



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 2022

Report date: June 2023

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

1.3 Names of the Trustees who manage the Charity

	Role	Date appointed	Date retired
Anthony Cheke elected	Chair	24 November 2022	Re-
Ruth Ashcroft	Co-chair	18 November 2021	
Laurence Burrell	Treasurer	18 November 2021	
Charlotte Ellis elected		24 November 2022	Re-
Adam Gibbon November 2022		10 November 2020	24
Susie Jakobsson-Thomas		18 November 2021	

Thelma Martin
elected

Ashok Stally-Chudasama

Secretary 24 November 2022 Re-

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 one other committee members who is not a trustee.

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

Terms of a 21-year lease at peppercorn rent were agreed with landowner Christ Church and the lease signed on November 2022.

Core conservation management and survey work, supporting public access and volunteering, and maintaining good communication with members and visitors, were all continued.

There were 115 paid up members. 12-20 people attended monthly work parties, and there were 8 further sessions with other conservation volunteer groups each attended by around 20 people. Up to 60 people volunteered individually and in smaller ad hoc volunteering sessions.

We had one Duke of Edinburgh Award student volunteer, and three PhD/ MSc students used Aston's Eyot for data collection.

Three wildlife events were held, all well-attended.

Footpaths damaged during greatly increased footfall during Covid-19 lockdowns were repaired and improved.

Woodland habitats were improved with some selective felling, and deer exclosures protecting new plantings and ground flora were upgraded. New hedging and trees were planted on sister site The Kidneys.

A trial pond was dug to test construction methods for a future ponds project. Planning and fund-raising for this future project were begun.

Serious sewage pollution in the Shire Lake Ditch arising from contaminated surface drainage inlets was monitored and tackled by persuading Thames Water to act so that seven properties found to have misconnected foul water pipes were corrected. Overgrowth round the most polluted inlet was cut back to help this habitat recover.

5. Activities, achievements and performance - full report

5.1. Main aims this year. In addition to keeping key conservation management and survey work going, supporting public access and volunteering, and maintaining good communications with members and visitors, our **specific aims for the year** were to:

a) Agree terms for a lease of Aston's Eyot from the landowner Christ Church

- b) Repair and improve footpaths which had become very muddy and damaged in wet winter weather partly as a result of the greatly increased footfall during Covid-19 lockdowns
- c) Improve some of the woodland habitat in particular
- d) Improve the deer fencing on exclosures protecting ground flora
- e) Tackle serious ongoing pollution in the Shire Lake Ditch
- f) Build a trial pond to test methods for a future ponds project
- g) Return to running wildlife events

5.2 Lease from Christ Church. After 4 years of negotiation, the trustees agreed with the College acceptable terms for a 21 lease for Aston's Eyot at a rent of £1 per year (if demanded). This lease was signed at the end of November 2022; the term of the lease starts on 25 December 2020.

The idea of leasing Aston's Eyot arose five years ago when the College made it clear that it wished to spend no more money on managing Aston's Eyot, and were looking for a sustainable solution for the site. Leasing the site to the Friends was seen on both sides as a positive and constructive way forward. The advantages of a lease for FoAE include the longer term security of tenure, and advantages for fund-raising and for getting help from the City Council and other organisations. The Friends had anyway become responsible for almost all the maintenance. The lease brings somewhat greater liabilities, but it transpired that the insurance required to cover this did not lead to an increase in insurance costs.

5.3 Public access, volunteering and communications

a) Public access and paths. To combat the muddiness of paths in winter, we spread 7 jumbo bags of gravel, trialling different sizes (10mm best!). This was effective, but more will be needed in the future. Oxford Conservation Volunteers very successfully reprofiled two sections of the path along the Thames bank where it was falling into the river. Willow branches cut when pollarding Thames bank willows were used to make picket fences to support the new path edge and protect the bank. We also started work re-profiling path sections alongside the ditch by Kingfisher Point, to make them less slippery and easier to walk. This work was funded from an Awards for All grant from the National Lottery Community Fund.

Oxford City Council assisted by mowing main paths, continuing a previous agreement with the landowner to do this. Smaller paths were kept clear by volunteer scything.

b) Membership numbered 115 by the end of the Sept 2021-2 year, showing a slight decrease once the era of lockdowns was over. Visitor numbers also went back to pre pandemic levels – very well used but no longer at numbers that were causing damage.

c) Anti-social behaviour. The year was relatively calm. The hot dry summer weather unsurprisingly resulted in riverside gatherings (sometimes noisy) but the bigger worry was the number of fires being lit

when the vegetation was tinder dry. The Fire service had to be called on one occasion. There were a couple of instances of bottle-digging, one problematic because it cut into a badger sett, the other dangerous because of deep tunnelling. Drug dealing has been observed but not a major problem currently. We have had three rough sleeper tents – two short-lived, and one at Kingfisher Point for several weeks. Thanks to St Mungo's outreach team for offering help and alternatives to the occupants, and to the Oxford City Council's Community Response Team for coordinating.

d). Volunteering. Work parties on the last Sunday afternoon of every month were well attended with 12-20 people attending each time. Smaller extra volunteer sessions were also held on a more ad hoc basis for nettle pulling, the scything, and pond digging. Many people put in individual effort as wildflower patch champions, nettle pullers and diggers, and litter pickers. The general community effort to keep an eye on things and deal with problems had a significant effect on keeping the site litter free and calm.

We also had two days of mowing and some gravel shifting from the City Council (via Oxford Direct Services) countryside team, 4 sessions with groups of around 20 people from Oxford Conservation Volunteers and 3 sessions with Good Gym teams also of around 20 people. Elsevier gave us a day of workplace volunteering, and we had a Duke of Edinburgh Award student volunteering with us.

e) Wildlife events. We held a dawn chorus (bird song) walk in early May 2022, a bees & butterflies event in July with wild bee expert Ivan Wright, and a bat and moth night in late August – all well attended. There were also small scale events led by others such as Forest Bathing.

f) Website, calendar, newsletters and social media. Work continued on the website – mostly still behind the scenes as yet. Digital newsletters were sent out to members twice during the year. Posts were placed regularly to the Facebook page to advertise news, events, and sightings. . The calendar was produced as usual and sold out, yielding useful income. It uses photos taken on Aston's Eyot sent in by visitors and members; these are valuable not only aesthetically but for the record of species seen and the current habitats and landscapes of the Eyot.

5.4 Habitat improvements.

Woodland. Some of the ash trees at the southern end of the Plantation were felled to give more light and space to non ash tree species, following out 2021 tree survey to assess the impact of potentially losing most of the trees here to Ash Die-back. The aim was also to promote understorey shrubs and woodland ground flora within the pre-existing large deer enclosure. This was also funded by the Lottery grant. Other tree work was to remove a small number of fallen or dangerous trees. Trees near paths were inspected for safety, and in general Ash trees were monitored for Ash Die-back – by late summer 2022 7 large Ash and several saplings were showing symptoms.

Meadows, wildflower patches and nettle control. Meadow areas and rougher grassy areas were mowed to schedule, and cuttings removed, with the work done by tractor mowing, the powerscythe and the manual scything. Nettle control remains a problem. We experimented with putting down thick geotextile over some of the worst areas, and found that leaving this for 2-4 months did make it easier to then dig out roots; without the digging it would need to be left for at least a whole growing season to have any impact. One volunteer dug out heroic quantities of roots. Nettle pulling sessions in April and May 2022 and 2023 did help other flower species grow away.

The “bird-seed patch” was mostly re-dug to allow annual plant species and biennials to flourish – including teasel, ragwort, thistle, and vipers bugloss as species deer tend to leave alone. These provide good flowers for insects then seed for birds. Some volunteers, “wild flower champions”, who each took on a small patch of either path edge or part of a meadow area to keep clear of nettles have made a real difference to these areas in terms of promoting the growth of other plant species.

Deer exclosures. During the 2021-2022 year, both the Muntjac and Roe deer really learnt how to breach our 4ft high wire netting fences protecting some areas from grazing. The impact on ground flora in all habitats was found to be very considerable, as a result of the high deer densities on site. We researched better fencing methods since the British Deer Society research shows that “soft” methods such as tape, noises, lights, human urine, lion dung etc do not work for long, and started improving the exclosure fencing during the 2022-23 winter. We are also trialling metal posts rather than wooden especially near the most frequented main path where wooden ones are routinely removed for kindling fires.

The Kidneys Nature Park is the City Council owned adjacent site, where Friends of Aston’s Eyot are also involved with management since the two sites are physically connected and act as a single unit both ecologically and for human visitors. The pollinator patches created in previous years to add meadow plant diversity continue to do well on the Kidneys meadow – the deer have a much lower impact here, and the plants are spreading gradually outwards from the patches. Noticeably more butterflies and bees are seen in these patches than in the rest of the meadow.

Stretches of hedging round the open area nearest Meadow Lane were planted in the 2021/2022 winter but most suffered during the summer drought and some had to be replaced in the 2022/23 winter. Crab apple and goat willow were also planted and have done slightly better. The Council started re-surfacing the muddiest sections of the main paths here last winter, and got some hardcore down but have not yet completed with surface topping which left the paths very lumpy.

Trial pond. A shallow rainwater-fed wildlife pond (5m x 6m) was dug in February and March over a series of sessions. Robust liner and thick

underlay and overlay were used, followed by a layer of sand and gravel. The spoil was used to create a bank also covered with liner then sand and gravel to both act as extra water catchment and to create a bee bank for ground nesting wild bees. The summer drought meant that it never got more than half full, and sowings of water edge plants failed. It successfully filled once rain began in autumn 2022. In late summer 2022 a boggy area was added by lining a dug pit (c. 4m x 6m) with old tarpaulins and backfilling. All areas were sown with suitable water edge plants in autumn. Piles of logs were also added nearby to provide cover especially for amphibia and grass snakes. The area was fenced to prevent disturbance and damage from people, dogs, deer, badgers and foxes. Birds, dragonflies and water beetles were observed visiting the pond.

The trial has also been useful to point up design improvements for a future ponds project, for which planning and fund-raising has now been started.

Shire Lake Ditch. Sewage pollution coming from road surface drainage running into the ditch has been an ongoing problem. Sewage fungus was visible at the Jackdaw Lane bridge for most of 2021, and was particularly bad from late winter 2022 onwards. Thames Water located and corrected the connections on 6 residential properties and one Cowley Road restaurant in spring 2022, and continued testing for some weeks afterwards. They think the problem is resolved. We noted improvement but still some continuing sewage fungus until end 2022, and our regular water testing shows very high nutrient and ammonia levels persisting. Time will tell whether this is due to pollution lodged in the silt being slow to clear, or whether there are still misconnected properties.

It was not all bad news – Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and other birds are finding food in this section of the ditch. In the School corner to Muntjac Point stretch the water quality remains somewhat better though still too high in nutrients, and fish are regularly seen.

Oxford Conservation Volunteers cleared the third remaining stretch of the ditch by Muntjac Point at the Thames end of the ditch in October 2021, to remove excess sedges blocking the waterway and to clear a section of the bank of bramble.

5.4 Wildlife surveys and sightings

Badgers. 75 active badger holes were counted in February 2022, up on last year when lockdown disturbances had an impact on setts (causing one sett to relocate further away from easy access). The Oxfordshire Badger Group returned in May 2022 for the second of 4 rounds of vaccination against bovine TB. They caught 11 badgers including one white one, thought not to be the same white one as caught last year (they take photos). Camera traps suggest there are 2 white badgers on site, and a total population around 17-19 individuals. It remains to be seen what impact the drought had on cub (and adult) survival.

Camera trapping - the team have experimented with low glow cameras for better picture quality though some animals do notice the infrared light. No glow cameras employ black LEDs which show no light but give lower picture quality. Roe, muntjac, foxes, weasel, rabbits, mice and rats recorded regularly as well as a number of different birds. Of note was a Marsh Tit caught on camera in March 2022.

Deer. A survey in March gave 6 adult and 2 well grown Muntjac fawns. Roe were seen regularly but no good counts.

Birds. Tit nest-boxes continued to have high occupancy and high fledging success. Bird sightings otherwise included Nuthatch, Parakeets, Grey Wagtails, Kingfishers, Tree-creepers, Linnets in September, Coal tits and Siskins in the 2021/22 winter and Firecrests in the 2022/23 winter. The Plantation Tawny owl is regularly seen and heard

Butterflies. Fairly good numbers were seen of 20 species, though the drought in summer 2022 probably affected later generations of species depending on nettles as they became very dry. Brown Argus was seen again on the Kidneys pollinator patches. Marbled Whites and Small Copper were not observed this year though they may well have been present. Brown Hairstreak eggs are still being found on the blackthorn.

Moths. With evenings a bit calmer this year, we returned to regular moth surveying. Results still to be analysed but we added a number of species. The scallop proved to be as good for moths as it is for butterflies – a sheltered flower rich spot.

Wild bees and wasps. The session with Ivan Wright produced one new species of solitary wasp, and an unusual new bee species – despite the heat that day. We have now recorded 73 species of bees and wasps. Black Horehound and White Bryony were particularly good flower species for them.

Fungi. Autumn 2021 was particularly good for fungi of all sorts, with Earth Stars and the rare Orchard Tooth-Crust found. We have not found the latter again this year.

Plants. No surveys this year except for Japanese Knotweed. 4 small shoots were found and destroyed on the Old Knotweed Patch, and none on the Elsevier patch and Claire's patch. Claire Malone-Lee has had an article published in *British Wildlife* on Japanese Knotweed eradication without use of herbicide, based on her work and records in one of the three Knotweed sites – the rest having been controlled initially with glyphosate.

6. Financial Review

6.1 Sources of income and outgoings

During the financial year to 26.9.22:

Income came from membership subscriptions, donations, sale of calendars and an Awards for All grant from the National Lottery Community Fund.

Subscriptions and donations at £3338.80 were higher than last year, mostly due to £2340 donated specifically to cover solicitor's fees incurred during lease negotiations. Sales of calendars produced a net profit of £352.31. We are now registered for Gift Aid, and in the process of collecting Gift Aid declarations from donors.

The National Lottery Community Fund kindly awarded us an Awards for All grant of £3825 in January 2022, for path improvement and habitat improvement projects. Following the signing of the lease, we applied for two further grants for two projects in March 2023, both successful.

Outgoings were for standard running costs, solicitors fees (funded by earmarked donations), the trial pond project, and grant funded projects which included some of the tree work. This grant was spent as required by the end of January 2023.

The **balance** carried forward at 26 Sept 2022 was £4703.50, which included £851.88 not yet spent from the Lottery grant (ring-fenced for specific projects). There was also an invoice not yet received for work done for £480. Thus the unrestricted part of the balance carried forward was £3371.62.

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 and tree safety work. We are now aiming for 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 (£3825) from the National Lottery was awarded for specific projects, to be spent by end of January 2023. This is now spent as agreed.

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

10 July 2023

7. Receipts and payments accounts for financial year to 26.09.22

RECEIPTS	This year	Last year
	£	£
Subscriptions & donations	3338.80	2451.50
Sale of calendars	586.50	822.00
Grants	3825.00	
Total receipts	7750.30	3273.50
Opening balance at 27 September 2021	4278.	79 2404.80
	12029.09	5678.30
PAYMENTS		
Insurance	157.99	133.00
AGM room hire	20.00	
Solicitor's fees (re lease)	2340.00	
Printing calendars	234.19	296.45
Printing leaflets		47.20
Tree work	1776.00	
Tools & small kit	827.85	165.88
Fencing & tree guards	339.42	460.76
Seeds and plants	140.82	81.75
Trail cameras & batteries	152.49	
Nest boxes		28.80
Pond construction materials	803.78	
Path materials	398.33	
Oxford Conservation Volunteers*		
Wild Oxfordshire subs	35.00	70.00
Website costs	45.98	28.78
Sundries	53.74	86.89
Total payments	7325.59	1399.51
Closing balance at 26 September 2021	4703.50	4278.79
	12029.09	5678.30

Notes

- a) * Invoice due from Oxford Conservation Volunteers for £480
- b) The solicitor's fee was covered by donations given for the purpose

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