A Right Royal View from the Bridge

Mike Hart, Chairman

Now that life is getting back to normal it is time to reorganise events that were cancelled due to the pandemic. Everyone was very disappointed that so many events had to be cancelled last year but the upside of this is that they can now be rescheduled to coincide with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in June next year to make our celebrations a right royal occasion. To start the ball rolling a small coordination group drawn from both the Sonning Regatta and the Scarecrow committees and the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society got together to do some preliminary planning and came up with the following provisional timetable:

Saturday 28th May: Sonning Regatta. As usual this highly popular event will be held upstream of Sonning Lock and will comprise a series of races for different categories together with food and beverage stalls. Calls for entries will be issued early next year to give the teams time to get into the mood and practice the physical and combative skills needed to compete.

Sunday 29th May: Sonning heritage and nature reserve events. The details are still to be arranged but this will be an opportunity to learn more about the history of Sonning village and its important buildings. Sonning environmental superstar Prof. Ali Driver will be your guide in the nature reserve.

Monday 30th May - Wednesday 1st June: Children's events to be held over the three days including tennis and soccer coaching and pond dipping at Ali's Pond. The idea is to create a range of interesting and challenging activities for children of all ages during the half term holidays.

Thursday Evening 2nd June: Sonning Parish Council is planning on arranging celebrations around the lighting of a beacon on King George V Field to mark the official beginning of the Jubilee festival. Details to be finalised but likely to include entertainment and a range of stalls.

Wow, that's going to be quite something, a whole week of celebrations to look forward to! Tickets to all the events will be available at a ticketing event in Pearson Hall that will be well advertised.



The Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations, Sonning Lane, 1977

Thursday 2nd and Friday 3rd June: These two days will be public holidays next year, replacing the one that would normally take place on Monday 6th June. As there won't be any buses passing through the village it will make the running of Sonning Scarecrows that much easier. Sonning residents will be invited to let their imagination run riot and come up with scarecrows that will delight the many visitors.

With good weather (already on request) the money generated will be put to good use to the benefit of the village. St. Andrew's Church will be decked out, more details to follow.

Saturday 4th June: The Regatta Committee is hoping to arrange an Elegant Picnic to take place on Saturday evening at a venue in Sonning, still to be finalised. The funds raised help to finance the next Sonning Regatta.

Sunday 5th June: Street Party as her Majesty has suggested for that day, venue still to be finalised but possibly Pearson Road if a road closure can be arranged. St. Andrew's Church will hold a special festival Jubilee Service at 10.30am.

Bridge is the newsletter of the
Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

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Executive Committee & Panels

Patrick Hamblin, Planning & Traffic Panel

Meetings & Planning Applications

Monthly meetings of the Panel have continued since the last edition of *Bridge*. At the June, July and August meetings a total of 10 applications were discussed.

The following decisions have been made by Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) in cases where the Society commented:

- Application for a 20 metres 5G telecommunications mast with a cabinet at its base on land at Bath Road, Sonning approved.
- Fairway, 7 West Drive: two applications (one to build in back garden and one to demolish existing property and build two houses in its place) refused.
- Land South of Old Bath Road: 57 dwellings in three blocks for over 60s approved.
- Holme Park Sports Ground Pavilion: to be replaced by a detached bungalow, previously refused by WBC and now dismissed on appeal.
- Reading Blue Coat School: to increase pupil numbers up to 1,100 approved.
- Berkshire County Sports Club,
 Sonning Lane: to extend the car park

area – approved.

- Reading Golf Club: Reading Borough Council refused permission for 257 houses on the site of the former golf club.
- South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) approved alterations to a building at Mill Farm, Sonning Eye.
- The Environment Agency, reporting to SODC, objected to the application by The Mill at Sonning for the conversion of the existing rehearsal/accommodation building into two dwellings.

Local Plan Update

In view of the fact that all the sites that were previously promoted by WBC, as well as three additional sites, were included in an update WBC issued earlier this year, the Society is waiting for the updated plan to be issued so that suitable comments can be given. As noted in the previous edition of *Bridge*, these three additional sites are: The Old Redingensians Sports Ground (4.29 hectares), Sonning Golf Club (1.6 hectare extension to the already agreed

site) and land at Holme Park Farm (25.3 hectares).

Traffic

As noted previously, Panel members are participating in a working group consisting of representatives of Sonning Parish Council, WBC, and others to endeavour to find solutions to the road safety problems in Sonning. Improvements in Pound Lane, being the extension of the 20mph area, are understood to have been agreed by WBC but we are waiting for the signage and street furniture to be installed.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

The results of the questionnaire are being analysed.

Third Thames Crossing

No further developments to report.

Sonning Parish Council Planning Committee Meetings

The Society continues to monitor all the applications and 'attends' the virtual meetings, where appropriate.

We're Back!

Mike Hart, Chairman

It's been well over a year since our last live event, along the way we had several false starts but at long last the Society was able to hold its summer garden party on 8th August. Thanks to the generosity of Mary and Gordon Jones the event was held in their beautiful garden in West Drive and was attended by 60 members and guests. We were very lucky with the weather, threatening black clouds flew past on both sides but we kept dry, although precautions had been taken by hiring the Scout tent. Tables and chairs were borrowed from Gary and Sharon Robinson,



the tables were further beautified with the Society's tablecloths and gorgeous flower arrangements made from flowers picked from her garden by our new Education & Social Panel Coordinator, Heather Kay.

Guests enjoyed a glass of champagne, sandwiches, tea and cakes (some from the



Gordon Jones

Village Hamper) served on attractive crockery. Gordon hid several clues around his garden which made up the letters to a phrase, participants filled in the answers and Gordon presented the winner and runner-up with a bottle of wine from the Hurst vineyard. Unfortunately Heather was unable to attend but she and her team did a great job planning and managing the event which everyone enjoyed, especially because of the opportunity to enjoy chatting to friends again, just like the old times!





Almshouse Assoc. 75 Year Celebration

Mike Hart, Chairman of the Trustees

On Sunday 11th July, the Robert Palmer's Almshouse Charity (RPAC) hosted a garden party to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the founding of the Almshouse Association. The CEO of the Association, Nick Phillips, attended together with Gerry Harmon the Association's Campaign Manager. Guests included Theresa and Philip May, past RPAC Chairmen Colin Pierce and Bart Guthrie, current trustees and helpers together with current cottage residents. In her speech Theresa reminded us that she is no stranger to the cottages having previously officiated at the refurbishment of the allotment sheds and the glass veranda.

Nick spoke about the role of the Association. Dating back to the 10th century, almshouses are the oldest form of social housing; they are held in trust by local people for local people in perpetuity, generation after generation. The Almshouse Association traces its roots back to February 1946 when, at a meeting held in the Chapter House of Southwark Cathedral, representatives of London's almshouses formed a committee to safeguard the interests of almshouse buildings and the welfare of residents.

In 1950, the committee extended its remit, and the National Association of Almshouses (The Almshouse Association) was born. The objects of the Association are to assist charity trustees to manage their resources effectively, to support them in providing good quality housing for those in need, to promote the welfare and independence of residents and to preserve the historic tradition of almshouses for future generations.

Readers will recall the feature article in the Spring 2019 issue of *Bridge* which described how the Robert Palmer's cottages were opened in 1850 to provide housing for the needy drawn from the catchment area of the five parishes of Sonning, Sonning Common, Eye and Dunsden, Charvil and Woodley. RPAC is managed by a committee of trustees drawn from each of the five parishes. Over the years the trustees have benefitted greatly from the support and advice provided by the Association and we were pleased to recognise this by hosting the garden party to celebrate their 75th anniversary.

And over in Sonning Eye Janey Gascoine celebrated her 93rd birthday in August, and wrote a poem

I had a party in my garden And to celebrate the occasion I invited all my special friends To partake in the celebration

The invitation said
"Bring a plate of food
No presents thank you
And I'll supply the booze"

We had a birthday cake
Which my friend Judy made
A chocolate cake - my favourite
It was to her credit

And the credit of good pals I can't thank them enough They pulled out all the stops To make the party really tops

After months of lockdown Indoors all alone I think we all felt the benefit And I felt much younger for it!

Photo thanks to Rod Thomas







Not Just The Pond Man

Memories of: Alastair Driver

Interviewed by Annabella Marks

Professor Alastair "Ali" Driver is a founder member of our society and is well-known to those living in Sonning and Sonning Eye. We were delighted when he agreed to join the executive committee and we have all benefitted from his expertise, lectures and nature walks. I spent a morning with him hearing about his life and career.

I was born in Gloucestershire, in the middle of nowhere. By the time I was four we were living in a 14th century cottage.... I had a pretty feral upbringing, roaming the woods, climbing trees, building dams in streams. My father knew quite a lot about wildlife and enthused me and I became a naturalist. I was collecting insects by the age of eight, and pinning them, and he made a recording of me, aged three, going through a field guide of birds and identifying most of them. My Dad sort of hot-housed me. He used to take me along on bird watching trips to Bardsey, a remote island off N Wales, very basic. I spent every holiday of my youth on that island and it was a fantastic contrast to the Cotswolds. I loved it.

I managed to get into Lancaster – the only university doing ecology in the country – in 1975 and scraped a degree. By that time, I was finding exams really difficult but I was fine at the practical stuff and I regularly got top marks for any field work. Fortunately, that was just enough to get me through.

I got a temporary job straight away after graduating doing wildlife surveys of Gloucestershire rivers with a team of three other guys in 1978, but it was only a summer job with no guarantee of further work. There were very few jobs in conservation in the late 1970s and one usually needed a PhD. Next year I got a similar job in Northants. Then nothing. I went back home and swept factory floors to earn enough for Belinda and I to get married, which we did in 1980.

Then I was offered a job on a fish farm near Colnbrook. It was a permanent job so we moved down here. That job lasted for three years then Thames Water Authority (TWA) advertised for a fish-farmer job, which I got.

The fish farm was at Queen Elizabeth reservoir, Walton on

Thames. I rebuilt it from scratch on my own. No health and safety don't go there! - all weathers, every day, all on my own on slippery wooden platforms in a giant 60 ft deep lake with no one around. It got me super fit though, which was great for me as I've always been very sporty, playing rugby, cricket, football etc. and I wanted to see if I could play top level rugby. So I joined London Irish and made it into first team squad and won Player of the Year for the "A" team. A great experience. It was before the professional game but a great experience to be in the same squad as British Lions and Internationals.

After 18 months in this job, TWA created the first ever Conservation Officer for the whole of the Thames catchment area. From Cirencester to Dagenham and Banbury to Basingstoke - 5000 square miles. After a circuitous route over five years, I had landed the dream job. This story is one that I would quote to youngsters who want a job in conservation and who struggle to get a job. If you hang in there and you do whatever you are doing to the best of your

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ability, you've got half a chance of getting to the right place for you - eventually.

It was 1984. Empty desk, no rules. No one had done that job before. Making it up as you go along. So, I asked myself what does this organisation do? It employed 10,000 people. 3-4,000 were engineers doing things that were potentially damaging to the environment. Dredging rivers, building flood defences, pipeline schemes, sewage works, reservoirs, all these civil engineering works gradually eroding the natural environment. A massive challenge so I focused on certain things. Gradually winning people over and building a big department.

What did you start with?

My main focus was the way we managed our rivers. There was a lot of dredging going on for no good reason. The assumption was if you dredge a river and make it straighter it's going to be better for flood risk management. It's often not. In many cases it makes things worse downstream. And of course. you lose the natural habitat as well. Our legal duty was to further conservation while carrying out our functions. I ended up with thirty people in my team in the Thames region when I moved up to head office.

I became the national Head of Conservation for the Environment Agency in 2002. I had the chance to do it sooner but I loved the handson stuff. It was a similar situation as before, there weren't many policies or strategies in place, so I brought my experience from Thames and built-up a big department over the next 15 years, despite multiple cutbacks.

In 2010 I thought we should enter the Thames into the International Riverprize, then the biggest environmental prize in the world. I had to persuade the powers that be, to let me put this bid together. In 1955 the Thames had been declared dead in London. Only bacteria and algae, no invertebrates, no fish. The clean-up story needed to be told. Now there are 125 species of fish, seahorses breeding in the estuary, and otters are back. I had to raise money to go to Australia for the awards event as they wouldn't fund me. But I did go and present the case and after an agonizing awards ceremony, we won and I came back with a trophy and a cheque for \$350,000. We gave that money to help clean up the Yamuna River in India.

The winning of that award was the highlight of my professional career and it was great to get international acclaim for what we had been doing. As a result of the environmental work I've been privileged to be involved in, I've been invited all over the world to advise governments and even royalty and it always amazes me just how small the Thames is compared to rivers elsewhere - but the basic principles are the same.

Although I relish influencing national policy, I still love the hands-on stuff, and so I have kept on doing that here in the village. We moved into Sonning in 1987, back to a more rural setting right alongside Reading University farm. Once we had settled in, I started thinking - what can I do locally? I had created a couple of ponds locally, and then thought we haven't got a village green or a pond. There were good habitats around the village but nothing in the centre of any great wildlife value, apart from big gardens. That's how Ali's Pond started. I raised grant money and, with Sonning Parish Council approval, we created a pond and planted trees and wildflowers in the waste ground on King George's Field. That was nearly 25 years ago. People started to call it Ali's Pond as it didn't have a name and the Parish Council kindly agreed. I'm delighted with it. We have a Friend of Ali's Pond group with over 70 members who look after it. I've overseen more than a 1.000 conservation projects around the country, but this is one I'm proudest of – not least because it's in the village I love.

There have been lots of other local initiatives to get stuck into as well, like the barn owl box project, the Sonning Cutting tree-felling saga, tree planting along the A4 and the restoration of the Pound. Small ways of contributing to a better natural environment. I've also enjoyed securing over £100K from various external sources to fund things in the village over the years.

By 2016, the Environment Agency (EA) was becoming increasingly clawed into DEFRA. I was becoming very constrained in what I could do and say at work.

PHOTOS

Left Page: Ali at Ali's Pond, October 2020 (credit Sam Rose); Ali in early Thames Conservation Officer rôle, mid-80s; Left: Ali with Home Secretary, Theresa May, and International Riverprize trophy and cheque, 2010 Next Page: Ali with Sir David Attenborough



I'd been used to talking to ministers directly, able to do media stuff without going through endless hoops and so I was ready for a change and so I took voluntary early retirement from the EA.

Then within three months, a job as Director of Rewilding Britain, a tiny charity, turned up and it turned out to be the perfect next step for me. It's a controversial subject, but already much less so than five years ago. What we are seeking to do is to catalyse large scale ecological restoration for nature and people, bringing communities with us. I've worked hard on the inclusive communitybased approach explaining what it can do for people as well as wildlife. Not purist rewilding admittedly, but this is how we can move people into a more sustainable future.

This approach is definitely working. I'm inundated by people wanting to talk about rewilding. As a result I have to focus on the big stuff; if you want to rewild 250 acres plus, then I will visit to advise. I'm travelling the country, encouraging people to join our Rewilding Network. We need clusters. It can't just be big estates; it will require smaller scale landowners to be joining together on this as well. The key thing now - a chink of light - is the change in farming policy. Generally, the EU brought us better environmental legislation than we would otherwise have had. But the Common Agricultural Policy was disastrous for the environment. It drove farmers to produce more and more food out of the same area of land, thus degrading soil and water, for little extra profit. Not the farmers' fault. Now we are phasing out the CAP Basic Payment Scheme and introducing the Environmental Land Management scheme. It will reward farmers if they farm in a proactive way that enhances the environment by creating habitats, protecting special areas, planting trees, restoring wild flower meadows etc. I'm not saying it's going to be perfect, but at least we will no longer be paying farmers money just to

produce more and more food. We should pay farmers properly for the food we produce through the marketplace - and we should stop wasting 40% of what we produce. Can vou believe it?! 40% doesn't get eaten. It's disgraceful. So, whenever people say to me how are we going to feed the world if we rewild everywhere, I say, first we are not going to rewild everywhere. We at Rewilding Britain aim to catalyse rewilding of 5% of Britain - most on marginally productive land - and at the moment we are rewilding only 0.3%. And secondly if we are so concerned about food security, then why are we producing all this stuff that doesn't get eaten?

Now I am thoroughly enjoying myself again. It's all the best bits of what I used to do without the bureaucracy. I love it. I did enjoy managing a team but I did my time, 35 years of that. I'm cut loose now. I can just pick up the phone to senior politicians or CEOs of the National Trust etc. - and vice versa. And we've had some big wins with policy lately; the Environmental Land Management scheme, natural regeneration now being allowed to be counted alongside tree planting in the Woodland Grant Scheme, and the establishment of the £640M Nature for Climate fund.

And I've had the great privilege of meeting many amazing people in my 40+ years in this business. I've met Sir David Attenborough several times for example and he's helped to launch some of my projects. You find out what they are really like. The TV celebrities, the real experts like him and Packham and the late David Bellamy, they are all really decent people. What you see is what you get. I've also teamed up with the incredible Col John Blashford Snell CBE, who is now 83 and still leading wildlife expeditions to remote corners of the world. I lead on the wildlife studies on those trips. Fantastic experiences.

If I'm talking about my career, I have to give massive credit to Belinda because when we got married in 1980, her dad said "What does he do? An ecologist? How's he going to keep you as an ecologist?" Don't blame him. But



she knew that and she has stuck by me and encouraged me all the way. We went through frugal times early on and she put up with me working stupid hours and me doing all my sport. Cricket and rugby on Saturdays forever! She also does a remarkable and, more than ever, critically important job as a psychotherapist – a job that I could never do!

Will you stay in Sonning?

We love Sonning – our three sons Daniel, Liam and Kieran were all brought up in this village and the whole community spirit here is phenomenal and we are both really happy here. We're involved in so much, and it's just a privilege to live in this community with so many good friends. And the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society stuff. Amazing. To have a village organisation like that with over 200 members and packing out the village hall for an AGM every year. And the scarecrow festival. So much going for us here. If you give, you get it back in spades in a place like this. That's another reason why I am always looking for more projects to get stuck into. My next one will hopefully be a hedgehog street for this part of the village. Always something else to do if you think global and act local!

Our Next Events

More information and links to purchase tickets to all our events in Pearson Hall can be found on sonning.org.uk

TALK: Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter

Tuesday 5th October, 7.30 for 7.45pm

Reading Abbey was founded in June 1121 exactly 900 years ago. It was one of England's foremost and wealthiest monasteries inhabited by monks for more than 400 years.

The Abbey fell into decline for 3 centuries. In 2018 the ruins were fully restored and opened to the public. John Painter will be delivering an illustrated talk about this ancient building.

To book a place email penny.feathers@btinternet.com or book online.

Tickets as usual are £4 for members or £5 for guests.





FILM CLUB: The Quiet American POSTPONED FROM LAST SEASON Tuesday 19th October, 7.30pm

The Quiet American is a 2002 film adaptation of Graham Green's best selling novel set in Vietnam in the early 1950s. It was directed by Phillip Noyce and stars Michael Cane, Brendan Fraser and Do Thi Hai Yen. A veteran British reporter vies with a young U.S. doctor for the affections of a beautiful Vietnamese woman.

Cost of attendance is £5 for members (£6 for quests) on the door or via our website.

Society AGM & Supper

Saturday 20th November, 7.15pm sharp!

Our AGM and Supper will be held in the Pearson Hall on Saturday 20th November.

We are hopeful that, if she's not called away, our guest speaker will be Sacha Dench, the renowned conservationist and founder of Conservation Without Borders, who is currently planning a 3,000+ mile circumnavigation of the British Isles in a green electricity powered paramotor - the Round Britain Climate Challenge.

Tickets remain at £16 and must be purchased before 5th November.



Eye & Dunsden - Neighbourhood Development Plan

David Woodward, Chair of Eye & Dunsden NDP and Parish Council

Eye & Dunsden parish held its first ever public consultation event on the area's emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan on Bank Holiday Monday. Creating NDPs has become essential for communities under increasing pressure that wish to influence what should be protected and where and what new building development should take place. The parish consists of just 150 houses, and the local landowner has already suggested it could cope with almost 800 more.

Around 50 people attended the event which took the form of a series of professionally designed exhibition panels and a questionnaire. The need to combat the climate emergency is a prime concern of the policies being developed by a dedicated team of ten volunteers who were available to answer questions. Consultation will follow with local businesses by Zoom later this month. It is hoped that the NDP process, which began 18 months ago, will be completed by this time next year. Comments received have so far been very supportive, with a number of people also urging

improvements to roads and footpaths. The parish hopes to work with Sonning on issues such as traffic calming and speed reduction measures on the B481.

So far the parish has attracted around £20,000 in funding to help pay for the tough and time-consuming process. This has mostly been spent on consultants' reports, with many more hours put in by volunteers. When adopted after a public referendum, the NDP will run with the South Oxfordshire Local Plan to 2035, although the Government's imminent new Planning Act, should it be passed, threatens to reduce the impact of the scheme to merely providing guidance on the design of new development.

In the opinion of your correspondent, this is the biggest initiative taken by our community in at least half a century. If we get it right, and if NDPs are not emasculated by forthcoming reforms, our NDP will be a powerful ally in our continuing battles to ensure that our parish continues to be an agreeable place in which

Future Even Dates For Your Diaries The events that are organised by the Society are shaded in brown, other events within the environs of Sonning and Sonning Eye have a green background. Please note these events are what we hope will take place but they are subject to whatever Covid restrictions are in place at the time. Check our website for information and to book tickets. 5th August - 9th October The Mill at Sonning, Ray Cooney's riotous comedy Two Into One, Tickets available from millatsonning.com 2.15pm & 8.15pm directed by Ron Aldridge and starring Mark Curry 10th September S&SES Talk: William Smith the Oxfordshire Mapmaker, presented Members of the Society and guests are 7.30pm by Owen Green from Oxford University very welcome 11th September The Sonning Village Show - the annual fruit & veg, arts & crafts, In the grounds of Sonning Primary 2pm-5pm baking show with lots of entertainment for all the family School, Liguge Way, Pound Lane S&SES Executive Committee meeting in Pearson Hall 29th September at 7.45pm Members of the Society are very welcome 5th October S&SES Talk: Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter, an Tickets available online, members of the 7.30pm illustrated talk by John Painter Society and guests are welcome 16th October The Mill at Sonning, First Night: Top Hat, this year's spectacular Tickets available from millatsonning.com 8.15pm Christmas Musical directed by Jonathan O'Boyle 22nd October Berkshire Gardens Trust: AGM & Autumn Lecture - Kiftsgate Details ot berkshiregardenstrust.org 1.45pm Court Garden; Three Generations of Women Gardeners 20th November S&SES AGM followed by a Supper, our guest speaker will be Members of the Society and guests are 7.15pm Sacha Dench, founder of Conservation Without Borders.. very welcome 8th December at 7.45pm S&SES Executive Committee meeting in Pearson Hall Members of the Society are very welcome

>> Membership information

A warm welcome is extended to new members:

Richard & Sarah Puttock
Paul Etherington

Tim & Judy Saunders Joanna Harvey

Welcome packs for new residents are available from Lesley Heaney, our Membership Secretary (membership@sonning.org.uk), so please mention the Society when you chat to your new neighbours. We can also be found on Facebook and at www.sonning.org.uk.



Bridge is the quarterly newsletter published by the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society

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