

Charity & Community

The Lye Valley – a green space in Headington

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and Judy Webb

We are fortunate in Headington to have two important water courses, the Boundary Brook and the Lye Brook. There is a footpath along the Lye Valley that leads off The Slade, about 70 yards beyond the Girdlestone Road junction, and if you follow the path beside the stream you will find it hard to imagine that you are actually surrounded by built-up Oxford. The two brooks join further along this path.



The Lye Brook was once the centre of a large boggy area known by various names including 'Hogley Bog' and 'Bullington Bog'. It is a very rare environment: a wet area, fed by lime-rich springs along the valley walls, making it technically a 'calcareous fen'. It is home to many unusual plants that are adapted to this environment, including the marsh helleborine, an orchid which flourishes here, and grass of Parnassus, a very rare species in this part of the UK. It is also abundant in wildlife: unusual insects including the brown hairstreak butterfly and glow-worms, birds such as the reed warbler, reptiles (grass snakes, slow-worms and lizards) and of course foxes, badgers and occasional deer. The importance of this area has led to the designation of two Sites of Special Scien-

tific Interest, the North and South Fens, which are protected by legislation.

For centuries this was common land used for grazing animals, which kept grass and reeds short, allowing the flowers to flourish. But over the last century, the valley has changed: large estates have grown up around it, trees have colonized it, and the vegetation has changed. Now there is a major threat to its continued existence because of hydrological (water) issues. The fen is wetted by natural springs, but the catchment area for these springs, once open country, is now very much built up – and threatened by further development. In addition, water run-off from the surrounding area, instead of percolating gently into the ground, is now captured in large drains and fed into the brook. When there is heavy rain, the brook becomes a raging torrent, and the bed and the walls are being eroded. We have put some videos of the brook during heavy rain on YouTube (search for Lye Valley). This increased flow is threatening the



fenland. As the brook sinks lower between its banks, water drains off the fen, leading to a gradual drying out of the fens.

The City Council cut the long vegetation once a year and volunteers rake the cut material off the fen. More volunteers are always welcome. But we should all be concerned at the state of this precious green space in Headington, and do all we can to protect it.