

Community Orchard, Steeple Aston

Introduction

The Parish Council has been offered for free a small piece of land to the east side of Water Lane that is surrounded by a low wall and contains shrubs and trees with grass. The PC would like to take ownership, assess trees and carry out any initial work needed on trees and walls, before handing over management to a committee. This paper outlines briefly how the new committee proposes to turn the space into a community orchard and maintain it for the enjoyment of the community and the benefit of wildlife.

Vision: *Wildlife, Community, Fruit*

- To encourage **wildlife**.
- To make available a quiet, contemplative space that is accessible to all in our **community**.
- To hold **community** events that are related to encouraging an appreciation for our local wildlife, trees, hedges and sustainable fruit and that raise funds for the orchard.
- To plant **fruit** trees and make the fruit freely available to the community. The space in the proposed orchard is limited, so in the longer term, we would like to investigate planting fruit trees/bushes elsewhere in the village where they can be accessed easily. We feel that with some imagination this small space could be the catalyst for a **nature-friendly, community-building, sustainable** project.
- To build up a **community** of volunteers who care for and take pride in the orchard.

We understand that the orchard may be named after the donor, which we agree would be a lovely legacy for a former villager. If this does not happen, we propose naming the new orchard the Platinum Jubilee Orchard. We would aim to open it to the public in time for the June bank holiday weekend.

Community

We would like this to be an open space for the community to use and for it to be shaped by what the community wants, and to improve health and well-being. When the land has been signed over to the Parish Council, we would like to hold an initial coffee and cake event, where people can come and have a look around, make suggestions, sign up to volunteer and start to feel ownership of the space. We will also write an article for Steeple Aston Life, outlining our plans and seeking volunteers.

We will have a list of volunteers – all ages and abilities welcome for any level of commitment - and will organise monthly sessions for general maintenance, mostly on weekends, with coffee and cake provided. The plan for each session will be determined by the committee. We would ask volunteers to bring their own tools.

Additionally, we will run community events that aim to bring the community into the orchard and learn about nature, the environment and fruit growing. We would like to respond to ideas from the community, our own ideas so far include: digging a wildlife pond, building bird boxes, how to compost, bug hunts, tree pruning, building a bug hotel, wassailing, apple identification and pressing (unless the Red Lion wants to continue doing this – we do not want to duplicate), picnics/cake sales, whittling and cooking and preserving fruit. We will seek volunteers in the village with the right experience to come forward and help with running these events.

A lot of the time the orchard will be quiet and will provide a place for people to sit, read, observe the wildlife and picnic. We would like to provide a bench or two for this, which could perhaps be commemorative benches.

Management of the land for Wildlife

At the start we will need to map what is already in the orchard and come up with a plan for maintenance and planting, using the suggestions from the community. We would also like to survey the current wildlife. We would aim to plant any new fruit trees, fruit bushes and other plants/bulbs/seeds in winter and spring 2022/23. We would like to investigate having local heritage fruit varieties where possible, maximise positive impact on wildlife and make the best use of the space available. We would also like to dig a wildlife pond.

We expect the work that volunteers would carry out would include pond clearing, strimming, grass cutting (just paths), pruning, hedge cutting and bramble clearance.

We will encourage pollinating insects and aim to improve ecological diversity, and will share this knowledge with interested villagers so that more people in Steeple Aston are inspired and empowered to take action to encourage wildlife in their own gardens. This may include having a compost heap, bug hotel, bee hive (if we can find someone who is interested in managing it), wildlife tracking cameras and bird/bat boxes (if appropriate), ideally involving the community in organising all of these through events and volunteering. We will not use pesticides, herbicides or man-made fertilisers.

We are aware of the potential for antisocial behaviour in the orchard and the impact that this could have on the neighbours around, but we do not want this to stop us from providing a valuable asset to the community. We will do everything that we can to minimise the risk and impact of antisocial behaviour by: keeping the south end wild with brambles (also good for wildlife) to maintain a wide barrier with the neighbour and locking the gate every evening.

Committee

We will set up a small committee of interested people to manage the orchard and organise events. This will be open to anyone who is prepared to take responsibility and commit time and energy. It will meet monthly and provide a short report to the Parish Council every 6 months.

We will seek advice from other organisations: BBOWT, other local community orchards and wildlife organisations. We have already been in contact with the organisers of Woodstock Orchard (well established) and Kirtlington Orchard (newly planted), who have been extremely helpful and kind with their time and advice.

Fundraising

We will need to raise a small amount of funding each year to cover the costs of buying trees and plants, a pond liner, providing and maintaining benches, producing an information panel, paying for any major tree work needed and maintaining the dry stone walls (though the PC will ensure that the trees and walls start off in good condition, we will need to keep some money aside for future maintenance). We will raise funds through the events outlined above (offering a reduced rate for families who could not otherwise afford to come), through optional donations for the fruit and through tree/bench sponsorship. We are already investigating grant options.

If the Parish Council is unable to fund the initial tree work, we will apply for grants and fundraise locally to cover this. We feel that we should not miss out on this fantastic opportunity to improve our village.

Shirley Palmer and Elen Wade-Martins, February 2022