



Celebrating people and nature

2019/20 Annual Review of the Cotswolds Conservation Board



Chairman's welcome

2019/20 has been a year of change! We've said fond farewells to Martin Lane, our Director and Liz Eyre, Chairman. Both have given many years of much-valued service to the Cotswolds AONB, for which we all thank them. We welcome Andy Parsons as our new Chief Executive and I'm delighted to take over as Chairman, along with Rebecca Charley as our new Vice Chairman. Further details of these changes and others are given in this Annual Review.



Brendan McCarthy

It's also been a year of achievement and celebration! For a long time, we have raised a resounding cheer for our army of volunteer wardens who carry out conservation work across the Cotswolds and lead our extensive walks programme. In 2019/20, almost 400 volunteers achieved more than 48,000 hours of work,

equivalent to a salary bill of £420,000 – if a living wage figure was applied to that total. This is, by far, the largest voluntary achievement within a year and our thanks go to each and every individual who has helped achieve that.

The completion of the Cotswolds LEADER Scheme, with over £1.7m of grant aid finding its way into 56 businesses across the Cotswolds, has been a notable and much praised success for us. We now have over 60 hectares of grassland floristically improved through our Glorious Grasslands Project – with more on the way. Some excellent, pioneering work on fighting Ash Dieback and helping nationally to design the

new Environmental Land Management Scheme for our post-Brexit world have also taken up many hours. Further details of all these projects, together with news of other successes in Planning and in Rural Skills, can be found below. All of this work shows how we are achieving our two statutory aims, in an ever more complex world.

Finally, thank you to our many partners and supporters who help us with our work. With the completed Glover Review on National Parks and AONBs now awaiting a formal government response, together with the recovery from Covid-19, we will have plenty of challenges and opportunities in 2020/21 and beyond.

Brendan McCarthy

Chairman, Cotswolds Conservation Board



Rebecca Charley

Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Cotswolds was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1966 and extended in area in 1990, in recognition of its rich, diverse and high quality landscape. Covering 2,038 sq km, it is the largest member of the family of the AONBs in England and Wales, and the third largest protected landscape in England after the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks.

The Board's role

The Cotswolds Conservation Board is an independent body established by Parliament in 2004 and has two statutory purposes:

- to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB;
- to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.

In fulfilling these roles the Board has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of people living in the AONB.



Our new chief executive

Andy Parsons joined the Cotswolds Conservation Board as our new Chief Executive in late 2019. Andy was previously a Secretary of State Board Member, so already familiar with our work before joining to lead the organisation.



Andy Parsons

Andy joins us from South West Lakes Trust, an award winning regional charity operating throughout Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset, where he was CEO. He has also held a number of non-executive roles including Chairman of Visit Exmoor and Vice-Chairman of Cornwall Sports Partnership Advisory Board. He plans to focus on ensuring the Board commits to making a positive difference to people and communities who live in and around the Cotswolds AONB.

Our **Voluntary Wardens** gave more than **48,000 hours** of their time to working across the AONB in 2019/20

Our legendary volunteers

2019 was another amazing year for our Cotswold Voluntary Wardens, who continue to grow the scope and scale of their work within the Cotswolds AONB. In 2019/20, they gave an astonishing amount of their time to enhancing the landscape and access network in the Cotswolds. Every guided walk, parish patrol, newsletter written and sent, training session delivered, wall built, grassland area cleared of scrub, tree planted, waterway cleared, and gate installed helps to make the Cotswolds remain a unique place for everyone to enjoy.

Speakers at this year's conference included colleagues from the CLA, Disabled Ramblers, Natural England, and the British Horse Society, providing food for thought concerning opportunities and barriers to access.

The wardens' summer season kicked off in June 2019 with the official launch of an 8.5 mile disability access route around Winchcombe, suitable for all terrain mobility scooters. The launch was hosted by Lady Ashcombe at the Sudeley Estate and attracted national media interest and support from the Government. The project was delivered in partnership with Disabled Ramblers, Sudeley Estate, landowners, and the Gloucestershire Highways team. Improvement works to create the route were carried out by wardens and funded by £4,000 from their countryside fund.

Access was also the focus at this year's annual warden conference. The conference, organised by Becky Jones, our Trails, Access & Volunteer Officer, was attended by a record number of over 100 wardens, rights of way officers from across five counties, and Conservation Board members and employees. The day focused on looking at access from the perspective of different user groups. Speakers included colleagues from the CLA, Disabled Ramblers, Natural England, and the British Horse Society, providing food for thought concerning opportunities and barriers to access. ❖



It was an inspiring day, with very engaging and knowledgeable speakers – which we hope will provide inspiration for many future projects.

It's worth remembering that the wardens' work is about more than access. They continue to work with school groups, assist with tick surveys for Public Health England, survey the state of Scheduled Monuments on behalf of Historic England, and work with under-represented groups. Their walks with the Friendship Café in Gloucester have taken us in a new direction; and work with Corsham Sponsors Refugees group demonstrates a genuine commitment to reaching new audiences in a meaningful way. It is also important to recognise their partnership working, and the support they lend to projects, including the rural skills hedgelaying competition, the Cotswold Gateways project, walks for local walking festivals and the National Trust's Upton House, grassland work with the Back from the Brink project, and more recently, tree planting schemes.

We would like to express our gratitude to John Shaw, who stepped down as Head Warden in March 2020. The role of Head Warden is challenging but hugely varied, and it gives an AONB wide perspective: working with all five warden districts and the CCB team, and representing the views of wardens to the Board. It has been a two year post for John, who also spent a previous two years as Deputy Head Warden.

John has achieved a great deal in his time as Head Warden. He was invited to Buckingham Palace to represent the wardens for their Queens Award in 2018, and was absolutely essential to the process of establishing the warden's area on the website, and Facebook. The enthusiasm and energy that he has put into everything he has done has been inspiring, and he has been a great pleasure to work with. In fact we will be continuing to draw upon his expertise as webmaster for the warden's site and he is helping to create gpx files for walks. John passes on the baton to Margaret Reid as Head Warden, and Mike Cripps as Deputy.

Cotswold Voluntary Wardens working on improving access on a route.

Photo: Dorothy Baker

John Shaw at Buckingham Palace (receiving the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service on behalf of the wardens)



Our role in planning

The Board plays an active role in influencing development in the Cotswolds AONB and its setting. This helps ensure that development is compatible with – and contributes to – the purpose of AONB designation, which is to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

We provide added value to this process by using and advocating best-practice guidance and case studies from across this, and other, protected landscapes:

Stonesfield – protecting the natural beauty of the AONB

In spring 2019, John Mills, our Planning and Landscape Officer, represented the Board as a ‘main party’ in a planning appeal inquiry relating to the proposed development of 68 dwellings at Stonesfield, West Oxfordshire. West Oxfordshire District Council had refused planning permission because of the harm that the development would cause to the Cotswolds AONB and because the proposal did not demonstrate the ‘exceptional circumstances’ that would be required for a major development, such as this, to be permitted in the AONB. The Board agreed with the District Council’s decision. At the inquiry, we worked alongside the District Council and in partnership with the other

‘main parties’ (Stonesfield Parish Council and Sustainable Stonesfield) to try and ensure that the appeal was dismissed. Colleagues from the other main parties reviewed John’s performance under cross examination as “most impressive”, and the evidence he gave as “invaluable”. We and the Rule 6 parties were all delighted that the planning inspector subsequently dismissed the appeal in June 2019. Success!

Laying foundation stones

In early 2020, John acted as the catalyst to bring together key stakeholders to discuss issues relating to the cluster of eight quarries between Naunton and Toddington in the north-west of the Cotswolds AONB. Having such a large number of quarries within a relatively small and sensitive area brings with it a number of challenges, including the impact of HGV movements on the tranquillity of the AONB and on local communities. In January 2020, ❖❖❖

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Guiting Quarry

© Paul Keyte, The Johnston Quarry Group

John organised and co-facilitated a quarry stakeholder meeting to discuss these issues and to identify how they might be addressed. The meeting was attended by 43 participants, including representatives from the quarry operators, parish councils, local authorities and the Conservation Board. The meeting received great feedback, with attendees saying it was a constructive discussion of the issues. Following the meeting, it was proposed that a steering group will be set up to take this work forward.

Sharing our message

In September 2019, John gave an informative and engaging presentation at a 'Rural Planning' seminar in Cirencester, organised by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). The seminar was attended by around 120 planning professionals, many of whom were from local authorities that overlap with the Cotswolds AONB. This event provided an excellent opportunity for us to advocate

putting the purpose of AONB designation at the heart of the planning system.

Local Plans update

In 2019/20, on behalf of the Board, John responded to ten strategic planning consultations from six local planning authorities, including five local plans, three transport plans, one minerals and waste local plan, and one county-level strategy. Several of these plans addressed issues that the Board had raised in previous consultations.

Planning applications and appeals update

During the year, the Board responded to consultations on 19 development management cases, of which, 12 responses were objections, three provided recommendations relating to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) requirements, and four provided comments or a standard response.

A417 Missing Link

During the year the Board has engaged with Highways England on the A417 'Missing Link' scheme.

In November we submitted our consultation response, providing constructive recommendations that we felt would enable the scheme to better deliver on its landscape-led vision. This nationally significant road scheme has received the green light from the Department of Transport and is included in their Road Investment Strategy for the period 2020-25. During the next 12 months the scheme will enter the examination phase and the Board will continue to engage in the process as appropriate, ensuring we fulfil our statutory duties to our own Secretary of State.



Photo: Mark Connelly



Rebecca Musselwhite, of Jive Pony
Photo: Squashed Robot Films

Cotswolds LEADER – a rural success story

Over
£1.7 million
in grants were made
across the Cotswolds
AONB

James Webb, Mandy Pressland, and Lioba Erwert, who formed our Cotswolds LEADER team, have now steered the Cotswolds LEADER Programme to its successful conclusion. Over £1.7 million in grants were made to support the growth and diversification of 56 businesses. A wide range of businesses benefited including artisan producers, farmers, tourism providers, retailers, and foresters. Grants reached all parts of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as well as many beyond the boundaries in the Severn Vale and west Oxfordshire. Many of the projects created jobs. As at 31 March 2020, most of these jobs had already been created, with others to be created in the years ahead.

Arbor Tree Care
Photo: Squashed Robot Films



As part of the monitoring and evaluation of the programme, a series of case studies and videos have been produced. These celebrate the achievements of our projects and are available on our website. You can also find our end of programme report on our website. The report details where the grants went and how they helped create thriving businesses and communities, as well as benefiting the environment. The report includes a statistical

breakdown by county and local authority. Finally, we reflect on our own journey through the programme, the lessons learnt, and a look to the future.

The report is available on our website:
cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

Putting down roots

Ash dieback has been a concern for some time now, nationally, and within the AONB. Mitigating the effect of ash dieback on the landscape has been a priority area of work for Mark Connelly, our Land Management Officer. The Cotswolds and Vale Ash Dieback (CoVAD) Forum received over £600 in public donations, and 2,000 new trees from the Woodland Trust.

These 2,000 trees have been planted across the Cotswolds AONB and the Vale of Gloucester to replace ash trees lost, or likely to be lost, to ash dieback. The focus of the planting has been outside of woods – to provide successors to ash trees in hedgerows, fields, and parklands. A variety of species were planted, including beech, oak, and small-leaved lime – and the ambition is that these trees will become the big landscape trees of the future. Hazel, hawthorn, whitebeam, and field maple were also planted. The species were selected to suit the CoVAD area and were planted by a legion of volunteers including Cotswold Voluntary Wardens, farmers, landowners,

and Cheltenham Borough Council; with the help and support of FWAG Southwest, Stroud Valleys Project, NFU and the National Trust.

The Board is also partnering with The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) Gloucestershire in offering a grant of up to £500 for parish and town councils, and community groups, to plant successor trees in their areas. The scheme will run until December 2020 and details can be found on the CPRE Gloucestershire website.

CoVAD has produced two guidance notes to help tackle the impact of Ash Dieback, which can be found at cotswoldsaonb.org.uk



Photo: Mark Connelly

Rural Skills – building on our heritage

Despite being cut short by the arrival of Covid-19, the 2019/20 Rural Skills programme ran 56 open courses training 530 people in 13 skills.

As well as our long standing courses such as hedgelaying, coppicing, and dry stone walling our Rural Skills Officer, Ed Bonn, continued to broaden the

programme with courses including horse logging, bird identification, and winter tree identification. We also ran LANTRA accredited courses in brush cutting and drystone walling through the Rural Skills Academy, whilst continuing to develop bespoke courses for individual groups. These bespoke courses included employee days for Skanska who returned for a second corporate event day with us, Wiltshire College, local schools, and a parish council. We also continued our work with students at Burford School – where pupils are creating and restoring a woodland wildlife area and learning dry stone walling.



Photo: Ed Bonn

530 people

learned 13 different rural skills with us in 2019/20

Over
60 hectares
of the Cotswolds
landscape now being
floristically improved
across the Cotswolds

Glorious Cotswold Grasslands – not just in name!

This ambitious project, aiming to create and restore one of the largest areas of calcareous grassland habitat in the country, began in February 2019, and has so far been very successful. The enthusiasm and local knowledge of our project officers, Harvey Sherwood and Anna Field quickly identified a good range of seed donor and recipient sites across the Cotswolds with a range of different grassland community types. The team doubled the initial target for the number of hectares of floristically enhanced grassland initiated in 2019 – and achieved an impressive 60 hectares. Importantly, this strong start will help protect the project’s targets in the advent of a wet seed harvesting season in either of the next two years.



Bee Orchid
Photo: Richard Tyler

The work done by Glorious Cotswold Grasslands (GCG) covers a wide range of activities – from surveying sites, to seed harvesting and collection, seed drying, seed sowing, and scrub clearance. The team has also been establishing valuable relationships with farmers, land owners and land managers – and advising them on how they can participate in the project. Below is a summary of each area of work – building a picture of the immensely busy year for the project.

Botanical surveys

Over 40 grassland sites were botanically surveyed during 2019. From these, 18 were identified as particularly species-rich and therefore suitable as donor sites and were subsequently harvested. Total surveyed sites also included over 30 potential recipient areas with moderate floristic content.

Some restoration sites from GCG’s predecessor project, Save Our Magnificent Meadows (2014-17), were also surveyed in order to assess long term flower establishment success rates.

Volunteers

The GCG project team recruited more people to assist with the project delivery. The volunteers have contributed fantastic amounts of their time towards a full range of tasks. Without them, the levels of project delivery would not have been so advanced. In addition to new volunteers, there has been a considerable input from the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens. These experienced volunteers with local knowledge and contacts have also helped identify potential sites and clients. They also help spread the word about Glorious Cotswold Grasslands throughout the area.



Volunteers working at Budgehill Belt
Photo: Anna Field

Seed harvesting and sowing

July and August 2019 proved to be an excellent seed year with ideal weather for seed harvesting. In excess of 1400kg of seed was collected by brush harvester from 18 donor sites, totalling 27 hectares, and to date that has been sown over 40 recipient sites, totalling more than 50 hectares. Some seed was dried and stored for use in the autumn or for spring sowing in 2020, but most was sown straight away to save on drying time and storage. ❖❖❖

GCG project support

Our exciting partnership with Sarah Horne, an award winning florist, is developing. Sarah has produced a number of botanical illustrations of plants and animals featured in Cotswold grasslands, and these illustrations have been adopted as a distinctive 'visual theme' to represent the project. In addition, Sarah has translated them to a new range of her unique homeware products, and will be donating up to 5% of sale prices back to supporting the project. Before Covid-19,

Sarah attended the two main UK retail trade exhibitions, to showcase the range. Orders were discussed, and we wait to see the outcome of those after lockdown is eased.

Schools

We have established working relationships with five schools, resulting in sports field restoration projects and a flowering meadows teaching pack is currently being developed.



A bush cricket found on grassland habitat

Photo: Anna Field

Caring for the Cotswolds

The last call for applications in April 2019 resulted in eight fantastic projects being supported right across the Cotswolds. A total of £8,293 was awarded. The projects covered the key themes of conservation, heritage and education, and access and interpretation.

The meadow areas were prepared and planted with native wildflowers, and bird boxes and reptile refuges were installed across the site.

Hilary Brown, Chairman

Sustainable Woodstock in Oxfordshire received a grant towards a series of works to increase the biodiversity of a community woodland and orchard, as well as improve access. The meadow areas were prepared and planted with native wildflowers, and bird boxes and reptile refuges were installed across the site. Work also included securing a permissive path through the woodland and orchard, connecting to the Oxfordshire Way and allowing walkers to keep away from the busy A44. Walkers can now walk to the Oxfordshire Way from Woodstock and either head west in to the Blenheim Estate or on to Stonesfield or east towards Wooton, and vice versa. Two picnic benches were also installed so that visitors and residents could enjoy the area for longer. An added benefit, the benches were made by RAW; a charity that works with people with learning disabilities, mental health problems or those from a disadvantaged background.

Eight projects funded by
£8,293
raised by members of
Caring for the Cotswolds



Gate construction using traditional techniques
Photo: Sustainable Woodstock

In Limley Stoke, Wiltshire, a project to design and install new information boards is nearly complete. The beautifully designed boards will be placed in several prominent areas. They show both the history and the habitats and species of the area. Limley Stoke is readily accessible from the nearby train station at Freshford, attracting walkers from Bath, Trowbridge and Bristol.

There are many more excellent results on the ground from our projects, enhancing the landscape for nature and people. All of this is possible because of the donations we receive from our members. A massive thank you to all of our members and in particular, Cotswolds Distillery, who have been such a major supporter of the scheme.

A new call for applications will open in 2020. Details can be found on our website: cotswoldsaonb.org.uk



Volunteers on a winter work party
Photo: Sustainable Woodstock



Photo: Squashed Robot Films

Environmental Land Management (ELM)

Led by Mark Connelly, our Land Management Officer, the Board has successfully delivered a test for Defra to help inform the design of the forthcoming Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme. ELM will be the cornerstone of the new post-Brexit agricultural policy and will provide farmers, foresters, and other land managers with the opportunity to secure financial reward in return for delivering environmental benefits – on the basis of ‘public money for public goods’.

The test was to work with a range of farmers, land managers, advisers, and agencies to discuss and identify new and innovative approaches and applicant requirements; to achieve national and local outcomes through ELM in the Cotswolds. This could include business advice, local payment rates, and land management advice.

The Board employed Red Kite Environment to design and lead on a series of workshops and a questionnaire. In total 100 individual farmers, foresters, and land managers participated in the test which finished in February. This was one of over 70 tests and trials across England, and four continue in the Cotswolds and are being led by FWAG, Small Woods Association, Wildlife Trusts, and Foundation for Common Land.



Photo: Squashed Robot Films

ELM will be the cornerstone of the new post-Brexit agricultural policy.

New team members



The Board is delighted to have offered James Webb, its LEADER Programme Manager, a permanent role with the organisation. From April 2020 James will be our new Partnerships and Fundraising Officer. James has a great track record with the LEADER programme and is looking forward to this new and exciting challenge. He will be focusing on a number of exciting projects, including the Caring for the Cotswolds visitor giving scheme, fundraising events, and developing corporate partnerships throughout the AONB.



In January, Scott Brown joined us from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE), an organisation which raises funds and allocates grants for environmental projects in the county. Scott is the project officer with us for a new programme called 'Cotswolds Champions', distributing grants and working in collaborative partnerships to best allocate mitigation and compensation funding from Network Rail, due to electrification works in the South Gloucestershire area of the AONB.

In February we recruited Ann Wyatt as the Board's new Head of Finance. Ann will play a leading role in the organisation by finding better, and more joined up, ways of delivering our financial functions alongside business and project planning. For the past four years Ann has been working as a self-employed finance and governance consultant. Prior to this Ann was the Director of Finance at Dorothy House Hospice and has experience working for a number of different charities. Ann qualified as a Chartered Accountant in 2004 whilst working in Corporate Finance with Deloitte and also worked as an Assistant Director in the Infrastructure Finance Team at Ernst & Young.



Financial Statement

Unaudited Summary Financial Statement
1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020

	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
Expenditure	941,720	989,479
Project Delivery	771,372	862,546
Corporate Management and Administration	145,195	126,933
Agency Operational Agreement (net)	25,153	0
Income	(1,065,774)	(1,459,727)
DEFRA Core Grant	(412,941)	(455,646)
Natural England	(67,294)	(63,929)
Local Authorities & Parish Councils	(145,579)	(130,574)
Rural Payments Agency	(87,127)	(95,040)
Network Rail	0	(500,103)
Other	(352,833)	(214,435)
Deficit (Surplus)	(124,054)	(470,248)
Balance Sheet		
Fixed Assets & Investments	25,000	450,000
Current Assets	322,997	354,701
Less: Current Liabilities	(82,741)	(69,197)
Net Current Assets	240,256	285,504
Total Net Assets	265,256	735,504
Financed by		
Restricted Funds	193,768	664,536
Earmarked Reserves	24,135	24,135
General Fund	305,043	46,833
Agency Agreement	(257,690)	0
Total Reserves	265,256	735,504



Gross Expenditure 2019/20

Conservation of Natural Environment	21%
Conservation of Cultural Heritage	7%
Recreation Management & Transport	14%
Promoting Understanding	20%
Cotswold Voluntary Wardens	12%
Forward Planning	13%
Corporate Management	13%



Photo: Squashed Robot Films



Cotswolds Conservation Board

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The Cotswolds National Landscape is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), managed and looked after by the Cotswolds Conservation Board.

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