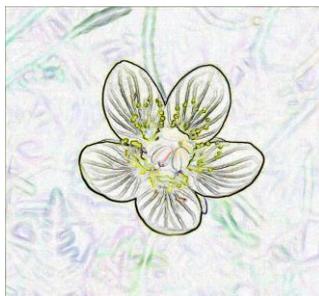


Friends of Lye Valley



Chairman's Report 2020-2021

Judy Webb

I again write this report much later than usual. Normally it is presented at our AGM meeting in August, but that indoor meeting could not be held in 2021 due to Covid-19 concerns and the FoLV Committee having an exceptional amount of work to do responding to planning applications potentially affecting Lye Valley.

Of course it has been another extraordinary year. Despite wide vaccination, if you or your family have been affected by Covid-19, my sympathy and best wishes.

Conservation Work in the Valley

Our normal Wednesday morning work parties went on in the North Fen area of the Valley throughout the year with Covid protocols - strict social distancing and tool disinfection. We made three visits to the private South Fen SSSI section, for scything, raking and willow scrub work. My thanks to all the stalwart crew of regular practical volunteers who turn up weekly and do whatever seems needed, 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 (OCV)** for Sunday sessions in July and October.

Oxford University Nature Conservation Society (OUNCS) undergraduate students volunteered with us for several Wednesday and Sunday sessions earlier this year. **Oxford Brookes University** undergraduate students volunteered with us midweek all this autumn. We made sure all students learnt a lot about fen ecology and management as well as getting good exercise. With all this help, fen restoration cutting and raking is now extended to the whole length of the North Fen wetland area owned by Oxford City Council and within the SSSI and designated Local Nature Reserve. A good deal of scrub reduction work has produced sunny glades on the drier banks and there has been much wildflower seeding from local sources.

Habitat improvement in both the North and South Fen areas has been good but in the South Fen unit of the fen SSSI, the years of willow work, re-wetting, cutting and raking have improved the rare alkaline fen so much that Natural England have changed its habitat condition status from 'Unfavourable, Recovering' to '**Favourable**'. This is huge progress as it is the only section of this type of fen in Oxfordshire to achieve this gold standard state. Especial thanks to the private owners of the

South Fen for allowing access for conservation work. The next target is of course to continue work to help the North Fen into 'Favourable' condition as well.

.Wildlife News this Year.

A very wet winter and record breaking wet February was followed by a very dry April. This dry spring was hard for early flowering species like our special cotton grasses (some heads shrivelled). Luckily wetter conditions from May onwards ensured this was the first year that none of our ponds or shallow pools dried out, very beneficial to aquatic larvae of insects like damselflies, dragonflies and soldierflies.

At the Lye Valley head, the new shrub plantings of Guelder Rose, Spindle, Gorse, Wayfaring tree, Blackthorn and Buckthorn whips are doing well and should provide breeding plants and nectar sources for butterflies and other insects and well as berries for birds.

The frogs, lizards and slow worms continue to thrive. The Valley is a normally great place to see butterflies but they were challenged by sometimes cool and rainy conditions during their summer flight period. This year the sighting of numbers of black baby viviparous lizards sunning on log-piles and willow pollards were the highlight of some people's visits.

Flowers have been spectacular this year. Wetter conditions from May meant no damaging drought and just one example was the really good showing of Early Marsh-orchids *Dactylorhiza incarnata* in May. These first appeared a couple of years ago and now seem to be increasing on the west bank of the restored SSSI section, easily seen from the boardwalk.



Early Marsh orchid in flower west side SSSI fen 19.05.2021

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 – in the North Fen an increase from 184 flowers in 2020 to **735** in 2021, giving a grand total for both North and South fen areas of **1,437 flowers**. This is more than any other fen site in Oxon (and Lye Valley started from the 'almost lost' population of just 22 flowers in 2006).



Grass of Parnassus in flower, with pollinating sawfly 12.09.2020

Lye Valley fen seed and cut hay has been helping other fens restore lost species. Small amounts of marsh lousewort and parsley water-dropwort seed have been donated to other fens with great success (see the Oxon Fens Project of the Freshwater Habitats Trust at <https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/projects/oxfordshire-fens-project/>). This summer the first Grass-of-Parnassus flowered at Raleigh Park and Chilswell fen areas from the tiniest amount of left over Lye Valley seed. This short species used to be in those fens but had been lost due to lack of grazing and consequent reed dominance. Regular cutting and raking there should now keep it happy.

Our newest project is increasing populations of rare plants with volunteer help - folk who cannot help practically in the valley but who have taken on looking after and potting-on seedlings of plants we are trying to increase in Lye Valley fens – the beautiful cotton grasses are the first to benefit from this initiative. Contact us if you would like to be one of our rare plant-minders next year.



Cotton grass - Volunteers are growing seedlings on for us at home in greenhouses

During spring lockdown the Valley has again been incredibly well used, especially by families with young children who came in spring specifically to look for mating frogs, spawn and tadpoles in the ponds. In March at the peak of frog spawning, much trampling damage was occurring to soft peat around the ponds, plus we had reports of intentional damage to frogs or spawn. As a result we

requested the City Council to place signs asking people and dogs not to enter the ponds. To further restrict public access to pond margins or vulnerable soft wet peat areas, our volunteer Rod constructed attractive woven hazel and willow wattle fencing barriers. These allow plenty of pond viewing from the boardwalk.

It is very encouraging to hear so many comments from visitors as to how much they have enjoyed walking through the valley now that it is more open and flowery. I especially like to hear from locals who have not been down the valley for years and are now amazed at the changes for the better.

The most recent bird wildlife news for the Valley is that a green parakeet has been seen in the valley for the first time!

At Rock Edge, we have continued enhancing the flora by seed spreading and introduction of lost species like the horseshoe vetch.

Lye Valley's increasing role as an Educational Resource for Universities

Three Oxford Brookes University Students studying for an MSc in Conservation successfully used the Lye Valley for the project aspect of their course. All three of them had our help from FoLV with advice and practical work. Student studies ranged from recording the botanical progress of fen restoration work combined with water levels and water chemistry (plus flowers useful to pollinators), to the diversity and abundance of freshwater invertebrates in ponds on the east and west sides of the valley and lastly a study calculating the carbon store in the peat in the north fen area by means of coring and analysis of peat samples.

We look forward to seeing all these student reports but will be especially interested in the results of just how much carbon is stored in the peat (over 1 metre deep) on the City Council owned fen land. Peat can be a vast long term carbon store and keeping it very wet with growing vegetation and accumulating more peat can be a much better way of removing carbon dioxide from the air than tree-planting. Particular mention should be given to those from FoLV who helped with the peat coring – strong arm stuff was required!



FoLV volunteers helping Oxford Brookes student Darcy with the peat coring for carbon storage estimation, north fen, May 2021

Prof. Adrian Parker from Oxford Brookes University Geography Dept. again brought a number of undergraduate students to demonstrate peat-coring in the North Fen. Sediment cores taken last year are being studied using various techniques to understand the pre-history of the site, which has a

sediment record going back thousands of years. The most recent report from this work is a Radiocarbon Date for peat/organic remains at the very base of a core from the South Fen SSSI unit of a remarkable **14,000 years BP** (Before Present) – just after the end of the last Ice Age and at the very beginning of the warm interglacial period we live in. This date is evidence that the Lye Valley holds probably the most ancient ecosystem in Oxford, our spring-fed fen.

Planning Applications and the Fen Water Catchments

Regrettably, we have had to spend much time and energy on planning matters to do with housing developments proposed in the rainwater catchments of the fens. We lodged objections to a number of back garden extensions for houses nearby within the spring catchment area.

The current most worrying application is the current one for two houses on the greenfield slope directly above the South Fen unit of Lye valley SSSI (**Land West of 75 Town Furze**). Our full objection is on the FoLV website under 'Threats'. To see some excellent visuals and explanation of all issues to do with this application see the Headington Heritage blog:

<https://headingtonheritage.wordpress.com/lets-save-the-south-fen/>

The deadline for comment on this application is now **3rd December**. Thank-you to all who have sent in objections, numbers really count. If you still haven't objected, we would be very grateful for your submission

Warren Crescent Housing Development. The application for 10 houses there was passed in 2016 after a very long battle opposing this development. A few foundations were dug in 2019. Then work stopped. We continue to be deeply concerned about the loss of this green space for the local community plus the instability of the bank of made ground these houses will be built on. Also there is no guarantee the mitigation water infiltration soak-away system will work to protect the fen adjacent and may cause bank collapse. Therefore we still strongly oppose this development and are pursuing the ground instability aspect. The diversion of the footpath around the proposed houses is recently agreed. We held a picnic with games for local residents of Town Furze estate on Warren Meadow greenspace on 12th September. This highlighted how much the area is valued.

FoLV have produced a request for **Supplementary Planning Guidance document (SPG)** that we sent to the Planning Department of Oxford City Council. This asks for stronger protection from development for the fen water catchments, particularly in the light of the **Climate Crisis** and is viewable posted on our website. Members of FoLV committee had a meeting about this document with the City Planning department on 7th October. This was a positive first stage, further meetings will happen.

If you have not seen the Headington Heritage blog on all these water catchment issues, I recommend it; the clear visual displays make issues understandable. See:

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

Artworks and Filming in the Valley

In August we were contacted by **Modern Art Oxford** who wanted use Lye Valley as part of their '**Sign Symbol Sound**' project. It was a chance to install their artworks in and around the fen so they could connect their theme with the environment. The artworks were installed throughout the day on 31st August, filmed in situ and then taken down. Below are some human hands modelled in fungal mycelium. These hands were installed to look as if they were emerging from one of our ponds. Wonder what the frogs thought!



Art installation, human hands made of fungal mycelium, part of the Sign, Symbol, Sound project, August

Also in August I was filmed in the valley by a crew from the **Oxford University Museum of Natural History** talking about **insects and the role they play on our lives**. This is planned to be on public view in the museum, aiming for opening on 8 March 2022 (International Women's Day).

Pollution and Fly-tipping

I look forward to a time when I do not have to report on these issues. This February there was a sewage contamination event along footpath 80 as it passes the houses on the end of Heath Close, above the valley. A sewer next to the end house had evidently blocked and backed up, with sewage flowing over the footpath and down the valley slope towards the SSSI fen springs below. We notified Thames Water who unblocked the sewer and cleaned up but this illustrates the problems that housing so close to the fen inevitably brings with ageing sewers. In April we found dumped used engine oil containers thrown into the valley from Peat Moors Rec but we safely removed them before they could leak.

We were very appreciative of help this spring from **Good Gym** volunteers in removing a large amount of litter and fly-tipped material at the head of the valley from scrub on the Peat Moors side banks. Thanks to Councillor Mark Lygo for encouraging them to help us. They will be back to do more good work next spring.

Changes at the Slade Entrance and parking

Following our requests some years ago the City Council Parks staff installed a gate across the entrance track to the valley from The Slade. In the past stolen vehicles have been driven into the valley and abandoned, one set on fire. The gate will prevent this happening again. FoLV have a key to the padlock so that our tools can be brought on site in a volunteer's vehicle. There is no parking in the entrance before the gate but we are waiting for the city council sign saying this to be replaced and other signage improvements at the entrance.

Pond Works at Valley Head

You may recall the **interception ponds** (dug in 1988) at the head of the valley are there to hold back road run-off storm water entering Lye Brook from a Thames Water (TW) road drain. This TW drain emits road water running from houses and roads from a very large area of Headington, - as far out as the Ring Road and from beyond Bury Knowle Park. You can see the force of the storm water in the video on the FoLV website.

The ponds receive this flow and hold it up somewhat, thus making erosion less likely in the soft peat of the fen to the south, and flooding less likely from Boundary Brook down near Barracks Lane and beyond. However, they had become full of silt and non-functional, so were partially dug out in autumn 2020 by City Council staff using Thames Water grant money. This October the work was completed, with the silt being placed on the nearby bank. Now their volume is increased again, the ponds hold back more water after rain and damage should be less in the fen and beyond. More leaky log-dams in the brook below the ponds would usefully slow storm flow even further.



Lower Interception Pond after de silting (looking down the valley) 13th Oct 2021. Water cress has recolonised and a grey wagtail visits regularly to catch insects.

Bullington Centre Re-build.

I look forward to the completion of this important community centre nearby sometime next year. The FoLV committee have had meetings with an artist regarding displays on the white hoardings currently surrounding the re-build site. Look out for Lye Valley species on these!

Future plans

We plan the delayed celebration of Rock Edge's flowers on that site in **May 2022**, if Coronavirus restrictions allow.

We will carry on with further log-damming in the brook to slow storm water flow events and reduce bank erosion in the Lye Brook through to the edge of City Council land. These actions are increasingly important with heavy deluge rainstorms becoming more frequent due to Climate Change.

Further scrub reduction work and glade creation on the Peat Moors bank side is planned to assist in reducing anti-social behaviour, fly-tipping and litter dumping in these areas.

Repair and re-instatement of damaged interpretation boards is a priority for next year.

We hope to work with more landowners of portions of old fen between the isolated North and South fen sections of the SSSI. Covid-19 temporarily stopped this work but FoLV are hoping to resume soon. 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. Our plans 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.

Thanks and publicity

I thank all the FoLV Committee for their help and support during 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 for calendars and for the group's social media on Facebook and Twitter. Recent news from Tony is that Friends of Lye Valley now has **640 followers on Facebook** (an increase of **200**) and the number of followers on **Twitter** has risen **to 1390 (an increase of nearly 400), tweets may be seen by up to 2000 people**. The increase in interest in the wildlife of the Valley is very pleasing.

Award

It was a surprise and joy to find I was to be awarded the **British Empire Medal (BEM)** in the Queen's New Year Honours List for 'Services to Conservation of Wildlife and Habitats in Oxfordshire'. I couldn't do what I do without the constant help and support of others, such as yourselves.

Happy Christmas and all good wishes for 2022

Judy Webb 01.12.2021