



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 2023

Report date: June 2024

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	24 November 2022	Re-elected Nov 22
Ruth Ashcroft	Co-chair	18 November 2021	Re-elected Nov 23
Laurence Burrell	Treasurer	18 November 2021	Re-elected Nov 23
Charlotte Ellis		24 November 2022	Re-elected Nov 22
Adam Gibbon		10 November 2020	24 November 2022
Susie Jakobsson-Thomas		18 November 2021	Re-elected Nov 23
Thelma Martin	Secretary	24 November 2022	Re-elected Nov 22
Ashok Stally-Chudasama		18 November 2021	Re-elected Nov 23

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 finally signed in November 2022, though the lease runs from December 2020.

There were 95 paid up members. 8-20 people attended monthly work parties, and there were 4 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.

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

Further riverside path improvements were made.

Woodland habitats were improved with some selective felling. Deer exclosures protecting new plantings and ground flora were significantly upgraded. Gaps in hedging were planted up on sister site The Kidneys, and scrapes for new pollinator patches made. Dead hedges were made with cut branches to maintain the protection of conservation areas from disturbance by people and dogs.

A new complex of three large ponds were created, and fenced against deer and dogs.

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 in 2022. 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) Finalise lease of Aston's Eyot from the landowner Christ Church
- b) Continue path improvement especially along Thames path
- c) Develop a ponds creation project near Jackdaw Lane
- d) Raise funds for the ponds project, a needed second tool-shed, more tools, tree work and general maintenance
- e) Tackle aftermath of pollution incidents in the Shire Lake Ditch
- f) Further improve deer exclosure fencing and enlarge some exclosures
- g) Make more scrapes for establishing meadow flowers

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. As Aston's Eyot is not registered with the Land Registry, but the ownership of the land is not in doubt, it was decided to register this lease as a "Good Leasehold". To date this has not been completed due to delays at the Land Registry.

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. Oxford Conservation Volunteers made further improvements to the path along the Thames bank by levelling and protecting the bank with a willow picket fence.

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 95 by the end of the Sept 2022-3 year, showing a slight decrease from the previous year. While membership subscriptions remained unchanged at £5 during

this year, the policy of encouraging people to give more had continued with some limited success. At the AGM in November it was agreed to raise the annual subscription to £8 minimum.

c) Anti-social behaviour. Perhaps because of the wet weather, there were few problems this year, with fewer fires and problematic parties.

d). Volunteering. Work parties on the last Sunday afternoon of every month were well attended with 10-20 people attending each time. Smaller extra volunteer sessions were also held on a more ad hoc basis for nettle pulling, the scything, and pond creation work. 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, 2 sessions with groups of around 20 people from Oxford Conservation Volunteers and 2 sessions with Good Gym teams also of around 20 people.

e) Art auction. An inaugural art auction was held on 26 April 2023 at the James Street Tavern. Local artists very kindly donated pieces, and £1517 was raised.

f) Website, calendar, newsletters and social media. Work continued on the website, particularly to improve function on smartphones, and ability to take donations through it was developed. Digital illustrated newsletters were sent out to members three times during the year. Posts were placed regularly to the Facebook page to advertise news, events, and sightings. WhatsApp groups are now being used for some volunteer communications. 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.

Ponds project. This project was to create a group of clean water ponds for wildlife, to complement the more polluted habitat of the Shire Lake Ditch and the large seasonal pond on the adjacent Long Meadow. These new ponds (North Ponds), like the trial ponds made 18 months ago (South Ponds), were designed to be mainly very shallow, fish-free, and rain filled so that they have clean water. Oxford Conservation Volunteers (OCV) first cleared the new ponds site of nettles and brambles in November 2022. Through the following summer we had volunteer sessions to scythe down the regrown nettles ready for work in September 2023 to level the site then dig out the basic pond shapes with a mini-digger. There were further volunteer sessions to line and fill a bog area, fine tune pond shapes and edges, remove sharp bits, and line the first of the ponds. OCV came again in November 2023 with a large team to finish fine-tuning the shapes and lining the last two of the three new ponds, and shifting over 15 tons of sand to cover the liners. Water edge plants were seeded round the edges, in part with locally collected seed. With a rainy winter and spring the ponds filled rapidly and new sowings grew away well.

The South (trial) Ponds dug in spring 2022 have been successful, with water levels not dropping below half full, and with the vegetation developing look much less raw. They have been much frequented by birds (including a pair of mallards in spring), dragonflies, water beetles and other wildlife. There is at least one adult frog in residence.

Shire Lake Ditch. The ditch has been subject to serious sewage pollution coming from misconnected foul water pipes in a number of local properties and a restaurant, which was feeding into the surface drainage system emptying into the ditch at Jackdaw Lane. Thames

Water corrected this in spring 2022, but with poor water through flow, the pollution has been slow to clear. To help the process, a few trees and other overhanging vegetation was cleared by volunteers to let light in to the area to promote natural breakdown of the pollutants and help aquatic vegetation begin to return.

Deer exclosures. In summer 2022, both the muntjac and roe deer learned to either jump or push underneath our 4ft fences on deer exclosures, and ate large quantities of the meadow, riverside and woodland flowers inside. Over last winter and this spring, we made all the fencing on deer exclosures more effective by increasing the height to at least 5ft and having a flange at the bottom to prevent squeezing underneath. This has worked well so far, and the impact on the vegetation has been very noticeable with all the flower species bouncing back quickly. On unprotected areas we found that teasel and burdock are now also being eaten, making the list of plant species not much eaten by the deer smaller still. A snap deer census in February 2024 showed that the numbers of Muntjac in particular have increased to record levels, explaining the increasing grazing pressure on the ground flora. A large Thames-side exclosure was cleared of thistle and sedge to allow return of diverse riverbank vegetation previously lost to deer grazing.

Conservation areas. To help keep a large central area free of human and dog disturbance, dead hedges were made to help limit access. One section of this area is mowed plus other management interventions; the rest is left untouched.

Trees. We undertake an annual tree safety check following Forestry Commission guidelines for land managers. The ash dieback situation has not become much worse this year – probably the trees were helped by a wetter summer. Tree surgeons were employed to remove an alder leaning dangerously low over the Cherwell, and to remove a few unsafe trees and branches. We also have a new volunteer who is a licensed chainsaw user who has done occasional smaller jobs.

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 compared to Aston's Eyot, and the plants are spreading very gradually outwards from the patches. To help the project along, the City Council made five more patches by stripping the turf, to augment the ones we already have. These have been seeded with meadow flowers. Noticeably more butterflies and bees are seen in pollinator patches than in the rest of the meadow. We also used the mini-digger while we had it to dig out two patches on the main meadow on Aston's Eyot for re-seeding.

5.4 Wildlife surveys and sightings

Badgers. 49 active badger sett entrances were counted in February, down from 75 last year. Entrances are dug and abandoned all the time, and it is always hard to interpret these counts. It may be that adult numbers are down, perhaps due to dispersal out to other sites, perhaps due to last summer's drought making feeding more difficult. The Oxfordshire Badger Group returned in May 2023 for the third round of vaccination against TB – they caught and vaccinated 5 adults and 3 cubs (10 adults and 1 cub last year). No white badgers were caught by them or seen on the trail cams, whereas last year there were two.

Camera trapping continued as usual, with a variety of mammals and birds recorded, making a useful insight into the wildlife less often seen.

Deer. A single survey in February 2024 resulted in 12 Muntjac seen – up from the 8 seen in March 2023, adding to the view that population numbers have risen to a very high level. Up to 4 Roe were seen, which suggests a steady population.

Other mammals. Foxes were very regularly seen. Rabbits seem to be doing better, judging by droppings seen and trail cam footage recording them in more parts of the Eyot. A pair of otters were seen swimming the length of the Shire Lake Ditch in early January. Water voles were seen at both Kingfisher Point and in the ditch near Muntjac Point.

Birds. The tit nest-boxes normally have a very high occupancy and success rate, but this summer there were more boxes unused or with nests started but abandoned before completion. The birds which did lay eggs had a significantly lower success rate with at least 36% failing to rear young. This may have been due to rain making feeding more difficult; there were also signs of sparrowhawk activity. The Cowley cubs group kindly made us 8 nestboxes which will go up this winter to augment numbers and replace damaged ones.

Bird sightings of note included Water Rail and Snipe in the ditch in December, Grey and Pied Wagtail, Willow Warbler, Firecrest, Redpoll, Bullfinch, Nuthatch, Tufted Duck, Coot, Little Egret, and (overhead) Hobby, Woodcock, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Raven, Meadow Pipit, Common tern, Skylark, and a cuckoo heard several times at a distance. Ring-neck Parakeets are now regularly seen flying in groups. The Plantation Tawny owl is regularly seen and heard

Butterflies. 19 species were recorded. Marbled White were seen again on the Kidneys and the Eyot, and Small Coppers also seen. Red Admirals were very numerous this year, but Small Tortoiseshells were hardly seen at all.

Plants. No surveys this year except for Japanese Knotweed. One small plant found on the Old Knotweed Patch – none on Claire's Patch and the Elsevier Patch. In general it was noted that the number of species being eaten by deer has increased again, with very little teasel, burdock, hogweed, mallow and hedge cranesbill surviving compared to recent years – leaving very few ground flora species untouched.

6. Financial Review

6.1 Sources of income and outgoings

During the financial year to 26.9.23:

Income came from membership subscriptions, donations, sale of calendars, an art auction, and two grants: an Awards for All grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, and a River and Wetlands Community Days grant funded by Thames Water via the Wild Trout Trust.

Subscriptions and donations at £1472.40 were lower than last year as that year included £2340 donated specifically to cover solicitor's fees incurred during lease negotiations. Sales of calendars produced a net profit of £357.10. We are now registered for Gift Aid, and in the process of collecting Gift Aid declarations from donors. (The first claim was later made successfully in February 2024).

The National Lottery Community Fund kindly awarded us a second Awards for All grant of £7345 in June 2023, for a second shed, tree work, pond creation, fencing and tools. The River

and Wetlands Community Days grant was for £4995 for ponds and bog creation, and ditch habitat improvements.

Outgoings were for standard running costs and grant-funded projects such as the second shed, the ponds project, fence improvements and tree work. Both grants were spent within the time periods specified (mainly by the end of the 2023-4 winter).

The **balance** carried forward at 26 Sept 2022 was £13,614, higher than usual as it included £9411 as yet unspent grant funds (ring-fenced for specific projects). Thus the unrestricted part of the balance carried forward was £4203.

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 storm damage, riverbank erosion, 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 grants received (£12,340) from the National Lottery and RCCD were awarded for specific projects, to be spent by end June 2024. 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 2024

7. Receipts and payments accounts for financial year to 26.09.23

RECEIPTS	This year	Last year
	£	£
Subscriptions & donations	1472.40	3338.80
Sale of calendars	710.50	586.50
Art auction	1517.00	
Grants	12340.00	3825.00
Total receipts	16039.90	7750.30
Opening balance at 27 September 2021	4703.50	4278.79
	20743.40	12029.09
PAYMENTS		
Insurance	155.94	157.99
AGM room hire	20.00	20.00
Solicitor's fees (re lease)		2340.00
Printing calendars	353.40	234.10
Tree work	550.00	1776.00
Tools & small kit	184.89	827.85
Fencing & tree guards	596.17	339.42
Seeds and plants		140.82
Trail cameras & batteries		152.49
Pond construction materials	329.56	803.78
Path materials		398.33
Lottery grant Feb 2022 (tools & fencing)	851.88	
Lottery Grant July 2023 (shed & bog materials)	2982.94	
Oxford Conservation Volunteers	600.00	
Wild Oxfordshire subs	35.00	35.00
Website costs	304.97	45.98
Sundries	218.65	53.74
Total payments	7129.40	7325.59
Closing balance at 26 September 2021	13614.00	4703.50
	20743.40	12029.09

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