

The Wokingham Society

An Open Meeting held on Wednesday 19 June in Wokingham Town Hall

St Paul's Churchyard Tree Succession Project and Friends of the Emm Brook

The Society was pleased to welcome to the Open Meeting representatives of two local environmental organisations, the work of which has been supported by the Society through the award of Grants towards the furtherance of their aims and the ongoing execution of their projects.

Andy Clark, team leader of the volunteers from St Paul's church and other local environmental organisations such as the Wokingham District Veteran Trees Association and the Wokingham Horticultural Society, provided an interested and responsive audience with a vivid account of the team's achievements in bringing order into the wilderness that parts of the churchyard had become while, at the same time, creating a special site as part of the National Biodiversity network.

Given the condition of many trees in the churchyard, and prompted by a tree falling onto a grave and opening it up, a decision was made in 2014 to manage existing trees and plant successors. At the same time, it was decided to embark on a process of providing more biodiversity.

Supported by a Grant from the Society, a topographical map of the church yard was commissioned, and with the use of the detail in the survey the exact location of graves and trees was found and appropriate action could be taken to preserve or replace individual trees. An ancient and iconic cedar of Lebanon was splitting in two and the Society provided funding for its preservation.

In 2015 a biodiversity survey was undertaken and the findings were both exciting and significant. Thus far five species of bats have been discovered, and there has been a sighting of a rare beetle, which had not been seen in the UK since 2008. Bird life is flourishing and a variety of reptiles, moths and bugs also thrive in the churchyard, as does a very special form of lichen.

In order to maintain the biodiversity, grass in certain areas of the churchyard is deliberately kept long, and graves are being maintained, helped by the laying of a new wood-chip path leading to the back of the church. There are now 3 beehives in the churchyard, looked after by local scouts, who are keen

supporters of the project. Recycling is a major part of the work and logs, woodchip and compost are available to the public for the payment of a voluntary contribution.

A tremendous boost was provided in 2017 when an award of £10,000 was received from the Tesco Bags of Help scheme. A Dorothy Morley prize for a biodiversity project was also awarded and an arboricultural report was provided, recommending which trees to keep. The Woodland Trust very kindly donated 420 saplings which have been planted along the south side of the site to become a new hedge.

A new oak tree has been planted as a possible successor to the oak dating from 1700. Newly planted are: a cedar of Lebanon, a mulberry tree, a small leaf lime tree (tilia), an incense cedar in memory of the Walter family, 2 white beams and crab-apple trees. Metal hoops are being placed around plants and wildflowers are being sown. Positive steps are being taken to maintain the habitat of the wild life and in the winter pots are being provided for birds. With help from the scouts, compost bins are being built as well as a bug hotel.

Throughout his presentation Andy Clark injected humour into his record of the activities of his team of volunteers who gather in the churchyard on every other Saturday, supported by the invaluable team of Pay Back workers, who undertake much of the heavier work involved. More volunteers are required to ensure the site remains a valuable asset to the community and a haven for wildlife, given the rapid loss of open green space in the environment.

Andy Clark's enthusiasm and commitment were mirrored by Eddie Napper, Chairman of FOTEB. In defining the organisation as 'Conservation in Action' he proudly displayed a map of the river's course dating from 1603. The inaugural meeting of the Friends of the Emmbrook (FOTEB) was in 2004 and with the support of a grant from the Society it was able to propose a management strategy adopted by Wokingham Borough Council in 2005.

Since its formation FOTEB have carried out regular wildlife and plant surveys, which means that changes over time can be noted. 40 bird boxes suitable for a wide variety of birds have been erected along the Emm, and annual surveys are carried out each winter to record the number and types of birds which nested in the previous season. Occupancy stands at 80% and breeding success is 70%. Unfortunately, at critical times youths climb trees and mindlessly throw boxes to the ground.

Surveys of veteran trees, plants, invertebrates and other wildlife are regularly undertaken and moth traps are set along the Emm. Eddie Napper is particularly interested in and enthusiastic about the traps and he has discovered a wide range of different species of moth in his own garden. A constant battle is fought over some 50 hours a year attacking and destroying the invasive and intrusive Himalayan Balsam plant. The annual Summer clearance successfully continues to reduce the spread of the plant.

One of the finest achievements has been the successful deculverting of the Emm on Molly Millar's lane, along with the storm flow management scheme, based on the FOTEB's monitoring of Planning Applications and the potential impact on the Emm. Another successful achievement is the creation of the Woosehill Meadows Pond behind Morrisons, which is an area of still water for dragonflies and other aquatic insects, amphibians and plants such as yellow irises and ragwort. At Toutley Bridge there is a sampling spot, where 30 different species of fish have been discovered as well as leeches and mayflies.

Having said that a second survey would need to be conducted, Eddie Napper handed over to his colleague Stephanie MacKay, who explained that the survey would not replicate exactly the work of the first survey. She said that FOTEB had been working with a group of students from Reading University to ascertain how to identify areas for development in its aim to obtain official recognition as a local wildlife site. So far three potential sites have been identified, none of which currently meets all the criteria set by the Thames Valley Record Office., However, 4 new species of bats and a bull-headed fish have been discovered.

The future will involve more surveys and continued recording and sampling as well as maintaining the onerous task of removing rubbish and debris from the river and its banks. New funding as well as more volunteers may be required, but both speakers made it clear that the will to protect and enhance the Emm Brook and its environs is as strong as ever.

The audience was impressed by the work and achievements of volunteers working on behalf of the local community with their sights firmly fixed on the need to maintain areas where wildlife may thrive in a natural habitat and biodiversity can be guaranteed.