Friends of Aston's Eyot

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

14th Annual Report 2023-2024

Here is our annual report to members, on what the Friends have achieved this year, who's been doing what, and what's been happening on Aston's Eyot.

Admin and communications

Charity trustees and management committee. The Friends are a charity, and the trustees are currently: 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. Rosemary Cameron has been a non-trustee committee member. We continue to meet monthly to sort out what needs doing and ongoing strategies. A more formal trustees' annual report is produced and submitted to the Charity Commission each year.

Membership, subscriptions and donations and gift aid. As you know, we depend on membership subs and donations to fund basic running costs. Membership stands at 91 members, about the same as last year, and we have been able to claim gift aid on the subscriptions and other donations. We are now able to take donations via Paypal through the website. Many thanks to everyone who has contributed.

The FoAE 2024 calendar sold out producing useful income. Just as importantly, the photos submitted for it are in themselves not only wonderful to look at, but are also such a good record of the wildlife we have and how the various habitats look currently. We will be working through the many years worth we now have to help compile species lists. Many thanks to the contributors – even if your photos weren't in the end used for the calendar, they are a very welcome resource.

Newsletters, website and social media. Two illustrated newsletters were produced thanks to Charlie Ellis – these are a members' benefit so if you are not receiving them check your subs are up to date and that we have the correct email address for you. Ash S-C continues to update the website, this year aiming particularly at make it user friendly for those visiting the Eyot and using their phones, and making it easier to join and/or donate as well as giving useful information. Susie Jakobsson has kept the Eyot facebook page well posted with events info and photos – contact her if you have questions about posting something. The WhatsApp group for FoAE volunteers has been well used and useful for sharing plans, photos, and problems encountered.

Public access. The Eyot continues to be very well used by a wide variety of people. With so much rain the nettles have grown even taller than usual, and from time to time some of the smaller paths became nearly impassable. Scything or mowing the small paths is not a favourite task among volunteers! Thankfully the City Council (via ODS countryside rangers team) continues to mow the main paths and other grassy areas twice a year.
The wet and cloudy weather this summer has also meant there have been fewer problems with parties and fires than in other years.

Conservation and habitat restoration

Many thanks to everyone who's helped with practical tasks on the Eyot this year. The last Sunday of the month work parties continue to be well attended and we've achieved a wide variety of useful tasks, fuelled by Thelma Martin's cakes. We've also had a number of additional sessions for smaller and ongoing tasks, and many people have put in time to pull or dig out nettles, litter-pick, clear up after gatherings, and clear fallen branches blocking paths.

Oxford Conservation Volunteers came with 15-20 volunteers for all day sessions to help with pond creation last November, to pollard willows in early April, and in early October this year for woodland tasks (ditch clearance having been abandoned due to high water levels after the September rain). GoodGym came three times with around 20 people to scythe nettles and clear overhanging branches – they come for about an hour and a half then continue on their way for a run.

Scythe course. We ran a whole day scything course in July, led by professional scyther Nicole Clough, with the aim of kick-starting a new scythe team for the Eyot. Those of us who attended learnt a lot especially about scythe maintenance – but we are still looking for a scythe team!

Ponds project. Creating the South Ponds complex has been the main habitat creation project this year, making three largish ponds and a bog. Many people were involved with clearing the space (once just nettles and bramble), marking out for the mini-digger we hired, fine-tuning the shapes, and lining them. Oxford Conservation Volunteers came for a whole weekend last November to line the two biggest ones and barrow nearly 20 tons of sand and gravel to cover the liners and overlays. A wet winter ensured the ponds had almost filled with rainwater by the end of December. With the help of the Oxford City Council wildlife volunteer group, we then surrounded the site with netting to keep out large animals and dogs – because of too much grazing, sharp claws on liners, and physical disturbance and flea treatments in the case of dogs. A few dogs rapidly learnt where the ponds were and made a beeline for them every time! A problem because of We then dug out the rest of the nettles and sowed with seed collected locally from Longbridges and elsewhere. A wet

spring and summer led to rapid establishment and flowering of the plants, quickly covering the edges of the ponds giving them a more natural look. Aquatic life arrived very quickly: water beetles, water boatmen and pond skaters first, then a succession of dragonfly species all through the summer. A pond survey in June revealed a further variety of species.
Meanwhile the original North ponds (3 ponds, 2 very small, dug in spring 2022) look increasingly natural and have done well with plenty of species there too including frogs and smooth newts.
Next summer we'll do surveys to compare the aquatic life in the ponds with that in the better sections of ditch, the ponds having much cleaner water and no fish.

Zoning Aston's Eyot for different levels of management. Rewilding or intensive intervention to improve habitats? There are pros and cons to each approach, and we've always done a bit of both. Now we are moving towards defining more clearly what we are going to do where, and dividing the site into:
a) Areas with minimal intervention and minimal disturbance from dogs and people (mainly the chunk between Middle Way and the Thames side main path – "The Scrubs")
b) Areas with minimal intervention but with access via paths (eg Wild Wood, and to a lesser extent the Orchard)
c) Areas with more management but minimal disturbance from people and dogs (eg Claire's patch, bird-seed patch)
d) Areas with more management and access paths (eg The Plantation and meadow areas)
e) Areas with more management but deer in particular excluded (eg the pond areas and other deer exclosures).

The Christmas tree dead hedging project was done last January to make a barrier to dogs particularly, to discourage access into the Scrubs at key points, especially during winter when the nettles are down. The hope is that these will become colonised with brambles and other vegetation to make more natural-looking barriers.

Deer exclosures. We have several exclosures of various sizes (mostly small) in the Plantation, in meadow areas, along the river bank, and round the ponds. Once the deer are effectively kept out (tricky!) the difference is startling and clearly demonstrate the impact of very high deer numbers on vegetation. This has proved particularly true where the ground has been dug to remove nettles so seedlings can establish. We are researching more effective fencing.

Trees and tree safety. The annual tree inspection was carried out in August, looking for cases of Ash dieback to monitor spread, and checking for unsafe trees near paths or buildings in accordance with Forestry Commission guidelines for land managers. There are cases of Ash dieback on the Eyot, but the spread continues to be much slower than initially expected, with some

trees showing recovery. Our tree surgeon came 3 times to fell unsafe trees. One issue is large trees overhanging the Cherwell – as the banks are being gradually eroded some of these have become unstable and two had to be removed for river users' safety.

Shire Lake Ditch pollution. The Friends have joined the Cherwell and Ray catchment partnership, which is set up to promote better water quality and ecological health in these rivers and their tributaries. As part of this we are doing monthly water testing of the Cherwell and the Shire Lake ditch (at Jackdaw Lane entrance where surface run-off from local streets is discharged). Although the worst of the sewage coming in from misconnected properties was sorted out by Thames Water in spring 2022, the water is still far too high in nutrients and sewage fungus still sometimes seen. Last autumn we made a start on cutting back overhanging vegetation here to let sunlight in, to help natural breakdown of pollutants, and will continue this. Despite this we regularly see birds feeding here such as the kingfisher and grey wagtail, and lately small fish have been seen here, so it's not all bad.

The Kidneys. On the main Thames-side field we have a long running project to increase the diversity of meadow plants, by scraping of patches of turf to allow seeding. The plants in these areas continue to thrive many years later (deer graze less here), but with the exception of the blue-flowered chicory, they have not spread much. They very clearly attract bees and butterflies not there before. So this summer we made some more scraped patches with the ODS rangers team to extend the areas.
ODS are also this autumn making some hard paths in the lower half of the site to make winter access easier, as paths have often been very wet and very muddy. This came about after a strong push from the local residents association IFRA and local councillors.

<u>Wildlife surveys and sightings.</u>
Camera trapping. In August we were sad to say goodbye to Sarah McFadden who has run the cameras so well for several years. Happily though, two couples have taken on the job and are beginning to produce great footage, shedding light on what goes on out of sight, and helping confirm the continuing presence of rabbits.
Two Brookes' students undertook projects on the Eyot, on pond fauna and snails.
Badgers. 56 active holes were counted in 4 setts (including the Rec) in our annual survey in early February, slightly up on last year. It does seem that numbers are settling down at a more realistic level. The Oxfordshire Badger Group came in May for the fourth and final round of TB vaccinations, catching and vaccinating 7 animals. They reckon to catch around half the animals in any one year, so we think actual numbers are around 15-20 individuals.
Deer counts. When counting badger holes in teams, we record all the deer we see, and saw 12 different muntjac and 3 roe. From territory mapping

(muntjac) and later observations, we think we had around 15-16 muntjac and 4 roe this year – a very high density.

Birds. Monitoring of nest-boxes showed that the tits had another difficult year with a maximum of 65% nests fledging some young, and many nestlings didn't survive, as a result of cold rainy weather. Birds seen this year included woodcock, common sandpiper passing through, grey wagtail seen regularly, and a cuckoo heard on site in May.

Butterflies. The overcast rainy weather really had an impact on butterfly numbers (and the number of surveys!). 17 species were seen, with hardly any Small Tortoiseshell present. Cinnabar moth caterpillars were abundant on the ragwort, however.

Frogs and toads had a better year judging by the number of young ones seen.

November 2024