

Cripley Meadow Allotment Association Newsletter

January 2021



I hope the new year finds you well after the most unusual seasonal holiday! This mahonia bush is always my go-for-delight at this time of year particularly against such a blue sky. It is rarely without insects.

I will stand down as Chair at this year's AGM and am wrapping up my time as Chair as we get near, particularly as I have my second knee-replacement operation booked in for mid-January. I hope it will be as successful as the last one which means I should be back to gardening by March. Rodney and I hope to work our plots for many more years so will still be seen on site. I have offered to stay co-opted to the Committee as a shredder operative at some working parties but I will play no part in meetings nor future management after the AGM.

This may well be my last newsletter. It is very long. Immediate topics are in the first few pages, but if you have time, read on for more reflective topics towards the end.

I hope we all learn from 2020, and that 2021 onwards sees moves towards more healthy-people-and-climate- friendly- directions. I have no doubt that in the hands of the talented continuing committee Cripley Meadow will continue to thrive.

The vaccines are giving us hope that 2021 will be a significant improvement on 2020.

As I finish this the water has gone down dramatically so as ever.. good gardening.

Wendy

In this newsletter (click on the link to go straight to that topic)

[Covid management update](#)

[Pennard Potato Day cancelled](#)

[2021 AGM and invoices](#)

[Plots and Flooding](#)

[Water harvesting](#)

[Tracks and flooding](#)

[Audits in 2020](#)

[The National Allotment Society](#)

[Our future organisation](#)

[Waiting list](#)

[Site work update](#)

[The apple tree by the skip](#)

[Boundary and willow work](#)

[Following the shed break ins](#)

[A wonderful squash](#)

[Allotments and a sustainable future](#)

[Reflections on the past](#)

COVID management update - Now we are again in lockdown all communal areas remain closed, members are generally restricted to their plots (and the most direct route to it) and may have **only one visitor**. You may also continue to use the skip, communal bonfire area and visit the Shop by appointment. **Plot paths are private**. Recently a few new members have been observed using other members' plot paths. This is not allowed unless the member is there and invites you, or you are involved in site business. The inside of the badger fence is not a site path; apart from immediately in front of a site gate, it belongs to the abutting plot's holder who must keep it clear and access is only allowed for maintenance. This has always been so but presently it is of more importance as we have members who are vulnerable.

The Pennards Day, 10th January, has been cancelled. However, they are offering a 15% discount for website orders until the 31 March off most items available during the past Potato Days, depending on availability. Enter code [oxford77k] in the 'Shopping Cart' page (P&P, Vouchers, plus a few odd things excluded). You can use the code as many times as needed during this period.

2021 AGM and Invoices - We have just set the date – **Sunday 21st March 2021 4-6pm by video conference**. Invitation, agenda and briefing information will be circulated well beforehand, and a means and date by which to submit questions and comments prior to the meeting.

The AGM marks the start of the new membership year and is the date by which invoices need to be paid. **An invoice will be sent to the lead member for each plot in February**. As agreed at our last AGM, fees will be increasing this year.

With regard to the payment for those who did not do a Working Party (WP) - although last year's AGM agreed to make this £20 per member levy mandatory, there have been so few opportunities for WP, the Committee decided to delay for a year. So the WP contribution will be voluntary. In the past, most members have been happy to pay it and we hope they will again as, in the absence of Wps, the work has still had to be done, so the Association has had to use paid labour to do it.

We are aware that some members may be facing particular financial difficulty. We do not want anyone to lose their plot for this reason; members in this situation are encouraged to contact a Committee member.

Plots and Flooding - I live next to the flood plain, some 20 yds from a local stream which is presently contiguous with Botley Field. This has had a noisy flock of quarrelsome geese and swans since Christmas Day. Our attic room always has a beautiful view across the Isis to Cripsey Meadow, but presently this is tinged with the concern that arises when looking out over a stretch of water that continues up to Wolvercote. Our Edwardian house has never been flooded in its 120 years, but the street has. We figured the view and location were worth the risk, but will it survive more climate change? Plans and provision for more cycles, buses and pedestrians are very appealing to a 70+ allotment-loving-cyclist.

Flooding as I write there has been standing water on the Site since Christmas Day when the Environment Agency (EA) issued a flood warning. The majority of plots have some standing water. Some new members may not have experienced our winter flooding so do follow [the advice originally published in November 2019](#)). **Most importantly never go through flood water.**

Take heart! Some members (see later) have been here long enough to have seen a handful of floods and some have plots that are amongst the most productive on the site. They have learned to work with what at first seems a disaster... but which like many such things is a double-edged sword. In the summer, when many city sites are drought ridden and making extensive use of piped resources, our grass is still largely green. Many of these long-term members have also had time to work on building up their plots by making and using as much compost as possible. Many have used a version of what is now called lasagne composting of green or brown waste as possible to build up plots, beds, or paths (if you look this up and find reference to peat moss, please don't use this unsustainable material). More now are using 'no dig' and clearing with cover, compost, grass cuttings and more cover. There are lots of ways to make the most of green and brown waste so find the one that is right for you but does not inflict your neighbours with weed root/seed.

Everyone knows we are flood plain, but it can be frightening when you see your plot go under, particularly the first time. Even when/if the [proposed Flood Channel](#) becomes a reality we will still be Flood Plain. This is one of the reasons we are still allotments after 127 years! If and when this plan is 'back on track' effort needs to go into the EA clearing our surrounding streams, as was promised in consultations. We accept that we are flood plain but asked that action be taken to ensure allotment land is as workable as possible by allowing the water to drain away.

Harvesting water With all this water around it may seem strange to be reminding you to harvest it.. but now is the time to either plan or act if you have not already done so. Climate change already means we are experiencing more erratic and extreme weather conditions. Cripsey Meadow has never had a piped water supply and we have managed 127 years of allotment growing on harvested water. [Do note Dr Nick Jackson ODFAA Paper on harvesting water \(Nick is the Science Coordinator and Science Outputs Manager at UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology \(UKCEH\) Oxford.](#)

In 2005 we began investing in large water butts next to our associations sheds. In 2012 we made an agreement with Castle Mill flats to harvest water from their-then-in-the-future roofs. We now harvest some 10,000L of rainwater from our communal sheds and Castle Mill roofs. We are in the process of putting in more rainwater

harvesting on our CMAA sheds on plot 54 and plot 70. We have ordered 4 more 1000L water butts, 2 to be located here and 2 beside plot 70's communal shelter. We encourage everyone with a shed or well to harvest as much water as they can store so that communal resources can be



available for those with less potential for collection.

In 2016 the arrival of the badger fence meant we needed to replace some previous access to the adjacent streams. We bought in petrol pumps to enable us to harvest of river water and installed one trial solar powered pump. The latter is

expensive to install and demands time, manual labour, and technical know-how, but we have successfully linked the tank furthest from the water so any more will be less work and expense. It is worth repeating as funds allow but meanwhile we have petrol pumps. In 2016 we installed 15 X 1,000L tanks along the Fiddlers Stream/Castle Mill Stream stretch and have a team of noble members who volunteer to fill them if/when rainwater resources run dry. Obviously, these and the well water level, will last longer if everyone who can harvests water. On our two large plots we have one well and 11 water butts. We had 13 but two have succumbed to old age and are having another life as a comfrey still and a grass edge composter. We water our polytunnel every 4 days and the plot only if sowing in a dry spell. Our healthy humus rich soil holds water well and has been another long-term priority.

Our Tracks and flooding The site sustained some track damage on the South Field and Castle Mill paths from cars during 2019-2020 flood..but our revised car parking, based on our member survey and AGM discussion, has dramatically reduced regular car use. Climate change and



COVID-19 re-thinking about car use may have helped but thanks are due to all for recognising the need for fair and limited use of the tracks. The Committee organised more track repairs in September 2020 and plan to complete topping-up work on the remaining halves of Fiddlers Stream and Central path this coming year. This precautionary approach of regular surface work and reduced usage are necessary as our tracks lie over shifting gravel subsoils and were never built to carry the weight of modern vehicles.

When there is site flooding (i.e., standing water on plots) or frost, members must ONLY use the OCC car park (or the area by the gate/skip if you need emergency access). **As a rule, members should never drive on site when there is any standing floodwater on site or frost.**

Audits in 2020 ..the strangest of years - It has been particularly tough year for a few members who have been unable to attend their plots. Our audits have been limited and suggested possible management strategies -which, for some, was only possible by paying co-opted site workers. In a growing community like ours everyone needs to think about how best to manage and sustain their plots, as every plot affects its neighbours. Almost all have been understanding. On the other hand, many members, old and new, have attended more often, as lockdowns, working at home and furloughs have released time for many.

Many have commented on how their allotment is a gift that has gone on giving. It has been great to see plots 64-70, and 86, 106-7, 126, 146-147 and now 152-3 regenerated to support small plot holders.

The Committee will be discussing our approach to the Spring Audit at its February meeting, watch this space...

National Allotment Society (NAS) membership. The Association has renewed our membership with [The National Allotment Society \(also known as NSALG\)](#). This costs the Association £3 per member and includes public liability protection for members on their plots if accused of accidently causing injury or damaging property, in their personal capacity. It is likely that our new lease and rules will be heavily linked to NAS models. Their theme in 2021 will be 'Plotting for the Future; and will focus on the contribution that allotments make to a sustainable future. This has always been a cornerstone of our reclamation and rules.

Our future organisation At the 2020 AGM -a few days before Lockdown 1- we flagged the probability of the future of CMAA as an incorporated body, most likely a co-operative. As noted previously at the AGM and in newsletters, the old 'trustee' structure is no longer considered sustainable nor fit for purpose because of the legal risks' trustees and their family members can be exposed to. No committee member is prepared to continue to stand as trustees and Oxford City Council (OCC, our landlord) would like us to be an incorporated organization so that they can deal with the Association as a legal entity. The Committee are agreed that this is the future structure they will recommend to you. We need to do this before we agree and sign a new lease. There are implications for our constitution and some difficult timing issues here which will need member information and discussion at our AGM and beyond. Our **OCC lease, which is due to start in September 2021**, is not yet fully decided as delayed by COVID-19 but negotiations over the past few years have given us some clear indications of the direction of change. Whilst we await work on the new lease by OCC and ODFAA (Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations, who are negotiating the new lease on behalf of all Oxford allotment associations) we need to take steps to become an incorporated cooperative.



The 2020 AGM agreed to a significant staged subscription increase over 2021 and 2022 and a change to working party time and dues. Last year the

Committee shared the findings of our asset management review which clarified our real costs and future maintenance. Much of this has been hidden by our success with external funding (thanks again are due to Oxford University, The National Lottery and Oxford City Council; extensive Committee member work with these bodies brought in some £160,000 of external funding over the past 18 years. Without this the site would not have been reclaimed). Newer members, or those wanting a refresher, can find details in [last year's annual report](#).

Waiting list The combination of Brexit, climate change and a pandemic has resulted in many people and bodies rethinking and resetting of priorities. As soon as lockdown allowed we made great efforts to stay in touch with a growing

waiting list and release available space when we could in accordance with COVID19 restrictions. We have accommodated 56 new members since January 2020 (compared with 35 in 2019) but this has necessarily taken far more time. Since the end of the first lockdown, short site visits for a new member has been 1:1 after applicants have provided some information by email. We have also been in touch by phone. Our waiting list has at the same time continued to grow but we have managed to keep it around 30 by picking up new plot space where we could. We now have 258 members (our highest membership was 280 in 2012).

Site work The committee has had to adapt this to the changes Covid-19 brought. We could not use Working Parties and members were largely limited to accessing their own plot. Communal spaces were closed and we had the usual spate of spring plots left for the association to reclaim along with the usual cycle of site work maintenance. This year repairs to our bridges, tracks, associations sheds, tree and track work, and improvements to our rainwater harvesting and storage sheds were planned. Jeremy managed the renewal of our Cripsey Island bridges, and replaced two raised beds (these all have members, and we have some additional small plots in this area).

We were also truly fortunate in co-opting members Arthur Bruce (left) and Harry Bruce (right) as self-employed site workers from May to December. Having finished their degree courses in a pandemic and were looking for some healthy outdoor exercise. They have both known the site since childhood and their long-term, gifted gardener parents had clearly had effect. They managed plot clearance, site maintenance, digging new plots, and some innovative water harvesting construction on plots 54 with plans for plot 70. Both have now moved on and we wish them well in their future careers. Wendy has continued to work at a safe distance to coordinate and manage both internal and external site workers. If any other **industrious, talented member has time to spare and is looking to contribute regular self-employed manual work to the site @ £10 per hour please be in touch.**



Wendy and Rodney, but latterly mostly Manda, picked up managing the communal bonfire. We have kept the **ban on any fires on plots** but allowed specific BBQ equipment (a gas or designated charcoal BBQ ('Weber style' or grill-type) but no bonfire, fire pit, chiminea etc.) to be used from October.



Apple tree by the skip When plot 159's last member retired we decided to leave this apple tree a bit larger than usual. In 2019 we had to remove the bushes by the gate due to an infestation of viburnum beetle and this apple tree provided some green back drop to the skip. We have yet to decide how to use this space but a car park, more orchard trees, a coppice of hazels have been suggested.



Meanwhile this apple tree was heavily laden with fruit well into October and was harvested by many members. It was left tall as there were no longer adjacent plots. However it may have suffered a lot of tugging. We noticed a crack in the central trunk and that the trunk has some bifurcation.

Wendy, Rodney and Ilias, our Orchard Manager, decided it was worth a punt at saving with some drastic central 'pruning'. Konstantina was fortunately on hand to help clear the twigs and she has since used them to make 2 new [Hugel beds](#). The tree is still too 'whippy' but with a little more January pruning we hope it will



survive and to bear many more harvests. Please treat it gently.

More boundary willow tree work awaits lower water levels. Contractors from Oxford City Council's Direct Services team came and did some plot tree work, deferred from 2019, in November. They removed some plot fruit trees that were out of rule on boundaries and /or too

big. Willow pollarding on the island and the site is awaiting lower water levels. Work is planned for some willows in the corner on the Castle Mill Stream and some outstanding willow pollarding on Cripsey Island. We also need major work on the huge weeping willow which has been dropping large branches all year. In 2021 the willows on plot and badger path along plots 1-9 are due to be pollarded. Please remember if **willow logs are around you must not use on plots for structures** as it will root if the bark is in contact with the ground. It can be buried in Hugel beds but **only if** totally dry.

Following the shed break ins – as soon as the weather permits and we have someone to do it, we shall be refreshing the anti-climb paint on the Gate. We are also, following a helpful conversation with a member of the University's security team, consider movement-sensitive solar lights.

A wonderful squash! - Joanna Kolakowska and Thomas Vogl let us know that they will be leaving us in January and they sent me magnificent photos of their Marina di Chioggia winter squash for the newsletter. They are returning to Toronto full of the joys of a fantastic productive year on Cripsey meadow. They wanted information about how allotments might be translated into a Toronto setting. In a year where our cooperation with others seems more limited I was more than happy to spread the word.



Allotments and a sustainable future - I am preaching to the converted but the enormous contribution that allotments make to a sustainable future has been rightly much rehearsed this year. By working your plot responsibly, you will inevitably be helping the environment as well as ...eating healthily, enjoying fresh seasonal food with fewer food miles, getting good outdoor exercise by working with the land, weather, and nature, acquiring new skills, and enjoying your outside space in a community of like-minded gardeners. Our camaraderie - even when we cannot share work parties and we are generally restricted to our plots, - has shone through. Just seeing others working at a distance has been reassuring, particularly for those who have had to isolate or shield. The structure of the site with

buffer and site paths could have been made for social distancing..

No doubt you have read reports that waiting lists for allotments are longer than at any time since the Second World War and perhaps noticed that in 2020 sales of seeds for fruit and vegetables were in short supply. Apparently they outstripped those for flowers. There were 1.4 million allotments in 1945 compared with an estimated 330,000 now. Oxford City has retained one of the best rates of plots per capita nationally but sites across the city all report waiting lists, where before Covid they generally just had turnover. Many articles and books have identified 'food as one of the most important material resources that we all share, along with the land and water needed to provide it'. This comes from Carolyn Steel's 'Sitopia -How Food Can Save the World' an interesting, if over-long, read.

[In August 2020 Rebecca Smithers reported in the Guardian](#) on how interest in allotments had soared during the pandemic. And if you still want yet more information on the national state of allotments try [State of the Market Survey 2020](#) [Local Authority Allotment Services](#)

If you have time for some further reflection on the past ...Read on

- I became a member in the 70s and a committee member in 2003 because the site was in such turmoil. I became Chair in 2005 having started on a reclamation programme in December 2004. In 2004 we had about 66 members but more than half of the 'let' plots with members were unworked. Plots were let knowing they would be unworked but they were needed to cover paying the site rent. We had too few members and no money for site work. By 2000 the site was largely over-run with self-sown trees and large tracts of brambles. I stood as chair with a clear aim to reclaim Cripsey Meadow, one of the largest sites in the City, to be a working allotment site. In November of 2020 we finally completed clearance of the last plot on the 2005 'list'.

In 2005 our first newsletter was posted by the gate and we completed the first full year of our reclamation project. That left about 160 plots to clear and put back to cultivation. I think this is my 329th newsletter but some news stays the same. The big news then was of our first Jericho Street Fair (we raised £356), but also was about paths and out-of-rule trees. We made great progress. These are now mostly resolved but need continued attention. The paths are the basis of

our site structure and determine fair allocations and mark and buffer all member's responsibility.

Over the past 18 years I have been lucky enough to work with and learn from so many committee members and members - many of whom have become friends as well as colleagues. As our membership has grown we have used the web site and more IT to keep our members and information updated. I have always had a personal dislike of social media. As I do site tours I have, uniquely, met all of our members. This has been one of my favourite roles. I have really appreciated and shared the joy of the many members who have shown such enthusiasm in taking up growing their own food. However, managing the site is of necessity a team effort and without committee members, members and working parties we would never have achieved such a lot.

In such a large community it is never possible to please everyone. Diversity is the essence of a good community... as most gardeners, and philosophers, seem to agree. There is always a balance to be struck between individual freedom and community cohesion. On allotment sites we share the soil and space, so are deeply interconnected. Whilst global threats like climate change, food production and pandemics threaten us, I have always been keen to reclaim and manage the site so that all can share this gardening space safely and collaboratively. There have inevitably been times where disputes, complaints or selfishness have caused upsets. I find these make me anxious nowadays ... but looking at the site today soon makes me, and I hope you, very proud.

Since 2005 I have worked with the following committee members who have contributed their time and skills to a mammoth effort needed to reclaim Cripsey Meadow. They are in green if still members followed by service records if they are not still in post. Sheila Allen (2003-2012) Alison Campbell (2003-2014) Carolyn Dutton, Sally Gilliard, David Bird, Ed Todd, John Sivell, Tony Clear, Jamie Forbes,(2007-now) Alex Hollingsworth, (2007-now) James Allan (2007-2009), Cathy Ferreira, Gaby Topliss, Aja Hansen. Jeremy Hyde (2011-now) Richard Haigh (2011-2016 -now co-opted) spraying) Claire Pike (2011-2016) Annalisa Cecchi (2013 -2016) Sarah Edwards (2014-now) Sara Jones (2015-2019), Emma Delap (2015-now) , Keith Holton (2015-

now) Anna Benn (2016-2017 –then co-opted), Emilie Clauzier, Manda Joyce (2017-now) Iulia Popescu (2017-now) Tia Sedley (2019) (Phyllis Starkey (2019-now) Christine Melia (2019-now). I think if Manda had not taken up the role of secretary so quickly and efficiently I would have had to retire sooner. The combination of chairing ODFAA during lease renegotiation and CMAA proved overly demanding.

A few plots have been maintained for many years with the same members. These long-term members can be those to go to for support, experience, information, guidance and connection. I have noted them some of the longest here so that you are aware. Obviously, all members long and short term are valued and nurture our membership.

John, Wendy and Rodney, Simon and Steve have all had the same plots since the 70s. By this time bramble-covered plots were just beginning to take over.

Sheila, Diana, George, Keith, Richard, David, Doke have been with us since the 80s and 90s though not all always on the same plot. During the 80s and 90s the site was increasingly unfit for its intended purpose as designated allotment land. The huge rabbit population was best served and most new members up to the early 2000s had to first clear 4ft high bramble and cope with 30ft willows and sycamores on and around plots. Not surprisingly many failed to sustain a plot.

Andrew and Jane, James, Sedhar, Alison, Toby, Miranda, joined us before 2004 when the site was struggling to stay afloat and was beset by internal strife and confusion.

Carol, Di, Tim and Patsie, Peter, Alex Jamie and Jeremy started on plots that were among the first cleared by the reclamation. For a while parts of the site looked like blasted earth! Alex started on plot which had one of our weed piles, which he nobly set about removing. 13 years a later he has a large and productive plot.