

South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers - Annual Report 2020



57 Fallen Trees Removed
8,000 Metres Cleared and Mowed
46 Gate Installations and Repairs
30 Waymark Posts Installed
Over 5,000 Volunteer Hours Spent

INTRODUCTION

The South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers (SCPMV), part of the Chiltern Society's Rights of Way Group, was established in 2004 to help improve access to the rights of way in South Oxfordshire, supporting Oxfordshire County Council and its Task Team. Working closely with the three Chiltern Society Oxfordshire Area Secretaries and their thirty-seven parish path representatives, OCC, Trust for Oxfordshire Environment (TOE), landowners, other walking groups and local companies, the SCPMV organises four workdays per month to carry out clearance, waymarking and gate installation projects.

SCPMV ACTIVITY IN 2020

2020 was the year of Covid 19, and unsurprisingly the tally of work undertaken by the volunteers this year was severely impacted by national lockdowns. The Chiltern Society initially stopped, and then adhered to strict distancing guidelines when the lockdown was lifted, restricting team sizes for safety, but despite this challenging environment, the volunteers achieved the following statistics.

Gates Installed	10
Stiles/Repairs/Steps/Sleeving	36
Waymark Posts Installed	30
Trees Cleared	57
Metres Cleared and Mowed	8661
Volunteer Appearances	344
Workday Hours Spent	1415
Total Volunteer Hours	5475

The 'stand-out' statistics are the number of waymark posts installed – just a few shy of last year's total - and the number of fallen trees cleared – a record! Facing the need to work in smaller teams, the volunteers focused on work that could be done by just two-volunteer teams, and addressed the backlog of waymarking requirements, and an unusual number of fallen trees brought down by a combination of wet weather and wind. John Bentley deserves special thanks for his chainsaw activities in this period.



Clearing the Paths

Smaller teams also drove our record number of 54 gate repairs, usually where parts of the wooden structure had failed due to rot.

It is important to say that these installations almost all pre-dated 2015, when SCPMV started to apply Postsaver bitumen sleeves to all installed posts. Our internal statistics indicated that around 8% of unsleeved posts become unviable due to rot in any one year.

This year was therefore also noteworthy in that the Group decided to implement tests on sleeved posts to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment. Such tests were last undertaken in 2017, so Vyv James, the SCPMV sleeving lead,

organised the testing of 120 posts, installed in 2015 or 2016, at 28 gate installations.

We found that the failure rate of sleeved posts, after four years in various ground conditions, was under 2% - approximately four times better than we would have expected prior to sleeving. Sleeved posts also demonstrated more consistent results with less variability.

The results and conclusions were shared with OCC, the other Chiltern Society PMVs, and Postsaver.

GATE INSTALLATIONS

Two large TOE-funded gate projects were completed this year.

A Walk in the Park saw the installation of seven gates to replace existing stiles around Park Corner Swyncombe, and designed to link into several much-used and promoted paths, such as those from the BBOWT-owned Warburg Nature Reserve, the Chiltern Way and the popular Five Horseshoes pub at Maidensgrove.

An important element of this job was the replacement of two particularly hazardous stiles that had troubled walkers for many years.



One of the hazardous stiles

The results of replacing these were demonstrated when on completion, Alan Futter, one of the Society's Area Secretaries, was able to lead Reading Association for The Blind (RAB) walkers on this route, for the first time in years. Alan stated "This'll be a great walk, very safe as we also don't cross any main roads and there are no steps anywhere. Of course, there are many other hazards along every footpath so each blind walker needs the help of a sighted guide to point out tree roots and half buried stones which might cause a trip. But it's such a relief to have no stiles!" Alan continued, "We've waited a long time for this. You only have to try helping a group of totally blind or elderly people over a stile to know how dangerous they are and that's why we have to get them off our footpaths".



RAB Walkers enjoying the new gate

Phase 2 of the gate project at Model Farm had three main aims: to deliver stile free links into the Oxfordshire Way at Shirburn; to provide a stile free route between the villages of Shirburn and Stoke Talmage; and to make Model Farm a stile free estate. In addition the landowners had agreed to create a new

permissive footpath between the dead end Stoke Talmage FP7 and Stoke Talmage FP1, creating a link to the Oxfordshire Way.

Nine gates were installed, building on the 12 gates installed in Phase 1, all on the Oxfordshire Way.



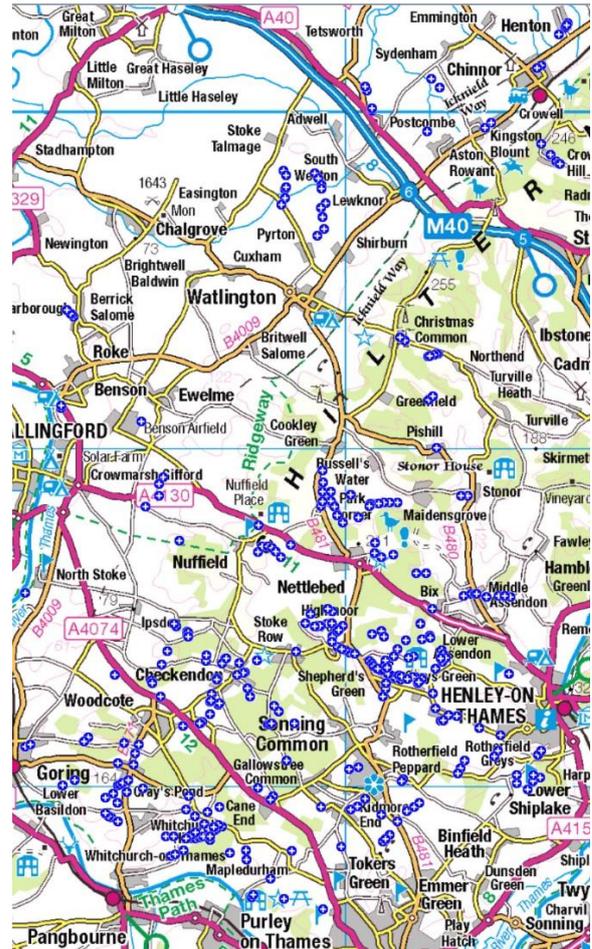
Simon Kearey at the Model Farm workday

On one of the workdays at Model Farm, we were pleased to welcome Simon Kearey, Chairman of the Chiltern Society, and he definitely earned his later pint as a very productive member of the team.

In this context of gate installations, another volunteer, Richard Miller has used his GIS skills to plot all 300 plus installations on a map of the South Chilterns. They are all on the map, but where installations are close together, they often appear as one!

VOLUNTEER NEWS

During the year, three of our volunteers became clearance and gate leaders, considerably adding to our strength in this area. They are Liam Woolley, Phil Gibbs and John Bentley. In addition, Ray Maguire and Richard Miller also led projects.



Mike Boas, who has led many of our TOE-funded gate projects, decided that the time had come for him to retire. Ron Doole, another very active member of the team, also retired this year. We should like to thank both of them for their years of work, and to wish them well in their new pursuits.



Mike Boas will be missed

We welcomed a number of new volunteers to SCPMV during the year, and three of these, Tim Howard, David Hancock and Dave North, were very active. Welcome to all of them.

NEW TRAILER AND TOOLS

Last year we reported on the extremely generous legacy left by Charles Crawcour to the SCPMV. Some of this funding was used this year to order a new, larger trailer for the volunteers, which had been carefully specified to meet all our needs by Richard Miller and Ray Maguire. The new trailer will enable us to convey not only more tools and materials, but also the larger gates which are specified for some locations.

We also purchased a jack hammer for breaking up concrete, and equally importantly, a jack, which has proved extremely useful for pulling out rotten posts.



Demonstrating the value of the new jack

Once again this year we purchased a selection of hand tools for the use of Society path reps. These were provided through the three

Oxfordshire Area Secretaries in recognition of their invaluable help in monitoring the rights of way and identifying access issues, the addressing of which forms the basis of much of the work undertaken by SCPMV.

DONATE A GATE

This year the Chiltern Society scheme for supporting publicly donated gates was extended into South Oxfordshire. Previously it had really only operated in Buckinghamshire. An announcement about the new scheme was sent to the Henley Standard and a new Donate-a-Gate section for Oxfordshire was created on the Chiltern Society website. There has been considerable interest in the scheme and as a result two new gates have already been pledged (we will instal ten sponsored gates this year). The Area Secretaries and path reps are actively looking for potential sites for additional donated gates so that we can build up a list for would-be donors to choose from.

THE YEAR AHEAD

Looking to 2021, we have three large TOE-funded gate projects in Sywncombe, Emmington and Ewelme already confirmed. These will help fill our gate installation schedule for the whole year.

We will also have a substantial number of waymark posts to install.

It has been agreed that we will transition from petrol to more environmentally-friendly battery-powered tools over the course of about three years. It is likely that the first item to be purchased will be a new battery-powered chain saw.

We are also looking at purchasing a 4x4 vehicle for the volunteers – rather than relying on a few members to use their own vehicles – to both carry tools and

materials and tow the new trailer. This would be purchased using part of Charles Crawcour's generous legacy to the Group.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We should like to thank Hugh Potter, Group Manager – Operations Hub, and the Countryside Access Delivery team at Oxfordshire County Council, in particular our day-to-day contact, Jackie Smith, for their continued help and support throughout the year.

The close relationship with the OCC team, with associated funding and support, makes everything we do possible.

Thanks are also due to Trust for Oxfordshire Environment for their funding support and commitment to our gate projects. We are extremely grateful and look forward to continuing our work together in the year ahead.

We also acknowledge the support we receive from Henley and Goring Ramblers, and from other like-minded organisation, who have helped fund donated gates this year.

The vast majority of the work of the SCPMV is generated by the three South Oxfordshire Area Secretaries and their 37 path reps. The quality of their reporting of issues, and their commitment to identifying and sourcing funding for gate projects is invaluable to us.

And finally, thank you to all the SCPMV members, new and old, leaders and volunteers, who have achieved so much in what has been such a challenging and curtailed year of activity.

SCPMV Contacts

SCPMV Facilitator – Steve Feigen; Gate Coordinator – Stephen Fox; Clearance Coordinator – Bob Parry; Quartermasters – Peter Harden and John Lynch; Finance and Purchasing – Ray Maguire; Membership – Dick Strange; Training, Health and Safety – Jenny Strange; Task Leaders – Mike Boas, Vyv James, Wim Klaucke, Richard Miller, Howard Dell, Liam Wooley, Phil Gibbs, John Bentley; Area Secretaries – Susan Maguire, Maggie Templeman, Alan Futter.



Drawing lots to see who is going to clear up after the workday!

SCPMV Partners



The Chiltern Society and the South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers are extremely grateful for the essential help and support from the above organisations, but we would also like to thank those Parish Councils, local landowners, farmers and residents who make the task of helping to care for the Chilterns paths so much easier.



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