



Oxford Conservation Volunteers

Annual Report 2021 – 2022



Registered Charity Number 1186114

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Chair's Report

It's been a year of a gradual return to normality for OCV after the pandemic restrictions. We haven't needed to cancel any tasks in the 2021-2022 year due to Covid. We've been able to re-introduce minibus pickups, and with the end of restrictions on social gatherings we've been able to end the booking system to manage volunteer numbers, as they return to more ordinary (but still healthy) levels. We've also ended the special signage, hand hygiene measures and compulsory mask wearing in the minibus. We're gradually re-introducing tea and coffee on tasks as leaders see fit. But we still haven't organised any residential trips and we are continuing to keep the minibus well-ventilated.

It's difficult to choose highlights of the task programme. Phil has carefully planned it to include a good balance of different types of work and site, all while doing tasks at the most appropriate time of year. Favourites for me would include the Wolfson College fencing work in the Summer and the Burgess Field hedgelaying work in Winter. Both of these gave those of us who have become the old guard the chance to refresh our skills, and remind us that we do actually know some stuff, if only we can find some people willing to listen to us drone on about it! Usually it's only towards the end of the day that we really remember how it all works, so it's nice to have more than one of each task like this per season. The pollarding at Aston's Eyot was also a great success, although we have decided to scale back this sort of work in future. The risk factors included working at height, heavy branches, rotten timber, uneven ground and members of public on footpaths and in small boats, so it was complex to manage the work safely. It's always important to be able to identify when jobs are too big for us.

Turning to longer-term projects, we have yet to make much progress on purchasing a new minibus, but we have made some tentative first steps. Nic has made excellent progress on starting to modernise our website, beginning with making it work much better on mobile devices. In light of current economic circumstances we recently made the difficult decision to increase the task fee from next year. This will ensure that we can continue to pay for ongoing running costs such as fuel and insurance and replacing broken tools without dipping into the reserve kept for a new minibus.

One of our main pre-occupations in recent months has been the small pool of leaders, drivers and committee members. This is becoming an existential threat to the organisation and we need to continue to work on this problem seriously, perhaps considering more radical solutions. Following discussions at recent committee meetings our current approach is to produce good publicity to maintain our pipeline of keen volunteers, and then support as many of them as possible to develop knowledge, skills and confidence to lead tasks. It might be necessary to slow the pace of work to prioritise encouraging more people along the path to becoming task leaders. It's also important to foster a positive and supportive atmosphere, and try not to put new leaders off by holding each other to unnecessarily high

standards! Despite these concerns I think overall OCV is in good shape, doing great work to improve biodiversity in so many ways, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of everyone involved. I hope everyone else has had as much fun as me doing it.

Chris Skepper



Hedgelaying at Burgess Field Nature Reserve, February 2022

Task Programmer's Report

We took on two hedge laying projects over the winter season - at Burgess Field and Aston Rowant. The supposed hedge-line at Burgess Field was really nothing of the sort. Composed of grown-out, brittle hawthorn trees, planted in line astern it was tough going, but we persevered and laid about 60 meters in three days' work. The Friends of Burgess Field followed up with extensive new planting to plug the gaps and broaden the girth of the hedge. It will take two or three years for the new growth to develop but it should amount to the regeneration of a valuable habitat.

We worked on the other hedge project, at Aston Rowant, along the top of Hill Lane, in collaboration with Nigel Adams. The mixed hedge was in a nice state to lay and Nigel completed the work with an immaculately finished course of binding. On our April visit to Aston Rowant the hedge was already in full leaf and in partial flower.

Hedge-laying requires that we provide hazel stakes and binders which have to be harvested in advance and then brought to site. We now have two woodlands that we can coppice for hazel: the privately owned Pissen Wood in the Chilterns, and Piddington Wood, owned and managed by the Woodland Trust, in Buckinghamshire.

We've had a strong program of construction work over the past year: the renovation of the stepped paths that give access to the reserve at Crecy Hill: the installation of a flight of sleeper steps at Stansfeld; diversionary path work along the riverside path at Aston's Eyot; revetment construction and path levelling at Mathew Arnold Field; post and wire fencing for Wolfson College on the mead that borders the Cherwell; fence repairs and demolition at Jubilee Fields; ad hoc dam work with natural materials at Mathew Arnold Field; and the construction of several large raised beds from scaffolding planks at the East Ward Allotments in Oxford. This last job was for the Children's Allotment project – a nice example of one of our more unusual clients.

Summer scythe work took us back to sites we visit regularly: Iffley Island (I reckon we've now cut this Thames riverside site for thirteen consecutive years); North Hinksey; and Cuxham. We also cut and cleared the wet meadow at Burnt Mill, a new site for OCV on the edge of the Cherwell flood plain in Old Marston. Later in the year we cut and raked the fens at Lye Valley and the Louie Memorial Fields.

On a Saturday last August we arranged one of our occasional training days, this time on the use of Austrian scythes, our standard bit of scythe kit. The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust granted us funds for the day long course hosted and led by Clive Leeke at his home base in the Chilterns, just outside Reading. There were eight places, and we had a good mix of volunteers - men and women, young and old – all beginners.

The work I've mentioned so far is in addition to our usual, more routine tasks, for example tackling scrub at Aston Rowant to maintain the grassland habitat, or working on general maintenance at two urban Oxford reserves - the Trap Grounds and Milham Ford.

In summary, from the beginning of April 2021 to the end of May 2022 we worked on 67 days (60 Sundays, 7 Saturdays).

All our volunteers are important, but those prepared to lead and drive are essential to what we do. Thank you to everyone who has done so – without you it would not have happened. At the time of writing we are desperately short of task leaders in particular. This last year we've worked a full schedule and yet still I've had more requests for work than I could accommodate. I've never had to cancel a planned task for the lack of a volunteer to lead it, but that's becoming more likely as we're forced to rely on the same small number of leaders. So 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



Scythe Training Course at The Old Farmyard, Emmer Green, Reading, August 2021

Social Secretary's Report

As Covid restrictions were relaxed, socials resumed properly in June with a picnic in Angel and Greyhound meadow, an evening walk around Wolvercote in August, a meal at a pizza restaurant in September, a pub trip in October and fireworks night in November. Despite many people cancelling Christmas parties amid another bout of Covid concerns we did have a modest gathering for curry in December. Then, so far in 2022, we've had a night hike, a pub trip and a vegetarian/vegan meal at a different pub. Most socials attracted 6-8 people and they sometimes appeal to new potential volunteers as well as many of the regulars so they do seem to serve a useful purpose as well as being a fun night out. I'm really only standing in temporarily as Social Secretary and would be more than happy to hand over the responsibility to someone else, so if you would like to take over, or you know someone who would be good at it, then let me know. It's an easy and fun job, and there is the possibility of bringing more creativity to it than I normally manage!

Chris Skepper



Scrub control at Grim's Ditch Blewbury, South Oxfordshire, January 2022

Treasurer's Report

The accounts for the financial year 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022 are presented in Table 1. Our income for the year was £6,526.85

The balance in our accounts is £39,549.00. We are in a healthy financial situation thanks to grants & donations. We have sufficient funds to replace the minibus when needed.

Tim Bletsoe

Table 1. Accounts for period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022

	2021-2022	2020-2021	2019-2020	2018-2019
INCOME:				
Task Fees	£5,220.00	£4,080.00	£7,200.00	£5,040.00
Memberships	£105.00	£309.00	£131.00	£135.00
Donations	£150.00	£829.70	£949.00	£1,045.70
Grants	£850.00	£550.00	£491.48	£0.00
Merchandise sales	£150.70	£0.00	£26.00	£0.00
Interest	£39.64	£34.32	£0.00	£0.00
Other	£11.54 ⁽³⁾	£0.00 ⁽³⁾	£865.21 ⁽³⁾	£0.00 ⁽³⁾
Income for the year	£6,526.85	£5,803.02	£9,662.69	£6,220.70
EXPENDITURE:				
Minibus				
Maintenance, MOT	£217.80	£456.55	£226.08	£1100.70
Fuel	£301.21	£90.95	£460.35	£372.37
Tax & Insurance	£793.53	£772.93	£771.48	£770.84
Total Minibus costs	£1,312.54	£1,320.43	£1,457.91	£2,243.91
Car Mileage	£155.52	£106.80	£99.52	£17.82
Tools, materials & tool insurance	£2,000.57	£1,860.30	£1,012.92	£1,082.48
Training	£350.00	£0.00	£810.00	£0.00
TCV affiliation and insurance	£207.09	£207.09	£217.09	£207.09
Food	£0.00	£0.00	£503.39	£1.69
Stationery	£66.77	£40.32	£167.09	£77.72
Publicity	£0.00	£86.37	£65.45	£20.60
Accommodation	£0.00	£0.00	£50.00	£0.00
Other	£332.44 ⁽²⁾	£279.89 ⁽²⁾	£279.89 ⁽²⁾	£238.58 ⁽²⁾
Merchandise	£338.40	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00

Depreciation	£0.00	£1,600.00 ⁽¹⁾	£1,600.00 ⁽¹⁾	£1,600.00 ⁽¹⁾
Expenditure for the year	£4,763.33	£3,901.20	£4,662.84	£3,939.38
Excess income over expenditure	£1,763.52	£301.32	£3,162.27	£680.82
*Excess income over expenditure excl depreciation	£1,763.52	£1,901.32	£4,762.27	£2,280.82
Balance in current account	£2,756.85	£4,319.89	£34,806.50	£30,045.03
Balance in Investment Account	£36,792.15	£30,052.63	£0.00	£0.00
Petty Cash	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£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



Left: Riverside path work at Aston's Eyot April 2022, Right: Newly created steps at Stansfeld Park, January 2022

Minibus Officer's Report

The minibus continued to support the tasks we ran transporting tools and volunteers to site. It passed its MoT with no issues, and no other repairs required in the past year. As an

essential asset for the group, we will be looking to replace it later this year and have sufficient funds to do this.

Tim Bletsoe



Matthew Arnold Field, May 2021

Secretary's Report

Having met online from spring 2020 to summer 2021, the autumn of last year saw a return to in-person committee meetings. While the town hall remained closed outside of office hours we managed as best we could for a number of months finding a little space in a pub. However this was a poor substitute for the quiet meeting rooms of the Oxford Town Hall, and we were glad to finally make our return there in December 2021, and have been appreciating the benefits of having this space since. As we enjoyed greater meeting attendances online, in particular from non-committee members, I have been continuing to circulate a link to allow online attendees, and aside from a few glitches these hybrid meetings have been working well.

As Chris mentioned in the Chair's report we are no longer implementing a booking system and cap on task attendees, which has removed a job for the leader, avoided us turning away enthusiastic volunteers, and at certain sites where attendances tend to be high increased the amount of work we can get done. Although below the heights reached while people's regular weekend activities were subject to COVID restrictions, volunteer attendance numbers remain healthy. As mentioned already by Chris and Tim, where the OCV is now struggling is a lack of people who can spare a little time to help with the running of our

activities, either by sitting on the committee, or volunteering to drive the minibus or lead tasks. Although not without responsibility and a commitment of time and energy, we're not only looking for people to do these jobs every other week; leading or driving for a task every once in a while is still a great help. I have found it to be rewarding and bring an extra appreciation of the work we do and why we do it.

Jenny Hill



Before and after at Wolfson Water Meadows, August 2021

Tools Officer's Report

After the excitement of the introduction of the tree-poppers last year, 2021-2 was a relatively quiet year for tools. We carried out the usual basic maintenance with some replacement of new for old: a couple of mells; new bungee cords for the tools cage in the van; a new, lighter wheelbarrow; a replacement set of 19 inch bowsaw blades; replacement first-aid consumables.

There were a couple of notable repair jobs. Jim Ballantyne arranged a repair by a friendly welder to one of our scythe blades that was slightly cracked. A very tricky repair which lasted the length of last year's mowing season. So far so good! The other significant repair

work - fixing a loose contact in one of our Dewalt battery drills, was carried out by our own Chris Skepper. Chris also turned his hand to the fabrication of a new stob-twister, the revamping of the first-aid box; and sharpening the blades of some of our mattock heads, with definitely improved performance as a result. We also reorganized the contents of the OCV tool box into two much more manageable separate boxes.

Additions to the tools stock included, in no particular order: another long-handled lopper/pruning saw, an extra muck fork, some litter pickers, safety glasses and protective sleeves.

The OCV scythe equipment will see its seventh year of use later this summer and into the autumn. There's always the chance that inexperienced, or even experienced, scythers will strain the tools, or damage the blades, but with the one exception mentioned above, the kit is still wearing very well.

We added two pairs of chest waders to the OCV stock of clobber.

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.

The Tools Officer position on the committee has been vacant all year. Chris and I filled in well enough, but we're still looking for someone who can take it on. If you'd like to give it a go, please get in touch!

Phil Hunter



Revetment construction at Matthew Arnold Field, April 2022

Webmaster's Report

After a few years of no development, 2022 has seen some new changes and improvements to the website. In particular, the home page now contains details of the next upcoming conservation task, and many of the frequently viewed pages are now easier to read on mobile devices, with a single-column view and a toggle-able navigation bar. Following this success, I hope to roll out the improved mobile view to the rest of the webpages in the coming weeks and months.

As in previous years, we are using 4UHosting as our web hosting provider and Mailchimp for our public mailing list.

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

Nic Bricknell



Milham Ford Nature Park, April 2022

Social Media and Publicity Officer's Report

In the time since April 2021, we have increased our social media presence and once again used these channels widely in communicating our volunteering tasks, as the COVID regulations changed over time and it was possible once again to safely accommodate more people on tasks.

We continue to advertise our events online through 4 main channels:

- Our weekly task email (thank you to the leaders who send these out every week)
- Facebook events in our group page
- Daily Info website events
- Twitter page

Facebook and Daily info events are posted as the task programme becomes available on our website. Both the task email and our tweets are more topical and aimed specifically at the up-coming event in the calendar. During this year we've made a conscious effort to use Twitter more widely and consistently and try to engage with other local groups via this medium.

Our always organic, never paid, social media presence continues to grow slowly but steadily:

On Twitter we now have 556 followers, a slight increase on last year's numbers.

Instagram has seen our biggest growth in following, with 533 people currently. Thank you to Anne Cossutta who continues to manage the account with such gusto.

Our Facebook group now has 693 followers. Many thanks to Chris Skepper and Tim Bletsoe, among others, who are so helpful in taking and sharing photos from our tasks on the page. It's these posts that see the most engagement and help us share with everyone why the work we carry out is important and beneficial, and we all appreciate seeing the results of everyone's efforts.

To all our volunteers and friends in the past year, thank you again all for your continued support!

Carla Ponte Júlio

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