



# FoAE Newsletter

October 2012

## Success! We got the grant



Many thanks to all of you who wrote letters of support for our latest grant application – it did the trick! We have now been promised nearly £7000 to fund work in the plantation that runs parallel to the back of the scrapyard, and with the veteran willows on the banks of the rivers and ditches.

The grant is coming from WREN, an organisation which awards grants to community projects from funds donated by landfill operator WRG (Waste Recycling Group) out of their landfill taxes, via a voluntary scheme known as the Landfill Communities Fund. Given the past history of Aston's Eyot as the city's rubbish dump this seems a particularly appropriate source of funding.

So what's the plan? This winter we'll be thinning overcrowded trees from the rest of the plantation, following on from the successful start we made last year. This will give the remaining trees more space to grow, and allow us to create some more open areas and glades. We hope to use the same contractors as last year as they were sensitive to wildlife issues, and many people commented on the improvement their work had made. The work will be carried out this winter, timed to minimise disturbance. Once the thinning is complete, we will plant native understory shrubs and woodland flowers to improve the habitat for wildlife. Where possible without removing the big old trees along the ditch here, we'll aim to let more light into the ditch so that aquatic and water-edge vegetation can develop, improving this habitat too. This work will make the path through the plantation more attractive, with the extra light, the plantings, and we hope a less dismal ditch!

Many of the old willows on the river and ditch banks are in urgent need of pollarding to prolong their lives. Once pollarded, willows depend on it being repeated regularly as otherwise the branches become too heavy to support and eventually collapse damaging the tree in the process – there are a number of willows on the Eyot which have suffered this way. Christ Church pollard some of the willows on the Thames when necessary for the rowing, but not elsewhere on the site, so we'll be doing this as part of the WREN grant project. Just the ones in urgent need would be done this winter – the rest will be left for another time so that a rotation can be established. The pollarding will have the additional benefit of letting more light onto the ditches and banks, helping the smaller plants here.

There'll be a number of clearing and planting sessions involved with this project, on which we'll keep you informed – as always the more people helping the merrier!

## FoAE Calendar

We have produced a fundraising calendar of images from the Eyot – wonderful as a gift or a reminder of your favourite wild space.

**Only £6.00 with free local delivery**

For more information visit

[http://friendsofastonsevot.org.uk/?page\\_id=1962](http://friendsofastonsevot.org.uk/?page_id=1962)



## The Eyot, the Weed, the Lord and the Battle of Walcheren



In 1809, during the Napoleonic Wars, a fleet from the British navy attacked and occupied the island of Walcheren in Holland. The expedition was a disaster with a large number of British troops falling ill from dysentery. After a few months the expedition

returned to Ramsgate, with many of the sick troops being transported on mattresses stuffed with hay which included a native plant from Walcheren, 'Hoary Cress'. The used bedding was later given to a farmer on the Isle of Thanet who ploughed it into his land and, to his surprise, soon had a wonderful crop of hoary cress, subsequently given the name 'Thanet weed'. Hoary Cress has since spread throughout the south coast and has somehow travelled all the way to Aston's Eyot – you may have seen it flowering there this summer.

This story has a further interesting twist as the unsuccessful expedition contributed to rivalry between two of the major politicians of the day, Canning and Castlereagh, which culminated in a duel – to find out more click here -

[http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page\\_id=1932](http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page_id=1932)

## Ravens over the Eyot

Keep a lookout for a new visitor to our area. Just as over the past few decades the buzzard has gradually spread from the west across England, it seems that now the raven is spreading its range in a similar fashion.

Ravens have been present in the Chilterns for some years and recently there have been reports of sightings at Shotover. Now, within the last month, there have been three separate sightings of ravens over our patch. Although at a distance the raven may be confused with a carrion crow, at close range it can be distinguished by its much greater size (slightly larger than a buzzard), its wedge or diamond shaped tail as opposed to the square tail of the crow, and by its deep 'cronk, cronk' call. Ravens often become the focus of aggression by other birds and on one of the occasions when it was seen in this area it was being mobbed by a crow.



*Raven and Crow Silhouettes*

*Note the difference in the shape of the tail of the raven on the left and crow on the right*

Go to

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/r/raven/index.aspx> to hear a recording of a raven's call, shorter and deeper than a crow –heard from a distance it sounds a bit like a deep-voiced frog!!

## Annual General Meeting

Thursday October 25<sup>th</sup>

7.30 – 9.00pm

At the Gladiators Hall

- corner of Iffley Road and Percy St

Come along to the Friends' AGM to share your views on how to protect and enhance Aston's Eyot.

There will be an exhibition of Friends' activities and an opportunity to discuss plans for the future.

Want to get more involved – we're looking for new committee members. If you would like to stand, email [anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com](mailto:anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com) or come to the meeting with a brief statement (and a seconder).

**There's a bar and nibbles will be provided**

**All welcome!**

## Bird and Bat box building Day

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October - 2.00-4.00pm

– meet in the first field in the Kidneys Nature Park

We'll be building tit boxes, owl boxes, kestrel boxes and bat boxes.

Most of the boxes will be put up on the Kidneys and Aston's Eyot but you can also make a tit box and take it away for your garden for a small charge!!

Click here for more information -

[http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page\\_id=1631](http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page_id=1631)

# The proposed Jackdaw Lane bridge



As many will have heard, Oxford City Council's "Cycle City Plan 2012-16" includes a proposal for a bridge across the Thames at 'Jackdaw Lane', and an initial allocation of up to £10,000 for a feasibility study, though the full work is estimated to cost over £2 million.

Although no details of what they are really thinking of have been published, it is clear that this would involve a cycle track from the scrapyard to the river through Aston's Eyot, a bridge spanning the 50m-wide river and towpath, and some sort of clover-leaf on the other side to bring the track back round to the towpath. Given the cost, the

chances are they would want to it to be able operate day and night, and so it is likely to be lit with street lights on the stretch through Aston's and onwards to the Abingdon Road, if not along the towpath - like the route from University Parks to Marston Road.

The council document clearly considers this an unrelieved benefit to us all, and totally ignores the downsides to the wildlife and quiet uses of Aston's Eyot. At the moment the fact that the area is *not* en route to anywhere else is one of the main reasons why Aston's is such a haven for wildlife and a pleasantly peaceful place to wander about in. Turning it into a cyclists' 'motorway' would irretrievably alter that ambience - anyone who regularly walks the towpath or Meadow Lane knows how many cyclists, in their haste, treat walkers as impediments and show scant respect. If it were also street-lit, the Eyot would be urbanised, turning it from its currently remarkably rural aspect into a sort of street, affecting nocturnal wildlife and very probably drawing in more undesirable persons at night.

The bridge itself, if built to conform to Sustrans's minimum slope standards would need at least a 100m lead-in ramp, or 160m if the preferred lesser slope were employed, thus creating a massive visual and physical obstruction at the river end of the track. Since the clearance over the river would need to be the same as at Donnington Bridge, 16ft (5m), one can visualise scale of the structure. To build it large machinery, bulldozers, cranes, lorries bringing hardcore, steel and concrete would need to be brought on to the Eyot, causing months of very destructive disruption.

All for what? It would not provide a useful route into the town centre, and the gain in time over Donnington Bridge into South Oxford would be minimal. It would help a few commuters living in East Oxford to get to the railway station traffic-free, but does that justify ruining a resource precious to far more people? The council announced their intention without consulting Christ Church, the land-owner, whose permission would be required for the project. There would certainly be disruption to the towpath used so intensively in university term-time for coaching boat crews, and almost certainly Christ Church's new bridge from Jackdaw Lane would have to be replaced by something suited to massive cranes etc.

While supporting cycling in general, the Friends of Aston's Eyot committee are firmly against this proposal, as are many people in the Iffley Fields Residents Association. We would encourage everyone to write to the councillor responsible, Colin Cook ([cllrccook@oxford.gov.uk](mailto:cllrccook@oxford.gov.uk)) to encourage him to spend the feasibility money on more directly useful and less destructive cycle projects - of which there are many - and abandon this superficially attractive, but very flawed, scheme.

A fuller discussion is available on our website [http://friendsofastonseeyot.org.uk/?page\\_id=1966](http://friendsofastonseeyot.org.uk/?page_id=1966)

Anthony Cheke

# Japanese knotweed patches



View from the west – April 2012



Same view from the west – October 2012



View from the south – April 2012



Same view from the south – October 2012

Thanks to everyone's efforts, we really do seem to have made huge strides in eliminating the knotweed. The main patch on the right of the path as you walk from the Jackdaw Lane gate towards the river has been transformed from dense growth of knotweed last year to a great variety of flowering plants and grasses this year. When we realised how few knotweed shoots were coming through in the spring, we decided to sow a mixture of species (a mixture of grasses, and over 30 others) to see what would do well. In the end Claire Malone-Lee and her team recorded 70 species of plants growing there in August, with more being added since.

There are a few knotweed shoots still coming through; we pulled them out regularly until July, and spot-sprayed with glyphosate the ones still there at the end of August. We'll probably mow the vegetation right down this autumn, both to maintain the diversity of plants and to make it easy to see any new knotweed shoots that may yet appear in the spring.

## Where have all the apples gone?

We were going to hold an Apple Day this year, but we have had to cancel due to lack of apples. Although the crop was poor overall, some trees had reasonable quantities, but they have mysteriously disappeared - there aren't even any on the ground under the trees as there usually are, the trees are bare to the top, and there are very clear tracks in two places where the harvesters went into the orchard.

We suspect industrial scale harvesting as happened two years ago when a group of people were seen cleaning up. This has happened before, as shown on a short clip on YouTube in 2008 of people shaking apples out of a tree: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxX0UX6HJzw> - "Trenchfoot, Fendog and Gogs go apple picking to feed the new cider press"

Did anyone see or hear anything to indicate what actually happened this year? We would very much like to get to the bottom of this and try to stop it happening so the apples can be, as in the past, a community resource, not a free supply to some dodgy juicing firm.



## Woodcraft Folk at Aston's Eyot

The Woodcraft Folk is a national educational youth organisation founded nearly 100 years ago with the aim, in a spirit of co-operation, of helping to build a more peaceful and fairer world.

Eastwind Pioneers is a Woodcraft Folk Group for 10 to 13 year old young people that meets in East Oxford. In the early part of the summer this year we began to discuss ways in which we could work with a local community group on an issue that is in keeping with Woodcraft Folk's aims. After several weeks of discussions and an exchange of e-mails with Ruth Ashcroft, we decided to approach our Headquarters that has a fund of money for such projects, for a small grant to enable us to help in the conservation work that the Friends of Aston's Eyot have been doing. Thankfully that application was successful and this autumn our group has spent some time visiting the area, "School Corner", where we will work. A number of our group members attend or have attended SS Mary and John School so this work may have special significance for them.

We will be organising some days, probably on the weekend, in the coming weeks to begin the work of (1) clearing the area of some of the nettles and elder trees that have taken over parts of the land and as a consequence prevent light effectively penetrating these areas, (2) clearing an area opposite the school and down by the bank of Shire Lake Ditch and planting some native species of wildflowers and bulbs and (3) preparing an area, not too readily accessible to casual users of the Eyot, where we can construct a hibernaculum, for small amphibians, insects and bugs living in the area to find shelter. As a further project we might try and build a sculpture from some of the waste materials in the areas we clear.

There are groups for all ages of children and young people - do have a look at our website <http://www.oxfordwoodies.org.uk/> or the National website at <http://www.woodcraft.org.uk/>

If you would like to know more about Woodcraft groups in Oxford please email [clivegillam2011@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:clivegillam2011@hotmail.co.uk)

Clive Gillam and Heather Hull – Group Leaders

## Volunteers needed to grow wildflower plants

This spring and summer you may have noticed some additions to the flowers in the plantation and meadows. Most of the plants in the new meadow areas have grown from grass/wildflower seed mixtures and are doing remarkably well. It is more difficult for flowers to establish themselves in woodland because of the lower light levels and grazing by deer.

Planting out established plants is one way of addressing this problem, as was shown by the patch of foxgloves and primroses at the southern end of the plantation – these were grown from seed at home and planted out when they had reached a good size.

So, we are looking for green fingered volunteers who can offer to grow some more wildflower plants. We will provide the seeds and the volunteers will sow them and grow them on, ready for planting out over the course of next year.



*Foxgloves in the  
Plantation*

The seeds do not necessarily need to be planted in seed trays and potted on (though we would be very happy if anyone can do this). They can be sown as a row in a garden or allotment and then dug up to be planted out. This is the system used by some nurseries and is very successful.

If you would like to help with this project please get in touch at [info@friendsofastonseyot.org.uk](mailto:info@friendsofastonseyot.org.uk)

Don't forget the website –

<http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/>

## FoAE on the Kidneys – the other side of the bridge!



Many people are confused by the names Aston's Eyot and The Kidneys. Do they refer to the same area or not? The answer is that they are two different but adjacent areas separated by the Shire Lake ditch. Aston's Eyot is the area from the Cherwell (bottom of Jackdaw Lane) to the ditch, and is owned by Christ Church. The Kidneys Nature Park is owned by the City Council, and can be accessed directly from Meadow Lane or via Aston's Eyot by crossing the metal bridge across the ditch. Both were part of the old rubbish dump, though the Kidneys seems to have had less domestic rubbish, and was better covered afterwards.

From the point of view of both walkers and wildlife, they are closely connected sites. So it made sense when the issue of Friends groups for Council nature parks arose this spring, that Friends of Aston's Eyot should also be the Friends group for the Kidneys. With the help of Carl Whitehead from the Parks Dept, this is now in place. Carl and the Parks team will continue to do what they already do – the mowing and general maintenance and oversight. We will do the extra bits to enhance biodiversity there, and help keep a general eye on it.

These are the projects we have agreed with Carl that we'll do this winter:

- 1) Surveys of the plants and animals there. We've made a start so far on plants, birds and butterflies, and to a lesser extent on moths and aquatic life.
- 2) Put up some nest-boxes which many of you will be helping to make.
- 3) Remove the invasive saplings and the bramble encroaching too far on open areas where it's smothering smaller plants. We'll advertise a session to start on this.
- 4) Introduce more native flower species into the recently mowed meadow area, especially for butterfly and bee benefit. We'll make a small-scale start on this shortly by having a session to clear a few small patches (mostly less than a square metre) into which we'll either sow seed (autumn) or put in larger plants (probably better to wait until early spring). We'll put in a variety, but especially aiming at June/July flowering nectar-rich species such as knapweed and scabious, as the lack of these is currently part of the problem for butterflies there, especially the Marbled White (only one seen this year). Otherwise we were thinking of cowslips, birds-foot-trefoil for Common Blue butterflies, yellow rattle, and others. Ideas welcome!

Thoughts, ideas, suggestions and above all help with any of this would be warmly welcomed. The projects above are just a start – you probably have other good ideas too.

## Join the Friends of Aston's Eyot!!

If you are not already a member of the Friends of Aston's Eyot, please do consider joining. Having a healthy membership raises essential revenue and also confirms that the Eyot is valued by local people. For a membership form, collect a leaflet from the Eyot or download a form from the website – [http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page\\_id=96](http://friendsofastonseyot.org.uk/?page_id=96) - It's only £5.00!!!  
(And do come to the AGM!!!)