

SONNING COMMON GREEN GYM 25TH ANNIVERSARY 2023



At this Health Centre in 1998
Dr. William Bird created
THE SONNING COMMON GREEN GYM
the first of many Green Gyms
throughout the UK and overseas
set up together with
The Conservation Volunteers

The birthplace of Green Gyms



**Celebrating 15th anniversary at
Withymead with a contingent from
Abingdon GG (the second one to be
founded).**

25 Years of Conservation Volunteering

Let's celebrate our quarter-century of caring for the plants
and creatures that make this world such a beautiful
place.

We've made a real difference to Nature Reserves, to
Commons, wetlands, woods and footpaths. So as we
celebrate our 25 years we can raise a toast (and a slice of
cake!) to all we've done for nature conservation and for
our own well-being, looking forward to our next 25 years.



Green Gyms were Dr William Bird's brainchild. In 1998, he brought in nature conservation experts from the forerunner of charity TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) to set up the first group, at Sonning Common. That very first gym has prospered, and today is just one of 140 Green Gyms all over the country. In addition there are now Green Gyms in Australia, and in South Korea.

Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

1998 - 2000

March 1998: SCGG started for real after several trial sessions, set up by **Dr William Bird**, a GP at Sonning Common Health Centre

Mar 1998: First ever session of SCGG at Kennylands Field

Back Row: **Ian Munro, June Munro, Yvonne Hunt** (née Trchalik, our leader from BTCV until we became self-managing in the summer of 1999), **BTCV helper, Gill Vaughan, BTCV helper, John Lerpiniere, local councillor**

Front row: **BTCV helper, Diane Gordon**



Healthy Activities

for all ages

in and around Sonning Common



GREEN GYM PROGRAMME SPRING 1998



Spring 1998:
First programme

The Green Gym is a unique scheme where you can develop your fitness and health through improving your local environment. This programme gives you all the details of when and where we will be working.

BOOKING:

It is important that you give Yvonne a ring on 01235 972 4664 a couple of days before a project to let me know you're coming and if you need a lift.

EMERGENCY NUMBER:

Yvonne can be contacted the morning before and during a conservation project on 01235 972 4664. Please wear old clothes and sturdy boots if you have a pair. As it gets warmer hats and sun cream are recommended. Refreshments are provided. While the cold weather lasts please drive your children (and yourselves) safely.

WHAT TO WEAR:

Under 16s accompanied by an adult are welcome. Some projects have organised activities for children under parental supervision. These need to be updated every 10 years, so please contact your GP if yours is out of date.

CHILDREN:

TETANUS INJECTIONS:

MARCH

DATE AND TIME	MEETING TIME AND PLACE	WORK SITE	TASK	OTHER NOTES
Thursday 12th 9.30am - 12.30	Team members pick up from Bladder House, Sonning Common; see Map 1 overlaid OR 9.30am on site; Map 2	Cherfield Copse	Rake Clearance (see listings) Dead hedging Creation of Butterfly Garden	

June 1999:
First Newsletter



Newsletter

June 1999

GG in its second year

In April the Green Gym, which had initially been supported by grants from Shell and the Countryside Commission, and run by Yvonne Trchalik a paid officer of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, became independent & self-sufficient. It took several meetings to get things organised and agreement on the way ahead. Finally on 16 Mar 99 a constitution was agreed and officers appointed so that we could present to the outside world an easily recognised structure. (This helps in dealing with banks & other businesses). A leaflet is included with this mailing.

Need for more attendees

Numbers turning out are dropping a bit, especially at weekends. We could do with more people turning-out.

If you are an occasional attendee or have attended in the past how about coming again? Remember what fun it was!

If you are just on the mailing list make the first step, come along & find out what it's like - we'd love to see you. You will find friendly people, interesting work, healthy exercise in wonderful surroundings - and tea & biscuits!

Our first, rather insecure, wooden tool shed was situated the other side of the fence from the current one. After an attempted break-in Robert installed inner protection.



2000: Our shiny tool shed arrived at Bishopswood Sports Ground in 2000 and was installed by a crane on the back of the delivery lorry.

The local council donated us the site (now owned by Rotherfield United FC. We are hugely grateful to them for allowing the shed to remain there).

Robert Watson had levelled and paved the site in advance and supervised the unloading.



Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

2001

One of the **first spud roasts** at Aston Rowant. **Diane** organised our refreshments single-handedly twice a week for nearly 20 years, including her delicious home-made cakes, probably the main secret of our success!



April 2001: Our 1st AGM **Jean Munro** (treasurer), **Dr. William Bird** (president) and **Jules Thomson** (chairman)



April 2001: **Peter Warrick** and **Fred Denton** cutting logs for path waymarking in Bishopswood Spinney.



2001: Kennylands Field warm-ups. Clockwise: **Julia, Diane, Fred, Jill, Andi, Robin, Jules.**

This photo was one of those submitted by SCGG volunteer Victor Morton to the BTCV photography competition, which he won with a photo of foxgloves at Kingwood Common.

His prize was a week's BTCV working holiday in Cumbria paving eroded paths with stones so enormous they had to be winched in by helicopter. He came back exhausted but happy!



Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

2002 - 2004

April 2002: **Freddie Beesley** stapling the wire at the Warburg Nature Reserve.



2003: **Robert** amongst gloriously flowering heather on Kingwood Common in 2003.

He had collected heather seeds from the small amounts on the Common and scattered them in the patches SCGG had previously scraped. As a result the heather spread over a much greater area than before.

SCGG was given '**Highly Commended**' by the Chilterns Conservation Board in their Conservation Awards that year for the restoration of heather glades at Kingwood Common.



This was largely due to Robert's efforts.



2004: The lopper is born



THE LOPPER
Full of little cuttings.

NO.1

July 2004: Opening of the Watercress Beds centre by the Duke of Kent



Nov 2004: Warburg NNR using the fire trailer nicknamed "**Chariot of Fire**" which was constructed from an aged caravan and two garage doors



Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

2005 - 2010

2006: **Tony Chandler** chatting to the Duke of Edinburgh at a BTCV awards ceremony at the Café Royal



July 2006: Summer Festivities held at Withymead



2008: SCGG's 10th year project at Watlington Hill was the clearance of a sunken track which multiple yew trees had made impassible. After much felling and many bonfires we had an unofficial opening: I-r **Chris Ash, John Hasler, Tony, Jerry Page** (NT warden), **Jill, Freddie and Jean Beesley, Jules, Robin,** and **Julia**. This project won us a Special Commendation from the Chilterns Conservation Board.



2009: SCGG filmed at Flowercroft Wood by ITV for a show about ways to get fit and enjoy the outdoors.



Winter 2009-2010: for the first time ever we had to cancel a session due to bad weather. 2022 also saw a cancellation due to a heatwave.



Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

2011 - 2017

2011: He's fallen in the water - **Tony Holmes** at Ewelme - fetching spare clothing



2011: Late Summer Party at **Freddie and Jean's** House



2013: 15th Anniversary of SCGG celebrated at Withymead with a cake cut by **Dr William Bird**.



2015: Coffee Table Upgrade



2017: 1st Aid course: **Peter Keel's** sling tied by **Geoff**



2018: New Catering Trolley & wet gloves drying on the line



Sonning Common Green Gym Highlights

2018 - 2023

2018: 20th Anniversary Cake



2018: SCGG featured in Saga magazine



April 2020: Lock-down hits -
Lockdown Loppers keep the
group together

"THE LOPPER"
full of little cuttings.

Lockdown Edition April 2020



July 2020: Lock-down planning meeting in John Hasler's
garden



Sept 2020: 1st Lock-down ends so back to the hard
work, or at least a socially-distanced chat on a bench!

Spring 2021: 2nd Lock-down starts
and ends:
It's behind ewe



2022: session cancelled due to
heatwave



To be continued

INTO THE FUTURE

Reminiscence from Christine Horsfield

What I enjoy about the Green Gym is the variety of sites and characters we have in the group.

I remember Victor Morton, who used to take photos for us with his pre-digital camera.

For the Christmas spud roast he would contribute a trout which he had caught and cooked, and he insisted on us wearing the Santa hats he'd brought.



Aston Rowant requires us to use all sorts of skills, such as when we had to repair a flight of steps.



But what I really liked best, when the sessions went on to 2.30, was being able to have a good chat during the lunch break.

Christine

Reminiscence from Robert Watson:

The first Green Gym I came along to was at Old Copse in Sonning Common. We were spreading scalpings along the muddy footpath to make easier to walk on.

I was in two minds as to whether I would enjoy the Green Gym, but thought I'd give it a go. If it wasn't for **Diane** being so welcoming I might not have persevered. As we ended the session she said to me:

"You are coming along next time, aren't you. If not, I'll send the boys along to fetch you!"

She was a bright spark and made it a friendly group.

The Green Gym might never have continued after Yvonne left us and we had to become self-managing.

None of us felt like running the Green Gym, we just wanted to do the work, but **Jules Thomson** stepped in and said he'd be Chairman if others would help. Without Jules doing this I don't think the Green Gym would have survived.



Robert in full protective gear at Parmoor September 2010 applying selective herbicide to what had been vegetable beds in the walled garden. The Green Gym then dug them over ready for planting by youngsters in a community project.



Spreading scalpings on the footpath to Old Copse April 1998.
Diane Gordon, Ian Munro, Robert Watson and Peter Warrick.

Robert Watson

Reminiscences of Mike Saunders

Tsavorite? Crumbs, I thought it was a Ruby for the 25th.....

No, I checked. Tsavorite is the right gemstone, variety of the garnet group species grossular, with the formula $\text{Ca}_3\text{Al}_2\text{Si}_3\text{O}_{12}$. Well, yes, alright.

More to the point for Green Gym joy, oh joy oh jubilay.. it is vivid green.

I thought and thought what I could say as a tribute to GG to celebrate our 25th even turning over phrases and ideas at 3am in bed (as one does).

Wrestling over it I came up with my personal choice of **'elements' and 'differences'**.

Well, the famous elements posited by the Ancient Greeks were Earth, Water, Air and Fire. We've always had plenty of these over the years, disturbing the one, splashing through another, breathing gulps on a frosty morning and the -delight of delights-the **bonfire of brash and cuttings**. My elements though are those 'close up' magic bits of here and 'now you can' experiences of any GG session, Thursday or Saturday. Here are three of many. All twitching one or more of the 5 senses.....wow!



Watlington Hill January 2012



Aston Rowant May 2014

Coffee breaks, yes, they are getting longer but who did cake today and what is it (why does everything taste better al fresco?)



Joyce Grove May 2011

Con't.....

.... Mike's Reminiscences cont'd

Tool selecting, now what do I want and is it shears or loppers, umm, maybe a pruning saw, popper (the lovely snick as a tough piece of blackthorn snakes up)



Aston Rowant Sep 2007



'centre of bush work outwards'

Watlington Hill

Jerry Page was a one for starting a bonfire in the middle of a thicket.

Alexa, please shuffle me some highlights of my 18 odd years of GG all stored as a million mental pictures:

-the day someone asked me **'do you know what a bird's mouth is?'** eeheh!!!! Then the first time one got the twig at the right angle and a great crash told me 'No banana. Hooray!'

-going to Oak Farm in Harpsden and not being able to get up the lane in the snow. Like a glass slide it was

-seeing Tony tease a fire into life in pouring rain on a bed of wet bramble, way up there with 'one match G'

-Gillotts Field and the ragwort so amusing that little island left for the cinnabar moth

Many more but can't outstay one's welcome!

MikeS

And differences? Loads of them.

Many tasks involve cutting, pulling, raking similar and to a pattern but.....

- different places, different weather, different size and access

- different strategy and tactics, **'centre of bush work outwards'**, trim edges first, slash or cut at ground level

- different muscles, oh my back is killing me with these brambles, ok switch to raking, mmm... a bit of lower branch lopping



Andrew Hawkins (owner of Flowercroft Wood) in Gillot's Field with his car full of ragwort. June 2007

Reminiscences from Jill K

I'm not one of the first members but have been around a few years.

I well remember turning up at the millennium celebrations at Kennylands field on a lovely hot day and going round the various stalls showing what went on in Sonning Common and seeing the Green Gym stall with Diane standing hopefully waiting for new recruits. I went up she explained what GG was all about and that was it.

I was hooked and have so remained to the present day – 23 years of pulling brambles cutting back scrub, felling(small) trees, caring for heather on the commons, digging out encroaching sedge, hedge laying, pond clearing, raking and above all, moving stuff from one place to another (that is one of the major skills of GG).

That is quite beside the enjoyment of working alongside like-minded people and the chat and banter that ensues. Not to speak of the coffee and cake... just to think of it makes my mouth water.

Memories

Rain: we have worked through some very wet days, and occasional snow; recently working through the rain on Kingwood Common clearing round beleaguered heather plants so that they would survive the summer's drought – I think every one of us must have had to strip to the skin when they got home – it really found out whether our gear was rain proof – it wasn't!



Kingwood Common October 2006

Launching the first edition of the new newsletter, scratching my head for a suitable name. Brilliant suggestion by Peter Warrick - what about "The Lopper" and adding "full of little cuttings"? That was a challenge as I had little idea about using the computer. Many thanks to Tony Chandler for all his help. And The Lopper is still going strong.

Clearing the ivy off the horse chestnuts in the field near the Maltsters – a very satisfying job somewhat spoiled when I found I had lost my car keys somewhere in half a mile of long grass, never found.

Working at Ewelme to help set up the Centre and the grand opening day with royalty present; or more regularly cutting back the channels round the water cress beds to keep the water running and clear; and more recently watching everyone hard at work removing silt and removing weed. Each time looking with pride at how much we had removed and then on return a couple of months later seeing it overgrown and silty again. That's nature for you.



Ewelme l-r: Mike Macleod, Jill, Claire Brown, Bert Gill

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Con't.....

Reminiscences from Jill K con't



The challenge of building the boardwalks at Withymead across the marsh – one too many hits of the lump hammer and your upright post disappeared into the mud! But how rewarding it was walk out into reeds and see and hear the birds and gaze up into the great sky above.

It is seeing the Loddon lilies on the site spread yearly into areas the GG has cleared.

This also applies to Cleeve where our regular sessions see the lilies increasing as overgrown areas are cleared. And what about those Ritz-standard habitat piles carefully built up by the stockade? I hope they have been a haven for all kinds of wildlife.



Bonfires. I know this is a bit of a forbidden pastime, but amazing memories of Jerry and his great fires on Watlington Hill, consuming the fearsomely prickly black thorn that encroached on the open spaces.

That brings back memories of our project involving clearing the yews on one major path on Watlington Hill and relaying the path to protect the precious chalk downland that was getting worn away by walkers. Getting that done was hard work but very satisfying.



Another of our great bonfire masters is Trevor at Bishopswood. He has a project to reinvigorate a very old hedge and make a thick corridor for wild-life alongside the football field. Every time we turn up there are highly organised bonfire sites and masses of old wood to be consumed.

There have been a few problems when the wind blows across the football pitches with a game in progress. Now, however, the hedge is looking good and has thickened up amazingly, and should be a fine place for nesting birds and little animals.

On the commons the heather display on Peppard Common in the autumn can be spectacular, very largely our efforts to firstly spread seed, and lately and regularly, to pull bracken and bramble. There is a similar transformation on Priest Hill Nettlebed; an area that I remember being covered by trees and where heather now flourishes with our efforts at birch removing and (again) bracken pulling. Not to speak of the open corridor we created on Kingwood – in our tree felling days.



Con't.....

Reminiscences from Jill K con't

And as for Spring Wood the holly has been decimated and bluebells have spread steadily in from the edges. Robin Howles particularly loved seeing the bluebells increasing year by year.

So, in fact, although our hearts sink when the job is, once more, bracken pulling we do in the end make a difference!



Spring Wood - Robin giving a tools and safety talk

Why I do it



Flowercroft Wood

There was a dusting of snow the sky was heavy with grey cloud, but the air was cold and fresh and the ground soft under our feet. The cold wintry landscape stretched mistily before us as we stood on the hillside in Flowercroft woods. The trees stood black against the green of the fields across the valley. Yes, snowy showers blew in our faces, toes were numb and the fingers in gloves were stiff and cold but it was an exhilarating feel.

We were there to plant trees on the steep slopes of the woods where mature larch trees had been felled to open up the hillside. It is always good to come and work in Andrew Hawkins' wood. He is a committed naturalist with great interest in all things environmental. To extend the diversity of trees in the wood we were there to plant some wild service and small leaved lime trees. It was a very good turnout in spite of the wintry conditions and working in groups we were soon digging holes, treading in the small trees and sliding on the protecting tubes. Gloves became thick with clay and chalky soil, boots claggy but we finished the job in quick time. We were warm and glowing as we squelched back. What a sense of satisfaction at the end with a job well done!

That's why I do it.

Jill K



PS. One might also think that I have a watery affiliation. I think I am the person who has fallen in the water more than anyone else – such as falling over in the Ewelme brook, on several occasions; going full length in the pond at Greys Court; and, most recently, sinking one leg and boot in the ditch at Temple Island. What next I wonder! Is that why I do it?!!



Temple Island Meadow 05-05-10
fencing by ditch Nick, Brian,
John, Jill, Richard Harris

Some Group Photos



The Thursday group at Greys Court October 2006

Back row L-R: **James Johnson, Mike Saunders, Christine Horsfield, Robin Howles, Jules Thomson, John Hasler, Richard Harris, Fred Denton**

Front row: **Jane Starkey, Diane Gordon, David Gordon, Julia Booker, Jill Kendal, Tony Chandler**

We installed a rustic bench (still there!) at Aston Rowant in March 2008 in memory of founder member **Fred Denton**. Seated on the bench, which was provided by Natural England, are his widow, Rose, and son. **Yvonne Trchalik** and **Dr. William Bird** can be seen behind among many familiar faces.



Peppard War Memorial Hall after clearing the area at the back of the car park ready for the installation of a community workshop May 2022.

Back row: **Brian, Peter Keel, Tony, Julia, John, Geoff Bond** (hidden)

Front row: **Susan Byers, Veronica Englishby, Jane Starkey, Jill, Carol Speirs, Mike S.**



Hedge laying at Pack and Prime Lane February 2009: **Chris Ash, Brian Gardener, John Hasler, Jill Kendal, Julia Booker, Mike Saunders, Mike Macleod, Jane Starkey, Tony Chandler**



Contemplating our handiwork at Temple Island Meadow in full flower

Brian Gardener, Nick Odell, Richard Harris, Eric Yarrow, Keith May and Jane Starkey August 2010.



SCGG Officers

We would like to thank our past officers for their vision and leadership, and our present officers for their hard work and dedication. Your contributions have helped to make our voluntary group a strong and vibrant organisation.

FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT	Dr. William Bird
BTCV LEADER for first 18 months:	Yvonne Hunt (née Trchalik)
CHAIRMAN	Jules Thomson, John Hasler, Peter Keel
SECRETARY	Alison Holdsworth, Robin Howles, Martin Rhodes
TREASURER	June Munro, Jean Fowler, Sheelagh Hill, Sian Hickman, Lyn Thompson
TOOLS OFFICER	Robert Watson, Tony Chandler, Robert Watson/Mike Macleod
COFFEE AND CAKES	Diane Gordon until Spring 2017
COFFEE from 2017	Saturdays Jill Kendal, Lyn Thomson; Thursdays Julia Booker
1 ST AID COURSES and CAKE ROTA from 2017	Jane Starkey
TRAINING COURSES	Eric Yarrow, Carol Speirs
WEBMASTER	Wim Klaucke
PRESS/SOCIAL	Julia Booker
EDITOR of THE LOPPER	Jules Thomson (Newsletter), Jill Kendal, Chris Ash, Imogen Lloyd, Martin Barrett



**Lyn Thompson and
Carol Speirs**



Jane Starkey



Martin Barrett



Robin Howles

Happy Anniversary, here's to the next 25!



Silver Anniversary session at Burnt Platt, with 4 additional Green Gyms