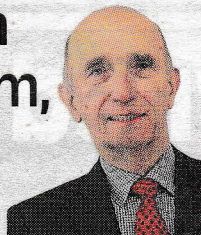


NewsFeature

Abingdon Green Gym, by James White



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PRIDE

Heading out to get fitter and boost our surrounding nature

ABINGDON Green Gym is part of a national network of Green Gyms that have over 100 branches throughout the UK and the idea is being replicated in some other countries.

The first Green Gym was set up by Dr William Bird, a local GP, in Sonning Common, near Henley. It started in 1998 and Dr Bird's idea was that people recovering from surgery or some illness would benefit from the fresh air and exercise and, at the same time, make a contribution to enhancing their local environment and enjoying the social benefits of being in a group of like-minded people.

This model was developed by the Conservation Volunteers (BTCV at the time) who established a structure, organisation, and provided resources to expand the Green Gym network. Green Gyms now have a broad base and welcome anyone with an interest in conservation and the 'green' environment.

The Abingdon Green Gym was started in 2005 and works in 15 sites in the Abingdon area, usually no more than five miles from the town centre. These include nature reserves, parkland, and sites of special scientific interest.

Among these are the Jarn Mound and Abrahams Wood at Boars Hill, Southern Town Park, the Abbey Fishponds and the Ock Island. The group has also carried out pond clearance at Cumnor, Sunningwell and the Elizabeth Daryrush Memorial Garden at Boars Hill.

Much of the work is carried out in association with conservation bodies such as Natural England, the Oxford Preservation Trust, the Earth Trust and BBOWT.

The Abingdon group meets every Saturday at 9.30am and works until 12.30pm throughout the year, whatever the weather. It has around 35 members and, on a typical Saturday, some 20 will be present. They can be spotted by the distinctive green T-shirts and sweatshirts they wear.

Members enjoy social events, including theatre trips, picnics and quizzes. Work includes coppicing, scrub clearance to facilitate the growth of wildflowers, the creation of habitats, the pulling of the invasive weed Himalayan Balsam, plus planting saplings and wildflower seeds.

One of the Green Gym principles is that no power tools are ever used, but the group has an extensive stock of hand tools including loppers, bandsaws, slashers, spades, rakes, and pitchforks.

It has a website - <http://abingdongreengym.org.uk> - a blog recording weekly activities - abingdongreengym.blogspot.com - and is on Facebook @abingdongreengym

Other Green Gyms are in Wallingford, Sonning, Woodstock and Bicester.