



Green Gym turns twenty



Back in the 1990s, Dr William Bird was a young GP at Sonning Common Health Centre in South Oxfordshire. He had always been fascinated by the connection between human beings and their environment and was concerned that we were, and are, being cut off from our true origins.

He says, "our bodies are meant to be active and we're designed to be connected to nature. We're hunter-gatherers and our bodies currently exist in an alien environment of being indoors all the time and living under artificial lights and so on. Owing to this, our bodies respond with chronic inflammation which leads to cancer and long-term illness the real aim of the game is to get people moving and connect them to their place."

Green Gym was his brainchild. In 1998, he brought in nature conservation experts from the forerunner of charity TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) to set up the first group, at Sonning Common. That very first gym has prospered, and today is just one of 140 Green Gyms all over the country. In addition there are now Green Gyms in Australia (one of them just 20 miles from Chipping Norton, N.S.W.) and in South Korea. Today, Green Gym is also present at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham - just a few years ago, we might have said "even present".

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Green Gym, at the beginning of February, Sonning Common invited all the other Oxfordshire groups to celebrate with them at a work session on Watlington Hill in the Chilterns. Being members of the most distant of the Green Gyms represented on the day, we received an especially warm welcome almost worthy of time travellers. As some fifty assembled volunteers walked across the hill to the chosen site, the early morning drizzle petered out and below us, the expanses of the Vale of Oxford became more distinct as the murk lifted.



Chippy Green Gym time travellers on Watlington Hill

In times past, Watlington Hill formed part of a mediaeval royal park, while today, it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The National Trust land on which it now lies is a mosaic of chalk downland, chalk scrub, mixed broadleaved and yew woodland habitats, with areas of leached and more acid grassland and scrub on the upper slopes. The site supports what is considered to be some of the most floristically diverse grassland in the Chilterns and is also notable for its butterfly populations, with twenty species having been recorded.

As hunter-gatherers, we went for trees and bushes which had been designated as threatening to become thuggish in fragile habitat terms. A copse of birch saplings showed off its winter finery, the red fronds of the slender branches glowing against the gleam of the smooth white trunks. I felt that connection which inspired Dr Bird, but our National Trust ranger Jerry had said that the Watlington Hill birch self-seeded much too freely - so they got the chop. Privet, wayfarer and hawthorn also met its end, though the thorn inevitably fought back by trying to work its spines into my socks.

Quite soon, it seemed, it was time for the tea-break, a vital part of the Green Gym experience, a chance to socialise and more often than not sample the cake that is so generously made by members week after week. On this occasion there was a choice of delights baked all over the county. It's not only armies that march on their stomachs: it's been scientifically proven that during many Green Gym activities more calories are burned off than they are in aerobics sessions. This special anniversary tea-break was followed by a short speech from Dr Bird himself and a few words from Green Gym's Managing Director, physiologist Craig Lister. Green Gym has grown tremendously as an organisation and is now attracting considerable amounts of charitable growth funding, so requires a professional management structure.



William Bird M.B.E. (left) with Sonning Common Green Gym Chairman John Hasler

Then it was back to more sawing and lopping, and dragging of brush, branch and bole to the bonfire sites. We developed a very satisfactory symbiosis with the fires, whereby they consumed our scrub and we, at the end of the session, consumed the potatoes baked in their embers. Green Gym work sessions often seem very much of two halves; after the break, some work at a gentler pace and maybe take more time to chat, or just stop and stare, while others set themselves a goal to achieve before going-home time, and crack on with renewed energy.

By the end of the morning, after the equivalent of two and a half weeks' work if done by one person, we could clearly see the difference we had made. That beautiful spot was a very fitting location to have chosen, as it is involved in a second project also dating back to the 1990s. One question then was "will Green Gym work?", and the other, "what are the prospects for *Milvus milvus*?"

We now have the answer to both. As we collected up our tools, the magnificent milvus wheeled overhead, instantly recognisable forked tails steadying them as they loftily surveyed the results of our labours. We were close to where a first generation of these red kites was reintroduced at a time when it was a globally threatened species. Theirs is an undoubted success story, and Green Gym is too.