Friends of Aston's Eyot

Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO); Reg. No: 1185744

10th Annual report – 2019-2020

The **Covid-19 pandemic** has made our tenth year a very different one, though thankfully there have been no major difficulties. At the height of the spring lockdown many more people were visiting the Eyot – we guestimated a fivefold increase in numbers, with many more families with children visiting. Many people commented on how important Aston's Eyot was to them – "a life-line" was a common phrase used. The pandemic has made very clear how important green spaces and nature reserves are for the well-being of people in towns and cities.

There were (and still are) some tensions arising from competing uses, especially between runners, cyclists and walkers, particularly on the smaller paths. The main path network was deliberately mowed to be kept wider to help people keep spaced. Litter was a problem on the riverbanks in the warm spring and early summer of lockdown, when there were many more young adults visiting than usual especially in the evenings, but it was nothing like the problem encountered at other sites, and soon came under control thanks to the efforts of the local community to pick it up. There was one very noisy rave which the police eventually dispersed.

Membership stands at 132, up another 15% from last year. Subscriptions and donations were up by 35%. In the circumstances, with Covid causing financial difficulties and uncertainties for many, it did not seem appropriate to either raise the subscription rate for this following year, or to press hard for more donations.

Conservation and Management. Thanks to the goodwill and effort of many people, most (though not all) of the management tasks were achieved. Steve O'Farrell from the City Council Countryside Rangers was able to give us a third day of mowing with the tractor as well as the usual ones in May and October, and we hope this will be repeated in future years. The Oxford Conservation Volunteers came 4 times this year to clear minor paths and pollard willows. GoodGym volunteers joined us for one Sunday session, and Elsevier did a very welcome session. We have had two Duke of Edinburgh Award students volunteer with us this year.

The last Sunday of the month work parties had to stop for 5 months, but a lot was achieved through the spring and summer by individual effort, patch champions, and very small groups working well spaced. Very many thanks to all involved.

The Plantation and the new Woodland Path. Although last autumn Christ Church's tree surgeons felled a couple of unstable trees and removed a number of large limbs that could fall on the scrapyard or school, further trees fell in the Plantation last winter including three more across the Plantation ditch path, one too near a walker for comfort. The trees along the ditch bank are older, seem to be more unstable, and many of them are heavily covered with ivy, which is very good for wildlife but the weight and sail effect makes trees more vulnerable to blowing over. Rather than fell

the lot, it was decided to re-route the path through the Plantation. The new Woodland Path was made in April and is now very well used. The old path has now been closed by barricades.

Trees, tree safety and Ash Dieback. We now have a tree safety policy, which was drawn up using Forestry Commission guidance for best practice. This recognises that very few people are in fact killed or badly injured by falling trees (it averages 6 deaths a year, mostly people in vehicles), and that trees at all stages of their life cycle play important roles ecologically, for air quality and carbon sequestration, and for human well-being and landscape value. But we have a duty of care. The policy involves zoning the site into zones according to the level of public footfall and proximity to neighbouring property, regular inspection of trees within falling distance of paths, with problem trees either felled or reduced, or paths re-routed to avoid them.
Ash Dieback, if/when it hits the Eyot, makes this all the more relevant, as many of our trees are Ash. Two large trees are showing definite dieback, but we have been unable to confirm that it is this particular fungal disease rather than other causes.

Ash tree showing dieback in late June this year, with a healthy one to the right for comparison

Meadow areas. One of the questions we have been asking this year is: To what extent are the deer impacting the flora by grazing? This was investigated in a small way by fencing off a section of the main meadow in March. It became clear very quickly that spring species such as cowslips and dandelions were showing more flowers inside the fence rather than outside, though the benefits were less clearcut later. The fence was left up until mid July; and we will repeat this next year. Attached is a piece by Claire Malone-Lee that explores this and other matters further - The plants of the Eyot.

Sewage pollution in the Shire Lake Ditch. No-one who visits the Eyot regularly can have failed to notice the smell emanating regularly from the ditch at the Jackdaw Lane bridge. One sharp-nosed member realised this was more than the usual stagnant water smell and sounded the alarm. Our own water quality tests helped confirm this involved sewage. It transpired that there is a surface drainage outlet at the bridge, feeding in water from Jackdaw Lane and Bullingdon Road all the way up to Cowley Road. The collapsed sewer in Bullingdon Road earlier in the year was probably a main source of contamination, but it seems misconnected properties are also to blame. There has been a campaign together with IFRA to get Thames Water and the Environment Agency to clear this up. Promises are made but to date there has been no effective action and the problem persists. Thames Water personnel have also admitted that there are still misconnected properties around Chester Street, which leads to pollution in the Meadow Lane drainage which enters the ditch by the school. Together with the End Sewage Pollution mid-Thames group, who are concerned with all sources of sewage pollution of the Thames, we jointly asked City Council (Leisure & Parks leader) Cllr Linda Smith for help. She decided that the best approach was to campaign for designated bathing water status for the Thames at Oxford, and the City Council have passed a motion to apply to DEFRA for this. The current interest in wild swimming in rivers, much boosted during the pandemic, has helped this campaign locally and nationally, but the benefits would apply to all river users and to the ecological health of the Thames and its backwaters such as the ditch.

Surveys and sightings

A planned re-survey of the **plants** has had to be postponed until next year.

Birds present have been recorded regularly; there have been no unusual species seen, apart from a Nuthatch in November 2019, a first for the Eyot. Normally we check the nest-boxes to ring the chicks and get a measure of breeding success, but that also could not be done in summer 2020. Our usual pair of breeding Sparrowhawks went missing in 2020, and the warm winter meant that cold weather species like Siskins didn't appear.

Badgers. *The active sett entrance count in February came to 82 excluding those in the convent, compared to 89 last year. So a continued slight decline in actively used entrances, though this doesn't necessarily mean a drop in the number of animals. The Oxfordshire Badger Group plan to vaccinate the badgers against TB next summer, and we hope this can be a way to find out more about the number of animals including the white ones.*

Four **weasels** have been seen this year, including one caught on camera trap, and two found dead on the path by the Thames

Rabbits have been seen, but rarely. No sightings of **otter** or **mink** this year. There was on unconfirmed sighting of a **water vole.** There are still at least 4 **Roe deer**, and the **Muntjac** are seen regularly.

Trail cam video clips have been posted through the year on our Facebook page *www.Facebook.com/ASTONSEYOT* - many thanks to Sarah McFadden for regular work on this form of monitoring.

There were at least 2 sightings of **grass snakes.** The Freshwater Habitats Trust sampled the ditch and the Christ Church Meadow ditch for **Great Crested Newt** DNA but the results are not back. They are found on Long Meadow but we don't know where they successfully breed now that the Long Meadow Pond dries up too soon each year.

Butterflies. Marbled Whites continue to be seen on the meadows. A Brown Argus was recorded on the Kidneys, only noticed because a close examination of a photo of what was thought to be the very similar female Common Blue. It demonstrated the usefulness of taking photographs! In general this was not a particularly good year for butterfly numbers.

Moths were monitored with light traps – records still to be analysed but no remarkable species found this year.

We strongly encourage members to report sightings of birds, mammals, butterflies, dragonflies (with photos where possible) and anything else that looks interesting to Anthony Cheke (anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com), as we don't have enough recorders, and many people are down on the Eyot more often than the committee. Simple lists from regular visits of common species are just as useful as rarities ! We can provide blank lists to use for recording.

The committee continued to meet once a month, with a gap during lockdown, Work on a lease for Aston's Eyot was shelved during lockdown, but is now underway again. We have both charity trustees and non-trustees. Trustees this year were: Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair), Laurie Burrell (treasurer) Thelma Martin (minutes secretary), James Martin, Penny Bassett, Susie Jakobsson-Thomas, and Adam Gibbon. Claire Malone-Lee continued as membership secretary.

We were very saddened by the death of James Martin in April, and miss his legal expertise, hard work, good sense and wry humour.

Very many thanks to everyone who has contributed in one way or another this year!

And finally: Spot the difference! Brown Argus left, Female Common Blue right. There are two differences in the spot layout and numbers. Luckily they are easier to distinguish if you see the upper side of the wings.