

## Sonning Common Green Gym Group at Withymead Nature Reserve



*One woman's dream to turn an overgrown spot beside the Thames in Oxfordshire into a peaceful place for all to enjoy has helped a group of people aged 20 to 80 to get fit and healthy.*

*Beautiful Withymead Nature Reserve near Goring-on-Thames has been restored and improved by the volunteers of Sonning Common Green Gym for the Anne Carpmael Charitable Trust so that it can be opened to the public in line with the late Mrs Carpmael's wishes.*

*It's a favourite site with the members of the Green Gym, providing the perfect incentive for regular exercise (once a month, outside the nesting season) with a wide range of work activities to suit each person's level of skills and fitness.*

*While tackling personal health and fitness issues, they have made Withymead safe for visitors, particularly the pre-school children who now attend Forest School on land they have cleared. Green Gym members have also prevented the reserve's large areas of rare Loddon Lilies from being strangled by scrub, removed rusty debris from collapsed boat sheds and erected new fences, a bridge, boardwalks and bird hides. With so many different things to do and such beneficial results, it's not surprising that, according to one Gym member: "Everyone has a smile on their face when they're working at Withymead."*

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The 22-acre Withymead Nature Reserve, bordered by the Thames, is situated between Goring-on-Thames and South Stoke in Oxfordshire, near the Ridgeway Path. It is run by the Anne Carpmael Charitable Trust, which was set up five months prior to the landowner's death in 2004. It was Mrs. Carpmael's wish that the riverside lands surrounding the house at Withymead should be open as much as possible for the public to enjoy its peace and tranquillity.

The special features of the site are its Loddon Lilies which cover large areas near the river and its wildlife, both resident and migrant. There is also historical interest in the remains of the boatyard, which operated there from the 1880s until 1916. Some of the original formal gardens with ponds survive around the house, and the west of the Reserve contains extensive reed beds.

The Reserve, which has involved local schools since its opening in June 2004, now has in its grounds a Forest School, where pre-school children discover the outdoors in a structured manner.

### **Hazards to tackle**

Sonning Common Green Gym started work sessions at Withymead in April 2004. The site had suffered many years of neglect and needed a lot of work to make it accessible and safe for visitors, particularly schoolchildren. It was a jungle of trees and scrub, some of which was useful habitat for birds and animals, but in some areas was threatening wildflowers such as the Loddon Lily. There were hazards to tackle: dangerous trees and ditches, rusty debris from collapsed boatsheds, and squelchy paths through the reed beds. The garden ponds were

silted up and the industrial features of the historic boatyard had disappeared under decades of leaf mould and scrub.

As there was such a lot to be done, the Green Gym allotted Withymead a monthly session in its work programme except in the nesting season. Tasks have included: tree felling and clearing away professionally-felled trees (either burning or creating habitat piles from the debris), pruning willows on the river bank, removing trees from the river, taking down derelict fences, erecting new post-and-wire fences, clearing corrugated iron from the old boatsheds into a skip, digging out the boat-launching slipway, building a bridge over the inlet to access the reed beds, cutting paths in the reed bed then building boardwalks, and constructing two bird hides. When plans were made to set up the Forest School, Green Gym members prepared an area in the former orchard by removing trees or other vegetation which could be hazardous to pre-schoolers (whilst retaining everything that could be a learning/adventure opportunity), installed a perimeter fence with a gate and erected a small open shelter.



The tasks are done under the direction of resident wardens Brian and Joyce Shaw. Sonning Common Green Gym is the only volunteer group involved in practical conservation at Withymead, and it continues to visit for about 8 sessions a year now the initial work has been done.

### **Work-outs for all**

It is the variety of activity, together with the beauty of this riverside site, which attracts Green Gym volunteers, and continues to make it one of the most popular sites for the group. The volunteers, both men and women, are aged from 20s to 80s so have different skill levels, all of which can be accommodated at Withymead. Tasks such as digging out ponds and driving in fence posts give a heavy work-out, whereas nailing slats to a boardwalk or pruning overgrown footpaths is steady but lighter work. A major aim of Green Gyms is to promote health and fitness, so it is important that people come on a regular basis; at Withymead the average attendance is 14. Working with others in the open air has been proved to benefit mental as well as physical fitness, and those volunteers with problems of depression or undergoing stressful situations such as bereavement or redundancy have found the Green Gym to be very helpful. They also enjoy the social side of conservation volunteering, finding Sonning Common Green Gym a very friendly group.

### **Preserving wildlife**

The Green Gym members enjoy learning about the variety of wildlife at Withymead. 137 different bird species have been observed to date at the Reserve, and the members' work helps to preserve the various habitats they need. Buzzards and red kites nest in the tall trees and sedge warblers and reed warblers arrive each year to breed in the reed bed. One of the bird hides overlooks the inlet used for nesting by great crested grebes and swans. A survey of the Reserve in 2007 logged many types of moths, butterflies and dragonflies, over 150 flowers and plants and flourishing badger setts.



### **Schoolkids and twitchers now have easy access**

With the improvements to the Reserve, visiting groups of schoolchildren and bird-watchers now have easy access to the reed bed via the bridge and more than 150m of boardwalk for observation. Visitors from The Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Society and the Consuta Trust are able to study the hitherto hidden remains of the Saunders boatyard. One of the greatest successes is the Forest School, in which rising-5s interact with the woodland environment through play and structured lessons. Youngsters

nowadays are most often driven everywhere by car and don't get the chance to run free in the woods. At the Forest School they get close to Nature, which is used by their teacher as a basis for other subjects such as maths, English and crafts, to say nothing of the inbuilt PE! Sessions are held twice a week at Withymead during term time.

The Reserve is funded by the Anne Carpmael Charitable Trust, with additional grants from the Chiltern Conservation Board, Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and South Oxfordshire District Council for boardwalk and hide materials and the planned visitor centre/observation hide. Lottery funding is also being sought for this building, which is to be of wooden construction on the site of a derelict cottage. The Trust pays Sonning Common Green Gym a small administration fee per session.

It is hoped construction of the visitor centre will start in 2009. The history of Withymead and its surrounding wildlife will be displayed in the building, which will enable school groups to make day visits whatever the weather.



**“Withymead is such a lovely place”**

SCGG holds Withymead in great affection, having been so closely involved with the evolution of the Reserve from its beginnings, and will continue to visit there as needed. “It is so satisfying to work at Withymead, because you see results every time you come and our work brings permanent improvements to the site” (Jane). “I like the fact there is always something to do at your own level, and the tasks are well-planned in advance by the warden” (Christine). “I’ve had all sorts of heart problems, but the Green Gym has kept me

going over the years. Withymead is such lovely place, I make a point of turning up whenever it is on the programme” (Freddie). “Everyone has a smile on their face when they’re working at Withymead” (John).

**Robin Howles** (SCGG Secretary) 0118 972 3528 – for contact details:

[www.greengym.org.uk/sonningcommon](http://www.greengym.org.uk/sonningcommon)

**Brian Shaw** (Withymead Warden) 01491 872265

[www.withymeadnr.org](http://www.withymeadnr.org)