

Judy Webb
Picture: Richard Cave



Historic adventures

Oxford's Lye Valley is revealing its natural history, writes Wendy Tobitt from the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust

A few years ago (well, more like 150 million years ago), Headington was under a shallow warm sea, where a tropical coral reef lay at the edge of a sandy beach.

Today remnants of the coral reef jut out from the quarry walls at Rock Edge nature reserve next to Windmill Road, and the sandy beach has been transformed into the hard limestone which was quarried to build Oxford colleges.

Rock Edge nature reserve is part of a network of important sites for wildlife as well as geology, giving the perfect habitats for nectar and pollen-rich wild flowers including small scabious and clustered bellflower that thrive in the soils created by fossilised coral and limestone.

These wild flowers are vital sources of nourishment for the moths, butterflies and other flying insects that live in the Lye Valley, the fenland nature reserve that connects Headington with Cowley via Oxford Golf Club and Barracks Lane.

Both Rock Edge and Lye Valley are nature reserves owned by Oxford City Council and cared for by the Friends of the Lye Valley, a group of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable nature conservationists led by Dr Judy Webb, one of the city's notable ecologists.

In the past few years the wonderful fens, slopes, ponds, streams and woodland of the Lye Valley have been restored, revived and renewed by the

Friends of Lye Valley with the help of volunteers taking part in the Wildlife Trust's Wild Oxford project co-ordinated by Andy Gunn.

This summer people using the Lye Valley as a shortcut between The Slade in Headington and Barracks Lane in Cowley are enjoying the benefits of the volunteers' hard work earlier this year.

Trees were felled, and many more planted, dense thickets of reeds were scythed back, and ponds were opened up to the sun. The first stage of re-wetting the fen has been achieved by installing 19 leaky log dams to slow the flow of the stream; and all this is just a few yards from the coral reef at Rock Edge.

The true nature of the Lye Valley, a rare and precious calcareous fen, is now being revealed.

Find out more about this extraordinary nature reserve at the Friends of the Lye Valley Facebook page [facebook.com/friendsoflyevalley](https://www.facebook.com/friendsoflyevalley) or book on one of the walks that Dr Judy Webb is leading this summer, and come along to her talk: The BBOWT Wild Oxford Project on September 26 at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. The Wild Oxford project attracts volunteers of all ages including students from local colleges, keen conservationists and local residents keen to do their bit for their local environment.

W: bbowt.org.uk/wildoxford

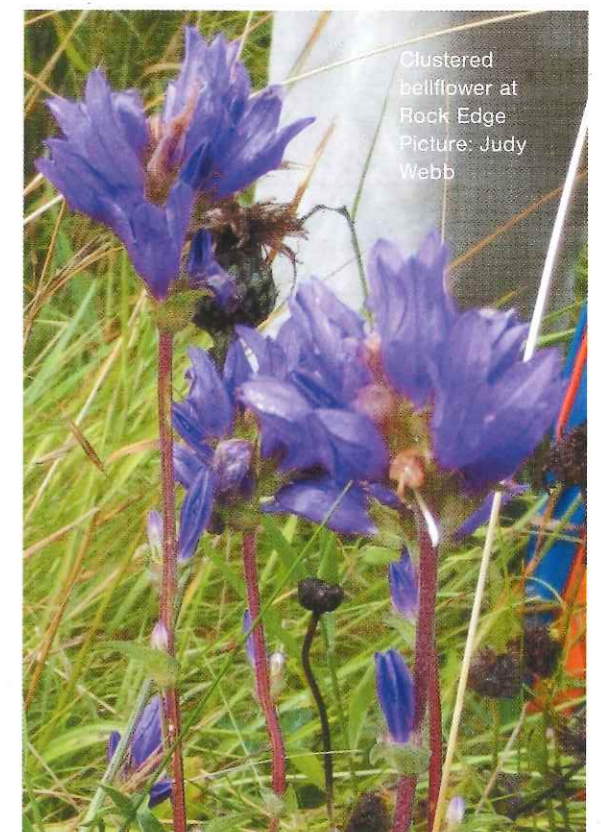


Dr Judy Webb leads a guided walk through Lye Valley

Picture: Andy Gunn



Grass-of-Parnassus, one of the rare fenland plants found in the Lye Valley
Picture: Peter Creed



Clusters bellflower at Rock Edge
Picture: Judy Webb