

# THE WYCHWOOD PROJECT ANNUAL REVIEW—2009



The Wychwood Project encourages and supports people and communities within the ancient royal hunting Forest of Wychwood to conserve and enhance the area's distinctive wildlife and landscape. The Project undertakes a wide range of activities. This review highlights some of the achievements and successes over the last year and the contribution that the Project is making to maintain and improve the natural environment of West Oxfordshire.

## NEW COMMUNITY WOODLAND FOR WYCHWOOD



*The location of the Project's new community wood*

The highlight of 2009 and one of the most significant developments in the history of the Project was when, with funding from our supporters group, the Friends of Wychwood, the Project secured **nine hectares** (22 acres) of land at **Southdown Farm** on the north-western outskirts of Witney — the first time that the Wychwood Project has taken on the role of landowner. Over the next few years we will be creating West Oxfordshire's largest community woodland to date, providing access to a natural green space for many local people.

In early 2009 we completed the latest phase of work on the **Wharf Stream Coppice** woodland at Eynsham. Young volunteers from Oxford Brookes came to help plant several hundred native trees to complement a larger area of willow coppice. We have continued to support Wychwood's other community woodlands including one of our most recent additions **Little Garden Wood, Ramsden**. The Project has now helped create 10 community woodlands in the local area.



*Young volunteers help create a new coppice at Eynsham*



## V SUCCESSFUL

We are now in the second year of our Wychwood v programme that has a specific focus on engaging young people from the crucial 16—25 age group, in conservation volunteering. The Wychwood Project secured **£150,000 of external funding** for this three year initiative. Already we have involved **120 young people** in activities as diverse as tree planting, hedgerow management, drystone walling, surveys and mapping and made new links between young people and older people. One young volunteer has committed over 300 hours of time and another was recognised as the South-east region's **young eco-volunteer of the year** at the national vinspired awards. New initiatives are being developed within Wychwood v to provide specific support for young people who are not in employment, education or other training.



*Wychwood v take a break at Woodstock water meadows*

## THE BEST FOREST FAIR SO FAR

The Forest Fair attracted **an audience of several thousand**, as this year we returned the Fair to its historic origins at Cornbury Park - at the invitation of Lord and Lady Rotherwick. The Forest Fair provides a showcase for community groups involved with environmental conservation. Reflecting the changes taking place in society as a whole this year saw an increasing focus on issues of sustainable development, waste and climate change as well as wildlife, landscape and traditional rural crafts. The Forest Fair has established itself as a key date in the district's social calendar. For



In 2009 the Forest Fair returned to Cornbury

2010 we will once again be looking at the first Sunday in September. The Forest Fair is **wholly organised and financed by the Friends of Wychwood**. Any income is used to help finance the activities of the Wychwood Project and other local conservation efforts.

## RESTORING LANDSCAPES

We were pleased to see two Project initiatives continue to establish themselves as regular fixtures in the work we do—both making a direct contribution to maintaining the characteristic landscape of the Wychwood area. Our hedgelaying group had a full season working on four different sites and laying nearly **300m** of hedgerow. In November the Group organised Wychwood's first



Walling at Fifield Church

**amateur hedgelaying competition.** Heavy rain didn't stop eight competitors laying 60m of hedgerow at Breach Wood Community Woodland under the careful eye of two experienced judges. The Group is now affiliated to the National Hedgelaying Society. One benefit of the Group that we work hard to achieve is using hazel stakes and binders that are cut from local woodlands. This is **helping to rejuvenate neglected coppice woods** and re-instate the traditional woodland management cycles.



Two local competitors at the hedgelaying competition

Our volunteer wallers met regularly and **completed walls at Stonesfield and Fifield Church**. The Project provided training courses and walling and hedgelaying for people who wanted to learn the techniques in more detail. We have also provided advice and, through the Friends of Wychwood, funding, to a range of local conservation initiatives including Forest Schools. We were pleased to be **awarded a grant of £4800 from CPRE** to organise a survey of path-side hedgerows in the Wychwood area, building upon work done in previous years. Twenty six people attended training seminars on hedgerow ecology and survey methods.

## RESTORING HABITATS

The Project has worked closely with the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens for many years on a range of practical projects. Once again we ran a strong programme of woodland work with them—a particular focus being coppicing in ancient woodlands. Each year for the last three years we have **re-coppiced areas of neglected woodland on four different sites** allowing light back in to the woodland and encouraging the hazel to throw out vigorous new shoots. We work small areas so that sensitive species such as hazel dormice are not disturbed. Many of Wychwood's woodlands were once managed in this way and the lack of management is leading to the decline of once common flora and fauna. Where appropriate new hazel is being planted to make the coppices more productive in future cycles. Other activities have included **hedgerow planting** near Combe and scrub **management** near Fifield.



Hedgerow restoration near Combe



Coppice restoration near Charlbury

We were also pleased to secure a **grant of £1500** from the Tree Council to give out to local landowners to help them with the costs of **replanting gaps in important hedgerows**.

## AND TAKING PART

We recognise that not everybody is fit enough or has a whole day to go hedgelaying or coppicing in the cold and mud. With this in mind we recently established a new group the **Wychwood CAT** (Countryside Action Team) to bring a more social side to practical conservation work, whilst still delivering real improvements in the landscape throughout the year. Our **new Orchard Group** is also attracting a lot of interest.

## WALKING MADE EASY

The link with the Cotswold Wardens and our other volunteers continued in other activities. This year saw the commencement of a new initiative to improve some of Wychwood's most pleasant walks by **replacing difficult stiles with kissing gates**. The chosen routes link in to our very own long-distance path—The Wychwood Way—providing shorter circular routes that can be completed in a days walk. The Project was pleased to get a **grant of £5000 from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment** towards the cost of this work.

## RAISING AWARENESS

We have continued to host a range of talks and events throughout the year. Notable during 2009 was a talk on traditional Oxfordshire long-straw thatching, a trip down a disused slate mine in Stonesfield and the first public showing of our **unique digital archive** of coloured first edition Ordnance Survey maps from the late nineteenth century,



An extract from our unique C19th digital map archive

## THE FRIENDS OF WYCHWOOD

The Friends of Wychwood, the registered Charity that supports the Project continues to attract new supporters. By the middle of 2009 we had **over 725 members**, most of them coming from within West Oxfordshire. As the Project grows we are looking hard at the systems and procedures we have in place to keep our members involved and informed. Recent developments that are helping with this include the Project website ([www.wychwoodproject.org](http://www.wychwoodproject.org)) and an email bulletin the *Forest Flyer*. The winter edition of Forest Update, the Project newsletter, also took a big step forward as we made the switch from black and white to full colour.

After being at the helm for the first 10 years Ken Betteridge stood down from the role of Chairman of the Friends of Wychwood (though he remains closely involved with the Project) and was succeeded by Michael Drew. **Two new trustees** Stephen Ashworth and Richard Lord joined as Trustees.



New-look full-colour Forest Update



The Project supports Bird Aid's work to conserve rare farmland birds

## BARN OWLS AND FARMLAND BIRDS

Wychwood's birds continue to receive care and attention from a dedicated band of Wychwood volunteers. A long-running programme of barn owl monitoring and providing nest boxes continued to support this most charismatic of species, whilst Bird Aid, a programme that provides winter food for species under pressure from habitat loss — such as yellow hammers, tree sparrows and corn-buntings entered its sixth year.

## POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

The Wychwood Project is pleased to have been involved in the development of the environmental themes within Shaping Futures, the District's local community strategy and now represents local environmental interests on the Strategic Partnership's Steering Group. Through its activities and advice the Wychwood Project is helping local councils meet their statutory obligations towards biodiversity and landscape.

