



THE WEASEL

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NO TIME FOR CONSERVING?

If you're too busy to devote a whole Sunday to an OCV task why not contribute a few hours on one of our Oxford tasks? It's a great way to get involved, meet other OCVer's, and sample OCV's famous storm-kettle tea!

Our next local task will be Urban Conservation at Holywell cemetery on Saturday 3rd February. Be sure to subscribe to the OCV mailing list on www.ocv.org.uk for more details closer to the date.

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OCV WORKS WITH SUSTRANS TO PROTECT RARE BEES

The former railway line from Didcot to Upton is a well used cycle path, which forms part of Sustrans' Regional Cycle Route 44, linking Didcot to Wantage. The exposed chalk embankments between East Hagbourne and Upton provide nesting places for rare species of bees and wasps (in particular, the clepto-parasitic halictid bee, *Sphecodes spinulosus*), thus periodic scrub clearance is necessary to ensure the variety of habitat.



Sphecodes species

Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity and works on practical projects to encourage people to walk, cycle and use public transport in order to reduce motor traffic and its adverse effects. Sustrans provides practical but imaginative solutions to some of the biggest transport challenges facing us all. 50% of the UK population live within one mile of the Na-

tional Cycle Network, 75% live within 2 miles.

There are over 10,000 miles of National Cycle Network across the UK, one third of these are traffic-free, the rest on mainly quiet or traffic calmed roads. Sustrans works in partnership with the County, District and local councils in Oxfordshire, and are grateful for their support. A team of just over 2,000 Volunteer Rangers helps to maintain

the Network. This year, they have opened three new routes in Oxfordshire: The Cherwell Valley ride, National Cycle Route 57 between Oxford and Thame, and Regional Route 47 between Witney and Farmington. Details of these rides are on the Oxfordshire pages of the website. Further information about the National Cycle Network and Sustrans in Oxfordshire is available via this link: www.sustrans.org.uk/southeast

FOCUS ON WATLINGTON HILL

By Jerry Page

Watlington Hill was donated to the National Trust in 1941 by Viscount Esher and the nearby National Trust woodland was given to the Trust in 1946. Additional areas of the hill were donated in 1957 and 1974. The Hill is 235 metres high at its highest point and is 112 acres in extent. It offers superb views over the Oxfordshire plain.

The long triangular shaped with mark on Watlington Hill is a distinguishing local feature. The church in Watlington has only a tower and it is said that it was carved into the hill to give the effect of adding a spire to this tower when viewed from a particular spot in the Oxfordshire plain. It was cut into the hill in 1764 by Edward Horne of Greenfield Manor.

The Ridgeway Long Distance Footpath follows the route of the Icknield Way to the west of Watlington Hill. The Icknield Way starts from as far away as Dorset then up along the line of the Chiltern Hills and up into East Anglia. This way dates back to Neolithic times and at over 3000 years old is judged to be the oldest track in the country.

Watlington Hill forms part of the Watlington and Pyrton Hill Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and although primarily known as a very high quality chalk downland site supporting rare plants, butterflies, mosses and lichens, it also has a small area of acid soil habitat on the ridge top where gorse and silver birch trees can be found. A dense yew wood covers

(Continued on page 4)

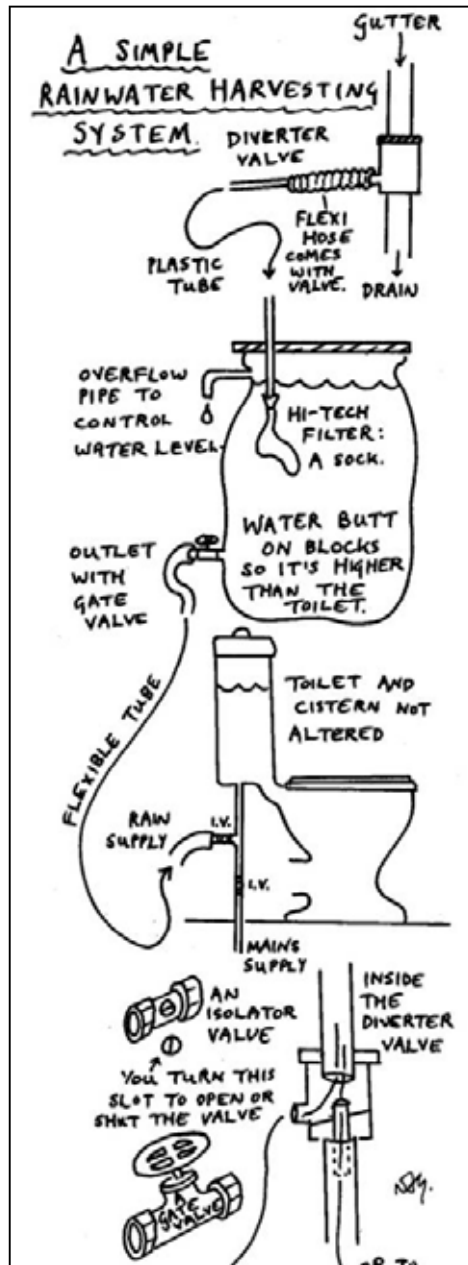
CONSERVATION BEGINS AT HOME

By John Gorrill

Have you been to B&Q in Cowley lately? They're selling a wind turbine for homes at £1498 including VAT. If you're technical, you'll love to know that the 'Windsave' generator promises an output of 1 kW at a wind speed of 12.5 metres per second with a life of ten years. I'm not so technical and I don't want to spend £1498, so I've added a simpler green measure to my house: rainwater harvesting.

If you have a water butt in your garden topped up by the gutters of a garage or shed, you're doing this already. The logical next step is to use the rainwater to flush a toilet, because sending drinking water down the sewers at one or two gallons per flush is ridiculous. Thames Water think they need an enormous new reservoir at Steventon, hosepipe bans ran throughout the dry summer and then in autumn flash floods put parts of Cowley and Botley underwater. Wouldn't it be simpler to use less drinking water, have a mini-reservoir beside every home and release rainwater steadily so our drains can cope? The environment wins too, with less water taken from rivers and aquifers, fewer chemicals used for water treatment and no need to flood the countryside between massive man-made earthworks.

I put in a downstairs toilet during some building work this year. While adding the normal drains and plumbing to satisfy the building inspector, I thought it would be easy and cheap to pipe in a second water supply. It comes from a 50-gallon plastic water butt at the side of my house. After raising the water butt on concrete blocks to four feet above ground level, I find that gravity and a plastic hose fill the toilet cistern quite happily. The only thing to be careful about is the difference in water pressure between a gravity-fed system and the mains water supply, which is pumped



and therefore stronger. I used two isolator valves to deal with that: I turn off the mains and turn on the rainwater when I have enough. When I don't (and it hasn't happened yet in winter), I will turn off the rainwater and turn back on the mains. Clever people out there may know of subtler ways to do this, and ways to pump rainwater to the upstairs toilet, but

I haven't got there yet. Meanwhile I keep it simple, though I might add a sock to filter out moss that washes off my roof.

The costs are about £6.00 for a plastic rainwater diverter to slot into the downspout / pipe that takes water down from the gutter to the drain at ground level. My downspout is white, so I got a white diverter. If your pipes are black, you can get a black one and make the job look neat. Then I used white plastic overflow pipe of 19mm diameter to feed the rainwater into the water butt. That rigid pipe costs about 90p per metre and two right-angle bends to get round a gate cost 90p each. You could use a flexible hose if it suits your house better. The water butt and blocks I had already, but maybe £35 would buy them new. Then I used standard 22mm metal plumbing fittings for an overflow pipe near the top of the water butt and the outlet near the base - about £15. Next there's a plastic hose running through a hole in the house wall to the base of the toilet cistern, the two isolator valves and a side branch of 15mm copper pipe leading off the pipe for the mains supply - another £10. And it works...all for £36 and some DIY cunning.

If you're ultra green, you could store bath water and use it to flush the loo or water the garden. And in that garden you'll surely have a compost heap for kitchen waste, an untidy corner for hedgehogs, shrubs with plenty of berries, a bird table and a shady bench to ponder the future of our world. Yes, conservation really does begin at home.

PS. Can birds, bats and insects detect a wind turbine when it's spinning like an aeroplane's propellor? I don't know, but I'd hate to see the bloodshed if they can't. And noise? Vibration? I'll stick to the water butt which causes no bother except to the water bill.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

The rainwater toilet. The transparent pipe on the left supplies the rainwater to the cistern by gravity alone. There is no pump.

The diverter valve fitted to a downspout / pipe bringing rainwater from the gutter to the drain. It has no moving parts and is simple to install.

The water butt - full to the overflow pipe with about 50 gallons of rainwater



THE JOYS OF DRIVING FOR OCV OR 3 PIECES OF SERENDIPITY

By Ray Hitchins

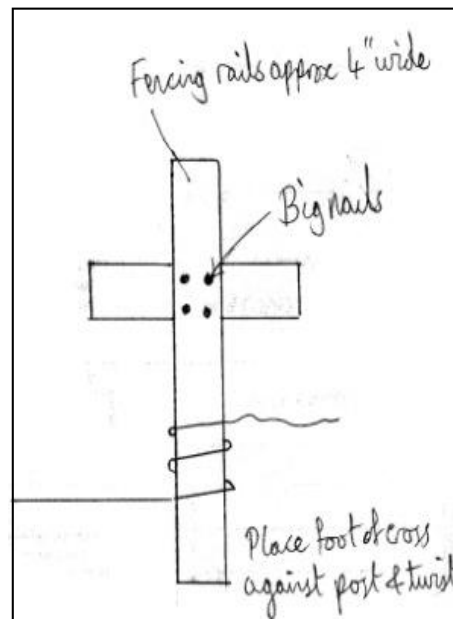
Driving for OCV starts the night before, when I need to set the alarm about half an hour earlier than on weekdays. Also, as I am starting a cold I have asked my wife to drive me out to the Territorial Army Centre in the morning. For once I have not been dancing, so get more than 6 hours sleep. Instead of taking my wife up on her offer to drive me to the minibus it I allow her to roll over and go back to sleep (as usual).

Hmm, looks a bit chilly. two pairs of socks, long johns, trousers, T-shirt, rugby shirt, pullover, waistcoat, fleece, padded outer jacket, fluorescent tabard, scarf, woolly hat, mittens – if I still feel cold I will put on my waterproofs. Feeling like the Michelin man I waddle out to the bike.

Arrive at the TA centre to find a heavy frost encasing the minibus. Also notice the passenger door is slightly ajar – oh dear, this could be a problem. The interior lights are not on, which either means the door was closed far enough to switch them off, or they have been on all night and the poor little thing is now devoid of electricity. Trying the ignition shows it is the second scenario, the battery is as flat as a pancake. Phone wife to get her to bring the car to the TA centre for a jump start. The first three attempts fail, so the leader phones the rescue service – which inevitably means that when they answer a fourth attempt, a bit of fiddling with the jump leads finally persuades the engine to start.

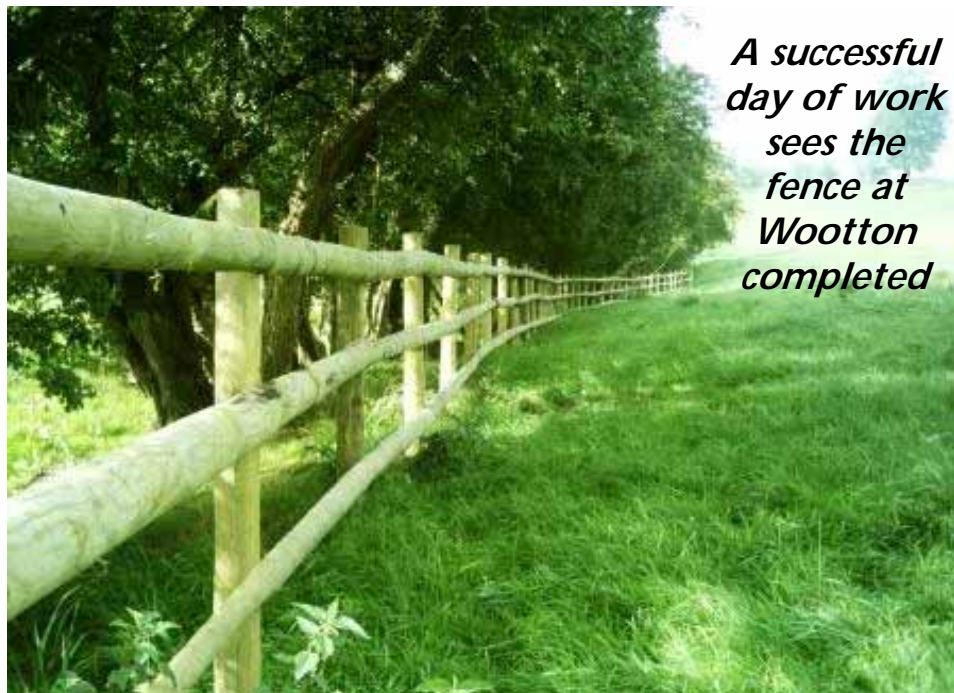
Drive round to tool store with wife in close proximity in case I stall and need a further jump start. The leader says the only thing we need is water, as the tools required have been left in the minibus overnight. After leaving the tool store I ask if we have got monkey (wire) strainers and I am assured everything we need is already packed. So of course, on arrival at the site the first question from the site contact is “Did you get the message to bring some monkey strainers from the toolstore?” Rather than drive all the way back to Oxford to get some from the toolstore we decide to try and manage without them and, necessity being the mother of invention, come up with the Mk Ila rail wire strainer (patent pending), see diagram. The Mk I, as used the previous day, had no cross piece and needed a gorilla (or possibly a Gorill) with fingers the size of sausages to operate it. The Mk II had a cross piece nailed on with small nails and quickly came apart when put under pressure (rather like the England cricket team in the Ashes, although hopefully that will forgotten about by the time you read this). The Mk Ila had bigger nails and was almost as effective as the missing monkey strainers – and less likely to remove unwary fingers.

A successful day of work sees the fence at Wootton completed, although worryingly the cattle seem to be on the wrong, muddy, side. Drive back to Oxford and drop the volunteers before heading to the



toolstore. (One of the joys of being a driver or leaders is that on each task you spend nearly two hours more than ordinary volunteers on conservation work, an hour collecting the van and loading the tools in the morning and another hour unpacking the tools and parking the van at the end of the day). At the toolstore I look for the toolstore keys in their usual place in the van – not there. Turn out all the likely compartments and my pockets (all 14 of the them) – still no keys. My initial thought was that, with my propensity for scattering keys like confetti, I had picked them up and lost them but a phone call to the leader the previous day establishes that he forgot to put them back in the minibus. Park the van and head for with some relief at one less job to do.

Have you spotted the three pieces of serendipity? If my wife had driven me to the TA centre, she would have been driving home, and uncontactable, when I discovered the pancake shaped minibus battery. Not having the toolstore keys meant we didn't have to unpack the tools, although by the time we had undertaken a thorough search for the keys, phoned the previous leader and washed the cups up it didn't save a huge amount of time. Finally, thank goodness I didn't drive back to Oxford to get some monkey strainers – if I had driven all the way back only to discover I had no keys I would have been really cheated off.



A successful day of work sees the fence at Wootton completed

FOCUS ON WATLINGTON HILL

(Continued from page 1)

approximately a quarter of the site; this unusual feature dates back to the 19th century.

Like many of the Chiltern Hills, scrub and tree invasion have covered much of the hill which would have been virtually tree-less as little as sixty years ago, with the exception of the yew wood and a few scattered shrubs. The shrubs would have included the increasingly rare juniper which still survives on the hill but in much-reduced numbers. Regular sheep grazing kept the hill 'open' with the sheep eating off the young trees and shrubs before they got too large. However, with the demise of the wool market and cheaper imports of meat, grazing was dramatically reduced. With nothing to then impede their growth the tree and shrub seedlings grew readily and began to climb the slopes of the hill.

Rabbits did delay this process of "natural succession" as they nibble young seedlings too but with the advent of myxomatosis most of the rabbits died and again the seedlings grew unhindered. Rabbit numbers have recovered since then but the amount of scrub and trees is now too great and advanced for them to have much effect.

Watlington Hill is a very important site with rich calcareous grassland containing many increasingly rare plants and a good variety of invertebrates including nationally scarce species. It is also a well known butterfly site and is home to silver-spotted, dingy and grizzled skippers; dark green fritillary; small blue, chalkhill blue; brown argus and green hairstreak.

The levels of tree and scrub cover are currently too great and ideally need to be reduced by at least fifty percent. However, the mixed species

composition of the tree/scrub habitat makes the hill an attractive place for birds. It is not only the resident birds such as whitethroat, linnet, and bullfinch that benefit from the harvest of berries but also summer and winter visitors including fieldfares and redwings. Red kites are also a very familiar sight on the hill and you rarely walk far without getting very good views of this magnificent bird of prey

In addition to rabbits, many other mammals can be found on the hill. There are foxes, badgers, deer (primarily muntjac but sometimes larger deer like roe and fallow) and grey squirrels which do tremendous damage to the trees by stripping bark from the trunks and branches.

OCV will return to Watlington hill on Sunday 25th February to assist warden, Jerry Page in his ongoing battle with the scrub.



EVENTS JANUARY-MARCH 2006

Scrub clearance at Calvert Jubilee

Sunday, 21 January

We visit another BBOWT reserve to contribute to the ongoing management programme by clearing scrub on the old railway embankment. This is to try to increase the suitable habitat available on the site for the rare Wall Brown butterfly. Shake off those January blues with a big bonfire and some energetic bramble and brash bashing!

Hedge rescue in Deddington Parish

Sunday, 28 January

We return to work for Deddington Parish Council in the village of Clifton. As a safety 'recommendation' the council have been advised that a well established hedge is a safety issue for the adjoining children's park. Rather than remove it, the council want to lay the hedge to protect the natural habitat. Today we will be preparing the hedge for laying by coppicing out the unwanted material, returning in March to lay the hedge and protect this established habitat

Urban conservation at Holywell Cemetery

Saturday, 3 February

We return to Holywell Cemetery working to protect a valuable haven for wildlife in central Oxford! We will be opening up a path by the north-facing wall of the cemetery by clearing saplings, ivy etc. There will be no minibus pick-ups for this task, so come along by car, bus, foot or bike, for an hour, half a day or the whole day! For directions or more info contact tasks@ocv.org.uk

Coppicing at Brasenose Woods

Sunday, 4 February

We return to the depths of Brasenose Woods, carrying out coppicing work essential to Oxford City Councils work to manage this beautiful, ancient wood. This will involve selecting ash and other younger trees for felling and thinning; removing the brash by either burning or weaving straight into dead-hedges to protect younger coppice stools from hungry deer.

OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 6 February

Monthly committee meeting for discussing the running of OCV. Come along to the Town Hall Jury Room at 8pm and join us for a pint in a nearby pub. All welcome.

Scrub clearance on a SUSTRANS Cycle Route

Sunday, 11 February

This stretch of the cycle route between Wantage and Didcot has been proposed as a County Wildlife Site on account of the rare chalk grassland habitat. This habitat supports a diverse range of rare flora, insects and butterflies, so we will be working to clear the invasive shrub species right back and restart the natural succession, as well as contributing to the development of a real alternative to the A34!

Sheep maintenance at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 18 February

We return to Aston Rowant reserve where we will be working with Natural England wardens foot trimming one of the flocks of sheep. Daggings is also on offer to those who are really keen!

Scrub clearance on Watlington Hill

Sunday, 25 February

We return to the stunning National Trust reserve, assisting warden Jerry Page on his mission to reduce invasive scrub on the hill by 50%. We will be removing species such as yew, whitebeam and of course hawthorn, from encroaching over this SSSI chalk grassland site, and restarting the natural succession. The bonfire was so big last time the red kites were circling on the thermals!

Hedge rescue in Deddington Parish

Sunday, 4 March

We return to work for Deddington Parish Council in the village of Clifton. As a safety 'recommendation' the council have been advised that a well established hedge is a safety issue for the adjoining children's park. Rather than remove it, the council want to lay the hedge to protect the natural habitat. In February we prepared this hedge for laying; we now take up our billhooks to cut it back and restart a new lease of life

OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 6 March

Monthly committee meeting in the Town Hall Jury Room at 8pm, followed by a pint in a nearby pub. All welcome.

Varied conservation tasks at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 11 March

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.

Hedgelaying in Wootton by Woodstock

Sunday, 18 March

We return to the tranquil water meadows of Jubilee Reserve, where many of you will be able to admire the serpentine curves of the 2006 OCV fence project! Today we work on a stretch of derelict hedgerow - laying where we can, and coppicing out material that will struggle to regrow and replanting with saplings to restart a hedgerow that will be valuable habitat for the flora and fauna that enjoy this diverse reserve. A visit to Wootton wouldn't be the same without a drivel and blisters; so to avoid disappointment we will be erecting a short stretch of fence to protect our hedge from those hungry cattle!

Woodland management at Foxholes

Sunday, 25 March

We return to the beautiful Foxholes Wood, a BBOWT managed woodland reserve on the Oxon/Gloucesters border. As part of the ongoing coppicing cycle, we will today be removing deer fencing from the perimeter of a young ash copse; now that the trees are big and strong enough to survive the nibblings of hungry deer, we can remove this fencing to let the wildlife back in, and clear the 6 foot deep brambles and other scrub that compete with our trees.

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

