



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 2021

Report date: June 2022

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@friendsofastonseeyot.org
website: <https://friendsofastonseeyot.org>

1.3 Names of the Trustees who manage the Charity

	Role	Date appointed	Date retired
Anthony Cheke	Chair	10 October 2019	
Ruth Ashcroft elected	Co-chair	18 November 2021	Re-
Laurence Burrell elected	Treasurer	18 November 2021	Re-
Charlotte Ellis		18 November 2021	
Adam Gibbon		10 October 2019	
Susie Jakobsson-Thomas elected		18 November 2021	Re-

Thelma Martin
Ashok Stally-Chudasama

Secretary 10 October 2019
18 November 2021

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.

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 continuing 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. Only a few small events were possible. However communications to members and visitors were greatly improved by reinstating regular (digital) newsletters, reinvigorating the Friends Facebook page, and by starting a review and update of the Friends website.

4.2 Provision of facilities for recreation and volunteering :

The pandemic continued to result in greatly increased numbers visiting Aston's Eyot with several hundred visits a day at the peak of lockdowns. People visiting included families with children, large numbers of teenagers and young adults, and older 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 endeavouring to minimise the impact increased visitor numbers had on wildlife and habitats. The few events possible were on the themes of well-being and art in nature. Regular newsletters were reinstated, the facebook page reinvigorated with regular posts, and an overhaul of the website initiated.

People also benefited from volunteering. Including litter-pickers, around 60-70 local people were involved, and another 60+ from three visiting volunteer groups. Two Duke of Edinburgh Award students volunteered with us, and three students carried out individual ecology projects. Membership of the Friends increased by 11% to 147; membership is not required for access.

4.3 Conservation management and habitat restoration:

A tree inspection was undertaken, including monitoring for Ash die-back, and some unsafe trees were felled or reduced by tree surgeons. Tree species in the Plantation (mainly Ash) were mapped to help develop plans for this area post Ash die-back. 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 were maintained by scything. Water quality in the Shire Lake Ditch was

monitored regularly by testing for pollutants, and a continuing serious sewage pollution problem tackled with only partial success. Plans were drawn up with Oxford City Council Parks Dept for habitat and access improvements on the neighbouring Kidneys Nature Park, though only a small part of the programme was completed this year. Oxford City Council assisted with management with 2 mowing days and other help on Aston's Eyot.

4.4 Surveys of fauna and flora:

Surveys were continued as possible mainly by observers working individually. 68 bird species present were recorded this year, highlights being a marsh tit sighting and larger numbers of nuthatches and ring-necked parakeets. Nestboxes were monitored and young birds ringed. 64 active badger sett entrances were recorded, and 11 animals were vaccinated against TB by the Oxfordshire Badger group as the start of a four year programme. Mammals and birds were also monitored with trail cams and other sightings. 19 species of butterfly were recorded, slightly fewer than usual. Moth surveys using light traps were not possible due to high numbers of visitors on site in the evenings and more vandalism and disturbance than usual. Plant surveys focused on the loss of diversity caused by heavy trampling to path verges by increased footfall during winter and spring lockdowns, and the impact of grazing by the high density of deer present. 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 second year as a charity and eleventh year as a local community organisation another 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 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.

Specific aims for the year were: i) Agree and implement with Oxford City Council a programme of habitats and paths improvements on the Kidneys, ii) Facilitate the start of the first year of badger vaccination against TB, iii) Make a post-Ash-dieback plan for the Plantation, the woodland area that will be most impacted because of the high proportion of Ash here, iv) continue to investigate the impact of deer on ground flora.

b). To continue to facilitate Covid-safe public access for volunteering and peaceful recreation for the benefit of the local community, and to work to manage the impact of increased visitor pressure on the reserve so as to

maintain both the biodiversity and also 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 from the start of the first lockdown and stayed high, demonstrating here as elsewhere the importance of green spaces and nature reserves are for the well-being of people in towns and cities.

c). To update the website, reinvigorate the Facebook page, and reinstate regular newsletters for members.

5.2 Public access and volunteering

a) Membership of the Friends was 147, up another 11% from last year and 28% from 2 years ago. Many new members commented that they had joined to give something back to a place that had become important to them. **Visitor** numbers remained very much higher than pre-pandemic, with a guestimated five-fold increase in the both spring lockdowns and remaining high since at several hundred visits a day. They included many families with children as well as adults of all ages and backgrounds.

a) Paths and access. Safe public access was facilitated by keeping the main path network mowed extra wide by Oxford City Council. Smaller paths were kept scythed by volunteers as and when possible. A problem during the 2020/21 winter months was that the extra footfall caused all paths to become very muddy and for a wide area of path verges to become seriously trampled impacting the vegetation. This led to a decision in autumn 2021 to improve main paths with addition of gravel. Meadow areas and riverbanks were used by visitors to walk and sit as well, also resulting in more trampling than usual. Efforts were made to keep some areas undisturbed for wildlife by resisting the creation of new paths in with natural barriers and by explanatory notices where necessary, but this was less successful this year than last.

b) Anti-social behaviour. In March and April 2021 with strict spring lockdowns in place, there were numerous gatherings and parties, some large, and often involving fires as the weather was cold. This led to damage to trees, burning of tree stakes, other minor vandalism, more litter, and more creation of new paths into areas normally kept free of disturbance. Once summer came and lockdowns eased, most of these problems reduced. While facilitating public access is a key aim of the Friends, and was very important to many people during lockdowns, these events did make clear to us the importance of actively presenting Aston's Eyot as primarily a nature reserve rather than a party zone.

Litter problems were managed through litter picking by the local community and the involvement of Duke of Edinburgh award students. Tree stakes and fence posts near the busiest paths (thus the most prone to being removed for bonfires) were gradually replaced with metal ones.

c) Volunteering. Our regular monthly work parties had to be abandoned in the late winter and spring lockdown, but resumed in summer with 15-20 attending each time. Individual effort and work in

very small groups was able to continue throughout, and involved around 50 people in all. In addition the Oxford Conservation Volunteers came with around 25 people to pollard some of the riverside willows. Oxford Good Gym volunteers joined us twice with around 20 people to blitz nettle pulling and scything tasks. Elsevier publishers sent a team twice 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 two days of mowing and path clearance.

d) Events. Once again these were limited by the pandemic. A few small ones were run by others, including forest bathing, uses of wild plants, and an art project celebrating the rivers through willow sculptures. 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.

e) Website, newsletters and social media. Thanks to the work of new recruits, a much needed review and update of the Friends website is now underway, and regular newsletters have also been started again with the first sent out in the summer. The Friends facebook page has also been reinvigorated with frequent posts covering events, work parties and what's about to see, which rapidly attracted a number of followers.

5.3 Conservation management and habitat restoration

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

We have a Tree Safety Policy in place, under which trees near main paths are monitored for health and stability. As a result, a few trees which were dying or becoming unstable were felled by tree surgeons in December 2020. Ash trees continue to be monitored for Ash Dieback. 3 large trees are definitely infected, 3 more possibly, and some saplings by the Jackdaw Lane bridge are infected. The spread of this disease is proving slower than we had expected, though spread it almost certainly will. A small number of elms also died this year as a result of Dutch Elm Disease.

The Plantation. This spring the tree species in the Plantation were mapped to help develop plans for this area post ash dieback, since so many of the trees are ash here. We are planning to fell a few of the weaker ash here where this will promote the growth of the smaller oak and alder trees present.

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. Further areas near main paths were managed as rough grassland with mowing and 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 both this year and last 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 for a second year in early spring, and showed an immediate marked increase in flower numbers for both spring and summer flowering species such as cowslip and yellow rattle, though this year we have had to work harder to keep deer out. A section of flowering riverbank was also enclosed to prevent loss of flowering plants from both deer grazing and trampling by people.

c) Improving water quality in the Shire Lake Ditch. This is an ongoing project to improve poor water quality. Water quality has continued to be monitored regularly, especially near the street drainage outlets at Jackdaw Lane bridge, by the school, and from the scrapyard. All year it has been clear that there is sewage pollution still coming in at the Jackdaw Lane Bridge despite repairs to the sewer last year: high ammonia and phosphate levels, sewage smells, and sewage "fungus" (actually bacteria) present. A number of local residents helped to contact Thames Water and the Environment Agency about this, and Thames Water staff reported that they had located which area of housing the pollution was coming from and were taking steps to identify exactly which the buildings had misconnected drains so that their plumbing can be rectified. We will keep monitoring – it takes time for the pollution to dissipate as it binds to the silt in the ditch. The two other areas of the ditch remained less contaminated and this resulted in better conditions for aquatic wildlife.

The Kidneys. Friends of Aston's Eyot is also the friends group for the neighbouring Council-owned Kidneys Nature Park – together the two sites complement each other in terms of habitats, and in many ways act as a single unit for wildlife and walkers. In spring we agreed a plan of tasks this year with the Countryside team: re-gravelling some paths to reduce winter mud, mending fences, provision of a noticeboard, more pollinator patches, and further tree and shrub planting to improve biodiversity. In the event, the Countryside team have been seriously set back by lack of staff and by the extent of growth this year on all reserves. In the end, other

than routine tasks, only the repairs to the metal footbridge have been done, We will go ahead with the planting this winter.

Student projects. Projects carried out on Aston's Eyot this year have included one on people and green places, one on phosphate pollution in the Thames, and one on the nutrient content of pollen in relation to flower selection by bumblebees.

5.4 Wildlife surveys

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

a) **Birds.** 68 species were recorded in 2021; of note was the regular presence in late summer of nuthatches, previously only seen once, and sightings of a marsh tit in February; a pair of coal tits, rare in the city, bred by the sports ground. Sparrowhawk young were heard after fledging, but the nest was not found. Kingfishers were less in evidence than usual, but ring-necked parakeets are increasingly seen and heard. Mild winters have meant few interesting waterbirds in winter on the Thames and Cherwell, with no sightings of goosander, grebes or coot during 2020-21. Nestboxes were checked and young ringed in May, though some had already fledged; there was 90% occupancy, with (of known occupants) 5 blue tit nests and 18 great tits.

c) **Badgers.** The Oxfordshire Badger Group came in May 2021 to vaccinate the badgers against TB, as the first year in a four year programme. After a fortnight of pre-baiting with peanuts, traps were set, and 11 badgers were caught and vaccinated over two nights at the end of May, including one white animal and a cub. The peanuts used as bait were rapidly taken by the badgers in the run up to live trapping. The camera traps suggest we still have two white badgers resident on the Eyot. Our annual badger hole census in February revealed fewer holes than usual (64 entrances compared to 82 last year), but that does not necessarily imply fewer badgers - they were in the same areas as before (3 main setts on the Eyot, one on Meadow Lane rec.), though some inactive holes were reopened later and a few new ones dug. Spring disturbance by people during lockdown was significant in some places, and caused badgers to move setts a short distance.

d) **Trail cams** were monitored and recorded roe deer (max. 8 seen together), and muntjac (max 4 together but almost certainly more present), both of which bred successfully on the Eyot. Camera trapping also revealed foxes, squirrels, wood mice, brown rats and the occasional rabbit, now scarce on the Eyot. Trail camera footage highlights were shared with members at the AGM. There was an unconfirmed sighting by a visitor of the now rare water vole in the ditch; no otters or mink were seen this year, but there were several sightings of weasels.

e) **Butterfly counts** were made but less frequently. 3 observers recorded 19 species out of the 23 species recorded in recent years. It was generally

a rather poor year for butterflies with numbers and variety down on previous years, though a migrant painted lady, sporadic in recent years, was seen in August, and marbled whites returned to the Kidneys, enjoying the recently established knapweed patches. Sightings are reported to the local Butterfly Conservation branch.

f) **Moths.** Light trapping could not take place in 2021 due to the high numbers of people using the site in the evenings, and the risk of vandalism and theft from a small subset of those attending gatherings.

g) **Plant report.** Winter 2020/21 ended with a fair amount of anxiety about the plants on the path edges, the river edges, and the areas of scrub, woodland and plantation because so much footfall during lockdown in winter and spring had widened the paths and created a sea of mud. At the same time it was good that so many more people were benefiting from the experience of being out of doors on the Eyot and taking an interest in its biodiversity. The path edges recovered through the summer, but not all the diversity of plants. Some of this is probably because of past trampling, but we are increasingly conscious that some of the common nectar bearing plants we want to encourage as food for the insect population are being browsed by the deer, so are flourishing only where they are protected by fencing.

This year's rather limited plant recording has shown a reduction in species out in the open, unprotected areas. Plants that have been more numerous in the past include eg violets, tufted vetch and bird's-foot trefoil. This is mainly due to browsing by deer. The return of the Pyramidal Orchid on Middle Way after an absence of five years since its first appearance in 2016 was a delight, but as this too was browsed after several weeks, we hope the fencing now placed round the plant will allow it to flower again next year. The only species of wild flower not previously recorded on the Eyot but found this year was a little group of young greater celandine plants that appeared in the Orchard.

On the positive side, it's now clear that there is a range of plants that the deer don't eat, many of them woodland edge plants, and excellent for insects, such as ground ivy, garlic mustard, hemlock, welshed thistle, wood forget-me-nots. **Wild flower patch champions** (15-18 people) have taken on small patches of path verges to keep the nettles at bay (by pulling them out) so that these wild flowers can flourish and increase. The conversations the wild flower patch champions have had with people passing, together with information on the web page, has led to a good number of new recruits to the role.

6. Financial Review

6.1 Sources of income and outgoings

During the financial year to 26.9.21:

Income came from membership subscriptions, donations, and sale of calendars. Subscriptions and donations at £2451.50 were up by 288% from last year, mostly due to extra donations as well as the 11% increase in membership, with donors noting the value of Aston's Eyot to them personally during the covid lockdowns. Sales of calendars produced a net profit of £525. Following the September 2021 AGM it was agreed that we would apply for further grant funding, and apply to register for Gift Aid.

Outgoings were for standard running costs, including tools and small kit bought using the remains of the Co-op grant received last financial year. This grant was spent as required by December 2020, and an end of grant report completed.

The balance carried forward was £4278.79, up from £2404.80 at the start of year.

6.2 Reserves policy

There is no formal reserves policy, as basic running costs have been low. Informally, reserves have been kept for a year's essential running costs such as public liability insurance. We have gradually increased this to be around £4000 to allow for the predicted increase in essential tree surgeon costs with increasing likelihood of both storm damage and the need to fell as a result of Ash Dieback which is beginning to affect ash trees 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 July 2022

7. Receipts and payments accounts for financial year to 26.09.21

RECEIPTS	This year	Last year
	£	£
Subscriptions & donations	2451.50	851.00
Sale of calendars	822.00	545.50
Mid-counties Co-op grant		750.00
Total receipts	3273.50	2146.50
Opening balance at 27 September 2020	2404.80	1867.14
	5678.30	4013.64
PAYMENTS		
Insurance	133.00	133.00
AGM room hire		20.00
Printing calendars	296.45	296.45
Printing leaflets	47.20	72.08
Co-op grant spend (tools & small kit)	165.88	497.50
Oxford Conservation Volunteers		360.00
Wild Oxfordshire sub (2 years)	70.00	
Mower service		146.26
Website costs	28.78	
Trail cameras		
Tree stakes, posts & netting	460.76	
Seeds	81.75	
Nest boxes	28.80	
Sundries	86.89	83.55
Total payments	1399.51	1608.84
Closing balance at 26 September 2021	4278.79	2404.80
	5678.30	4013.64

Notes

Two invoices for work done during the year were not received in time for 20-21 accounts:

- 1) Oxford Conservation Volunteers (£120)
- 2) Tree surgeon's invoice for one day's work

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