



Friends of Aston's Eyot

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

12th Annual Report 2021-2022

It has been good to return to a more normal year post pandemic restrictions. All work parties and volunteering have gone ahead, with lots achieved. Many people continue to visit and enjoy the Eyot peacefully. The hot dry summer meant that the riverside was busy in the evenings and weekends, plants went over sooner, leaves dropped early from many trees and some of the badgers looked a bit thin by the end of the summer.

The committee this year has included 8 charity trustees: Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair), Laurie Burrell (treasurer), Thelma Martin (minutes secretary), Susie Jakobbson-Thomas (membership secretary), Charlotte Ellis, Adam Gibbon and Ashok Stally-Chudasama, with Rosemary Cameron as a non-trustee committee member. We have continued to hold monthly meetings.

Membership, donations and funding. Membership currently stands at 115. Now that we are registered with HMRC for Gift Aid we are gathering Gift Aid declarations from members and donors, which can be backdated to when we became a charity to give some useful extra funds. We also applied for and received a National Lottery Awards for All grant of £3825 to fund path materials, tools and kit, fencing, tree work, and seed. Ivan Wright very kindly donated a projector and screen. The committee decided to retain a higher running balance in the FoAE bank account to allow in particular for unplanned tree surgeon costs for dealing with dangerous or fallen trees, especially in the light of Ash Dieback disease.

Lease from Christ Church. After 4 years of negotiation and long periods of impasse, we have some good news. The FoAE trustees have agreed with the College acceptable terms for a 21 lease for Aston's Eyot at a rent of £1 per year (if demanded). The hope is that this will be signed off and completed by the end of the year.

The idea of a lease arose five years ago when the College decided to spend no more money on managing the Eyot and were looking for a sustainable solution for the site. Decades of previous experience suggested there was little hope of changing their mind on this, so a positive and constructive way forward was thought best. The advantages of a lease for FoAE include the longer term security of tenure, and advantages for fund-raising and for getting help from the City Council and other organisations. We have anyway been responsible for almost all the maintenance. There will be somewhat greater liabilities and a small increase in the insurance bill to cover this.

Website, calendar, newsletters and social media. Many thanks to Ash Stally-Chudasama for working on the website – mostly still behind the scenes as yet. Charlie Ellis has sent out newsletters, and she and Susie J-T have kept posts flowing to the Facebook page. The calendar was produced as usual and sold out, yielding useful income. The photos sent in this are all valuable not only aesthetically but for the record of species seen and the current habitats and landscapes of the Eyot.

Wildlife events. We held a dawn chorus (bird song) walk in early May, a bees & butterflies event in July with wild bee expert Ivan Wright, and a bat and moth night in late August – all well attended. There were also small scale events led by others such as Forest Bathing.

Conservation, management and volunteering.

Very many thanks to all those who helped with conservation and management tasks this year – well attended work parties on the last Sunday afternoon of every month, extra sessions for nettle pulling and pond digging, the scythe team, and lots of individual effort from wildflower patch champions, nettle pullers and diggers, and litter pickers. **The general community effort to keep an eye on things and deal with problems has been superb.**

We also had two days of mowing and some gravel shifting from Steve O'Farrell of the City Council (ODS) countryside team, 4 sessions with groups of around 20 people from Oxford Conservation Volunteers and 3 sessions with Good Gym teams also of around 20 people. Elsevier gave us a day of workplace volunteering, and we had a Duke of Edinburgh Award student volunteering with us.

Public access and paths. To combat the muddiness of paths in winter, last winter we spread 7 jumbo bags of gravel, trialling different sizes (10mm best!). It did help, but more will be needed this year. Oxford Conservation Volunteers very successfully reprofiled two sections of the path along the Thames bank where it was falling into the river. Willow branches cut when pollarding Thames bank willows were used to make picket fences to support the new path edge and protect the bank. We also started work reprofiling path sections alongside the ditch by Kingfisher Point, to make them less slippery and easier to walk.

Otherwise paths were mowed or scythed as necessary, but we never have quite enough people interested in doing this repetitive task!

Anti-social behaviour. The year has been relatively calm. The hot dry weather unsurprisingly resulted in riverside gatherings (sometimes noisy) but the bigger worry was the number of fires being lit when the vegetation was tinder dry. The Fire service had to be called on one occasion. There were a couple of instances of bottle-digging, one problematic because it cut into a badger sett, the other dangerous because of deep tunnelling. Drug dealing has been observed but not a major problem currently. We have had three rough sleeper tents – two short-lived, and one at

Kingfisher Point for several weeks. Thanks to St Mungo's outreach team for offering help and alternatives to the occupants, and to the OCC Community Response Team for coordinating.

Shire Lake Ditch. The pollution saga continued, with sewage fungus visible at Jackdaw Lane bridge for most of 2021, and particularly bad from late winter onwards this year. Thames Water located and corrected the connections on 6 residential properties and one Cowley Road restaurant in spring this year, and continued testing for some weeks afterwards. They think the problem is resolved. We note improvement but still some continuing sewage fungus, and our regular water testing shows very high nutrient and ammonia levels persisting. Time will tell whether this is due to pollution lodged in the silt being slow to clear, or whether there are still misconnected properties.

It's not all bad news – the Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and other birds are finding food in this section of the ditch. In the School corner to Muntjac Point stretch the water quality remains somewhat better though still too high in nutrients, and fish are regularly seen.

We will continue monitoring water quality.

Oxford Conservation Volunteers cleared the third remaining stretch of the ditch by Muntjac Point last October, to remove excess sedges blocking the waterway. And to clear a section of the bank of bramble.

Trial pond. A shallow rainwater-fed wildlife pond (5m x 6m) was dug in February and March over a series of sessions. Robust liner and thick underlay and overlay were used, followed by a layer of sand and gravel. The spoil was used to create a bank also covered with liner then sand and gravel to both act as extra water catchment and to create a bee bank for ground nesting wild bees. The drought meant that it never got more than half full, and sowings of water edge plants failed. In late summer a boggy area was added by lining a dug pit (c. 4m x 6m) with old tarpaulins and backfilling. All areas were sown with suitable water edge plants in autumn. Piles of logs were also added nearby to provide cover especially for amphibia and grass snakes. The area was fenced to prevent disturbance and damage from people, dogs, deer, badgers and foxes. Birds, dragonflies and water beetles were observed visiting the pond.

The trial has also been useful to point up design improvements for future ponds.

Meadows, wildflower patches and nettle control. Meadow areas and rougher grassy areas were mowed to schedule, and cuttings removed, with the work done by tractor mowing, the powerscythe and the manual scything. Nettle control remains a problem. We experimented with putting down thick geotextile over some of the worst areas, and found that leaving this for 2-4 months did make it easier to then dig out roots; without the digging it would need to be left for at least a whole growing season to have any impact. One volunteer dug out heroic quantities of roots. Nettle pulling sessions in April and May did help other flower species grow away.

The “bird-seed patch” was mostly re-dug to allow annual plant species and biennials to flourish – including teasel, ragwort, thistle, and vipers bugloss as species deer tend to leave alone. These provide good flowers for insects then seed for birds. The Wild flower champions who take on a small patch of either path edge or part of a meadow area have made a real difference to these areas; their efforts are very worthwhile.

Deer exclosures. This was the year when both the Muntjac and Roe really learnt how to breach our 4ft high wire netting fences. A female Roe deer routinely jumped the temporary meadow enclosure, eating the Star of Bethlehem, cowslips, knapweeds & other species. Flappy hazard tape did not deter her for more than a couple of days. Muntjac repeatedly broke into the Plantation exclosures and ate primroses, wild garlic and red campion. We are researching better fencing methods since the British Deer Society research shows that “soft” methods such as tape, noises, lights, human urine, lion dung etc do not work for long. We are also trialling metal posts rather than wooden especially near the cinder track where wooden ones are routinely removed for kindling fires.

Trees. Following our 2021 survey of tree species in the Plantation to assess the impact of probably losing most of the Ash trees here to Ash Dieback, we took out several ash last winter to give light and space to other tree species. This was funded by the Lottery grant. Other tree work was to remove fallen or dangerous trees. Trees were inspected for safety near paths and for Ash Dieback. By late summer 7 large Ash and a number of saplings have definite symptoms, others are on the watch list.

The Kidneys. The pollinator patches continue to do well on the Kidneys meadow – the deer have a much lower impact here, and the plants are spreading gradually outwards from the patches. Stretches of hedging round the open area nearest Meadow Lane were planted last winter but most have not survived the drought. Crab apple and goat willow were also planted and have done slightly better. ODS started re-surfacing the muddiest sections of the main paths last winter, and got some hardcore down but have not yet completed with surface topping which left the paths very lumpy.

Wildlife surveys and sightings– interim report.

Badgers. 75 active badger holes were counted in February, up on last year when lockdown disturbances had an impact on setts (causing one sett to relocate further away from easy access). The Oxfordshire Badger Group returned in May for the second of 4 rounds of vaccination against TB. They caught 11 badgers including one white one, thought not to be the same white one as caught last year (they take photos). Camera traps suggest we have 2 white badgers, and a total population around 17-19 individuals. It remains to be seen what impact the drought had on cub (and adult) survival.

Camera trapping – the team have experimented with low glow cameras for better picture quality though some animals do notice the infrared light. No glow cameras employ black LEDs which show no light but give lower picture quality. Roe, muntjac, foxes, weasel, rabbits, mice and rats recorded regularly as well as a number of birds. Of note was a Marsh Tit caught on camera in March.

Deer. A survey in March gave 6 adult and 2 well grown Muntjac fawns. Roe were seen regularly but no good counts.

Birds. Tit nest-boxes continued to have high occupancy and high fledging success. Bird sightings otherwise included Nuthatch, Parakeets, Grey Wagtails, Kingfishers, Tree-creepers, Linnets in September, Coal tits and Siskins last winter. The Plantation Tawny owl is regularly seen and heard

Butterflies. Fairly good numbers were seen of 20 species, though the drought probably affected later generations of species depending on nettles as they became very dry. Brown Argus was seen again on the Kidneys pollinator patches. Marbled Whites and Small Copper were not observed this year though they may well have been present. Brown Hairstreak eggs are still being found on the blackthorn.

Moths. With evenings a bit calmer this year, we returned to regular moth surveying. Results still to be analysed but we added a number of species. The scallop proved to be as good for moths as it is for butterflies – a sheltered flower rich spot.

Wild bees and wasps. The session with Ivan Wright produced one new species of solitary wasp, and an unusual new bee species – despite the heat that day. We have now recorded 73 species of bees and wasps. Black Horehound and White Bryony were particularly good flower species for them.

Fungi. Last autumn was particularly good for fungi of all sorts, with Earth Stars and the rare Orchard Tooth-Crust found. We have not found the latter again this year.

Plants. No surveys except for Japanese Knotweed. 4 small shoots were found on the Old Knotweed Patch, and none on the Elsevier patch and Claire's patch. Claire Malone-Lee has had an article published in British Wildlife on Japanese Knotweed eradication without use of herbicide.