



# Friends of Aston's Eyot

*Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO): Reg no.1185744*

## 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 2020-2021

**The Covid-19 pandemic** has continued to affect what it has been possible to do this year. The larger end of month work parties had to be cancelled through much of the winter and all spring, and only a few small events were possible. However no major difficulties were encountered, and many people stepped up to help. **Very many thanks to everyone who has contributed in one way or another this year!**

**Public access.** Many more people than usual continued to visit the Eyot, and continue to find it a lifeline in difficult times, especially when working from home and when many other venues have been shut. Some problems have ensued from this – paths in winter got much muddier than usual. In March and April, with lockdowns in place, there were numerous gatherings and parties, some large, and often involving fires since the weather was cold. This led to damage to trees, burning of tree-stakes, other minor vandalism, litter, noise, and the creation of too many new paths into the areas normally kept free of disturbance. Thankfully once summer came most of these problems eased. While facilitating public access is a key aim of the Friends, these events did make clear to us the importance of presenting Aston's Eyot as primarily a nature reserve rather than a party zone.

**Membership** stands at 147, up 11% from last year, and 28% up from two years ago. Many new members commented that they have joined to give something back to a place that has become important to them. Subscriptions and donations are up by 288%, for which we are most grateful as this allows us both to fund management and projects and to build more financial resilience.

**The committee** has met monthly one way or another. This year we have included 6 charity trustees: Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair), Laurie Burrell (treasurer), Thelma Martin (minutes secretary), Susie Jakobson-Thomas, and Adam Gibbon. Non-trustee members: Claire Malone-Lee (membership secretary), Rosemary Cameron, and co-opted during the year Charlotte Ellis and Ash Chally-Studasama.

**Website, newsletters and social media.** We're delighted that Ash Chally-Studasama is undertaking a much needed review and update of the website. Charlie Ellis has reinstated semi-regular newsletters with the first sent out in the summer, and with Susie J-T have kept posts flowing to the facebook page covering events, work parties and what's about to see.

**Conservation, management and volunteering.** Pandemic constraints and a wet summer causing much more growth than usual have made it a little harder than usual to get everything done, but all key management tasks were achieved. Meadow and grassland

areas have been mowed at the right times and weeded of nettles in early summer, thanks to small teams of volunteers and a regular scything team. Tree guards and deer exclosures have been maintained. Paths have been kept clear – mostly!

**Volunteers and other help.** The City Council countryside rangers mowed the main paths, bays and the main meadow twice. When weekend work parties were possible they were very well attended with 15-20 people the norm. Small weekday teams accomplished many other jobs. Several people have become wildflower champions, adopting a small patch to keep clear of nettles. Litter picking has once again been a very successful community effort, with two Duke of Edinburgh students assisting for a while. GoodGym came twice with around 20 people to blitz nettle pulling and scything. Oxford Conservation Volunteers came also with around 20 people to finish clearing the ditch of sedge overgrowth at the Muntjac Point end. Elsevier gave us two days of workplace volunteering, and look after one of the old knotweed areas.

**Deer exclosures.** Much as we love to see the roe deer and muntjac, they are present at a very high density and are having a serious impact on tree regeneration and plant diversity (see below – plant surveys). We repeated the spring/summer temporary exclosure on part of the main meadow, where as last year this greatly boosted the flowering of spring flowers such as cowslips, dandelion, and native Star of Bethlehem, then hogweed and other of the more palatable summer species. An exclosure on the Thames bank was also created this spring to protect riverside plants such as marsh woundwort against grazing by deer and trampling by people.

**Trees.** Ash trees continue to be monitored for Ash Dieback. 3 large trees are definitely infected, 3 more possibly, and some saplings by the Jackdaw Lane bridge are infected. The spread of this disease is proving slower than we had expected, though spread it almost certainly will. A small number of elms also died this year, as elms do nowadays when they get to a certain size because of Dutch Elm Disease. A few trees which had died and/or become unstable near paths were felled last winter.

**The Plantation.** This spring the tree species in the Plantation were mapped to help develop plans for this area post ash dieback, since so many of the trees are ash here. We are planning to fell a few of the weaker ash here where this will promote the growth of the smaller oak and alder trees present.

**Pollution in the Shire Lake Ditch.** Water quality has continued to be monitored regularly, especially near the street drainage outlets at Jackdaw Lane bridge, by the school, and from the scrapyard. All year it has been clear that there is sewage pollution still coming in at the Jackdaw Lane Bridge: high ammonia and phosphate levels, sewage smells, and sewage “fungus” (actually bacteria) present. Thanks to all those who helped badger Thames Water and the Environment Agency about this – we were very relieved that two FoAE members saw TW staff testing the water and were able to discover that they had located which area of housing the pollution was coming from and were taking steps to identify exactly which the culprit buildings were so that the plumbing can be rectified. We will keep monitoring – it takes time for the pollution to dissipate as it binds to the silt in the ditch.

**The Kidneys.** FoAE is also the friends group for the Council-owned Kidneys Nature Park next door to Aston's Eyot – together the two sites complement each other in terms of habitats, and in many ways act as a single unit for wildlife and walkers. In spring we agreed a plan of tasks this year with the Countryside team: re-gravelling some paths to reduce winter mud, mending fences, provision of a noticeboard, more pollinator patches, and further tree and shrub planting to improve biodiversity. In the event, the Countryside team have been seriously set back by lack of staff and by the extent of growth this year on all reserves. In the end, other than routine tasks, only the repairs to the metal footbridge have been done, We will go ahead with the planting this winter.

**Student projects.** Projects carried out on Aston's Eyot this year have included one on people and green places, one on phosphate pollution in the Thames, and one on the nutrient content of pollen in relation to flower selection by bumblebees.

### **Surveys and sightings – interim report**

The year's most significant event was the visit of the Oxfordshire Badger Group, who vaccinated 11 badgers over two nights in May, including one white animal and a cub. The peanut bait was so attractive that a mother vaccinated the first night brought her cub with her into the trap the next night ! The camera traps suggest we still have two white badgers. Our annual badger hole census in February revealed fewer holes than usual (64 entrances compared to 82 last year), but that does not necessarily imply fewer badgers - they were in the same areas as before (3 main setts on the Eyot, one on Meadow Lane rec.), though some inactive holes were reopened later and a few new ones dug.

Other mammals recorded included the usual roe deer (max. 8 seen together), and muntjac (max 4 together but almost certainly more present), both of which bred successfully on the Eyot. There was an unconfirmed sighting of the now rare water vole in the ditch; no otters or mink were seen this year, but there were several sightings of a weasel. Camera trapping by Sarah McFadden also revealed foxes, squirrels, wood mice, brown rats and the occasional rabbit, now scarce on the Eyot.

For birds 2021 was notable for the regular presence in late summer of nuthatches, previously only seen once, and sightings of a marsh tit in February; a pair of coal tits, rare in the city, bred by the sports ground. Sparrowhawk young were heard after fledging, but the nest was not found. Kingfishers were less in evidence than usual, but ring-necked parakeets are increasingly seen and heard. Mild winters have meant few interesting waterbirds in winter on the Thames and Cherwell, with no sightings of goosander, grebes or coot during 2020-21. Nestboxes were checked and young ringed in May, though some had already fledged; there was 90% occupancy, with (of known occupants) 5 blue tit nests and 18 great tits.

There were several sightings of grass snakes, but it is very much a matter of luck. Frog and toad numbers are well down on previous years, with no frog spawn seen in the ditch this spring.

It was generally a rather poor year for butterflies with numbers and variety down on previous years, though a migrant painted lady, sporadic in recent years, was seen in August, and marbled whites returned to the Kidneys, enjoying the recently established knapweed patches.

Other wildlife was not formally surveyed, though photographs of a variety of insects appear in our calendar. **Please do continue to send in sightings and photos** of plants and wildlife seen – it really does help for keeping a record of what's present. Send to [anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com](mailto:anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com).

## **Plant report** (Claire Malone-Lee)

2020 ended with a fair amount of anxiety about the plants on the path edges, the river edges, and the areas of scrub, woodland and plantation because so much footfall during lock-down had widened the paths. I expect the sea of mud lives in people's memories. At the same time it was good that so many more people were benefiting from the experience of being out of doors on the Eyot and taking an interest in its biodiversity. The path edges have recovered, but not all the diversity of plants. Some of this is probably because of past trampling, but we are increasingly conscious that some of the common nectar bearing plants we want to encourage as food for the insect population are being browsed by the deer, so are flourishing only where they are protected by fencing.

This year's rather limited plant recording has shown a reduction in species out in the open, unprotected areas, both where seed mixes have been introduced and in plants that have been more numerous in the past such as violets, tufted vetch and bird's-foot trefoil. This all seems to be due to browsing by deer. The return of the Pyramidal Orchid on Middle Way after an absence of five years since its first appearance in 2016 was a delight, but as this too was browsed after several weeks, we hope the fencing now placed round the plant will allow it to flower again next year. The only species of wild flower not previously recorded on the Eyot but found this year was a little group of young greater celandine plants that appeared in the Orchard.

On the positive side, it's now clear that there is a range of plants that the deer don't eat, many of them woodland edge plants, and excellent for insects, such as ground ivy, garlic mustard, hemlock, walted thistle, wood forget-me-nots. Ten of our wonderful **wild flower patch champions**, now cover in sections the whole of the woodland end of Woodpecker way. They keep the nettles at bay so that these wild flowers can flourish and increase. Wild flower patch champions take on a small area and do what they can, whenever they can. The conversations the wild flower patch champions have had with people passing, together with the information on the web page, has led to a good number of new recruits to the role. Do get in touch if you are interested.

*Fuller versions of plant and wildlife reports will appear in future newsletters. A more formal version of this report from the Trustees will be sent to the Charity Commission in the next few weeks, the one for 2019-20 is available on request.*