



Friends of Aston's Eyot – Annual report to members for 2012-2013

The Friends, formally established in October 2010, have now completed three full years of activity on the Eyot. As before we have had public events, sought and received grant money for projects, and volunteers have worked on the site and kept up wildlife surveying. We also became the official 'friends' group for the adjacent City Council-owned Kidneys Nature Park, which allows us some input into its management.

The most conspicuous change for most people will have been the flower meadows, carpeted in a dazzling show of white ox-eye daisies in mid-summer. The big area left of the path from Jackdaw Lane was pure nettle and thistle when we started, and the patch to the right of the path further on was previously a large Japanese Knotweed thicket. A combination of mowing, pulling up and weedkiller (glyphosate) has almost eliminated the knotweed here, while the alternative treatment (fortnightly scything) is gradually weakening it in another patch. The other unwanted invasive weed, Himalayan Balsam along the river bank, has been controlled by pulling plants before they flower – as it is an annual, no seeds = no plants.

We obtained a grant from the landfill tax, via WREN (Waste Recycling Environmental Ltd.) to buy a variety of trees (and tree-guards) and other plants, complete the thinning of the plantation, and pollard some very overdue willows along the ditch - this was done by contractors in February-March. We got a further grant from the National Lottery's OPAL Fund (Open Air Laboratories), administered by the Natural History Museum, to produce a free A3 colour leaflet about the wildlife on the Eyot, and to buy some extra equipment to use for surveys and public wildlife events. For the second year we have produced a colour calendar illustrated by photos taken on or around the Eyot. For next year's calendar we are holding a photo competition and invite contributions from all Eyot users.

During the year we held a number of organised events: nestbox-building (November), big litter pick (January), Oxclean follow-up litter-pick (March), fun dog show at Isis School (May), dusk and dawn chorus bird walks (May), tree and flower walk (July), bat and moth evening (August), together with a number of tree planting and weeding events. The nestbox building was partly for local people to build their own boxes, but we also put up tit boxes in the Kidneys, and built boxes for larger birds, Tawny Owls, Kestrels and Stock Dove/Jackdaws that we put up on the Eyot. Litter picking is best done in winter after the nettles have collapsed and all the bags and tins emerge from hiding in the vegetation. The dog show was a successful fun day with a surprising number of enthusiastic participants, and their owners enjoyed it too! Although there is an ongoing problem with dog poo along the paths, we wanted to make clear that we have no issue with dog walking on the Eyot. Bird and flower walks were well attended, though the bat & moth night was somewhat dampened by the failure of the generator, however the battery-powered traps caught moths and the detectors found bats.

As the Eyot is already well-wooded, we are only adding trees very selectively, mainly to increase the diversity of species present, and each one has to be protected by 4ft guards against deer, which is quite labour-intensive. Happily survival is generally high, though some species, notably Scots Pine, are proving harder to establish. In the plantation we are beginning to underplant with hazel in the brash piles left from thinning, which allows some protection without having to use the plastic guards.

Compared with past years there has not been a major problem with rough sleepers, though a few tents have appeared, most did not stay long. Luckily we were spared the raves that have happened in the past. As last year, the rowing races in February displaced houseboats moored on the river, and some parked up illegally along the Cherwell, where powered boats are supposed to be banned. As with rough sleepers, the presence of one can attract others, and at one point there were 6 boats along the Eyot shore of the Cherwell, which only shifted after formal legal warnings from Christ Church. There have been one or two boats back since September.

We maintain ongoing surveys of birds, mammals, reptiles & amphibians, butterflies, moths and plants (see our website for details), and try to organise spot assessments of other groups – this year in the summer a student from Brookes University surveyed ground insects etc. using pitfall traps. Each year we add a few species to the bird list (though none globally exciting!), and we were delighted to find a rare Clouded Yellow butterfly, a migrant from southern Europe in August.