

Oxfordshire Countryside Matters

Issue 3 June 2011

Welcome to the June 2011 edition of Oxfordshire Countryside

Matters, a round-up of news from Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Service.

Our summer articles show the wide range of ways that we work with local communities. The community woodland planting events and Cherwell Swift and Greys Court initiatives are great examples of community-led projects where we have provided just a little bit of expertise, information or time to help get things going. Other news covers projects that we undertake in response to local needs, working with the communities involved. Our work in localities across the county often involves partnership with other organisations, as with Ascott Park Historical Trail and community walks in the North Wessex Downs.

We encourage local people to explore the countryside and get involved in groups and projects in



Disabled access in the Lower Windrush Valley



National Trails volunteers at work

their area. For more information about these opportunities see www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/improveyourlocalcountryside. Our work shows the value that local volunteer projects can deliver, both in financial terms and through bringing people together and developing their skills and confidence. The work of the Wychwood 'v' Project, for example, has both generated work valued

at over £120,000 while at the same time giving young people the skills they need to go on to further education and paid jobs.

Victoria Fletcher
Natural Environment Manager



Changes ahead

We are entering a period of considerable change for the services provided by Oxfordshire County Council. The need to make savings of £119m over four years mean that the council needs to make difficult choices. The Countryside Service is not immune to these challenges and we will shortly begin to set out how they will impact on our work. The importance of the countryside to our county is unquestionable, both as a rich source of natural beauty and as an important part of our economy.

Without the help and support of our local communities and groups of volunteers we would not be as successful in protecting and promoting our countryside. It is



The Rollright stones near Chipping Norton

important that we try and retain as much as possible of our existing capacity while at the same time challenging ourselves to ensure that we get the most out of the resources available and being open

to doing things in a different way.

Change is inevitable. The key test will be maintaining our high standards. I anticipate that changes to the Countryside Service will be implemented by late autumn. I will keep you informed of what this will mean in greater detail in due course. In the meantime the County Council remains committed to working with its partners to support the long term future of the countryside.



Village visitors enjoy an ice cream



Martin Tugwell, Deputy Director, Growth and Infrastructure

Online map provides keys to countryside

Following requests from the public, last autumn we launched our online interactive map showing countryside access opportunities across the county. The unique resource found at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/countrysidemap is an invaluable tool for exploring our beautiful county. It displays all

2,600 miles of public rights of way, open access land and some

of the best walks and rides throughout Oxfordshire.

An 'Activity' option allows users to select only paths for walking, cycling or horse riding. Searches can be made by parish or postcode and distances can be measured to help choose routes. Users can also use the map to report any problems they find on paths.

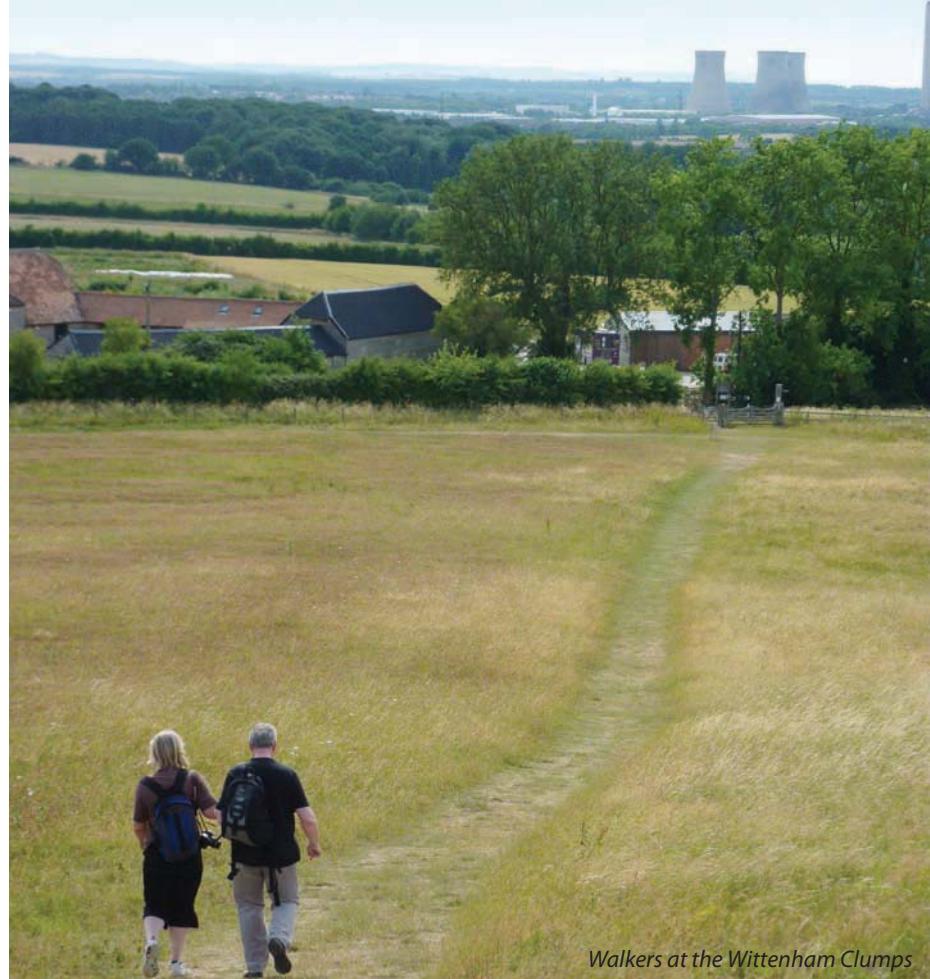


Legal record of public rights of way goes online

We also recently published at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/definitivemaponline the legal record of public rights of way in Oxfordshire. This record, known as the 'Definitive Map and Statement', enables home and land buyers to check for public rights of way and provides a resource for anyone considering applying to change the route of a path.

The 'Definitive Map' shows the exact location of public rights of way while the 'Definitive Statement' gives a description of the legal conditions of the route.

Paper copies are still available at the Countryside Service office, Oxfordshire Studies and certain local libraries and district council offices.



Volunteers plant community woodlands

Drive down the A44 to Woodstock and you can't miss the fantastic sight of a new woodland springing up on the edge of Blenheim Palace estate. The inspiration for the woodland came from the local community as part of the 'Woodstock 900' anniversary celebrations. Many people helped with the planting including young Wychwood v project volunteers and children



Tree planting at Stanton Harcourt

supported by charity SeeSaw, which helps families through times of bereavement.

The Oxfordshire Woodland Project designed the woodland to mix sustainable timber production with amenity, conservation and education and supervised the work on the ground. The community woodland, which includes trees planted in memory of loved ones, is on land made available by the Duke of Marlborough. Around half of the tree shelters and stakes were recovered from landfill and the mulch used was intercepted from the local waste stream.

At another location across the county, a good turn out of volunteers of all ages made short work of planting a community woodland at Fox Field in Stanton Harcourt. Local people and members of the Wychwood Project Conservation Action Team worked together to plant native tree species, which will provide all year round colour and a new wildlife habitat. The project was initiated by local resident Colin Wells and supported by the Wychwood Project with technical advice, tools and volunteers.

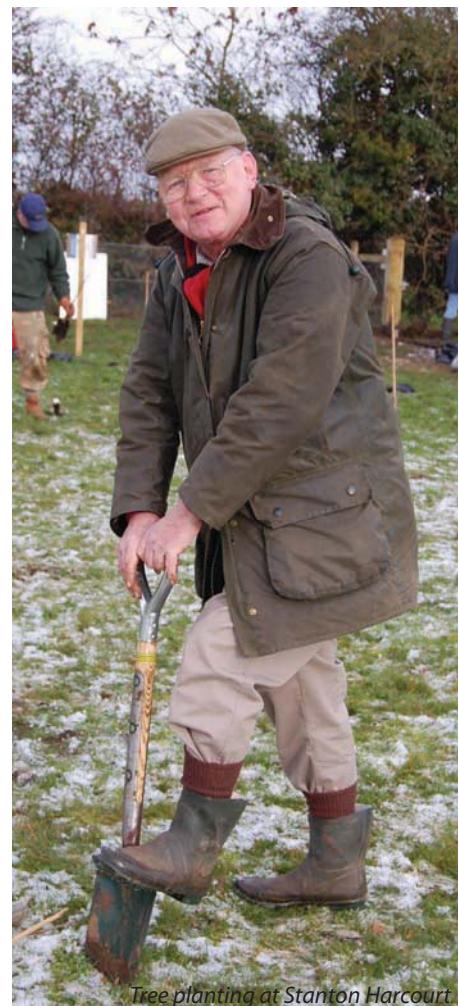


Jane Bowley,
Wychwood v project



David Rees, Oxfordshire
Woodland Project

For information about volunteering with the Wychwood Project go to www.wychwoodproject.org or call 01865 815423.



Tree planting at Stanton Harcourt



Location of the new community woodlands

Swift conservation in Cherwell District



By Chris Mason, coordinator for the local voluntary organisation Cherwell Swifts Conservation Project.

Swifts are amazing birds, wintering in Africa and coming to Britain to breed. When swift fledglings leave the nest they spend the next two or three years flying continually. Swifts nest in small holes under eaves or in building walls and return to the same hole year after year.

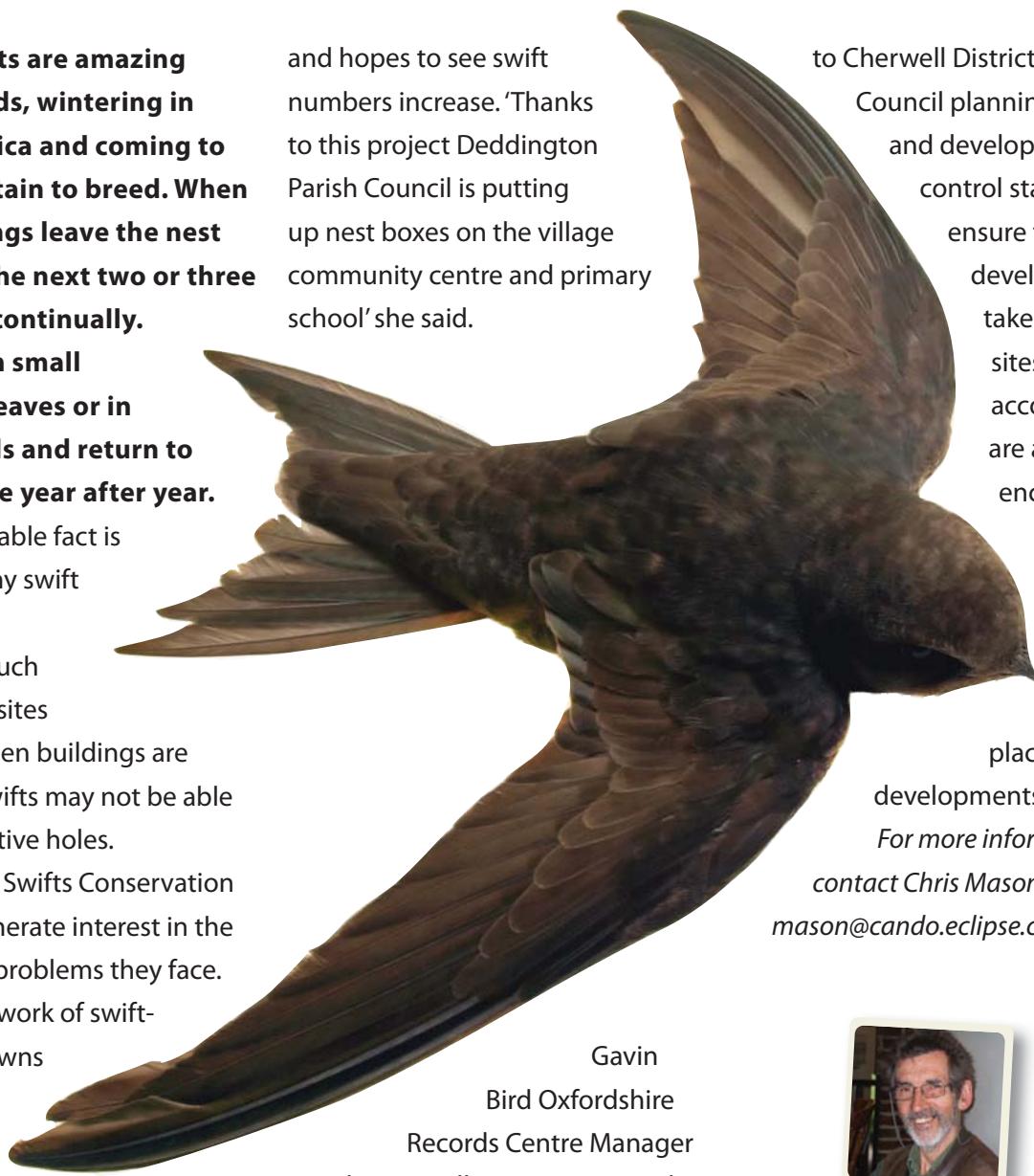
This remarkable fact is one reason why swift numbers have declined so much recently. Nest sites can be lost when buildings are altered and swifts may not be able to find alternative holes.

At Cherwell Swifts Conservation Project we generate interest in the birds and the problems they face. We have a network of swift-watchers in towns and villages in Cherwell, recording swift locations and advising on swift-friendly building repairs. Jean Rudge looks out for swifts in Deddington

and hopes to see swift numbers increase. 'Thanks to this project Deddington Parish Council is putting up nest boxes on the village community centre and primary school' she said.

to Cherwell District Council. Council planning officers and development control staff can then ensure that new developments take nest sites into account and are also now encouraging developers to include swift nest places in new developments."

For more information, contact Chris Mason at mason@cando.eclipse.co.uk



Gavin Bird Oxfordshire Records Centre Manager at Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre said: "We digitally map the records given to us by the Cherwell Swifts Conservation Project and send them



Chris Mason, Cherwell Swifts Conservation Project coordinator

Chiltern Society volunteers improve access at Greys Court



*Location of
Greys Court*

For the last couple of years myself and other Chiltern Society volunteers have been replacing stiles with gates on Oxfordshire's Chilterns footpaths to create good, stile-free walks. As part of this, Chiltern Society planner Dave Teasdale put a proposal to Greys Court, the National Trust 16th century house and estate near Henley on Thames, to make all the paths across the 285 acre estate stile-free.

Jane Greenhalgh, Greys Court Property Operations Manager, jumped at the opportunity as not only would the gates benefit less

mobile visitors but the project was in tune with the Trust's policy of improving access to the countryside.

Funds for the purchase of the kissing gates came from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment through the Places for People scheme which the Countryside Service set up. Work began when Greys Court closed to visitors last October.

In all, we installed 13 gates through the bitter weather of the



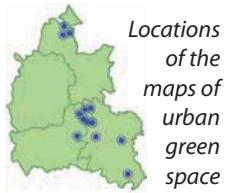
winter, the whole project being completed on time at the end of March 2011.

Installation team leader Bob Parry said, "Greys Court offers some fine walks through its extended estate, and it is good to know that the gates we've installed have helped make this attractive landscape more accessible to the wider community."



Howard Dell, Chiltern Society

Family friendly walks



Walks in urban green space

We are encouraging families in urban areas to increase their health and well-being by exploring nearby green space using our new maps found at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/urbanwalkingmaps.

The maps of green space cover parts of Abingdon, Oxford, Banbury, Chalgrove and Watlington and Sonning Common. They indicate areas such as parks, allotments, rivers and nature reserves and how to get to these. Based around children's centres, the maps also include a range of simple outdoor activities to try with children under five.



A family near Iffley Lock, Oxford

We have also just published our collection of short, easy walks under 1.5 miles in a new family-friendly format. These push chair accessible walks are located across the county in attractive and diverse landscapes including woodlands, meadows, nature reserves, rivers and lakes.

The new format makes the maps colourful and easy to read and identifies local features and attractions such as wildlife and cafés.

In addition to being push chair friendly, the walks are also suitable for wheelchairs and the maps show accessibility information such as path widths and surfaces.

To download walks, go to www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/walksandrides and click on the area of the county that you would like to explore.

While out and about, you could also try one of our fun countryside activities for children aged 3-11, available at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/countrysideactivities



Making the most of a push chair friendly walk



The Oxfordshire Way is now online



We have just published online for the first time a guide to the historic walking route which winds through some of Oxfordshire's most beautiful areas of countryside.

Up-to-date large-scale downloadable maps of individual sections of the iconic 65-mile Oxfordshire Way along with directions are now available at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/oxfordshireway

The Oxfordshire Way runs from the Cotswold town of Bourton-on-the-Water to the banks of the River Thames at Henley. It takes in two famous Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; the Cotswolds and the Chilterns.

The heritage-rich Oxfordshire Way landscape includes prehistoric tracks, Domesday Book manors and medieval churches. The route crosses Blenheim Park estate and visits the beautiful conservation area town of Charlbury.

The web page features an

interactive map through which you can view the route, zoom in for large scale detail and click on towns and villages for further information.

The 43 large-scale maps have been split into 16 groupings between key towns and villages along the route, enabling users to easily navigate a range of possible start points and use the route for a large number of scenic shorter walks. Each map also details the location of pubs where walkers could stop for refreshment as well as points of geological and historical interest.



Explore a place of mystery

By John Sykes of the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust

The two mile Ascott Park Historical Trail at Stadhampton was opened in March by County Council Chairman Hilary Hibbert-Biles. Created by Oxfordshire County

County Council Chairman Hilary Hibbert-Biles opens the trail.



Council and the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust, the trail travels around parkland that was once part of the Dormer family estate.

The estate has been called a 'place of mystery' because of the many historical puzzles that it presents. Foremost amongst these is the location of a grand new house built by William Dormer in 1662, which burnt to the ground as soon as it was finished.

The trail route was

designed in consultation with local parishioners and trail leaflets are being distributed by parish councils to local communities in Stadhampton, Chalgrove and Little Milton. Leaflets are also available in some libraries and can be downloaded at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ascottparkhistoricaltrail



Location of the Ascott Park Historical Trail

North Wessex Downs community walk

In partnership with the National Trust, we have replaced ten stiles with gates on a circular walk which incorporates The Ridgeway National Trail, Ashdown House and Ashbury village. Ashdown House is an extraordinary building with a doll's-house

appearance nestled in a beautiful valley. National Trust volunteers helped complete the work, which has made the walk entirely stile free.

Improvements were funded by Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, which donated the £2,000 needed through the Countryside Service

initiated scheme Places for People, which helps community projects to succeed.

The circular walk is part of an ambition to create circular walks that

incorporate The Ridgeway and communities on the northern edge of the North Wessex Downs.

To download the walk, go to www.nationaltrail.co.uk/Ridgeway



Mark Sumner, Rights of Way Field Officer



View of Ashdown House - courtesy of Jos Joslin



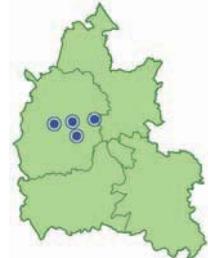
New walking routes to enjoy in scenic West Oxfordshire

New information about four circular routes in West Oxfordshire has been posted on the County Council's website. The routes range from four to seven miles and feature rolling farmland, ancient woodland and trackways, Roman villas and rural villages. The walks were suggested by volunteers and link to the 37-mile Wychwood Way in West Oxfordshire.

To download the routes, go to www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wychwoodcircularwalks



Nick Mottram, Wychwood Project Director



Location of the new Wychwood Way circular walks

'Missing link' found for grassland walkers

We are pleased to have been able to secure a new walking link between two attractive areas of chalk grassland at Gatehampton, near Goring.

A strip of access land connecting the open access areas has been permanently dedicated and signage and kissing gates have been installed.

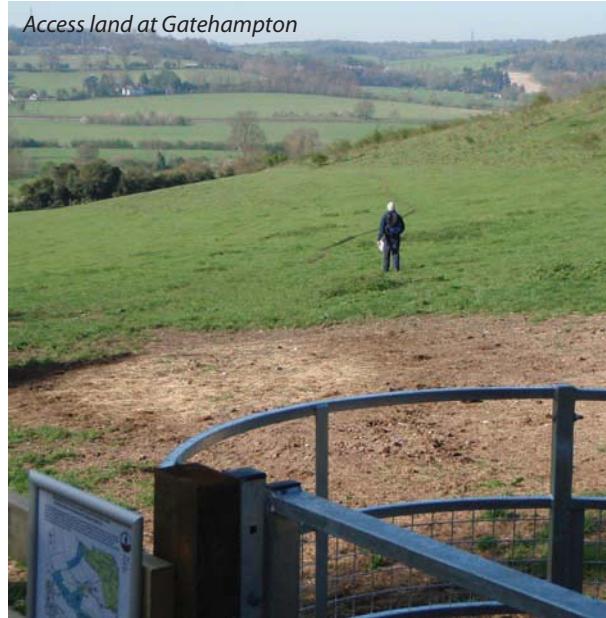
Works were undertaken with funding from Natural England's Access Management Grant Scheme.

For more information about Oxfordshire's open access land go to www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/accessland



Paul Harris, Strategic Countryside Access Officer

Access land at Gatehampton



Survey confirms that public rights of way are still well used in Oxfordshire

In our last issue, we advertised an online survey to find out Oxfordshire residents' views about accessing the countryside. There were some interesting results from the nearly 300 people who took part.

Our key findings were that a very high proportion of people use the countryside and public rights of way. Nearly all respondents had used the countryside for leisure in the last 12 months and nine out of ten had used public rights of way. Although it was a small sample size, the findings reinforce results obtained in previous resident surveys.



Walkers on the Oxfordshire Way

A very high value was also placed on Oxfordshire's countryside with nearly all respondents rating it as either very important or quite important.

There were high levels of spend at local businesses – over half of respondents spend over £5 on an average trip and nearly a third spend over £10, mainly on

refreshments and attractions.

A full survey report is available at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip and we will use the findings to inform our future work planning.



Horses near Shilton



Walkers stop for a picnic near Bloxham

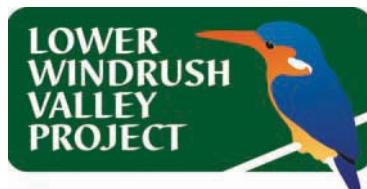
Take part in countryside access study

Local councils and community groups in Oxfordshire with an interest in the countryside can complete a short online survey being run by an MSc student, to give their views on community involvement with public rights of way. To take part, go to www.surveymonkey.com/s/26YLCK8 by the end of June 2011.

Improved access in the Lower Windrush Valley



The area covered by the Lower Windrush Valley Project



*Alison Hopewell
Lower Windrush Valley
Project Officer*

This summer local people are enjoying improved access to the countryside of the Lower Windrush Valley, thanks to substantial practical improvements that have been undertaken during the last year. Work was carried out by the Lower Windrush Valley Project, which co-ordinates nature conservation, land management and public access in the valley, during and following extensive quarrying activity.

An £85,000 grant for the

improvement programme was provided by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and Waste Recycling Group through the Landfill Communities Fund and from Natural England through Defra's Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. The Countryside Service contributed 60 days of work, equivalent to £15,000. Other in kind contributions were made by National Trails, the Wychwood 'v' volunteering project, Hanson Aggregates, Smiths Bletchington and local landowners



The Wychwood 'v' project' volunteers tree planting party

Improving circular walks in the valley



New gate leading to the Devil's Quoits

A wide programme of improvements has been steadily undertaken throughout the year on three key access routes in the valley; the Gill Mill 3-mile loop, the Dix Pit 2.5-mile walk and the Standlake Common 7-mile circuit. These walks connect local communities to nature reserves, public open spaces, rivers and pubs.

The walks have been substantially

enhanced by upgrading two bridges, replacing 12 stiles with gates, installing or improving a further 14 gates, fitting benches, erecting new fencing and clearing and widening paths. A range of environmental enhancements have also been carried out along the paths including the planting of 500 native trees and shrubs, hedgelaying and willow pollarding.

New road verge at Ducklington

As part of the improvements in the Lower Windrush Valley, a new 180m multi-user path that provides a strategic link between two key bridleways has been created beside the A415 at Ducklington. The new path along this busy road enables walkers, cyclists and horse riders to safely travel along the section of road connecting the bridleways that previously created a significant obstacle to countryside users.



New boardwalk on Windrush Path

The Windrush Path is an important route in the valley, but deep mud on one section had reduced access and enjoyment for many years. This problem has now been successfully resolved through the installation of a new 200m boardwalk across the low lying ground.

The Countryside Service Task Team built the boardwalk, a task involving the construction of 42 frames to support the boardwalk decks, re-sizing 1300 deck boards and pre-drilling the 6,500 holes to fix the decks in place. The boardwalk was constructed using recycled plastic, reducing landfill waste and producing a durable non-slip surface that requires little

maintenance.

Antony Collieu who lives in Standlake said "The boardwalk is a great improvement to this attractive walk which is much used both by

locals and visitors. Both visually attractive and practical, it will be a pleasure to be able to recommend without reservation this route to those who don't know the area"



County Forester finishes his 37 years of service

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Eric Douglass, County Forester, who recently retired following 37 years of public service. Eric helped to re-afforest the county following the devastating Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s, helped set up the Countryside Service in the 1980s and the Wychwood Project and the Oxfordshire Woodland Project in the 1990s.

Eric said: "37 years ago, I joined the county's Estates Department... the plan was to stay for about two years. They gave me a desk, dictaphone and a huge glass ash

tray and I moved into the first of my eleven offices. Then they mentioned Dutch Elm Disease and the two million dead trees in Oxfordshire!

In 1980 I became a "Minerals & Special Projects" officer in Planning, then County Forester in 1982.

The work involved anything and everything to do with trees and a fair bit of ecology and nature conservation. My tree planting budget was £60k a year, which is maybe an equivalent of £200k today. Happy days!

In 1989, we upped sticks to start the new Countryside Service. Developing it from 2.5 people to what it is today



Eric at Stratfield Brake in 2007

was very rewarding. We also managed to divert resources into computerising biological records and played a part in preparing the County Conservation Strategy and forming the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum.

Very little, if anything, went according to plan and it's been a long and interesting 'two years'!"

Key Countryside Service contacts

- **Countryside Service General Enquiries;** countryside@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 810226
- **Victoria Fletcher, Natural Environment Manager;** victoria.fletcher@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 815420
- **Hugh Potter, Senior Rights of Way Field Officer;** hugh.potter@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 810228
- **Anita Coghlan, Senior Rights of Way Officer;** anita.coghlan@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 815403
- **Paul Harris, Strategic Countryside Access Officer;** paul.harris@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 810206
- **National Trails Information Line;** NationalTrails@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 810224
- **TVERC General Enquiries;** TVERC@oxfordshire.gov.uk; 01865 815451

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