

Green Gym



Sonning Common

"THE LOPPER"

full of little cuttings.

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Green Gym Returns to Its Roots at Sonning Common

On a suitably moody January morning, fourteen determined Green Gymers gathered in the **Sonning Common Health Centre** car park—a place that holds a special kind of magic in the Green Gym world. Many years ago, this was the workplace of **Dr. William Bird**, whose revolutionary idea that people could improve their health by improving green spaces sparked a worldwide movement. Returning to the very ground where it all started, the team prepared to tackle a long-neglected plot tucked behind a new locked wooden gate.



The challenge was immediate: a curtain of ivy shrouded a structure of unknown origin, and a forest of brambles loomed ahead. These thorns looked as if they had never felt the blades of shears nor loppers. Adding to the intrigue was a large, abandoned wooden chicken shed, complete with nesting boxes and bedding, though sadly devoid of any chickens or eggs.

The volunteers split into two specialized work parties. One group was armed with shears and thornproof gloves to battle the **dense brambles**, while the other utilized hammers and hard hats to tackle rotting wooden structures before they could collapse.



A welcome break featured Carol's energy-boosting cakes and a visit from John Hasler, a former GP at the practice and former Chairman of the Green Gym. By the time the morning ended, the fourteen filthy volunteers had successfully revealed the outline of the proposed new area, leaving behind mounds of mixed rubbish for later removal. With Tony even salvaging useful hazel

stakes for other projects, the team looks forward to continuing the task and reviewing the finished site later in the year. **Jane**

Crafting a Living Legacy: Hedge Laying at Rokeby



In the crisp air of late January, Rokeby Recreation Ground played host to an ancient and vital art form. While our team managed typical winter maintenance—felling small trees, removing ivy, and clearing stubborn brambles—the real transformation took place along the boundary shared with the golf course. There, Tony and a group of Gymmers focused their efforts on the traditional craft of hedge laying.

Hedge laying is far more than a rustic aesthetic; it is a vital conservation technique that creates a "living fence." By partially cutting through the stems (known as pleachers) and weaving them together, we encourage the hedge to grow thick and bushy from the base.

This year's progress is a continuation of a multi-year project, and the workmanship is truly of a very high standard. We owe a huge thank you to **Tony**, who put in a significant amount of work outside of our regular Green Gym sessions to see this through.



The "before and after" views of the site show a striking difference, but nature now requires a pause. Because hedge laying is only successful when the trees are dormant, we must wait until next year to continue the line. It is a rewarding lesson in patience, watching a traditional skill slowly weave a stronger, greener future for the Rokeby community. **MartinR**

Restoring the Glade: A Sunny February at College Wood



Finding the entrance to College Wood off the A4074 can be a bit of a challenge, but a couple of volunteers in hi-viz jackets were on hand to point the way for our February work session. We were fortunate to have a beautifully sunny morning for a change, which made the physical labor much more enjoyable.

Our main task was to restore a glade by raking up dead bracken and collecting old tree sleeves left over from an original plantation. We also worked along the glade's edge to manage self-seeded birch trees, lopping the smaller ones to ground level and sawing the

larger ones into manageable lengths.

Nothing went to waste, as all the arisings from the birch and bracken were used to build a dead-hedge along the perimeter. This creates a wonderful habitat for local wildlife while keeping the site tidy. It was a productive session, and we are already looking forward to more of the same. **Julia**



Gymmer's holiday: Janet & Robert's conservation news from Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a Central American country, about the size of Scotland, located between Nicaragua and Panama. While it covers only 0.03% of the earth's land surface, it contains an incredible 5% of the world's biodiversity, making it a premier destination for eco-tourists.

A Unique Economy and History



White-Headed Capuchin

Tourism is a vital part of the economy, though it actually ranks third behind technical services and the production of medical products. The country is a major global contributor to medicine, supplying most of the world's anti-snake venom. It is also a remarkably safe and peaceful nation—so much so that the army was disbanded back in 1948.

Protected Wildlife and Ancient Flora

Roughly a quarter of the country consists of protected jungle. This land teems with exotic wildlife, including monkeys, frogs, spiders, snakes, and over 900 types of birds. The flora is equally impressive, with some plant species existing since before dinosaurs walked the earth.

Strict Rules for National Parks

There are 27 National Parks, and they maintain very strict entrance rules to protect the environment:

No disposable water bottles, plastic bags, food, or insect spray

are allowed.

In the most popular parks, bags are searched at the entrance to check for forbidden items.

At Manuel Antonio National Park, even the café is enclosed in a cage structure to prevent visitors from feeding the wildlife.

Modern Successes and Challenges

Costa Rica is a global leader in conservation, safeguarding over 500,000 species. Most impressively, the country reversed the deforestation of the 1980s, doubling its forest cover while tripling its GDP.

However, **challenges** remain. Large stretches of land are used for palm oil and pineapple production, which causes soil degradation and requires the intensive use of fertilizers. Additionally, climate change is pushing birds like toucans into upland areas like the Monte Verde cloud forest, threatening rare species such as the iconic quetzal.

Looking Ahead

There are many opportunities for volunteering and numerous programs running to explore best practices in conservation. As the country continues to balance growth with preservation, there are many lessons for the rest of the world to learn.

Right: **Janet and Robert** with a large holly tree which they felled at Greys Court a few days after returning from Costa Rica. Rather different habitat from the ones they had been visiting



The Strangler Fig



Preparing for the Bishop: A Sunny Morning at All Saints'



On a bright Saturday morning, our team gathered in the car park of All Saints', Dunsden. We were preparing for a special occasion, as the **Bishop of Dorchester** was scheduled to conduct an ordination service. To ensure there was plenty of room for the congregation, we set to work clearing back the dense brambles encroaching on the parking area.

While the group tackled the overgrowth, Brian and Peter Keel managed a **bonfire** to deal with the resulting arisings. As it turned out, the service was later moved to Shiplake to accommodate a larger crowd, but our efforts were far from wasted. We successfully cleared a significant amount of brambles, leaving the car park much more spacious and tidy for the local community. It was a rewarding morning of hard work and great weather.



Julia

Carbon Sinks and Carpet Moss: Spring Restoration at Nettlebed Common



March saw our team return to the glades of Priest Hill for two productive sessions focused on habitat restoration. With dead bracken already strimmed by Rod d'Ayala, we set to work raking the material into substantial **habitat piles** along the woodland edges. These structures provide immediate shelter for local wildlife as the seasons shift.

The work took an interesting turn at the ponds, where we used some of the cleared material to construct "**causeways**". This isn't just about access; as the bracken submerged in the water

gradually rots, it transforms into a form of peat. This process creates a valuable **carbon sink**, helping the common play its part in the broader environmental picture. While raking nearby, Sally pointed out patches of delicate **sphagnum moss** flourishing at the water's edge.

Away from the damp ground, the battle against invasive growth continued. Carol maintained her steady assault on stubborn bramble roots among the heather, expertly deploying a mini-mattock to clear the way for native plants to thrive. It was a rewarding blend of heavy lifting and ecological discovery.

Julia



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