



Oxford Conservation Volunteers

Annual Report 2020-2021



Registered Charity Number 1186114

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Chair's Report

It's been a strange year for everyone as a result of the pandemic, but we've managed to achieve a huge amount in very challenging circumstances, which I think makes OCV's year a rare positive story in what has otherwise been a tragic, bleak and lonely period for many people.

This time last year we had cancelled all our tasks because of the pandemic, but we had begun to think about how to resume activities in some form. I think we probably expected things to be completely back to normal within a matter of weeks, but I'm glad we didn't wait, because we would still be waiting a year later! We had some early strong encouragement to restart tasks from former OCV stalwart John Gorrill, who had a beach cleaning group running in another part of the country. He was the first to point out to me that there was nothing preventing us from organising work parties if we could mitigate risks, and suggested some practical steps. The regulations which allow volunteer work have stayed constant in this regard, although confusion about them has been widespread, particularly about whether work had to be in some way essential and in whether there were differences in tier areas or during different periods of time. Often the policy choice of one organisation was cited as an example of what the regulations must say, so rumours developed that did not reflect either the regulations or the guidance, which was hardly surprising given how difficult the regulations were to find and understand, and the arbitrary way in which they were enforced.

A major part of the preparation for resuming tasks was developing a risk assessment and some risk mitigation measures for Covid-19, which we did at a time when face-coverings were still a rare sight in public and actually against government advice. The focus at the time was on cleaning hands and surfaces, and then distancing. I think we did a thorough job on the risk mitigations, and several other conservation groups used it as a model to adapt for their own use over the subsequent months. The key points were not providing minibuss transport and 2m social distancing. Both of these have provided significant challenges. The latter meant mostly avoiding doing more complicated construction tasks or things like hedgelaying that we would normally do in pairs.

We had our first task following the first lockdown on Sunday May 31st 2020 at the Trap Grounds and were very relieved that plenty of volunteers showed an interest and we were able to do some useful work without any problems. I will always be grateful to those clients that were willing to host us for those first few tasks. I led the first couple of tasks and had the experience of arriving on site with not just a risk assessment in my pocket, but also printouts of laws, regulations, guidance and police advice, in the case there was an altercation with the authorities or members of the public! Thankfully, in the event, none of that was needed.

Although many people and organisations continued conservation volunteering on an ad-hoc basis throughout the first lockdown I'm proud that we were one of the first groups in the area to restart officially, and that we did so openly, with a risk assessment that the trustees had signed off, and that we made that we made it known to all our volunteers rather than just privately contacting people we knew personally. I think this shows the value of small,

dedicated groups like ours and some of our partners, as compared to very large charities and government organisations which can sometimes be slow to make decisions, have to support paid staff before volunteers and can become pre-occupied with finances and bureaucratic processes.

One of our biggest challenges this year has been managing large numbers of willing volunteers, often more than we can make good use of or safely accommodate on site. This was anticipated as there were fewer opportunities for people to get out and about, or to do volunteering with other organisations. It became increasingly apparent over the Summer where we had some very large turnouts, regularly between 25 and 35 for tasks in Oxford.

We were able to continue throughout the November/December lockdown with largely the same measures in place, but then cancelled a few tasks in January before resuming activities in February, this time with numbers limited to 15. One task was oversubscribed by 30 people, meaning we had willing volunteers to do 3 times as much work. (If only we had 3 times the tools, leaders and organisational capacity!)

In a year of great disruption and uncertainty, Phil Hunter deserves a special mention for juggling all the requests and filling all the gaps in the programme, sometimes swapping things around at quite short notice in order to maintain a full and varied programme with work that we could do safely in the circumstances.

A notable success story this year is the amount of scrub clearance work we've been able to do at Crecy Hill, Tackley. We've transformed this site with half a dozen sessions of cutting back mountains of bramble and thorny scrub. It had been significantly declining as so much wild flower habitat was lost to scrub, but I think we've made a good start on turning it around, and hopefully we can do some of the longer term work now.

The purchase of 4 tree-poppers was a significant investment for us. But they are proving very useful, so much that I wish we'd had them sooner. Although they are expensive, one was purchased as a result of a donation, and they seem unlikely to break or wear out quickly.

We've had a couple of online social activities, two or three real-life socials involving 6 people at a time, but no residentials this year. I don't feel we've missed any opportunities, since residentials were clearly out of the question, and socials limited by regulations much of the time. There doesn't seem to have been much demand among volunteers for online socials, and most seem to be occupying themselves between tasks with work, other volunteering, and whatever outdoor activities are allowed.

Fundraising has gone well this year under Celia Taylor's direction, and now we are excited that Tom De Wilton is taking over the role with some new ideas. In the Autumn we were awarded a grant from the council for Covid-19 expenses such as gloves, cleaning products and extra tools to reduce the need for sharing. We also received a grant from the D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust for a scything training course to be held later in the year. We received donations from Sainsbury's and Asda for cleaning products and snacks.

One thing about OCV that is not widely appreciated is the amplifying effect we can have when we work with other organisations. For example, there are partners that have the budget to look after their nature reserve but not the numbers, or who have the expertise to design fantastic habitat projects but need the volunteers with the skills and tools to carry them out, or people trying to get a new volunteer group off the ground. Being part of a large and complex informal network of conservation organisations is great for resilience in difficult times like these.

Above all though, I continue to be impressed by all our volunteers who have shown a great willingness to drive, cycle or even walk significant distances in order to come to tasks, shown understanding when there isn't room for everyone, been willing to follow sometimes apparently arbitrary rules, while all the time working hard and keeping cheerful. I always feel better about the world after an OCV task and I hope everyone else does too.

Chris Skepper



Milham Ford Nature Park, Sun 6th September 2020

Secretary's Report

All committee meetings in the past year have been held online, with the town hall remaining closed for booking. The online meetings have been reliable with just a few minor technical issues, and attendance has been good, with the committee often joined by other

members or interested individuals. While the online meetings do have advantages I think I am not alone in hoping that by the time I write the report in 2022 we will have been able to hold at least some in-person meetings, once the committee judge it to be appropriate.

Last report I presented a summary of task attendance, for the year in question and further back in OCV history. This year interest in tasks has been healthy but a cap on numbers was introduced as a COVID safety measure, allowing all to hear the tools talk while social distancing and avoid overcrowding at other points of the day, and to ensure there are not more people present than is required to carry out the work. While it has been a real shame to turn enthusiastic volunteers away I hope that people will not feel put off and keep trying until we can accommodate greater numbers again, as there is plenty of conserving to be done!

Jenny Hill



Bat box installation at sites including North Hinksey Nature Reserve

Treasurer's report for the period 01/04/20 to 31/03/21

The accounts for the financial year 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021 are presented in Table 1. Our income for the year was £5803.02

The balance in our account is £30,000. The reduced number of tasks was compensated for by an excellent fund-raising effort. We have sufficient funds to replace the minibus when needed.

Tim Bletsoe

Table 1. Accounts for period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021

	2020-2021	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018
INCOME:				
Task Fees	£4080.00	£7,200.00	£5040.00	£7,200.00
Memberships	£309.00	£131.00	£135.00	£175.00
Donations	£829.70	£949.00	£1045.70	£1,562.50
Grants	£550.00	£491.48	£0.00	£0.00
Merchandise sales	£0.00	£26.00	£0.00	£51.50
Interest	£34.32	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Other	£0.00 ⁽³⁾	£865.21 ⁽³⁾	£0.00 ⁽³⁾	£671.10 ⁽³⁾
Income for the year	£5,803.02	£9,662.69	£6,220.70	£9,660.10
EXPENDITURE:				
Minibus				
Maintenance, MOT	£456.55	£226.08	£1100.70	£188.28
Fuel	£90.95	£460.35	£372.37	£364.63
Tax & Insurance	£772.93	£771.48	£770.84	£741.00
Total Minibus costs	£1320.43	£1457.91	£2,243.91	£1,293.91
Car Mileage	£106.80	£99.52	£17.82	£0.00
Tools, materials & tool insurance	£1860.30	£1,012.92	£1082.48	£1,154.82
Training	£0.00	£810.00	£0.00	£0.00
BTCV affiliation and insurance	£207.09	£217.09	£207.09	£211.60
Food	£0.00	£503.39	£1.69	£193.27
Stationery	£40.32	£167.09	£77.72	£58.78
Publicity	£86.37	£65.45	£20.60	£39.37
Accommodation	£0.00	£50.00	£0.00	£0.00
Other	£279.89 ⁽²⁾	£279.89 ⁽²⁾	£238.58 ⁽²⁾	£113.35 ⁽²⁾

Merchandise	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Depreciation	£1,600.00 ⁽¹⁾	£1,600.00 ⁽¹⁾	£1,6000.00 ⁽¹⁾	£1,6000.00 ⁽¹⁾
Expenditure for the year	£3,901.20	£4,662.84	£3,939.38	£3,065.14
Excess income over expenditure	£301.32	£3,162.27	£680.82	£4,794.96
*Excess income over expenditure excl depreciation	£1901.32	£4,762.27	£2,280.82	£6,594.96
Balance in current account	£4,319.89	£34,806.50	£30,045.03	£28,230.00
Balance in Investment Account	£30,052.63	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Petty Cash	£0.00	£0.00	£2.38	£2.38

- (1) Depreciation was calculated using the straight-line method, based on an estimated 8-year lifespan, and a £500 trade-in value
- (2) Website hosting and email service
- (3) Refund for task materials and residential payments

Tim Bletsoe



Tree planting at Burgess Field Nature park, 21st Feb 2021 (left) and Stansfeld Park 6th Dec 2020 (right)

Fundraising Officer's report

Ceila Taylor stepped down as Fundraising Officer in February 2021. Tom de Wilton took up the position of Fundraising Officer in February 2021.

Celia secured £898 of funding during 2020 through a variety of sources. The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust donated £300 to finance a volunteer Scythe training session, to be carried out once the COVID-19 restrictions allow in 2021. Asda (Wheatley) donated a variety of cleaning materials to disinfect tools between uses as well as individually wrapped drinks and snacks to support volunteers whilst on socially distanced work parties. Sainsbury's (Heyford Hill) donated a £50 gift voucher. Celia established a funding campaign on The Big Give to enable OCV to receive donations online.

Tom de Wilton has applied for a variety of grant funding, including: The Woodroffe Benton Foundation, Postcode Lottery Magic Little Grant and the Oxford University Community Fund. Tom has established an OCV LinkedIn page to explore fundraising from the Oxford business community in alignment with their ESG obligations. Tom has submitted applications to the Waitrose Community Matters and Tesco Bags for Help schemes.

Tom is in the process of writing to all of the Oxford University Colleges to ask for financial donations. Tom is exploring larger capital grant funding options to support the purchase of a new OCV minibus.

Thomas De Wilton

Task Programmer's Report

The Covid lockdowns threw out the task schedule not once, but twice. We lost 8 tasks and a weekend at Carrifran in Scotland to the first lockdown. New projects at the C.S Lewis Reserve in Headington, at Wolfson College, and at Ruskin College were indefinitely postponed as clients shut up shop and furloughed staff. But we managed to get back to work promptly, and legally, at the very end of May 2020 with a revised, simplified, and carefully planned schedule of tasks which ensured that volunteers could work widely separated, and in line with our anti-Covid policies. The most significant consequence was that anything that required close physical cooperation was ruled out. So, no fencing; no construction work.

Even so, we managed a full programme of tasks throughout the remainder of the year. We began a new project at Cutteslowe Meadows by the Cherwell in collaboration with the Freshwater Habitats Trust, Oxford City Council, and Oxford Botanical Gardens to reintroduce relatively rare native flowers suited to the pond and flood-plain habitat. We also worked seven scrub bashing tasks at the Crecy Hill Nature Reserve in Tackley, and restored the balance of the grass habitat in favour of the flower and insect populations. One of the unlooked for side-effects of the disruption caused by the pandemic was that it gave us the

opportunity to concentrate work on a single site that should show beneficial long term results.

Another task directly relevant to the pandemic involved a day's work cutting, clearing and widening the extensive path networks at Aston's Eyot. It's been obvious that all the sites on which we work have been used far more over the past year than they were before Covid, and I've never been thanked as frequently, and as often, by passers by as I was on this sunny day back in June 2020.

We have, of course, wherever possible, continued to do significant collaborative work for and with our usual clients: for Natural England (at the Aston Rowant NNR); for the Oxford City Council; for the Oxford Preservation Trust; for the Friends of Trap Grounds and the Friends of Burgess Field; and, not least, for the Oxford Trust at Stansfeld. We also took up work again on behalf of the local Parish Council on the fen at Louie Memorial Fields, after a break of several years.

We cancelled another five tasks in response to the resurgence of Covid-19 in January 2021. Again, it was possible to get back to work promptly with new working arrangements, including a booking system. Again, however, the distancing requirement all but ruled out some planned hedge-laying, which usually involves instruction at close quarters. However, we did manage a couple of ten-meter stretches working solo (one at North Hinksey, one at Burgess Field). In summary, from the beginning of April 2020 to the end of March 2021 we worked on 42 days (38 on Sundays, 4 on Saturdays).

Once again, we've been reliant on a relatively small number of leaders and drivers, although since my last report we've managed to recruit new leaders and a new driver – good news! All our volunteers are important, but those prepared to lead and drive are essential to what we do. So thank you to everyone who has been prepared to do so over the past, difficult year.

If you think you can help out by leading a task or driving our van then please let either myself or Chris know. We'll do everything we can to help you get started by shadowing current task leaders, or taking you through the driver's van induction. If you'd like to have a go, then please get in touch with me at tasks@ocv.org.uk, or Chris at chair@ocv.org.uk

Phil Hunter



Willow pollarding at Aston's Eyot, 27th Sep 2020

Van Officer's Report

The minibus continued to support the tasks we ran transporting tools to site. It passed its MoT with no issues, bar a clutch repair. It is an essential asset for the group and will hopefully return to carrying volunteers to tasks later this year.

Tim Bletsoe

Tools Officer's Report

The stand-out news on OCV tools for 2021 must be our new set of Tree-poppers. We've bought four of the tools: one large and three medium sized. In essence, the tree-popper is a long, strong lever ending with a simple clamp at the business end. The clamp grips the stem of the thing that you want to extract from the ground, then you apply force to the lever. If you judge the application of force correctly, given the state of the ground and the size and type of sapling or tree that you want to remove, it's possible to lever out the top growth complete with its whole root system, without unduly disturbing the surrounding turf. It's a tool that makes a significant difference to OCV 'scrub-bashing' in at least two respects: firstly, we can now eradicate invasive scrub without the need for herbicide, which, in fact, we've rarely if ever made use of; and, secondly, there's no regrowth to recut in future years. It also means that we can do productive scrub removal in the summer months if we're careful to select recently self-seeded saplings still too immature to support nesting activity. They were expensive, but should prove very useful.

The other significant recent addition to the tool stock is a very handy telescopic ladder.

We've also bought more spades.

We revamped our stock of bow-saws. Some of the old frames had lost sufficient tension in their snap-handles or screw mechanisms, so they were retired. We bought new saws in all three sizes, and old blades were replaced with new.

The OCV scythe equipment is wearing well – it's about to see its fifth year of use. We did crack one of the ditch blades last summer, and that's been recently replaced with a specialist grass blade.

We continue to be based at the Oxford City Council Parks depot in Cutteslowe Park, and we're grateful for the handy location, the use of a freight container as a tool shed, and a secure parking space for the OCV minibus. We had one of our occasional tool maintenance days there at the beginning of April: cleaning, oiling, and sharpening.

Phil Hunter



Our new tree poppers have been in action at various sites

Webmaster's report

Please continue to report any website or mailing list issues to me at webmaster@ocv.org.uk.

Nic Bricknell

Social media and Publicity Officer's report

In the past year our publicity efforts have been intermittent, due to the global coronavirus pandemic. The health measures meant that we couldn't go through with our programme as normal and therefore we had to adapt our social media and publicity efforts accordingly.

To that end, we mainly communicated with our members and friends through our task newsletter. During the times of the year when we could go through with tasks, in a safe way, we refrained from advertising this too widely in order to manage numbers of potential attendees and therefore decided to keep our communication to emails to our mailing list. Facebook and Daily info event posting was not pursued until as recently as April 2021, when it was deemed that a small increase in publicity could be managed by the booking system we have put in place.

Despite this, our Facebook page has continued to grow with and now totals 577 followers and 519 friends who like our page. Our activity on the social channels is largely thanks to the photos we publish of the work on tasks on both Facebook and Instagram (a special thank you to Chris Skepper and Tim Bletsoe, and all others for their continued posting).

Our Twitter page has 509 followers, and we are still trying to get better at this medium.

On Instagram, we have 318 followers.

It's worth noting that all our posting and advertising online is made for free, and our growth is organic.

Finally, thank you to all that come along to tasks and/or join the conversation with us online - it's a pleasure to be a part of this lovely community.

Remember, the simplest way to stay informed about OCV activities is to join our mailing list, via our site... so please do so if you haven't already.

www.ocv.org.uk

instagram - @oxfordconservationvolunteers

facebook - @OxConservation

twitter - @oxconservation

Carla Ponte Júlio

Social Secretary's Report

2020 was a tough year and not a particularly social one because of the Covid outbreak. But we still managed to have a few virtual events such as a "Listening to nature" workshop in May on Zoom where bird expert Nick Boyd helped us get better acquainted with the chatterboxes hiding in your trees and bushes. He talked us through how to read different environments and identify the sounds of our feathered friends within them.

Another social in October also involved Nick who took us on a nature walk in Iffley Meadows to look for signs of interesting wildlife and search the sky for brilliant birds. This event was particularly popular and we had to organise multiple sessions to comply with the 6 people limit at the time.

Other socially-distanced socials included a day at the OCV toolshed in the Council's Cutteslowe Parks Depot in April, working on our tools and various bits of kit. We cleaned, oiled and sharpened tools, everything from scythe snaths to bill-hooks, and from loppers to slashers. We also gave the shed (actually a decommissioned freight container) and the van a good spring clean.

More recently, we went on a socially-distanced evening litter-pick walk around the footpaths, cycleways and nature reserves of south-east Oxford. Instead of an evening social, which would not have been very practical with the rule of six, we instead tried to clear up some of the unsightly lockdown debris before it makes its way into streams and rivers and potentially affects wildlife.



As usual, if you have time, please make sure to fill out our short survey to give us some ideas for upcoming socials: <https://forms.gle/rShkMEZAredgetox7>.

Anne Cossutta



Scrub bashing at Swyncombe Estate, South Oxfordshire, 28th Feb 2021