



THE WEASEL

OCV NEWS

New Committee:

Nora Allavoine – *Socials*
Naomi Berger – *Publicity*
Emily Crane – *Treasurer*
Emmanuelle Denis – *Newsletter*
Martin Crane – *Tools Officer*
Gary Hillier – *Task Programmer*
Renaud Meunier – *Van Officer*
Jim Newham – *Secretary*
Miranda Rix – *Chair*
Mike Thyer – *Memberships and Webmaster*

Many, many thanks to those members of last year's committee who have now stepped down: Paul Brears, Jane Fisher, John Gorrill and Helena Thomaides.

New Worksite:

Watlington Hill commands magnificent views over the Oxfordshire plains. Here you will find unusual clusters of yew trees - part of a once dense and ancient forest. Come out and help us to assist the National Trust warden in managing the scrub thickets and invasive species that threaten to overgrow this rare habitat.

Please refer to page 5 for the complete event programme for autumn 2006

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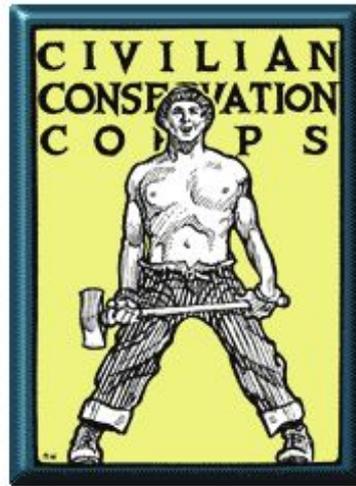
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THE ORIGINS OF CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERING

By John Gorrill

Before a talk last winter, I did some research on where conservation volunteering came from and how our group began. Here's what I found out and how it connects to the future.

The first organised scheme began in the USA in 1933. That was the time of the Great Depression, mass unemployment and hunger. President Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to hold his country together in desperate times. One idea he used was the Conservation Corps. Between 1933 and 1941 over three million unemployed men signed up to live in work-camps at \$30 per month. They built flood defences, planted trees, drained swamps to combat malaria, fought forest fires and laid out forest trails. It was a semi-military regime and in effect a job-creation project funded by taxpayers' money.



That American scheme was ended by the

Second World War; the men were needed in the military and the U.S economy was boosted by building tanks, trucks, bombers and so on. The U.S.A still has a Peace Corps which sends volunteers around the world to teach, nurse, train local workers etc, but the Conservation Corps is largely forgotten. Why? Maybe it revives painful memories of a time in history which modern, wealthier Americans don't want to think about.

The idea came to Britain in 1959 when Brigadier Armstrong set up the Conservation Corps here. Its first task or work party was in Surrey and an early volunteer was David Bellamy. The Corps became the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, still active and providing our modern group with accident and public liability insurance. I asked BTCV why Brigadier Armstrong was chosen. Even his first name would be useful in tracking down his career. But no answer. BTCV have moved on so far that they either don't know or

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DRY STONE WALLING IN SWANAGE

By Miranda Rix

Swiss Toni's guide to dry stone walling...

Dry stone walling is very much like making love to a beautiful woman. If you begin with too much enthusiasm, you will quickly tire and be unable to perform later in the session. Equal measures of strength, stamina and subtlety are required, and a degree of dexterity will also come in useful. You must

proceed with extreme care, ensuring at all times that there is as little space as possible between the components of your wall. You will find it is counterproductive to try and force things into holes where they don't easily fit. At times it may seem as if your endeavours are getting you nowhere, and that all your hard work will be for nothing, but if you are determined, and persevere, you will find that your efforts will be rewarded. You may find that you need to stop for refreshments along the way.

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THE ORIGINS OF CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERING

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would like to forget their army-style beginnings. I've met many crusty, lefty or self-styled anarchists in conservation groups and they too would be embarrassed at where the movement came from. And that word 'corps' has long gone. I heard it only once at a hedge laying competition in the 80s when a drunken conserver burst into song, 'If you're lonely and you're poor - join a conservation corps'. Funny how rhymes stick in your mind...

So why 1959 and an army officer? The Second World War ended in 1945 but National Service went on till 1960. Teenagers would be called up for 18 months or two years to join the forces. They weren't volunteers; this was conscription and they had to go. Victor Meldrew-types still moan about the lack of discipline, training and fitness in young people since National Service ended. Maybe the Brigadier was worried about young people running wild when free of military discipline. Maybe he wanted to offer a constructive civilian alternative: nature conservation. Just to confuse you, the Conservatives' new leader David Cameron recently proposed a community service scheme for school-leavers. Part of that would surely be our type of work. You can go

over to Witney and ask him - he's the local MP.

The UK Conservation Corps was designed to support volunteers setting up their own local groups. One of the oldest still working is the Cambridge Conservation Volunteers dating from 1962. The Berkshire Conservation Volunteers (with whom we had joint tasks lately) were set up in 1975. The OCV was born in 1977. We're old but far from oldest.

How did the OCV begin? A student called Camilla Huxley moved from Cambridge University to Oxford and noticed there was no local group here. She found a few other wannabe conservers, launched the group and did their first task on Sunday 2nd October 1977 at Hook Norton Railway Cutting, a BBOWT reserve on a disused industrial railway. It has a spooky tunnel. The work was clearing scrub in order to build a rabbit fence. I wasn't there but we have the first task programme and all others since in a green file for whoever becomes task programmer. Camilla is now Dr.C.Lambrick and she works for BBOWT at their HQ in Littlemore as a Bio-diversity Officer. She lent me some slides of those early days to show during my talk. I asked if she had a picture

of that first task but sadly the answer was no.

There have been several reunion tasks since 1977 for old and new conservers to work together. I went on two of them - the 10th anniversary at Hook Norton again and the 15th at Piddington Wood. That was a residential. We stayed in the village hall at Brill and watched the village fireworks display. From that I guess that it was in early November. There've doubtless been others but I wasn't there.

What will we do for the 30th anniversary in 2007? I don't know - it depends on the strength of the group and contacts with old conservers. One of them is Brian Williamson, who led our hedge laying course last autumn and our fencing course in April. He lives in Devon now but uses his conserving skills to coppice woods and make hurdles and hay-rakes for sale to gardeners, estates etc. Others are active in different groups: Camilla Lambrick in the Rare Plants Group and Pete Byfield in the Urban Wildlife Group for example. For them conservation is a life-long interest and commitment. And the rest? I know one or two more but most (hundreds by now, I guess) have moved away or found new pastimes. Some married other conservers and now have children. Two recent ones (Kate and Jamie) live in Edinburgh but work with the Lothians Conservation Volunteers. I visited them and worked one Sunday with the LCV too. If you move away from Oxford, you can probably find a local group and get to know people very quickly.

Our group has gone on for nearly 30 years but there's no guarantee that it will survive another 30. Some groups collapse through lack of organisers. One example is the Tyneside Conservation Volunteers who were based in Newcastle. When I lived in Northumberland, I used to travel by bus to Newcastle Central Station and get picked up by their minibus for work on sand-dune stabilisation, step-building, fencing, tree-planting and many things we do in the OCV. One day after a break of a few months, I went to the railway station and no minibus came. Silly me, I hadn't checked the website. On it was a message saying the TCV



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THE ORIGINS OF CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERING

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had suspended its work due to lack of committee members willing to run the group. I've checked on the internet and there's still no TCV. That's pretty sad because work won't get done, people won't meet and life is a little poorer.

Do you know the buzz phrase 'social capital'? It means all the bonds that tie individuals together into a society: families, workplaces, clubs, pubs, being neighbours and so on. Social capital is poorer now that we stay at home to watch DVDs instead of going to cinemas, drive (often alone) in private cars rather than take the bus, work at home, are self-employed - you can add many more. Conservation defies the trend with a sociable team-approach that gets things done. We're also against the grain of this consumer society. When you walk into a shop, people smile at you based on what you can spend. When you come to a task, we smile at you based on what you can do and we don't charge you for doing it. And what about health and safety? Who else lets total strangers pick up sharp tools after a five-minute safety talk? I guess we rely on trust, common sense, adult intelligence and (when it's needed) tactful guidance. In the 'nanny state' where government decides if you can smoke in a pub or not, these virtues are well out of time. The ethos of conservation groups comes from an earlier age but, since it works, it lives proudly on. By reading this, you are part of it.

The future of the OCV and of conservation volunteering depends on people such as you getting stuck into the Sunday tasks and keeping the confidence of wardens, rangers or reserve managers we work with. They are not forced to use us and we make a flat-rate charge for each work-party, so it's vital that they feel we are worth it. If you enjoy the Sundays and believe in the value of our work, then leading, driving, writing for the Weasel, helping with publicity, membership etc are the next step. Maybe you fancy a career in conservation? Well, we can help but there are no guarantees: some people get the dream job, others don't. How to get involved? Well, I became Weasel editor first. Nobody else wanted to do it and I saw a chance to ask nosy questions while researching an article. With that and planning the task programme, I've met dozens of people in lots of places I would never have known about otherwise. People respect our

voluntary commitment, so it's easy to meet them and talk conservation...followed by whatever else you find in common. No need to be shy or nervous: anything you do is a bonus because without you it won't happen, your talent stays hidden and nobody gets inspired by your example.

So what can you do?



OCV FRESHWATER RESIDENTIAL

*...Take it and come to the Isle of Wight:
Where, far from the noise of smoke and town,
I watch the twilight falling brown
All around a careless ordered garden,
Close to the ridge of a noble down.
You'll have no scandal while you dine,
But honest talk and wholesome wine.
And only hear the magpie gossip
Garrulous under a roof of pine:
For groves of pine on either hand,
To break the blast of winter stand;
And further on the hoary Channel
Tumbles a billow on chalk and sand.*

By Renaud Meunier

The poem was written by Tennyson about his life in Farringford, Freshwater. Of course, the Memorial Hall (the

place where we were staying) was a bit less luxurious (and had no magpie gossip), but for once it had a shower, and one sofa bed that, having been the fortunate discoverer, I allocated without an ounce of shame, to myself. The Hall also had a stage and gave us the opportunity to meet some comedians from a local troupe who were rehearsing Allô, Allô (most notably René, the French waiter).

There were ten of us on the journey; four of us were veteran OCV volunteers, two were more recent and three were brand new OCVers. We also received the support of Steve, an former OCV volunteer, now working as town planner for the Isle of Wight council. We had a good mix of

old and new volunteers. The new ones looked very happy so I think that we'll see more of them in the future. The warden was Bob (I think a former OCV member as well) who was a very nice chap too.

The aim of the work was to protect the Yar river valley (that runs from Freshwater to Yarmouth) from being invaded by willows and alders and keep its unique marsh habitat (reeds, eels, water snakes, amphibians, insects...) from turning into solid land. We worked a day and a half, with feet in the water (but protected by our OCV Wellies) and we did a tremendous job. Bob was very im-

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DRY STONE WALLING IN SWANAGE



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Repairing dry stone walls at Durstone Country Park during our April residential in Swanage actually involved pulling walls down as much as it did building them! By the time we left our worksite at the end of our final day, the section of wall we had been working on looked discouragingly like it had on the day we arrived, except that the gaps were now in slightly different places and there was a very deep hole at one end of it. We had made progress though; the problem with this wall was that it had started to fall down as a combined result of subsidence, age and weaknesses in its structure, so even the parts of it that looked stable were in danger of collapsing.

We took these sections down, which was much harder work than it first appeared. In some places thick knots of ivy had grown into the wall and around the stones, binding them together in some places and creating unexpected weaknesses in others. The stones from these sections were then used for recon-

struction, and had to be laid out within easy reach and according to their size and shape.

In some places, the original foundations of the wall had slipped down the bank on which the wall stood, and here we had to dig deep in order to make a flat base on which to start building the wall again. For the foundations, very large and heavy stones are used to provide a strong support for the wall. Once several layers of these have been laid, the main part of the wall could be built. Each side of a dry stone wall is actually built separately, so two people can work on the same section simultaneously, taking one side each. Flat stones are laid side-by-side, with their edges touching as much as possible. Any gaps between these two sides is then filled up with smaller stones (called 'hearting'), to make the wall as solid as possible. Probably the most difficult part of the process was ensuring that the wall stayed level with each consecutive layer that was added; the stones we were using were only very roughly cut, and were of all shapes and sizes. That said, the traditional local style of dry stone wall actually involves laying the stones horizontally! (see photo)

Dry stone walls are in many ways better for conservation purposes than fences

or cemented walls. The fact that they are effectively hollow means that there are plenty of spaces for animals to hide between the stones. We saw some proof of this during our demolition work as we disturbed the hundreds of invertebrates, from woodlice to snails to spiders that had made their homes in the wall. On the Dorset coast, reptiles and small mammals also use them to shelter in. Since we working in nature reserve, the walls' design included at least one ground level gap wherever they crossed a field, so that foxes and other larger animals could pass through them.



If you can put up with the snoring and smelly feet, OCV residentials are a great way to become more involved in the group, providing an opportunity to devote longer periods of time to active conserving, and to get to know other members better than is possible on a single day's task. Please check our task list for details of future residentials.



“Dry stone walling is very much like making love to a beautiful woman.”

EVENTS SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2006

Footpath construction at Foxholes

Sunday, 24 September

OCV return to this beautiful, BBOWT owned woodland reserve on the border of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. On this task we will be cutting a footpath, and maintaining/improving existing footpaths to ensure continued, managed enjoyment of this ancient woodland site.

OCV Social Event: A film at the Phoenix Cinema

Wednesday, 27 September

Cinema night! Bond with fellow OCV-ers in a darkened room... When listings come out for the week Nora will arbitrarily choose a film. If you like it, come see it in good company! We plan to abuse the 'Orange Wednesday' 2-for-1 deal, so people with Orange phones: we need you!

Fencing in Wootton

Sunday, 1 October

Continuing our work constructing post and rail fencing at the Jubilee Reserve at Wootton-by-Woodstock. FYI this is the Wootton near Tackley, NOT the Wootton near Oxford. If you are making your own way there, and unsure of directions, please contact Task Programmer. The work is to prevent cattle trampling into the flood plain and boggy ground on the banks of the rivers which run through the reserve. We will also be replacing a stile.

OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 3 October

All are welcome to join the OCV committee as we meet to discuss and fine tune the delicate inner machinations of the OCV.

Scrub clearance and footpath work in Tackley

Sunday, 8 October

We return to the Crecy Hill reserve in Tackley, working to extend the bark-covered path through the reserve, cutting back scrub regrowth, and removing surplus thistle plants.

OCV Social Event: Beer festival

Friday, 13 October

Beer! 120 barrels of it, all real ales, in the stunning barrel-vaulted ballroom in the Town Hall. Meet at the top of the staircase at 7 pm, get your pint glass and vouchers and then savour away! Cover charge is £2.50.

Scrub clearance at the Lye Valley nature reserve

Sunday, 15 October

The Lye Valley Nature reserve is no more than a sliver of land between the Slade and The Cowley Golf Course, yet it is a fantastically secluded place to get away from it all. Marsh patches and reed beds in the valley are so rare that they have been made Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The entrance to the reserve is 100 metres south of Girdlestone road on the Slade and the path continues across the golf course to Cowley Marsh.

Varied conservation tasks at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 22 October

Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve sits on the steep west-facing scarp of the Chilterns. It comprises flower-rich chalk grassland together with beech woodland and juniper scrub. A number of scarce plants can be seen at the reserve, including Chiltern gentian and a wide variety of orchids. The site is also home to many species of butterfly such as the silver-spotted skipper and chalkhill blue. The reserve's diverse habitats support a variety of bird life and Aston Rowant is renowned as one of the best places in England to see red kites.

Scrub clearance on Watlington Hill

Sunday, 29 October

Our first task at Watlington Hill, a stunning National Trust reserve in the Chilterns, south of Oxford. The reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest on account of the rare species that exist on the chalk grassland, and we work to assist the National Trust warden managing the scrub thickets and invasive species that threaten to overgrow this rare habitat and the countless plants and butterflies that thrive there. Superb views over the Oxford Plain (weather permitting) under the watchful eyes of circling kites and buzzards.

Hedgelaying in Little Wittenham

Sunday, 5 November

We return to this Northmoor Trust managed property at Little Wittenham, home to an Iron Age fort and the Wittenham Clumps. We continue last year's hedgelaying here on a hawthorn hedge round the base of the hill; containing livestock the traditional way and providing a valuable corridor for the wildlife. You can contribute your hedgelaying expertise or perhaps you'll take new skills home with you!

OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 7 November

All welcome, come along and get involved!

Varied conservation tasks at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 12 November

This site is an OCV favourite. It's managed by English Nature to maintain the important chalk grassland habitat. They have a small flock of sheep on site which we sometimes help with. Other popular tasks include fencing and scrub bashing.

Fencing in Wootton

Sunday, 19 November

Continuing our work constructing post and rail fencing at the Jubilee Reserve at Wootton-by-Woodstock. FYI this is the Wootton near Tackley, NOT the Wootton near Oxford. The work is to prevent cattle trampling into the flood plain and boggy ground on the banks of the rivers which run through the reserve.

Hedgelaying in Little Wittenham

Sunday, 26 November

We return to this Northmoor Trust managed property at Little Wittenham, home to an Iron Age fort and the Wittenham Clumps. We continue last year's hedgelaying here on a hawthorn hedge round the base of the hill; containing livestock the traditional way and providing a valuable corridor for the wildlife. You can contribute your hedgelaying expertise or perhaps you'll take new skills home with you!

Coppicing and woodland management at Foxholes

Sunday, 3 December

OCV return to this beautiful, BBOWT owned woodland reserve on the border of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. On this task we will be cutting a footpath, and maintaining/improving existing footpaths to ensure continued, managed enjoyment of this ancient woodland site.

OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 5 December

Come join the monthly committee meeting.

**** Be sure to check www.ocv.org.uk for the latest event details ****

OCV FRESHWATER RESIDENTIAL

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pressed and we'll certainly be invited again.

We also had lots of relaxation time. Each day, even on working days, we had our lunch on the beach. Being able to relax for an hour after four hours of hard work, under the sunshine, listening to the sea, is fantastic. A few of us went for a swim, the water was nice (not too cold) and the waves quite strong (but beautiful).

After our first day work we went to Yarmouth (the village where we landed) to see the harbour. It is a pretty little village, and some of the boats (which were mostly yachts and motor yachts) were worth seeing.

Back at the hall, we had a fantastic roasted chicken made by our now famous 4 star cook, Nora, and her apprentices, Cat and Cathy. One evening we headed to the local pub (The Wine) with Steve, where we had good beer and good fun.

On Sunday for our day off, we did a walk, along the chalk crest, from Tennyson Monument to the needles. It was a five mile walk and very pleasant. On one side we could see the sea cliffs and the sea (navy blue with patches of turquoise), and from the other a valley bounded by a second crest full of heather. Our crest was made of chalk and chert, topped with grass, gorse, and flowers (campanulas) The needles were like three witches hats in the sea (perhaps the keepers of the Island?). From the side we could see chalk cliffs with almost vertical beddings, that the tides were eroding very quickly (we could still see streaks of chalk powder on the beach).

In the Afternoon we went to a second beach on the south cost, a sandy one this time (as the one at Freshwater was made of pebbles). We relaxed on the beach, watching surfers on their boards as the sea there was very rough. Some of us went for a swim and it was quite fun being rolled by the waves. We also had a look for fossils, but couldn't find any except the usual sea shells. However

the rock there was worth seeing; an indurate sand with very peculiar iron band patterns. Cat saw a hawk (I think) hunting only ten meters above her head. In the evening we went further on the south coast to Ventnor which is twenty miles from Freshwater (more than half of the total length of the island). The road was just stunning. We finally managed to find fish and chips (the aim of this journey) at the local kebab shop (the other being closed) but surprisingly, it was delicious.

On the way back we cut through the Island to Newport (the capital of the Isle) and came back via the north coast (so we covered half the Island in a day)

Monday was our last day so we worked for half a day and then took the ferry back to Lymington. The ferry trip was short but pleasant; the sky was clear so we could see the two shorelines and all the boats sailing in the Channel. The journey back went without any problems and we were back to Oxford by 6.00pm, delighted by our weekend.

So for the next resi, for sure, just sign up!

WANTED



Leaders and Drivers



OCV needs you!

Our tasks can only take place if there is someone to lead the group and drive the minibus. Come out on a task and ask your leader or driver how you can help out.

★ The reward is helping to ensure that we can continue to carry out our practical work to conserve Oxfordshire's wildlife and traditional landscape.

