



Friends of Aston's Eyot - Annual report to members for 2013-2014 at the Annual General Meeting on 23 October 2014

The Friends, established in October 2010, have now completed four years of activity on the Eyot. Aston's Eyot belongs to Christ Church college, who have given the Friends fairly free rein to manage it as a nature reserve and for quiet recreation. Having been very busy with two years of grants and the attendant hard work implementing the projects applied for, the committee decided on a year of consolidation. We continued the work of developing flower meadows, looking after planted trees, eliminating knotweed and wildlife surveying, which mostly required volunteer manpower rather than money. We reinstated monthly work parties for ongoing management, and also held a number of one-off public events. We are also the official 'friends' group for the adjacent City Council-owned Kidneys Nature Park, which allows us some input into its management. We have been collaborating with Oxford Friends of the Earth on their bee-friendly flower plots on the Kidneys, and also worked to clear overgrown brambles and a new riverside path there. Under a standing agreement with Christ Church, the City Council mowed the main Eyot paths twice, now collecting the cut grass etc. by machine, thus saving us the effort of raking it up.

An article by the Friend's Chair in the **Oxford Times** in August brought a flurry of interest and visitors who discovered this unexpected wild place on their doorstep for the first time.

Many people have commented on and appreciated the **flower meadows**, once again covered in a dazzling show of white ox-eye daisies in mid-summer. Knotweed is now largely controlled, with only a few spikes coming up in the main patches treated by mowing, pulling and glyphosate (Roundup), while the scythe-only patch (off Middle Way) also now has very little coming through. The increased variety of flowers in these patches has brought back Common Blue and Small Copper butterflies. A new project, on the right of the Cinder Track near the turn to Boathouse Corner, is to create a **birdseed patch**. We have cleared it of nettles and will sow annual small-seeded crops (flax, millet, mustard etc.) in the spring hoping to bring back Linnets and encourage other finches.

In the autumn of 2013 we planted oak trees and understory shrubs (hazel, dogwood etc.), and had other **work sessions** protecting these and earlier plantings with tree-guards against deer. Some of our members have brought on wild trees from seedlings in their gardens which have been used in recent planting sessions. The A3 **colour leaflet** produced with funds from last season's OPAL grant has been very popular and won praise from Christ Church and others.

For the third year we have printed a **calendar**, the 2015 edition including for the first time photos solicited from general users of the Eyot, not just the committee. We had submissions of large numbers of photos from a dozen members of the public with a good range of subject matter, and we selected several either for the month picture or for additional illustrations in the extra pages at the back of the calendar. It was billed as a competition (to get a free calendar), but the undoubted 'winner' was Paul Freestone whose photos feature in 3 of the months.

As usual during the year we held a number of **organised events**: big litter pick (January), followed by Oxclean, also a litter-pick (March), fun dog show at Isis School (May), dusk and dawn chorus bird walks (May), bat and moth evening (August), flower walk (September), together with a number of tree planting/protecting and weeding events as mentioned above. Having had nestbox building days in previous years, we now have around 30 standard **nestboxes** on the Eyot and Kidneys, most of which are occupied by Bluetits and Great Tits in summer. One owl box was occupied by Tawny Owls, but the Kestrel and Stock Dove boxes have not been used yet, except in some cases by squirrels. We choose winter for **litter picking** as the nettles have collapsed and all the bags and tins emerge from hiding in the vegetation. The **dog show** was again a successful fun day with many enthusiastic participants (both canine and human) and raised funds for the Friends – special thanks to Kate Patullo for organising it, helped by Ellie Patullo, Marian Pocock & others on the day. However it may not happen again unless new organisers can be found. The **bird and flower** walks were well attended. The **bat & moth night**

was a bit cold and moths were fewer than usual, but we much appreciated the loan of Oxford Urban Wildlife Group's generator to power the traps; both pipistrelle species and a Daubenton's Bat were located using bat detectors. Two members also ran a moth & bat evening for OUWG at their Boundary Brook reserve.

As with last year, there has not been a major problem with **rough sleepers**; a few tents appeared, but, with one conspicuous riverside exception, did not stay long. One narrowboat remained moored (but not lived in) by the Cherwell all year, and from August another small boat with all too conspicuous residents shifted around various moorings on the Eyot and Kidneys – both have now been served with bailiff's notices by Christ Church. There remains an ongoing problem with **dog poo** along the paths – not just unpleasant on one's shoes, but a health risk and nasty for those looking at small plants and flowers on path edges. Many dog walkers are responsible and bag their dog's excreta, but there remain too many who seem to think the Eyot is really just a large dog's toilet; one very noble member regularly removes most of the faeces.

The wettest winter and spring since records began meant that **flooding** kept the riverside path was under water for several months and the current was so severe that the February 'Torpids' boat races on the Thames/Isis were cancelled. However this weather was good for establishing young trees and most have thrived this year, despite the near-drought conditions later in the summer.

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. Each year we add a few species to the bird list either overall or as breeding species – this year we confirmed breeding Tawny Owls for the first time, and one member saw an Osprey migrating overhead in spring. We are planning to create nesting bank for Kingfishers.

And finally – we have just heard that the locally based **Patsy Wood Trust** has awarded us a substantial grant for work over the next three years (2014-7).