Lancashire County Council's Community Engagement Officer. We also received £50,000 from Groundwork Community Spaces, £30,000 from the Lancashire Environmental Fund, £17,000 for capital works from Natural England and a number of smaller donations. In April 2011 we signed a Higher Level Stewardship agreement with Natural England to farm the 16 acres of Fauna fields in a wildlife-friendly way until 2021. Besides the funds for capital works mentioned above, this agreement provides annual payments, helping us to fund the yearly management work required. Redundant stone gateposts were used to create a Fauna carving to match the one in the Orchard.⁴ In 2012 Fauna was awarded the Lancashire Environment Fund Best Practice (Natural Environment) Award.

Flora and the Fairfield Association's farmed Flora and Fauna Nature Reserve (2013)

Soon after we had established the Fauna grazed nature reserve, most of the land to the south of Fauna, between Lucy Brook and Aldcliffe Road, became available for purchase. So we decided to raise the funds to buy the fields and extend the Fauna nature reserve. It was difficult to find out who owned the various parts of the Flora land. We first discovered that a small strip of about two acres belonged to the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO). It had originally given to Lancaster Castle prison in the eighteenth century, to be used for the benefit of prisoners, was sold to us in by NACRO August 2011 and is now part of Flora Field. We eventually discovered that most of the rest of the land we were trying to buy was jointly owned by the three direct descendants of Geoffrey Curzon Harries, who had lived locally. The Harries family agreed to sell their land to us because their father had been very interested in wildlife and the local environment. After acquiring the Harries land we eventually managed to buy, from a developer, the remaining part of the field next to Lucy Brook (which had been left over when the Abraham Heights housing estate had been built). This campaign took more than two years to bring to completion, through the purchase of the various parcels of land in 2013. The agreement with Natural England was then extended to cover Flora as well as Fauna (we currently receive over £8,000 per year in financial support for Flora and Fauna, until 2021).

We have named the enlarged farmed nature reserve the Fairfield Association Flora and Fauna Nature Reserve. More than £300,000 was raised to acquire the Flora land. We received donations ranging from £5 or less to £10,000 from supporters, mainly from those who lived locally but also from elsewhere in England and even further afield (e.g. Holland and China). The total donations, including the associated Gift Aid, where relevant, were well in excess of £220,000; and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) contributed a further £80,000 for the purchase of the land and securing our boundaries after the purchase. HLF also provided £16,700 for a learning project about Flora, its biodiversity and history. This project enabled us to: (1) train volunteers (e.g. in hedge laying and chainsaw work); (2) buy tools; (3) run a free lecture series open to all (which we have sustained ever since); (4) lead specialist walks through the nature reserve (which also continue); (5) teach four half-day sessions on Flora to each of eleven classes from eight local primary schools (including visits to Pony Wood) and; (6) mount a two-day, end-of-project, public exhibition in Lancaster city centre in September 2014. These learning activities extended the educational work we had been conducting in Fairfield Orchard since 2000. We now do considerable educational work annually, using some of our annual Natural England income to fund it. Our websites show our educational materials – <http://www.fairfieldassociation.org/flora/education.html> and <http://www.fairfieldassociation.org/learningzone/>.

Weather conditions in North West England mean that grazing is preferable; and our cattle are more helpful for wildlife than sheep.⁵ With advice from the RSPB and Natural England, we created the large arable field (now called Flora Field) because an arable/grazing mix is better for wildlife than grazing alone, as it provides more food and cover. We laid existing hedges through Flora and planted new ones, to encourage insect, bird and small-mammal life and we left some strips in the middle of Flora Field to go wild (thus also preserving some of the medieval lynchets). We established a three-metre strip around the perimeter of Flora field, some of it for a wild-flower mix and some of it to create winter fodder for birds and small mammals. We are conserving Pony Wood, the copse at the south end of Flora Field through a programme of preservation and planting. South of Pony Wood new trees have been planted to connect it to another copse (Little Wood) near the adjacent public footpath. We intend, once we have raised the funds (which we have been trying to do since 2013), to install a new permissive footpath, running around Pony Wood from the public footpath beside it to Aldcliffe Road. This will provide a new walk enabling people to enjoy the views from the edge of Pony Wood across the nature reserve to Lancaster Castle. The other fields in Flora, like those in Fauna, are dedicated to grazing and we have also created ponds and scrapes in them to attract wading and wetland birds. We have no-cost agreements, helpful to both sides, with both our arable and grazing farmers.

Supporting Other Volunteer Groups

The Fairfield Association has always wanted to help like-minded groups, as we know how difficult it was for us to get started. Most of these volunteer organisations are local to Lancaster (e.g. the Friends of the Storey Gardens, the Friends of Greaves Park) but some are further afield (e.g. in Liverpool and Devon). When we began, about twenty years ago, there were relatively few volunteer organisations in Lancaster. Now there are many more, helping to preserve and develop amenities which, in straitened times, the Council can no longer afford to support. There are many groups that have formed without our help, of course, but we are proud to have helped those we have. Currently we are working with the Beyond the Castle project, helping to create wildflower meadows in Vicarage Fields.

The Friends of the Aldcliffe Road Triangle

The most extensive involvement we have had with another volunteer group has been in relation to the Friends of the Aldcliffe Road Triangle (<http://www.aldclifferdtriangle.org.uk>). This group was

formed in 2012 to protect and improve a small area of land next to Lancaster Canal, opposite the junction of Aldcliffe Road and Regent Street. The land was owned by the Canals and Rivers Trust with a long lease to Lancaster City Council. The Triangle group has been working to convert the area into a safe public green space, with areas of planting and natural play opportunities for children. In December 2012 the Triangle group became a self-organising group within the Fairfield Association itself. This status gives it access the Association's volunteer tools and public liability insurance. Moreover the Friends of the Triangle wanted to sub-let it from the City Council but found that they could not do so because they were not a charity. So the Fairfield Association took over the lease and now the Friends of the Triangle work mainly independently and report monthly to the Fairfield Association meeting. Although this project is not yet finished, much work has been completed and the public can already enjoy the Triangle area.

What main factors have contributed to our success?

It may be helpful for others if we itemise the main factors which we believe have helped us over the years:

1. Having an external threat is clearly very helpful in generating beneficial change. The Fairfield Association would never have been formed without the threat to Fairfield Green in 1995.
2. The involvement of local people throughout has been very important. We continually need volunteers to do the work needed. Selling donated cakes from local bakers has been an abiding activity at our many local, fund-raising community events. Every time we mount a new project we get new volunteers and new association members.
3. We run many regular community events, not just to raise funds but also to give something back to the local community, e.g., Apple Days, carol singing round the streets of Fairfield, Easter Egg Hunts, Fairfield Fun Days, Kwik-Cricket matches and Wassailing.
4. Getting the support of influential local people (e.g., City councillors, council officers) is very important.
5. Good publicity is also important. We worked hard at persuading local journalists and others to support us, and we put out press releases at every opportunity. The more widely we became known, the more support we got, and the more influential we became.
6. Bloody-mindedness is essential. Originally we thought that we would probably fail to preserve Fairfield Green, and to buy the Flora fields too. But local commitment was very strong.
7. It is important to realise that involving the community, including arranging community events, changes the community itself. Until the Fairfield Green project, Fairfield was like any other area of the City. People tended to know and talk only to their near neighbours. But soon, because of the threat to the play area and the volunteer work we had all become involved in, Fairfield became more like a village. People stopped to talk to others they had met while volunteering. Fairfield also became known as an area where there was very little litter. Local people picked rubbish up when they came across it. Fairfield community spirit gets stronger all the time because we feel more in charge of our own destiny.
8. It is important to be alert to new opportunities and grasp each one as it arises, whatever the effort needed to achieve it. You cannot be successful every time but the more practice you put in, the luckier you get.
9. The Orchard project in particular helped us to see how important it is to have an extensive and well-organised volunteer effort, and we are always looking to increase the number of volunteers. In the early years we would have a mere handful of Orchard volunteers at each monthly volunteer Saturday. Now our monthly nature-reserve volunteer days often involve 25–30 volunteers or more, and our volunteers email list is extensive. We only employ

outside contractors when something is beyond our volunteer capabilities. In addition to our group volunteer sessions we now have dedicated volunteer working parties (e.g. the hedge-laying group, who work every Wednesday through the winter months) and ‘stand-alone’ volunteers, who take responsibility for a particular task (e.g. trimming a particular hedge).

10. The Association now has around 300 members; and around 80 per cent of them contribute annually in some way, from chairing the Association to baking cakes for sale at events.
11. Those who work outdoors to maintain our various assets are the most visible volunteers; but many others give up their time to run the Association, develop new activities, raise funds, create and organise community events, run stalls at those events and communicate with our members (e.g. via our newsletters, email lists, Facebook and web pages – <http://fairfieldassociation.org/>).
12. Gaining expert advice and help, collaborating with other groups and continually learning new skills as we move into new areas and projects have all been important for us. Every new project we have embarked on has led us to learn new skills.
13. Openness to new ideas has been important, as it has allowed the charity to develop and grow. A recent example is our new creative writing group, whose work has resulted in engaging community events as well as the writing itself.
14. We could not have achieved what we have without the extensive and committed collaboration and support from others locally, particularly Lancaster City Council, Lancashire County Council, the local RSPB, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Lancaster Girls Grammar School and a myriad of unnamed supporters and volunteers.

The Fairfield Association has effectively been built on the determination to succeed, whatever the odds, the desire of people to work together and collaborate with others for the common good, the commitment of our local community, and, last of all, cake. In June 2017, the charity was awarded The Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS).

¹ We would like to thank Oliver Fulton and Ross Trench-Jellicoe for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² For reasons of space, this article is less extensive than we had hoped. At a later stage, we will put a more detailed version on the Fairfield Association website (<http://fairfieldassociation.org/>).

³ £1 became the standard peppercorn rent which the Council uses for all our leases of their land, ranging from a 10-year period (Fairfield Green) through 30 years (Fauna and the Aldcliffe Road Triangle) and 999 years (Fairfield Community Orchard).

⁴ Both carvings were created by the sculptor who carved the well-known Spirit of Portland statue on the Isle of Portland (<http://www.portlandhistory.co.uk/spirit-of-portland-sculpture.html>), and who used to live locally.

⁵ Sheep grazing creates a closely cropped ‘billiard table’ sward but the tussocky conditions created by cattle are better for wildlife and cow pats are a food source for insect grubs.