

Chair's Report for ST AGM 2015 -2016

Following last year's AGM in June 2015, we agreed plans for this year to include occasional meetings, some short films and to run a series of skills workshops. The regular attendance at the Thornbury Town Council Environment Committee and Tree Groups continued and also Grow Your Own Food and the Orchard Group. Reports from these groups are below.

In the autumn we held some meetings where we discussed in particular the development proposals which may affect the Community Compost Site as well as housing development proposals in Thornbury. The issues are ongoing and being monitored by members so that appropriate responses can be made if formal planning consent is being sought. In addition, several members attended a very successful Climate Change March which halted Bristol for several hours and highlighted the issue. It was very well attended despite the rainy weather.

Over January – March we met on a monthly basis at the Chantry to watch and discuss the short videos entitled 'Living with the land' - an interesting series about growing food sustainably and in harmony with nature. Over this time also, a small group was planning the series of skills workshops. We agreed to subsidise these workshops, should it prove necessary, as we did not want to charge highly. We agreed that it was more important to offer the learning opportunity. These eventually took place during May and June 2016.

During the year we said goodbye to two longstanding members – Paula Hunt and Andrew Mearman who have moved to Leeds. We wish them well and are very grateful for all their contributions over the years.

The following are reports from those who attend the various groups:

Town Council Environment Committee: Felicity Harrison

I have attended as many of the Environment Committee meetings as I could, which is most of them. At each meeting I have reported something about us. I told them we were attending the Climate Change march in Bristol. As we finalised our Upskilling Workshops meetings I kept the committee abreast of our progress, and as soon as I was able submitted our programme of events. I also told them of the advertising we did in the St Mary's Centre. I shall, of course, comment on the results when we have finished.

I have also been to some of the other council meetings, when I thought that they might be of use. At the moment it is more of an understanding that I am getting rather than anything else.

Grow Your Own Food Group: Marian Stephens

During 2015 GYOF continued to hold monthly meetings including visits to Old Down Kitchen Garden July and Filnore allotments in August + our Harvest Supper but as our numbers were static we planned to encourage more people to grow veg by holding an "Open Meeting" at the Chantry in March. This was successful in increasing membership by 5 and bringing along 2 current members who did not usually attend.

We have however had requests from two former members to remove their names from the Yahoo e-mail list at present.

In April we had a talk by Brett on seed sowing and May visited Diane and Nick to discuss "When to plant". Six also visited Barley Wood Organic Walled garden. June we shall be visiting Mary Stevens's garden to look at Fruit Tree growing.

Thornbury Orchard Group: Marian Stephens

We are a very small group at present – 6 active members + a8 more on the email list. During 2015/2016 we had work parties to manage Thornbury Community Orchard – First Wednesday morning and third Saturday afternoon of the month. Attendance at each was between one and four people.

Oct 2015 we had a joint work party with South Glos. staff clearing the brambles. We renewed our contract with South Glos. In Feb 2016 and during the last year some members attended training in First Aid, wildflower meadow management, scything and safe hand tool use. We also attended their Volunteers' evenings.

Plums, apples, black currants and medlars are growing but so is the long grass. We are seeking more volunteers by having a stall at Thornbury Volunteer fair on 7th July 2016.

Please see John Mills' report for more details including plans to establish a wild flower meadow.

Report by John Mills: Volunteer, Thornbury Orchard group

We are affiliated to Sustainable Thornbury and manage a small Victorian Orchard at Morton Bridge under a volunteering Contract from South Gloucestershire Council.

As well as managing the community Orchard by caring for, pruning and harvesting the fruit trees we are also committed to maintaining and promoting the Biodiversity of the Orchard.

Last summer we attended a Wild Meadow day at Donald MacIntyre's farm and wild seed producing company near Bath. Here we learnt about the benefits of Yellow Rattle and heard again about the B-lines project. One of the B-lines passes right through the Orchard at Morton Bridge Thornbury.

In September the group cleared a test area in the Orchard and sowed yellow rattle seed. The seed has to overwinter to germinate and in mid March we roped off the test area to protect any emerging plants. The Yellow rattle is an annual and must not be cut between mid March and when it sets seed in mid August. Over a number of years the Yellow rattle which feeds off the roots of grasses weakens the grass to create niches which promote biodiversity, so wild flowers and other native plants can establish a foothold. As of May this year we are pleased to report the yellow rattle is well established and already flowering in the 'boxing ring' trial area.

Although the rattle feeds off the grass and stunts its growth it does not kill it and the grass will still grow high between March and August, this why it is often managed by scything. The Group have also taken advantage of South Gloucestershire training in Scything and first aid but has not raised funding for a scythe nor the seed to move on from a trial to the full seeding of a wild flower meadow. At present our contract allows for South Gloucestershire to cut the grass in the Orchard, but if the volunteers take on scything in 'partnership' with the Council this cost will be reduced and possibly totally eliminated. It also means we can preserve existing naturally occurring plants such as Cuckoo flowers.

Other simple aids to biodiversity have included collecting any dead wood in piles to rot down and promote wildlife such as mice and insects, keeping patches of nettles, managing the existing blackberry plants and drilling some varying sized holes into a dead plum tree stump on the South facing side. We have already attracted some new tenants.

We have a very old stone wall which encloses the Orchard on three sides, the local stream being on the other side and this is home to many interesting plants and wildlife. We have cleared a section of earth near the wall to grow blackcurrants and we have also sown Kew wild flower mix in part of this area along the wall.

At present we have no funding and are entirely made up of volunteers so we are looking for small amounts of funding to further facilitate our unpaid work.