

Sixth annual report 2015-2016

Six years have gone swiftly by since the formation of the Friends, with much achieved and much that could still be done. **Membership** remains steady at around 100 people at any one time. Since the opening up of paths again, use of the Eyot (and perhaps the Kidneys too) has increased steadily among all age-groups and many interest groups, and on the whole this is all to the good. This summer we had to reprint the free A3 colour leaflet after the first 3000 copies all went in 3 years. A Facebook page has been created to highlight events and sightings.

The last Sunday of the month **work-parties** have been well-attended, and have been a crucial to getting key work done. Many thanks to everyone has helped at these and other ad hoc sessions, some very regularly, or have undertaken individual projects such as the patch champions.

We held two bird **events** in May, the dawn chorus walk and the evening birdsong walk, which were well attended. In mid July we held a popular Plants and Pollinators walk, greatly helped by the presence of Ivan Wright who identified the bees seen.

Surveys: Plants, birds and butterflies have been recorded regularly as usual, though in general we have not done as much as we would have liked.

Bird highlights:

The national charity Butterfly Conservation has reported a very poor year for **butterflies**, and this has been true for many species on Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys too. Numbers of all vanessids, especially Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock are well down, despite a large number of Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars being observed on the nettles in early July. Their fate is unknown, but caterpillar parasites are a possible explanation. Numbers of Common Blue had been increasing well as a result of sowing its food plant Birds Foot Trefoil, but very few were seen this year.

Plant highlights?

Many thanks to the volunteers who have championed wild flower patches, pulling nettles to give space to flowers. This is a long term project, surrounded as the wild flower patches are by ever more nettles, but already the results of hard work are a source of satisfaction and the volunteers are to be congratulated. Accident and illness has held back some progress, and one patch, already showing good progress, needs a new champion because of this. An unexpected highlight is the spreading of the Common Meadow Rue on the Thames path from its enclosure, down into the wild flower patch just downstream. There is the potential for many more patches to be created, and anyone interested, please speak to Claire at the AGM, or email Claire, malonelee@btinternet.com, or telephone Oxford 209177.

Thanks too to all those who have come out onto the Eyot and further afield to record Oxfordshire plants for the 2020 plant atlas of the British Isles. Your company has been greatly appreciated. Claire hope to go out again next year and will be in touch to find out who may be interested in coming too.

Grants and associated projects

The Patsy Wood Trust very kindly gave us an extension to the time allotted to complete the projects covered by their generous grant in autumn 2014, and will now

finish at the end of 2016. The extra time was needed to complete work on trees at the water edge along the Shire Lake Ditch (veteran willow pollarding, removal of excess young trees, letting more light into the ditch to improve the aquatic habitat there). We have not wanted to do this work during the breeding season to avoid disturbance to nesting birds, but nor is it safe when water levels rise in winter. With these constraints and the busy schedule of Ian xxxx our tree contractor, it has been a push to get the work done, but happily this has been completed last week.

After the two years of this project, the Plantation thinning has been finished, with some more open areas created at the south end. Along the long edge, a big scallop was taken out of the very straight tree line to create a large sunny sheltered bay for butterflies and other insects; and further along a new hedge has been planted to create a different kind of shelter. The orchard area has been protected by removal or ring-barking of sycamores and most of the ash which were overtopping it and would have eventually shaded out the mixture of fruit trees and native shrubs which make such good wildlife habitat as well as a source of free apples. All veteran willows which in the past were regularly pollarded have now been pollarded again to prevent further collapse, and excess other trees and other growth shading the ditch have been cut back in enough places to allow much more light onto the water to create better aquatic habitats and promote more varied bankside vegetation – while still leaving areas of dense undergrowth for wildlife refuge.

Projects tend to evolve as they progress, and we came to realise that rather than protect every tree and shrub individually it would be better to fence them in groups against deer to encourage low bushy growth. Last winter we created three larger deer exclosures in the south end of the Plantation, and planted them with a variety of understorey native shrubs and woodland flowers. Thanks to the team effort over several sessions manhandling wire netting and post rammers, weeding out the nettles, and sowing and planting, we have a successful result. The plants are growing away well, deer have been kept out, and it has been good to see birds foraging in the low vegetation and piles of logs and brash.

Overall another 400 trees and shrubs have been planted over the last 2 years; this completes all the major planting planned for the foreseeable future.

The tool store which this grant funded has continued to earn its reputation for being vandal-proof. We now wonder how we managed without it.

Path and meadow maintenance and Council input

The main paths continue to be mown twice a year by Steve O'Farrell from the City Council countryside team. This year, thanks to supportive leadership from Julian Cooper in the Parks Dept, Steve has also been able to mow the main meadow area and other small bits as well. Since the cuttings are collected at the same time, this is a very good step forward. Cuttings removal is important to promote good growth of a range of flowers, but of all the maintenance tasks raking up cut material is one of the least popular among volunteers! It's time-consuming and tiring. This year the first cut was carried out in June which was late, but from now on will be carried out in mid May and then again in autumn, which will allow better late summer flowering.

The old knotweed patches and smaller paths are unsuitable for management by tractor, so we are still doing those and other odd bits ourselves.

Japanese Knotweed had a bit of a resurgence this year on the main old knotweed patch on the right of the cinder track. We have tackled it by pulling and a little spot spraying of the worst bits, but we'll need to keep an eye on it. It will only be a serious problem if regular management stopped. The species is notorious for becoming semi-dormant and then returning. Conversely on the knotweed patch treated solely by very frequent cutting (no herbicide), the quantities seen continue to decline. Our other damaging invasive plant **Himalayan Balsam** likewise has been very greatly reduced by regular pulling before seeding, but needs continued vigilance as more seed can be carried in by the river.

Ponds project. This year we have investigated the feasibility of digging ponds to create some less polluted and different aquatic habitats. Under advice from freshwater ecology specialists, this involved making a series of boreholes down to the water table, and recording water levels and water quality from late summer last year to early summer this year. Unfortunately the water quality was very poor in all the boreholes on both Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys, suggesting that the buried rubbish is still having an impact many decades later. Any ponds would therefore need to be lined (set deep to avoid damage), and since wildlife ponds need mostly shallow water they would have to be partly filled with imported subsoil or other material. This raises a number of obstacles to overcome, and it would be expensive. As a result, we have shelved this project for the time being.

A few weeks ago **Great Crested Newts** were found by contractors working on the site for the University Sports Ground extension off Jackdaw Lane. There is no pond in the sports ground; they probably came from the adjacent flood-meadow Long Meadow. Although Long Meadow has a good quality pond, it dries up every year, usually by late spring except in the wettest years. Habitat improvements on Aston's Eyot for the newts will be investigated further.

The Kidneys pollinators project

The Friends of Aston's Eyot are also the friends group for the Council-owned Kidneys Nature Park next door. Since 2013, we have collaborated with the Council and the local Friends of the Earth group who created a "beeworld" patch of pollen and nectar rich wildflowers there. We have since made and managed more patches with the aim of improving the meadow here for bees, butterflies and other insects. This year all the patches have flowered well – but there have been fewer bees and butterflies around to make use of them. Further work next year is planned.

Antisocial behaviour

In January an encampment of nine tents appeared in the middle of the site in the large area normally left completely undisturbed for wildlife such as the roe deer and badgers. Offers of help with housing from Council officials, St Mungo's and local councillors were all turned down, and they eventually left in March after Christ Church took out a court order for eviction. Otherwise there have been fewer problem campers and boaters than in previous years.

Problems such as littering, unsuitable bonfires and dog-fouling continue. We have experimented with wiring together log piles to prevent disturbance in sensitive areas, and have secured the remaining log seating with stakes into the ground.

Campaigns to protect Oxford's nature reserves and green spaces

Although the vast majority of the Friends' work is focussed on our "patch", we recognise that Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys are part of a wider network of green spaces which are essential to both wildlife conservation and the well-being of local people. Both as individuals and as a group we have supported campaigns and projects where we thought it appropriate, for example joining the CPRE's Need not Greed campaign, and looking at the local section of the Flood Alleviation Scheme.