

Friends of Lye Valley

Chairman's Report 2019-2020

Judy Webb

I write this report much later than usual. Normally it is presented at our AGM meeting in August, but of course that indoor meeting had to be cancelled due to Coronavirus restrictions. Writing now has enabled me to include news of important happenings in the Valley this last autumn.

Of course it has been an extraordinary year. If you or your family have been affected by Covid-19, my sympathy and best wishes.

Conservation work in the valley

We work with the permission and cooperation of Oxford City Council and Natural England on agreed management tasks. Our normal Wednesday work parties went on in the North Fen area of the Valley all through a very a very wet autumn and winter 2019. Work parties had to stop for some time this spring with the onset of Coronavirus lockdown at the end of March. After the first lockdown, slowly volunteers were allowed by the Council to re-start work with strict Covid rules on distancing, and tool disinfection. These have worked well with no problems. My thanks to all the stalwart crew of regular practical volunteers who turn up weekly on Wednesday mornings and work separately up and down the Valley, mostly scything and raking ranker reed and rush, also quite a lot of digging to reduce problem plants (pendulous sedge, bittersweet, some nettle) that would otherwise limit the return of more attractive and valuable flowers for insects. All this work substitutes for the grazing by cows or horses the fen habitat needs but cannot have in its now urban situation. We had the assistance of the Oxford Conservation Volunteers for Sunday sessions in July and October. Sadly the Saturday BBOWT Wild Oxford work parties were not able to resume this year. Fen restoration cutting and raking is now extended to the whole length of the wetland area owned by Oxford City Council and within the designated Local Nature Reserve. A good deal of scrub work has produced sunny glades on the drier banks and there has been much wildflower seeding from local sources. There have been new plantings of blackthorn and buckthorn whips to favour butterflies.

During lockdowns the Valley has been incredibly well used, especially by families with young children who came in April specifically to look for frogs, spawn and tadpoles in the ponds. It is very encouraging to hear so many comments from visitors as to how much they have enjoyed this wonderful place on their doorstep.

Wildlife news this year.

The frogs, lizards and slow worms continue to thrive. For bird news in the valley I recommend you follow local bird expert Tom Bedford's Oxonbirding blogspot or his twitter account. Just as a flavour: on November 28th Tom tweets '*Woodcock in the Lye Valley this morning, plus Tawny Owl, Siskin, Lesser Redpoll and 6 singing Song Thrushes*'. We must be doing something right to attract these. The Valley is a great place to see butterflies with marbled whites being a fairly new addition to our regular set. The nectar flowers they depend on have gradually increased, year on year.

Flowers have been spectacular this year. The early heat and drought of April, May and part of June had me very worried that the fen surface would become too dry (the springs are already short of water due to development around) and our rare plants would suffer. Luckily for the fen species (if not so much for us) summer rainy conditions from July onwards (combined with our summer cutting regime) have favoured all of them and there were more marsh helleborine orchid flowers than I could count. In

the North Fen it was particularly pleasing to see that more than 40 of them have spread from the east side fen to the west bank fen restoration areas where it is easier for the public to see them.



Marsh helleborines in flower in the North Fen on 01.07.2020.

The iconic Grass-of-Parnassus (our logo flower and an amazing arctic-alpine, ice age survival) had the best flowering year ever so far, due to the good management of cutting and raking combined with some help in hand seed-spreading to new areas (this help necessary because there is no transfer by feet of grazing stock walking up and down). Numbers were spectacular – over 1,051 in the privately owned small South Fen section and 184 in the North Fen, giving a grand total of **1,235 flowers**. This flower started from the ‘almost lost’ population of just 22 flowers in 2006, but now there are more here than in any other fen in Oxon! Especial thanks to the private owners of the South Fen for allowing access for conservation work and species monitoring.



Grass of Parnassus in flower, with pollinating sawfly 12.09.2020

Some Lye Valley waste hay from an area of the fen rich in many species was taken to another fen in Chilswell Valley as part of the BBOWT Wild Oxford project in 2017. This summer the first Grass-of-

Parnassus flowered at Chilswell from seed transported in that hay, a species returned after being lost due to lack of grazing and consequent reed dominance. Regular cutting and raking there should now keep it happy. Since 2017 more waste hay and specifically collected seed from the Lye Valley has gone to several other fen sites to help them get back their lost plant biodiversity.

We have been very successfully using marsh lousewort *Pedicularis palustris* in our fen restoration as it is a semi-parasite which reduces the vigour of reed and rush. Seeding it to new areas has markedly reduced the amount of cutting and raking we do and it has increased the biodiversity of other plants it does not parasitise. Read more about this in the article I wrote on the website of the Freshwater Habitats Trust, Oxon Fens Project page: <https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/projects/oxfordshire-fens-project/>

Lye Valley as an Educational Resource

I'm very pleased to report the site regularly being used for higher education by Brookes University. Their students have been on educational trips to look at fen ecology and site problems -they were particularly interested in the mitigation log damming in the stream to slow the flow and stop bank erosion. The Geography Dept. took a number of students to demonstrate peat coring in the fen. Sediment cores already taken last year are being studied using various techniques to understand the history of the site, which has a record going back to the last Ice Age which ended 10,000 years ago. A number of student projects are on-going in the Valley, mostly at MSc level. Topics include the progress of fen restoration and hydrology, calculating carbon storage in the valley peat, soil infiltration rates up and down the valley and aquatic invertebrate diversity in the ponds. Coronavirus restrictions on travel this year made this a very attractive site for Brookes students as it is so easy to get to, on their doorstep.

Planning applications and the water catchment

As always there is much to report as to planning applications near the valley. In September 2019 work began at Warren Meadow off Warren Crescent on the foundations of one of the 10 houses planned there (application passed in 2016 after a very long battle opposing this development). Foundations were dug and laid for one house. Then work stopped. We continue to be deeply concerned about the stability of the bank of made ground these houses will be built on and the success of the mitigation water infiltration system supposed to supply water to the fen adjacent. There are also footpath issues on-going. If you came along to our protest demonstration on this site on 4th November, thank you. You may have seen coverage in the papers.

A proposed development of two houses at 2 Dynham Place off Girdlestone road is potentially very damaging to underground water flow to the north fen and the FoLV objected to it strongly on the grounds that the necessary piling to support houses would interrupt and damage crucial water flow. If you wrote in objecting to this development, thank you. We are currently analysing a re-design.

A much stronger protection is necessary for the rainwater catchment of the Lye Valley fens –more development in this area is a big problem. It was all green 100 years ago but now the catchment area has much urban development, with roofs, paving, concrete, tarmac hard surfacing limiting how much rain can enter the ground to feed the valley springs, and limiting water production in the fen.

Protection of the remaining permeable green areas of gardens/allotments/parks etc.in the catchment is absolutely vital and the committee is working hard on this. Current and future Climate Change to hotter and drier conditions poses the biggest of threats to the survival of this special wetland. Water is the life-blood of fens. Hot, dry summers will result in spring flow reduction which will lead to drying-out, killing sensitive wildlife and exposing the considerable depth of carbon-containing peat to the risk of fire. If you have not seen the Headington Heritage blog on all these issues, I recommend it; the visual displays explain all the complicated issues of the water catchment really clearly.

<https://headingtonheritage.wordpress.com/>

Pond works at Valley Head

In early October the long-awaited de-silting of the two interception ponds at the head of the Valley finally happened. This work was grant-funded by Thames Water and carried out by Oxford City Council staff. These ponds were first dug out in 1988 by the City Council in order to collect and hold back the peak water flow from the Thames Water large surface drain that emits at the head of the valley. This drain emits road water from a large area of Headington, as far as the Ring Road. The ponds held back the water after any rainstorm, reducing flash flooding and erosion of the soft peat exposed in brook banks as it passed through the SSSI fen. However, the ponds had become so full of silt they could not hold back any water. The digging-out of silt will be completed next spring. Already the deepened ponds, combined with the many log dams in the brook are significantly slowing the brook flow further down the system.



Ponds after de silting (looking down the valley) 1st Oct 2020

Future plans and recent news

Phase two of the work started with the interception ponds de-silting is further log-damming in the brook just below them and through to the edge of City Council land. This will slow the damaging storm flows even further, with the ultimate aim, in phase three, of raising water levels in the over-deepened brook and re-wetting dry fen adjacent. Grant funding is to be sought for this log-damming.

A further extension of the boardwalk to the edge of City Council land (grant funding needed) will enable dry feet and help us with re-wetting in dry fen adjacent by damming spring flow and holding more water in the fen and nearby pond during a dry summer. The frogs will be very happy about that.

At the southern end of City Council land below the ponds, one of our explanatory boards was vandalised and had to be removed. This had been produced by the BBOWT Wild Oxford Project. We hope to get it repaired and re-instated.

We plan further scrub species plantings to diversify the range, adding spindle, guelder rose, gorse and more blackthorn in appropriate areas.

The group is looking into working with more landowners of portions of old fen between the isolated North and South fen sections of the SSSI. Friendly landowners have been allowing this initiative for a couple of years now, with the aim of linking up the two fen areas with a wildlife corridor of shorter flowery fen vegetation. We are grateful for landowner cooperation in this. Our aims are explained in 'Vision for the Valley' on our website. We are also considering the purchase of portions of land

containing fen in the long bottoms of gardens off Lye Valley Road. Donations and crowd-funding will be required. If you know of any landowner who might be interested in selling land for us to hold and restore to fen, please make contact through our website email.

We plan a celebration of Rock Edge's flowers on that site on **Saturday 22nd May 2021**.

On a very positive note, we are grateful to local councillor Pat Kennedy who has agreed to fund new tools for the working volunteer group next spring, meaning new rakes, loppers, shears, and pitchforks to look forward to.

Do look at the group's website <http://www.friendsoflyevalley.org.uk/> - new articles are occasionally added. We add local folk's memories to the History section whenever they find time to share them (see Richie Hewer's memories of playing in the valley as a child when it was always called 'the Dump' and there was actually a bicycle race-track) and we are always looking for more memories of how things used to be. An interesting article recently posted in the 'About the Valley' concerns our Iron-rich springs— do read it if you have ever been concerned about oily looking stains or bright orange slicks in the Valley. They are all perfectly natural and fascinating.



Iron deposits on water in a Lye Valley spring. Photo Tony Gillie

Thanks, publicity and membership

I thank all the Committee for their help and support this challenging year and also Stephanie Jenkins for efficiently managing our website. Stephanie is also invaluable in alerting the committee to new and potentially damaging planning applications around the Valley. Tony Gillie is due thanks for taking wonderful photos of valley and wildlife and sharing them on social media Facebook and Twitter. Recent news from Tony is that on Facebook the Friends of Lye Valley group has 450 followers and the number of followers on Twitter just recently topped 1000. The increase in interest in the Valley is very pleasing. To entertain folk trapped at home during lockdown, Tony created virtual jig-saws from some of his Lye Valley landscape photos.

I thank anybody who contributed to my recent nomination for the Woman's Hour Power list 2020. I'm number 25 on the list which you can see on the Woman's Hour website. A big surprise and honour.

Happy Christmas and all good wishes for 2021.

Judy Webb 17.12.2020