

South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers Annual Report



- 15,580m of paths and 38 fallen trees cleared
- 26 gates and 14 other structures built
- 37 waymark posts installed
- 1,676 hours on site
- 6,821 volunteer hours in all

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, and to add value to the work already being undertaken by the County Council and its Task Team. Working closely with the three Chiltern Society South Oxfordshire Area Secretaries and their thirty-seven parish path representatives, Oxfordshire CC, Trust for Oxfordshire Environment (TOE), landowners, other walking groups and local companies, the SCPMV organises three workdays per month to carry out clearance, waymarking and gate installation projects.

SCPMV ACTIVITY IN 2019

2019 was another busy year, and our path reps and area secretaries generated more than enough work for our 50 plus volunteers. This year was unusual for the amount of non-gate furniture that we had to design, build and install, but overall activity was very much on par with 2018. The stats are set out below.

ACHIEVEMENTS			
	2017	2018	2019
Installations			
Furniture			
wooden kissing gates	17	8	10
metal kissing gates	8	12	12
non-kissing gates	5	7	4
zigzags, flights of steps, stiles, etc		2	14
gate repairs	7	6	5
Total Furniture Installations	37	35	45
Waymark Posts Installed	50	40	37
Trees Cleared	13	38	38
Metres Cleared/Mowed	16635	18175	15480
Hours Spent By Volunteers			
Site and QM Totals in previous repor	1676	1636	1676
Estimated Travelling to Site	462	416	487
Estimated Plannning and Prep Calcul	1918	1900	1822
Estimated Admin	1304	1542	912
Estimated Path Reps	1924	1924	1924
Total Volunteer Hours	7284	7418	6821

GATE PROJECTS

In February we completed the Aston Rowant 'Village Connections' project, installing three kissing gates to replace existing stiles. At the same time, Oxfordshire CC's Task Team constructed a new bridge and replaced one further stile on the same path, which now provides stile-free access between the villages of Aston Rowant, Chalford and Kingston Stert, and the wider network.



A rabbit-proof gate at Nuffield

Also, at the beginning of the year, we replaced two stiles with metal gates on Hollandridge Lane, Pishill. This ancient lane was originally used to bring livestock, farm produce and fuel from Oxfordshire to Henley for loading onto barges. It is part of the Oxfordshire Way, on which we recently installed gates in Fawley, and which is therefore now stile free where it crosses the Oxfordshire Chilterns.

Another important project was installing seven gates in Harpsden on the outskirts of Henley. There were considerable concerns from the landowners as to whether we could landscape the gates to fit in with the rural setting. These concerns were more than met by the carefully crafted installations. Henley Golf Club funded two of the seven gates and Trust for Oxfordshire the other five.



The Harpsden locations

The Bix Dairy Farm project saw the installation of three gates to replace stiles on footpaths Bix 13 and Bix 8 (the Chiltern Way). Bix 8 has long been difficult for many walkers, with seven stiles over a relatively short distance, and the 'challenge' more often than not of walking through fields of cows, often with their young. The dairy farmer has always been concerned about allowing the installation of gates to replace all these stiles because of the large number of young cattle and their protective mothers. This project, which gained approval from OCC, the dairy farmer and Nettlebed Estate, was designed to provide an alternative, and more attractive stile-free route around the centre of the increasingly busy dairy farm. In the longer term, the aim is to re-locate this section of the Chiltern Way to the new stile-free route.



A famous face welcomes the gate installation at Nettlebed Estate

OTHER PROJECTS

This year was unusual in that we installed more non-gate furniture, such as the zigzags installed on a new path between Kingston Blount and Crowell. This was part of an initiative by the local parish council, partly with the laudable aim of allowing residents of the former to reach the Shepherds Crook hostelry in the latter, without risking a busy and dangerous road. We also repaired some stiles and installed a dog gate as part of clearing a difficult and long-blocked path at Henton.

Our most technically challenging project, a long flight of steps, was designed and installed to the side of the pond on Bix 13. This short sloping section of the path was notoriously difficult in winter, being steep, wet and slippery. Work spanned four separate workdays, with installation not only of the steps, but of posts joined by timber side pieces to inhibit soil creep, and a handrail.



The Bix Steps

CLEARANCE AND WAYMARKING

Led by Bob Parry, our Clearance Coordinator, more than 15,000 metres was cleared or mowed by volunteers over the period, and we cleared 38 trees.

This year we did a lot more work in the North West of our patch, around Chinnor, and also Park Corner in Swyncombe. One area new to the PMV was Henton, where a team of 12 powering their way through a long unusable path, followed by stile repairs and a gate installation.

Another important role of the Clearance teams is to undertake the essential installation and repair of waymark posts, which are greatly appreciated by walkers. In 2019 we installed 37 posts, and since its inception, SCPMV has installed more than 1,000 posts throughout the Oxfordshire Chilterns.

WOODEN GATE LONGEVITY

The issue of rotting wooden posts and their replacement is an ongoing challenge for all of the PMV groups of the Chiltern Society. It is now five years since the SCPMV began attaching bitumen sleeving to its waymark and gate posts in an attempt to improve longevity. Vyv James, who instigated and manages the sleeving process, is now putting in place a project to test the efficacy of the approach. PMV and path reps will be asked to report on the condition of 120 pre-selected posts on gates that have been sleeved. The results will be analysed and will help to evolve a strategy for installation and replacement in the future.

BARN STORAGE AND TOOLS

Obviously most of the SCPMV activity requires the use of manual and power tools, and having the right tools for the job is hugely important.

Over the years, we have built up a wide arsenal of implements, some for very specific tasks, which make our work much more efficient. This year, we acquired a jackhammer/concrete breaker and a heavy-duty jack, for helping to remove stiles and other structures where postcrete or similar materials have been used to stabilise them.

We have also acquired a wheeled strimmer, while a local resident very generously donated an old Hayter Osprey Rough-Cut Self-Propelled

mulching mower. Although the machine is around 40 years old, it is in good working order. Its 8hp engine and 20" wide cut makes it ideal for summer mowing on bridleways.

Managed by Peter Harden and John Lynch, our quartermasters, who also service many of the tools, SCPMV utilises a large barn near Ipsden, in which we store gates and posts of all shapes and sizes, and in which we have a locked unit for the manual and power tools, safety clothing, signage and first aid equipment that we use. As an example we have two chainsaws, four brush cutters, and additionally combi units to drive pole pruners and hedge trimmers. We have four sets of digging tools to allow us to support multiple teams on any workday, and 12 sets each of shears and loppers. We also have two scanners for testing ground for underground cables and pipes, and a number of first aid kits.



Peter Harden and the SCPMV Lock Up

TEAM MEMBERS

Liam Wooley and Ray Maguire both led work parties for the first time this year, and Denis Boltwood worked closely with OCC on a trial aimed at reducing the backlog of data in their online CAMs reporting system.

We were all extremely saddened by the death of Charles Crawcour, who had been responsible for all the workday call-outs, as well as being an active member of the volunteers' team. He continues to be much-missed and a gate in his memory is being planned.



Charles Crawcour

TRAINING

Eight volunteers attended a first aid training course this year, and we now have eleven volunteers who are qualified first aiders. Two volunteers attended brushcutter training courses; there are now ten qualified brushcutter operators, and four who can use chain saws.

A new card system, provided by the Chiltern Society, was introduced for volunteers to wear around their necks on workdays, containing details of existing medical conditions, blood group, allergies, etc.

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The PMV works very closely with and is supported by Hugh Potter and his Countryside team within Highways at OCC. For the Chiltern Society working in Oxfordshire and more specifically SCPMV, this is our key relationship, and we could not achieve what we do without their help and backing.

WORKING WITH TRUST FOR OXFORDSHIRE ENVIRONMENT

The vast majority of our gate projects are funded by Trust for Oxfordshire Environment (TOE), an independent environmental funder.

Fiona Danks, director of TOE: "Our support for rights of way allows more people to enjoy Oxfordshire's green spaces and countryside. Over the years, we have provided grants for the South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers to replace difficult and broken stiles with almost 300 gates on public rights of way across the Oxfordshire Chilterns. We have allocated about £90,000 to these projects, with most funding provided by Grundon through the Landfill Communities Fund and some projects also supported by Brakspear.

"We are delighted to have supported the purchase of gates and other materials knowing that the skilled volunteers do such a great job of installing them. Many miles of Chiltern footpaths are now more accessible, and footfall looks to have increased by 25%. We gather that walking guidebooks increasingly mention that Chiltern paths offer some of the easiest access in the country.

"We wish the SCPMV ongoing success."

SCPMV AND THE HENLEY AND GORING RAMBLERS

SCPMV has always worked closely with the local Ramblers community, and a number of Ramblers act as volunteers and task leaders as well as working as Chiltern Society path reps and Area Secretaries, including Alie Hagedoorn, the chairperson of H&G Ramblers. In 2020 H&G Ramblers will sponsor a gate installation at Stonor, as they have done in a number of past years, and we are very grateful for their support.

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; Area Secretaries – Susan Maguire, Maggie Templeman, Alan Futter.



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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