



The Friends of Aston's Eyot

*Charitable Incorporated Organisation
Registered Charity No. 1185744*

Trustees' Annual Report and Financial Statement

for the accounting year ending 26 September 2020

Report date: February 2021

1. Reference and administration details

1.1 Charity name and Registration

The Friends of Aston's Eyot. Also known as: Friends of Aston's Eyot

The charity is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, registration number 1185744, registered with the Charity Commission on 10 October 2019.

1.2 Charity's address

c/o 139 Hurst Street, Oxford, OX4 1HE

email: info@friendsofastonseyot.org

website: <https://friendsofastonseyot.org>

1.3 Names of the Trustees who manage the Charity

Role	Date appointed	Date retired	
Anthony Cheke		Chair	10 October 2019
Ruth Ashcroft		Co-chair	10 October 2019
Penny Bassett			10 October 2019
Laurence Burrell		Treasurer	10 October 2019
Adam Gibbon			10 October 2019
Susie Jakobsson-Thomas			10 October 2019
James Martin			10 October 2019
Thelma Martin		Secretary	10 October 2019
			19 November 2020
			died 4 April 2020

1.4 Names of advisors and senior members of staff

None. There are no paid staff.

1.5 Bank

The Co-operative Bank, PO Box 250, Skelmersdale WN8 6WT

2 Structure, governance & management

2.1 Type of governing document

Constitution based on Charity Commission's model for a CIO with members

2.2 Charitable Objectives

1. To promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment, including biodiversity, of Aston's Eyot, the area of Oxford bounded by the rivers Thames and Cherwell and the Shire Lake ditch, in particular but not exclusively by:

a) carrying out work to protect, care for and manage or assist in managing the site as a habitat for wildlife and as a wild area.

b) surveying and recording species of fauna and flora present, disseminating the useful results of the surveys for the public benefit.

c) involving the wider public in activities such as working parties, wildlife events, path maintenance and other events in accordance with the objects or other events acceptable to the Landowners with their permission and in accordance with the objects.

2. To promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of Oxford and the surrounding area the provision of facilities for recreation or other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving the life of the said inhabitants.

2.3 Trustee selection methods

There must be at least 3 trustees. The maximum number is 12. Trustees are elected according to the Constitution at the Annual General Meeting of members. At the first AGM all the trustees must retire, and in subsequent years half must retire by rotation. Those retired may stand for re-election.

(Note: the first AGM took place on 19 November 2020, all the trustees retired, and all were re-elected except one who opted not to put herself up for election as out of the country).

2.4 Committees

The day to day management of the Friends is organised by a committee consisting of the trustees plus currently two other committee members who are not trustees.

3. Public benefit

3.1 The trustees of The Friends of Aston's Eyot confirm that they have paid due regard to the guidance issued by the Charity Commission on public benefit in deciding what activities the charity should undertake.

4. Executive summary of activities and achievements

4.1 Fulfilling our objects in the pandemic:

Key aims were to keep core conservation and survey work going as and when possible, to adapt volunteer opportunities for safe working, and to facilitate safe access for the greatly increased visitor numbers while minimising negative impacts on habitats and wildlife. Events were not possible.

4.2 Provision of facilities for recreation and volunteering :

The pandemic greatly increased numbers visiting Aston's Eyot to several hundred visits a day. People visiting included families with children and adults of all ages and backgrounds. To make this safe, the main path network was mowed much wider and more frequently, and steps taken to accommodate quiet recreation while minimising impact on nature conservation.

People also benefited from volunteering. Including litter-pickers, around 50-60 local people were involved, and another 50+ from visiting volunteer groups. Two Duke of Edinburgh Award students volunteered with us. Membership of the Friends increased by 15% to 132; membership is not required for access.

4.3 Conservation management and habitat restoration:

A tree safety policy was drawn up, and initial inspections undertaken. Some unsafe trees were felled or reduced by the landowner Christ Church's tree surgeons. An attractive new woodland path was created to replace an old one now unsafe with unstable but wildlife-rich trees. Young tree and shrub plantings were checked and tree guards repaired as necessary. Meadow areas were maintained with mowing regimes and nettle control, and some sample areas protected against deer grazing to boost flowering. Additional areas adjacent to paths were brought into management by scything. Water quality in the Shire Lake Ditch was monitored regularly by testing for pollutants, and a serious sewage pollution problem tackled semi-successfully. Oxford City Council assisted with management with 3 mowing days and other help..

4.4 Surveys of fauna and flora:

10 observers recorded 61 species of birds (0 new, 3 unusual for site) in 2020. 3 observers recorded 20 species of butterfly (1 new). 82 active badger sett entrances were recorded, and initial steps taken for vaccination against TB this summer. Mammals were monitored with trail cams and other sightings. Moths were recorded regularly with light traps. Freshwater Habitats Trust took eDNA samples for Great Crested Newt. A planned plant resurvey was started but then had to be postponed. Results of surveys were reported to relevant organisations and county recorders.

5. Activities, achievements and performance – full report

5.1 The Covid-19 pandemic made our first year as a charity and tenth year as a local community organisation a very different one. Our **main aims** this year have been:

- a). To keep key conservation management work going, and to continue where possible the programme of wildlife surveys and habitat restoration to promote biodiversity, on both Aston's Eyot and to a lesser extent the neighbouring City Council owned Kidneys Nature Park. Together they form a unit both ecologically and in terms of public use, and they form an important part of the local Conservation Target Area of the Thames and Cherwell at Oxford which is expected to become part of the national Nature Recovery Network.
- b). To facilitate Covid-safe public access for volunteering and peaceful recreation for the benefit of the local community, and to work to maintain the natural landscape value and wild feel that differentiates Aston's Eyot from much other green space locally. Foot-fall on both Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys increased dramatically, demonstrating here as elsewhere the importance of green spaces and nature reserves are for the well-being of people in towns and cities.

5.2 Public access and volunteering

a) Membership of the Friends stood at 132 by November, up another 15% from last year. **Visitor** numbers were very much higher with a guestimated five-fold increase in the spring lockdown and remaining very high since at several hundred visits a day. They included many families with children as well as adults of all ages and backgrounds. Many people commented on how important Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys was to them, a "life-line" was a common phrase used.

a) Paths and access. Safe public access was facilitated by keeping the main path network mowed extra wide by Oxford City Council, who gave us an extra (third) day of mowing. Smaller paths were kept scythed by volunteers as and when possible. Meadow areas and riverbanks were used by visitors to walk and sit as well, resulting in more trampling than usual. Efforts were made reasonably successfully to keep some areas undisturbed for wildlife by resisting the creation of new paths in with natural barriers and by explanatory notices where necessary.

b) Litter and anti-social behaviour. The usual winter group litter-picks took place over the 2019-20 winter once the vegetation had died down. In the spring lockdown there were many more young adults on site in the evenings, and this initially caused a litter problem, overcome with poster prompts and the individual litter picking efforts of the local community. There was one rave during the summer which the police dispersed.

c) Volunteering. Our regular monthly work parties had to be abandoned from March onwards, but individual effort and work in very small groups continued, and involved around 40 people. In addition the Oxford Conservation Volunteers came four times with around 20 people each time, and helped with paths and the pollarding of waterside willows. Oxford Good Gym volunteers joined us for a Sunday afternoon, and Elsevier publishers sent a team for a day as part of their workplace volunteering. We had two Duke of Edinburgh award students volunteer with us this year. Oxford City Council continued to help with three days of mowing and path clearance.

d) Events. All events planned had to cancelled, sadly. The annual photo competition was held as usual, with best submissions used to illustrate the Friends of Aston's Eyot calendar which is produced in part as a fund-raiser.

5.3 Conservation management and habitat restoration

a) Trees, woodland, and tree safety. Half the 13 hectare site is wooded.

We drew up **tree safety policy** for Aston's Eyot following Forestry Commission guidance for best practice. This recognises that very few people are killed or badly injured by falling trees, and that trees at all stages of their life cycle play an important role ecologically, for air quality and carbon sequestration, and for human well-being and landscape value. The policy involves zoning the site into zones according to the level of public footfall and proximity to neighbouring property, regular inspection of trees in falling distance of property or paths in higher risk zones, with problem trees found then felled or reduced, or paths re-routed to avoid them. The first inspection was completed during the 2019-20 winter. Further inspections of Ash were undertaken in July and August to check for Ash dieback; two large trees show signs of dieback but it remains unconfirmed whether this is due to Ash Dieback disease. Further checks will continue to be made.

The landowner Christ Church had tree surgeons in autumn 2019 to check trees with us along the boundary with the Metal Salvage and SS Mary & John primary school, and felled two

unstable trees and removed a number of large branches that could cause damage. However as the remaining trees along this stretch are elderly and seem to be more unstable (several more fell over winter), a decision was taken to close a path that runs through this area, leave the trees for wildlife, and create a new woodland path instead with volunteer labour.

Deer enclosure areas and tree guards round new plantings were inspected and repaired as necessary, and some nettle control (pulling and scything) was achieved.

b) Meadow areas. Having started 10 years ago with a complete loss of all grassy areas to nettles as a result of neglect and soil disturbance from bottle-digging (Aston's Eyot was a rubbish tip in the 1920's-40's), we now have 2-3 acres of meadow areas and rougher grassland. These were maintained as usual this year by mowing once or more times, with additional nettle control still required in early summer. Some small extra areas were also added near main paths by beginning nettle control through scything. A project underway on the Kidneys meadow to improve the meadow area here for pollinators by increasing floral diversity was informally monitored and continues to do well in terms of abundance of flowers, bees and butterflies.

A focus this year has been to investigate informally the impact of the high deer density on flower abundance through grazing. A section of the main meadow area was fenced off in early spring, and showed an immediate marked increase in flower numbers for spring flowering species such as cowslip, but the effect was less marked later in the year. Further work and investigation is planned next year for various flower assemblages.

c) Improving water quality in the Shire Lake Ditch. This is an ongoing project to improve poor water quality. This year, a serious pollution incident began in spring 2020 when there was clear evidence of sewage pollution at the Jackdaw Lane bridge, where there is a surface drainage outlet feeding in from neighbouring streets. A collapsed sewer turned out to be a main cause of the pollution, but it seems misconnected properties are also involved. A campaign was started together with the local residents association IFRA to persuade Thames Water and the Environment Agency to clear this up but with only partial success (in that some contamination continues). Our regular testing of the water in the ditch for pollutants also showed a worrying deterioration in water quality at the site of a second drainage outlet near the neighbouring primary school, where there have been sewage pollution incidents before from misconnected properties. Together with IFRA and local wild swimming groups, the help of the City Council Leisure and Parks leader was enlisted, and the Council have passed a motion to apply for designated bathing water status for the Thames at Oxford.

We will continue regular water quality monitoring.

5.4 Wildlife surveys

Although the Covid pandemic limited activities, some regular recording continued with a number of people putting in individual effort. Members frequently report sightings too.

a) A planned re-survey of plants was begun but then postponed due to the pandemic.

b) Birds. On Aston's Eyot, the Kidneys, and neighbouring areas, 61 species were recorded by 10 observers in 2020, 3 of which were unusual for the sites (Marsh Tit, Little Egret, Grey Wagtail). A new species for the sites, Nuthatch, was seen in November 2019, but not in 2020. The usual nestbox inspection and ringing of chicks had to be cancelled, but winter nestbox repairs and maintenance was done.

c) Badgers. The active sett entrance count in February came to 82 excluding the convent sett, which compares with 89 in 2019. The Oxfordshire Badger Group plan to vaccinate the

badgers against TB this coming summer, and the first site visit to plan this took place in November. It is hoped that this exercise will give some information on actual numbers.

d) **Trail cams** were monitored and recorded roe deer, muntjac, badgers (including white individuals), foxes, rabbits, and a weasel. Including other sightings, 4 weasels were seen, rabbits are seen only rarely, and there were no sightings of otters or mink this year. There were two sightings of a water vole in the ditch near the Thames, but no photos to confirm as yet. Trail camera footage highlights were shared with members at the AGM.

e) **Butterfly counts** were made but less frequently. 3 observers recorded 20 species out of the 23 species recorded in recent years. A Brown Argus was seen on the Kidneys for the first time in many years, on one of the new pollinator patches. Marbled Whites, recently arrived, continue to be seen on the meadows. Otherwise it was not a particularly good year for numbers. Sightings are reported to the local Butterfly Conservation branch.

f) **Moths** were recorded with regular light trapping, but the numbers of people on site in the evenings this year had an impact on where traps could safely be set. This will be repeated next year. Results were reported to the County Moth Recorder, but not yet analysed.

g) The Freshwater Habitats Trust sampled for eDNA in the Shire Lake Ditch adjacent to Long Meadow and the ditch on Christ Church meadow for the presence of Great Crested Newts, which are known to be present on neighbouring Long Meadow where they make unsuccessful breeding attempts in the pond there which now dries up too soon every summer. Results were negative.

6. Financial Review

6.1 Sources of income and outgoings

During the financial year to 26.9.20:

Income came from subscriptions and donations (£851, up 35% from last year), sale of calendars produced a net profit of £249, and we received a small grant (£750) from the Midcounties Co-operative Community Fund. No other fund-raising was attempted this year, as lease negotiations are underway with the landowner to give us more security of tenure than we have now with an informal agreement, which would make projects more attractive to future funders. We are not yet registered for Gift Aid, but are considering doing so.

Outgoings were for standard running costs, and tools bought using the Co-op grant. £252 of this grant remained unspent at the end of the financial year, but has been spent since, and an end of grant report completed.

The balance carried forward was £2404.80, up from £1867.14 at the start of year.

6.2 Reserves policy

There is no formal reserves policy, as basic running costs have been low. Informally, reserves are kept for a year's essential running costs such as public liability insurance. However this is under review at least informally as if Ash Dieback hits the reserve, extra tree work costs will be incurred, and also if a lease is taken on Aston's Eyot.

6.3 Financial status

The charity currently has resources from unrestricted donations and subscriptions that are sufficient to meet its essential outgoings for at least another year, and it is expected that that will continue to be the case.

6.4 Restricted Funds

The grant (£750) from the Midland Counties Co-operative was a restricted fund for the purposes of buying tools and small kit for volunteer use, and the term of this grant was December 2019 to December 2020. This is now spent as agreed and the end-of-grant report completed.

6.5 Details of any funds materially in deficit

The charity has no funds materially in deficit.

6.6 Remuneration of trustees

All trustees act in a voluntary capacity and receive no remuneration or other material benefits from their services to the charity. Out of pocket expenses necessarily and reasonably incurred by trustees in promoting the purposes of the charity are reimbursed at cost.

6.7 Statutory statements on liabilities

The trustees declare that

- a) The charity has given no guarantees where potential liability under the guarantee is outstanding at the date of this statement
- b) The charity has no outstanding debts which are secured by an express charge on any of the assets of the charity at the date of this statement.

Approved by the Trustees and signed on their behalf,

Ruth Ashcroft, Co-chair

15 Feb 2021

7. Receipts and payments accounts for financial year to 26.09.20

RECEIPTS	This year	Last year
£	£	
Subscriptions & donations	851.00	634.00
Sale of calendars	545.50	587.50
Mid-counties Co-op grant	750.00	
Total receipts	2146.50	1221.50
Opening balance at 27 September 2019	1867.14	2399.66
4013.64	3621.16	
PAYMENTS		
Insurance	133.00	133.00
AGM room hire	20.00	40.00 (incl for EGM)
Printing calendars	296.45	
Printing leaflets	72.08	59.76
Co-op grant spend (tools & small kit)	497.50	
Oxford Conservation Volunteers	360.00	600.00
Mower service	146.26	28.76
Website updating		270.65
Trail cameras		246.97
Tree stakes and posts		282.00
Seeds		50.00
Sundries	83.55	62.88
Total payments	1608.84	1754.02
Closing balance at 26 September 2020	2404.80	1867.14
4013.64	3621.16	

Notes

- 1) In 2019-20, £252.50 of the Midcounties Co-op grant remained unspent by 26.9.20 but was spent by the end of the grant term in December 2020.
- 2) In 2018-19, the payment for printing calendars was made in the previous financial year
- 3) In 2018-19, the payment to Oxford Conservation Volunteers covered work over more than two years

The accounts were prepared by Hon. Treasurer Laurence Burrell.

8. Approval of the Trustees

The Trustees declare that they have approved the above Annual Report and Statement of financial activity.

Signed on behalf of the trustees

Name: Anthony Cheke

Role: Chair