

RCCC 2nd AGM on 27/3/14

Chair's report

Welcome to the second Annual General Meeting of the RCCC.

The previous (and first) AGM was held in December 2012. In the 15 months since then there have been important developments in the garden. These include some crucial work on the infrastructure. Much needed work has been done on drainage in the College grounds generally and, thanks to that, we have not had water flooding down the garden recently as it did in torrents during the early months of 2013. The heavy clay in the garden means that drainage is also a problem in many of the plots, and there have been strenuous efforts to improve the texture and quality of the soil. William and Tom have double-dug extensively within the communal plots, a major undertaking for which we thank them. Since January 2013 we have also had three deliveries of compost which we have collectively and rapidly managed to move into the garden. We thank the Oxford University Parks for providing two loads of manure and Ruskin for helpfully accommodating this very necessary process.

The re-pointing of the walls was eventually completed in July 2013 and the scaffolding removed. This meant that we were able to plant the remaining fruit trees along the West and East walls just before Christmas, and these are now coming into leaf. The trees on the Crinkle Crackle wall are now well established, thanks to careful planting and subsequent training and pruning by Jeff and Karen, and even provided some fruit last summer. The transplanted apple and quince trees in the South bed are also doing well and becoming productive, as is the apple walkway in the centre of the communal areas. Completing the tree planting, step-over apple trees have been planted in the East and West beds.

Building on our first full season in 2011-2012, the garden was, in this last year, very productive. Early in 2013 we allocated overall responsibility for different communal areas growing specific crops to different RCCC members, and this worked well. Karen reported in September 2013 that we had had large quantities of soft fruit and vegetables from the communal plots. We also had herbs from the herb garden, and some produce for the Crinkle Crackle cafe from the kitchen plot. Karen oversaw all these efforts as project co-ordinator, helped by Jane's input in designing the rotation scheme. Judith continued to mastermind the herb garden, and Ellan provided regular contact with the cafe. In May 2013 we agreed to pilot a scheme for one year in which produce from the communal areas (apart from the kitchen plot which is dedicated to the cafe) is allocated to contributing members of the RCCC - contributing members being those who provide work on the communal areas of at least three hours per month, and/or provide a secretarial or other non-manual labour contribution. The working of this scheme now needs to be assessed in time for the coming season.

Liaison with Ruskin continues to work well. Ellan reviewed our licence arrangement with the College in March 2013, and again early this year, and we had a presence during induction week at the beginning of the academic year in an effort to get new students interested in the garden. Jeff also worked with Ruskin to devise a set of Health and Safety procedures for the garden. One major change was the departure of Audrey Mullender in November. Audrey championed the garden from the start, and we owe her a great deal. Hannah Jones now provides our main link with the College. We have also been re-assured by Chris Wilkes, as acting principal, that there are no plans to make any changes to the arrangements for the garden.

We have had three successful open days. We contributed to the Ruskin Arts Festival in May 2013 at which we ran a scarecrow competition for children judged by Brian Aldiss, and sold plants. The garden was open informally as part of the National Garden Scheme Headington Gardens Group in June, when again we had a plant sale. This was a prelude to a formal opening as part of that scheme this coming July, which has already been publicised in the NGS Yellow Book. And we ran a second Apple Day for Ruskin staff and students in October.

We have also had a large number of visitors throughout the year, including former Ruskin students and current students attending short weekend courses.

We introduced two changes last year. The first was an informal meeting dedicated to strategic planning. This was facilitated by Philip John, a patron of the garden, and was well attended. We considered the future structure of RCCC meetings and decision-making; the general maintenance of the garden & what that covers; how we decide what to plant where and when, and who we consult; how we involve Ruskin staff and students as fully as possible; general publicity and external relations; and finally financial arrangements and fund raising. On the latter point Judith will tell us more about our current position. The second change was the informal and rather jovial RCCC dinner held in January at the Black Boy to celebrate the planting of the final fruit trees and say goodbye to Audrey.

Finally, our membership has changed somewhat over the last year, and Ellan will provide further details. Two departures had special impact. One was Rachel Goddard, who was the Ruskin student representative during 2012-13, and provided a key link. We have not been able to find anyone else to take on this role. The second was Stephanie Jenkins, who had worked tirelessly for and in the garden from the start and has left a huge gap. Amongst other things, Stephanie designed and maintained the RCCC website, and we will now need to make new arrangements for this.

In summary, we have had a productive year (helped by good weather over the summer) and the permanent planting in the garden is now complete. But we still need to make efforts to recruit people and keep them in the RCCC if we are to have an adequate workforce to run the garden properly without over-reliance on the same few people all the time.

Thanks are due to all those involved and, specifically, to Karen as project coordinator, Judith as Treasurer, and Ellan as Secretary.