



Friends of Aston's Eyot

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

13th Annual Report 2022-2023

This is our annual report to members on what the Friends have been doing over the past year, and what has been happening on the nature reserve. The year has been in turn too cold, too hot, and mostly quite a bit wetter than last year, which has created some winners and losers for the wildlife.

The committee this year has consisted of 8 members. 7 were charity trustees: Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair), Laurie Burrell (treasurer), Thelma Martin (minutes secretary), Susie Jakobsson (membership secretary), Charlotte Ellis, and Ashok Stally-Chudasama, and Rosemary Cameron as a non-trustee committee member. Together we cover a good range of expertise. We continue to meet monthly. A more formal trustees' annual report is produced and lodged with the Charity Commission each year.

Membership, subscriptions & donations. Membership currently stands at 95, slightly fewer than last year and down from a peak in covid lockdowns. We continued the policy of fixing the subscription as a minimum amount (£5 last year), and now more people regularly give a bit more than the minimum. The whole amount (sub plus extra donation) is eligible for Gift Aid, so we have continued to gather Gift Aid declarations from members and donors. Ash S-C has been investigating ways of receiving donations via smart phones.

The 21 year lease from Christ Church at peppercorn rent was finally signed in November 2022, though the lease actually runs from December 2020. The final hiccup was to find that we were unable to register this lease with the Land Registry as is normally required, as Aston's Eyot is not itself registered. Christ Church being unwilling to register the land, we have opted to register it as a "Good Leasehold" as the next best method. As there is no real prospect of Christ Church proving not to be the lawful landowner, we took the view that we were not taking on extra risk by this course of action.

Website, calendar, newsletters and social media. Ash S-C continues to update the website to make it more user friendly especially for those looking at it while visiting the Eyot, perhaps for the first time. 3 newsletters were produced, ably edited by Charlie Ellis – a member's benefit so if you are not receiving them check with us to see if we have your email right and that your subs are up to date. Susie Jakobsson has kept the Facebook page lively with good posts including photos and trail cam footage which are widely viewed. We are beginning to use WhatsApp more for

communication between volunteers and to share photos. The annual calendar was produced from the many excellent photos received and made a useful profit of £357.

Art auction. An inaugural art auction was held on 26 April 2023, at the James St Tavern, ably organised by Charlie Ellis and Laurie Burrell, with Charlie as auctioneer. Many thanks to local artists for some great contributions – we raised £1517 and had a good evening as well.

Grants. The newly signed lease was a useful hook to hang an application to the National Lottery Awards for All programme. They have given us £7345 to buy a second shed (the first is bursting at the seams with tools, kit and materials), noticeboards refurbishment, materials for one pond and bee banks, a tools top-up, seeds and fencing materials, path repair materials, and tree work.

We also applied for and received £4995 from the Wild Trout Trust's "River and Wetlands Community Days" grant scheme which is funded by Thames Water. This funded the materials for two more ponds plus mini-digger hire, and some tools. The community days for this scheme include the sessions on the Shire Lake Ditch to help it recover from the sewage pollution incidents, and all the volunteer sessions involved with the ponds project.

Public access and paths. The Eyot continues to be very well used by a wide variety of people. A relatively dry winter plus previous gravelling work meant that the paths were not as muddy as has happened in previous winters. Small paths were mowed or scythed occasionally when necessary, but there are never enough volunteers for this task!

Anti-social behaviour. Perhaps because of the wet weather, there have been few problems this year, with fewer fires and problematic parties.

Conservation, management and volunteering

Very many thanks to all those who have helped with conservation and management tasks this year. The last Sunday afternoon of the month work parties have been very well attended, and rewarded by Thelma Martin's excellent cakes. Additional sessions covered nettle pulling, scything and mowing, and latterly a lot of work on the ponds project. A number of people have put in a lot of individual effort too for litter picking, looking after wildflower patches, digging out nettles and general maintenance work.

We had two days of mowing and quite a bit of sand and gravel shifting with the tractor from ODS (Oxford City Council) countryside rangers team. Oxford Conservation Volunteers (OCV) came twice to do work on paths and fences, and to clear the new ponds site of brambles. GoodGym also came twice this year – both groups come with a number of people who can power through tasks.

Ponds project. A year after OCV first cleared the new ponds site of nettles and brambles, they came again at the beginning of this month for the weekend to finish fine-tuning the shapes and lining the last two of the three new ponds, and shifting over 15 tons of sand to cover the liners. In between we had volunteer sessions to scythe down the regrown nettles ready for the mini digger starting work in September. Many thanks to Kevin who spent many days levelling the site then digging out the basic pond shapes, and thanks to the Scrapyard for letting us store the digger there when not in use. Then we had several more sessions to line and fill a bog area, fine tune pond shapes and edges, remove sharp bits, and line the first of the ponds.

These new ponds (North Ponds), like the trial ponds made 18 months ago (South Ponds), are designed to be mainly shallow, fish-free, and rain filled so that they have clean water in contrast to the much more polluted water in the ditch. We'll be sowing water edge plants seed round the edges (some collected this summer from Longbridges Island) and over the next year it will begin to look more natural.

Meanwhile the South (trial) Ponds have done really well, have not dropped below half full, and with the vegetation developing look much less raw. They have been much frequented by birds (including a pair of mallards in spring), dragonflies, water beetles and other wildlife. There is at least one adult frog in residence.

Deer exclosures. In summer 2022, both the muntjac and roe deer learned to either jump or push underneath our 4ft fences on deer exclosures, and ate large quantities of the meadow and woodland flowers inside. Over last winter and this spring, we made all the fencing on deer exclosures more effective by increasing the height to at least 5ft and having a flange at the bottom to prevent squeezing underneath. This has worked well so far, and the impact on the vegetation has been very noticeable with all the flower species bouncing back quickly. On unprotected areas we found that teasel and burdock are now also being eaten, making the list of plant species not much eaten by the deer smaller still.

The Kidneys and pollinator patches. Some of the new hedging planted in winter 2021/22 on the Kidneys succumbed during the drought of summer 2022, and were replaced last winter. These are now beginning to grow away.

The "pollinator patches" of meadow flowers on the Kidneys meadow did well again, but as these species seem unable to spread into the rough grass of this meadow, the Council made five more patches by stripping the turf, to augment the ones we already have. These have been seeded with meadow flowers. The deer don't seem to have such a negative impact on plants on the Kidneys as they do on Aston's Eyot. We also used the mini-digger while we had it to dig out two patches on the main meadow on Aston's Eyot for re-seeding.

Trees. We undertake an annual tree safety check following Forestry Commission guidelines for land managers. The ash dieback situation has not become much worse this year – probably the trees were helped by a wetter summer. In the summer we

removed an alder leaning dangerously low over the Cherwell. A tree surgeon is booked for next month to remove a few unsafe trees and branches. We also have a new volunteer who is a licensed chainsaw user who has done occasional smaller jobs.

Wildlife surveys and sightings

Badgers. 49 active badger sett entrances were counted in February, down from 75 last year. Entrances are dug and abandoned all the time – it's a fluid situation - and it is always hard to interpret these counts. It may be that adult numbers are down, perhaps due to dispersal out to other sites, perhaps due to last summer's drought making feeding more difficult. The Oxfordshire Badger Group returned in May for the third round of vaccination against TB – they caught and vaccinated 5 adults and 3 cubs (10 adults and 1 cub last year). No white badgers were caught by them or seen on the trail cams, whereas last year there were two.

Deer. A February survey counted 8 Muntjac and 5 Roe Deer. These are of course minimum figures.

Other mammals. Foxes were very regularly seen. Rabbits seem to be doing better, judging by droppings seen and trail cam footage recording them in more parts of the Eyot. A pair of otters were seen swimming the length of the Shire Lake Ditch in early January. Water voles were seen at both Kingfisher Point and in the ditch near Muntjac Point.

Birds. The tit nest-boxes normally have a very high occupancy and success rate, but this summer there were more boxes unused or with nests started but abandoned before completion. The birds which did lay eggs had a significantly lower success rate with at least 36% failing to rear young. This may have been due to rain making feeding more difficult; there were also signs of sparrowhawk activity. The Cowley cubs group kindly made us 8 nestboxes which will go up this winter to augment numbers and replace damaged ones.

Bird sightings of note included Water Rail and Snipe in the ditch in December, Grey and Pied Wagtail, Willow Warbler, Firecrest, Redpoll, Bullfinch, Nuthatch, Tufted Duck, Coot, Little Egret, and (overhead) Hobby, Woodcock, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Raven, Meadow Pipit, Common tern, Skylark, and a cuckoo heard several times at a distance. Ring-neck Parakeets are now regularly seen flying in groups.

Butterflies. 19 species were recorded. Marbled White were seen again on the Kidneys and the Eyot, and Small Coppers also seen. Red Admirals were very numerous this year, but Small Tortoiseshells were hardly seen at all.

November 2023