Yew Tree Hall AGM 6 July 2026 – Chair report

Well, another remarkable year in the history of our hall! Our year started with excitement and renewed vigour as our 'Friends of Yew Tree Hall' redevelopment fund had reached an incredible £125,000. We pressed ahead with many iterations of the plans, taking feedback from the community through drop-ins and surveys. In October we even attracted the attention of both BBC TV and Radio Cumbria for interviews such was the interest in what we were doing.

With help from Cal Williamson, our local architect, we managed to get our planning permission and listed building consent in towards the end of our year. So a huge thank you to everyone that took the time to review and comment on the ideas and then wrote in to support the plans. Of course I can't tell you the outcome of that process as obviously that's in this year! So you'll just have to come back in 12 months' time if you want to find out what happened!

Our committee was further strengthened by a twelfth member, Judy Johnson, Co-Chair of Governors of Lorton Primary School, who joined us as a representative trustee for the school. It's great to have that formal tie-in with the school again so many thanks to Judy.

As you may know, Yew Tree Hall 'lost' its title deeds in a flood in the 1940s so we spent some considerable time redefining the property and curtilage around the garden and river bank. Our solicitor advises that Land Registry is about two years behind so it may be some time until we receive the final confirmation.

Catherine will speak to the finances in due course but it is worth mentioning that nearly all our efforts are focussed on the redevelopment fund. However, we still have to pay the bills and maintain the hall. Like everyone, our costs continue to rise but we did realise a significant reduction in electricity costs by changing supplier. However, it still costs us the best part of £1k per month to keep the hall running.

Our social events programme remains healthy with a number of events and coffee & cake mornings taking place – thank you to Melbreak Communities for their continued support in this area and their wider support in terms of grants and communication.

Hires and occasional events dropped off slightly, largely due to the cessation of the U3A Bowls group but the Move to Improve class has now become a regular weekly hire. We are grateful to all hirees for choosing to use Yew Tree Hall as their venue for their particular activity.

Working in partnership with Lorton Parish Council in the dedicated Development Group was hugely important to the Trustees – it provided cohesiveness, an inextricable link, between the two main representative bodies of the community. And of course it was the original work done by the Parish Council that led us to the decision to redevelop the hall. On behalf of the trustees, I formally thank Peter as Chair and the Parish Council for their help and input to the project and especially to Cathy Lee, who without her drive and determination, the project simply would not be where it is.

We held a number of notable fund raising initiatives not least of which was the Grand Auction in November raising an incredible £22,000 in one night! Again, many thanks to everyone that donated an item or service, or bought things like a year's supply of ginger cake for a princely sum! But what an incredible night of fun and laughter – led by our tame auctioneer, Seth Armstrong. We'd also had great fun at the ceilidh in May raising over a £1000.

We managed to sell off most of the old items in the basement that raised another £1200 and cleared the under-croft to a large extent. Other sources of income were £4600 from Gift Aid which we registered for 18 months ago. And because our treasurer, Cath Armstrong, shrewdly switched our development fund into an old deposit account, we've attracted over £1000 in interest.

To coincide with the grand auction, and to celebrate the humble beginnings of Jennings in Lorton, the new owners of Jennings launched a brand new, heritage beer – Lorton Ale. They donate £1 to us for every bottle sold. We very much keep in touch with Jennings and with Rebecca Canfield, the owner of Jennings – we appreciate their ongoing support.

Just after Christmas we also launched our brand new website, Lorton Yew Tree Hall.co.uk. The best thing is that it was all put together and continues to be managed by Rachael Jennings, the six times great grand-daughter of John Jennings who built… this place. We're very grateful to Rachael who gives her time each week to update the site.

As part of the survey work connected with the redevelopment of the hall, it was identified that there were some minor concerns in the roof. It was last reroofed in the 1990s but used a non-breathable membrane (correct at the time) meaning the roof timbers are subject to extremes of temperature and humidity. At some point we will need to rectify this but it is hoped we can do it in conjunction with the overall longer term plans.

Aside from our plans to revolutionise the access arrangements, toilets and kitchen area, we are actively seeking out audio visual solutions for the hall. One of the key concerns is the poor sound quality so we intend to install acoustic boards, improved PA equipment and an electric drop down screen; after a full redecoration of our crazy paving effect ceiling of course. We're also looking to improve storage by using the space at the top of the old stairs.

Running the hall and any events takes a lot of time and coordination. If it wasn't for the hours of work and organisation put in by trustees and volunteers alike, they simply would not happen. I'm not sure people fully appreciate the time it takes to run an active village hall, and a charity to boot, let alone all the events we run. So, on behalf of the whole community, I say *thank you,* to you, all the trustees and volunteers, who give your time to keep Yew Tree Hall what it is, and what it is to become.

Of course, we need money to realise our vision, £120,000 more to be precise. Our community target is £300,000 and while £180,000 raised so far is an incredible amount, we now need the final push.

The people that use this wonderful, historic building are the local community. No one else is going to look after it, no one else is going to pay for it – we may get grants to help us but ultimately it's us, the people, who make up this lifestyle we all enjoy. The views, the location, the buildings, the organisations, the social occasions, the friendships, that's the Lorton community. And we help create that.

Every time we do maintenance, pay for something or make a donation, it's an investment. We are investing in this community, in the people, in future generations and in the very fabric of this, Yew Tree Hall. We have to do everything we can to raise that £120,000 to give ourselves a facility that is fit for everyone to use and fit for the next 100 years. If you have £10 or £10,000 we'd be delighted to hear from you.

Thank you Lorton, thank you everyone, for making Lorton, Lorton. It's a grand place. Thank you.