



Friends of Aston's Eyot

Ninth Annual report

2018-2019

Membership. This year we had 115 members, a 20% increase on last year, maybe helped by posters asking regular Eyot users to contribute by membership and/or practical help.

The overall footfall on the Eyot remains buoyant, though we made no attempt to quantify it this year. The calmer atmosphere with less drug dealing and drug-related camping (see below) helps, with some people mentioning that now they feel more able to walk here.

Anti-social behaviour has been less of a problem this year, partly attributable to the police operation to reduce drug-dealing on Meadow Lane last autumn. By late winter all tents (mostly involving drug use) had gone, and we have had only occasional temporary ones over the summer. There is much less evidence of drug use since last winter.

There was one all night rave with amplified music which caused a number of people to call 999 (to no avail). Fires are a potential hazard in dry summers, but people were sensible on the whole. However two of the large old willows by the ditch near Jackdaw Lane were burnt out, apparently deliberately.

We had our usual two winter litterpicks (including OxClean), and cleared abandoned camps and other litter dumps. Many thanks to all those who pick up litter and dog poo, this does seem to be working very well currently.

Conservation & management

With the State of Nature report showing worrying wildlife declines, and a report in Nature this week on a 10 year German study confirming the suspected large drop in insects, anything we manage to achieve on the Eyot and the neighbouring areas of the river corridors is worthwhile. We continue to work to improve habitats and biodiversity, and keep at least basic records of species present. The Plantation now offers a much more diverse habitat, the ditch water quality is improved despite that black mud (Thames Water Blitz & Freshwater Habitats Trust surveys). Although the nettles and thistles are never vanquished, the meadow areas have a lot of flowers and are full of insects. Just as important are all the unmanaged, naturally rewilded areas.

Last Sunday of the month work parties have been well attended – many thanks to those who come and help at these and smaller work parties. Meadow areas and bays were weeded, mowed and raked, nettles pulled, brambles cut back, overhanging and fallen branches removed from paths, paths scythed, fences and tree guards repaired.

Paths. Steve O'Farrell from the **City Council countryside team** mowed the main paths and some bays and meadow areas in mid May and late September, as part of the Council's agreed input. Smaller paths are our responsibility – it has been hard to keep up with them with just one work party a month.

We were greatly helped by the following groups, to whom many thanks:

Oxford Conservation Volunteers came twice, to do jobs we would find difficult to achieve. In February they pollarded the willows near Kingfisher Point, and have agreed to do one day of pollarding each winter for us which will keep on top of this task. This October they dug the excess vegetation out of the ditch at Muntjac Point, building on work done there two years ago. The material removed was carried up the bank to make large mounds for use in hibernation and breeding by amphibians and grass snakes.

22nd Oxford Sea Scouts came as part of their woodland badge work, had a tour, and planted goat willows for early season nectar for bees.

Volunteer teams from Elsevier came in May and September and as always got a lot done scything and clearing around the top end of the Plantation and on Plantation path.

Goodgym came twice as part of their weekly running sessions, and helped with nettle pulling and scything.

Christ Church's **tree surgeons** came in September and felled a couple of unstable trees and took off a number of potentially dangerous large branches overhanging the school and scrapyard. They came again at the end of October to finish off and to pull out a tree fallen across the Cherwell.

On the Kidneys the pollinator patches (created and maintained with Oxford Friends of the Earth and the City Council) flowered very well again. We continued to do some minor maintenance here, and have agreed with Council staff that a bit more access to the riverbank would be good. Still no sign of the promised noticeboard and 2nd dog poo bin.

Events. We ran the dawn and dusk birdsong walks in May, and a plants and butterflies walk in June – all very well attended. The Eyot is also increasingly used for other people's events such as "forest bathing" and foraging, and is also one of the routes for the local NHS health walks.

Wildlife reports

Badgers. The February count of occupied sett entrances totalled 96 including 7 in the convent and those on the Kidneys and rec ground. This is a drop from 115 in 2018 and 114 in 2017. It's hard to know whether or not this indicates a drop in actual numbers of animals. In both the last two dry summers many animals became very thin, but whether this affected survival is unknown. **Trail cams** were deployed all winter and revealed at least 5 white badgers, and that a white badger mating with a normal female resulted in one white and one normal cub.

A **weasel** was seen in July on Plantation path, and an **otter** on the Cherwell during dawn chorus walk in May. **Rabbit** sightings remain infrequent; once again no **grass-snakes** were seen.

The **sparrowhawks** bred successfully once again. All the **nestboxes** but one were occupied by blue and great tits, and these were all successful in producing young.

We were pleased to see **Marbled White** butterflies on the Eyot this year as this was a target species to attract – occasional ones have always been seen on the Kidneys.

We are now officially a CIO – Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Following an EGM (Extraordinary General meeting) in May at which conversion to charitable status was agreed unanimously, we put in our application to the Charity Commission, and are now a charity as of 10th October 2019. We had to amend our “objects” (aims) slightly to their preferred wording, as promoting public access is deemed not to be a charitable object.

What we originally agreed as aims in 2010:

The aims of the Friends below apply primarily to Aston’s Eyot (the area of East Oxford land bounded by the Thames, the Cherwell, and Shire Lake Ditch), but also to adjacent areas and the local river corridor where relevant. The Friends will work closely with any body (such as the existing Iffley Fields Community Nature Plan group) working for nature conservation in the East Oxford River Corridor and the preservation of local open and green spaces.

2.1 To protect, care for, and manage or assist in the management of Aston’s Eyot for wildlife and as a wild area.

2.2 To promote continuing open access to the public for quiet enjoyment of the area.

2.3 To maintain and where necessary restore the variety of wildlife habitats including woodland, scrub, grassland, orchards, river banks and aquatic habitats.

2.4 To survey and record species of fauna and flora present, reporting on the results of surveys where appropriate.

2.5 To involve the wider public in activities such as working parties, wildlife events and other appropriate events.

All activities on Aston’s Eyot must be acceptable to the land-owners, with permission granted as necessary.

What we have now:

1. To promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment, including biodiversity, of Aston’s Eyot, the area of Oxford bounded by the rivers Thames and Cherwell and the Shire Lake ditch, in particular but not exclusively by:

a) carrying out work to protect, care for and manage or assist in managing the site as a habitat for wildlife and as a wild area.

b) surveying and recording species of fauna and flora present, disseminating the useful results of the surveys for the public benefit.

c) involving the wider public in activities such as working parties, wildlife events, path maintenance and other events in accordance with the objects or other events acceptable to the Landowners with their permission and in accordance with the objects.

2. To promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of Oxford and the surrounding area the provision of facilities for recreation or other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving the life of the said inhabitants.

The committee have met once a month to discuss plans, review progress and organise work to be done. Of these, the initial 8 CIO trustees were Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair and official CIO chair), Laurie Burrell (treasurer), Thelma Martin (minutes secretary) James Martin, Penny Bassett, and the two committee members co-opted during the year Susie Thomas and Adam Gibbon. Claire Malone-Lee continued as membership secretary. Sue Rowe has sadly left Oxford. The

committee can continue to have both trustee and non-trustee committee members, but there must be at least 3 charity trustees. We elect 3-9, and can co-opt up to 3 more.