

FRIENDS OF



ASTON'S EYOT

Annual Report 2014-2015

In our fifth year since the Friends were founded we have concentrated on work enhancing the site and facilitating others who wanted to make use of its special character, rather than organising public events of our own. We did however continue with our popular annual dawn and dusk chorus walks, and a public plant identification walk; our plant identification group led by Claire Malone-Lee also met regularly.

We applied for and were fortunate to get a £12,855 grant from the local charity the Patsy Wood Trust to continue tree work (pollarding, thinning the plantation), create new plantation edge (multi-species hedge, sun-trap bay), removing some overshading ash and sycamore in the orchard, and most importantly get a secure shed to store our tools, and also to buy more tools so that whenever we have a work day everything is there on-site. The Armastore shed has been a great success; it blends surprisingly well, and once the trellis we added is covered in ivy, clematis and honeysuckle it will be scarcely noticeable. In addition to the temporary fencing around the new hedge area along Plantation Path, we have made some exclosures in the plantation to allow understory to grow up without being browsed by deer. Various studies have show that a good understory is important for insects and birds. The fruit trees responded well to shade removal, and there has been a bumper crop of apples this year (as also blackberries).

Some of the excess logs from thinning work were exchanged for larger ones to be used as seats as several people had requested – three of these have worked well, but one placed near Boathouse Corner was dragged to the bonfire site and burnt by boat people...

The rowan trees we planted in our first year are now fruiting, so there is more autumn food for thrushes – previous there was a gap on Aston's between the early fruiting hawthorn and late-fruiting ivy, but we are beginning to fill that in. The bird-seed patch we started this year has seen an eclectic mix of species, but the main 'crop' has turned out to be a large brassica (mustard or rape-seed) that flowered late and whose seeds are still unripe at the time of writing.

We have facilitated use of Aston's Eyot by ITV (making a series of Lewis), Isabel Anino Granados's 'Conversations with the Planet' contemplative walks in September and Stuart Mabbutt & William Mankelov's 'Interactive hands-on nature and sensory experience' in October. ITV gave us £1000 for helping them park vehicles and make a pontoon bridge without negative effects on the site, and we had a surprise donation of £150 from Paul Jepson after he made an unexpected profit from a meeting on rewilding held at the Isis pub.

We have continued monitoring wildlife, mainly plants, birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and butterflies on Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys. Nestboxes continue to be heavily used by Great Tits and Bluetits, and one of our Tawny Owl boxes has had a resident quite regularly. This was not a year with spectacular discoveries, but we had a few migrant Painted Lady butterflies, and a Lesser Whitethroat sang in the orchard for several weeks. Japanese Knotweed has now nearly disappeared, and waterside plants from the old meadow vegetation are re-emerging along the banks where protected. Worse news was a mink that appeared on the Cherwell in spring and summer, possibly responsible for the observed rapid loss of several broods of ducklings; BBOWT offered to catch and remove it, but in the event no action was taken.

The City Council parks staff regularly mow the paths on their land at the Kidneys, and also have an arrangement with Christ Church to mow the main paths in Aston's Eyot. Due to staff illness that only happened once this year, but we have agreed with them to mow to our timetable in the best interests of plants along the paths. As usual we participated in the city-wide OxClean tidy-up, in addition to our own rubbish collection days.

Although we have had fewer rough sleepers in tents this year, there were persistent problems with illicitly moored boats and their occupants through much of the period. It is to be hoped that forthcoming regulations under new legislation will make moving boats on easier in future. Another problem we had was that our website was infected by a virus that diverted visitors to a dodgy sexual assignation site – especially if accessed using a mobile phone. This problem affected many sites based on Wordpress, and proved quite difficult to remedy, but this was eventually achieved with professional help.

The committee would like to thank all those who have volunteered on Aston's Eyot during the year and helped enrich the site – planting, protecting and weeding around young trees & shrubs, planting woodland flowers, maintaining meadow and grassy areas and keeping the smaller paths open. After 5 years, with most members of the committee unchanged, we are keen to recruit more (and younger) members to see the group through to the future. Enthusiasm and ideas are more important than knowledge (as that can be gained!) – come and join us! Committee members for 2014-5 were:

Ruth Ashcroft (Secretary), Penny Bassett, Laurie Burrell (Treasurer), Anthony Cheke (Chair), Tim Lee (Webmaster), Claire Malone-Lee (Membership secretary), James Martin, Thelma Martin (Minutes secretary), Monica Turner (for part of the year), Greg Webster

Finally we report the sad death of founding committee-member Pamela Webber in September, after a long illness.

Anthony Cheke, Chair – for the committee
October 2015