

## **The story of Cold Aston road side verges pilot project.**

Cold Aston is a parish in the high Cotswolds with typical Jurassic limestone landscape, and the Windrush river valley on its Northern boundary. Just like every parish, it has miles of lanes and tracks, B roads, A roads with verges either side-some along the old droving roads are several metres wide, others are thin ribbons of less than a metre from the tarmac road surface to the field boundary.

**Why we got concerned.** Back in 2007, villagers noticed the roadside wildflowers were being cut down in the prime of blooming and they had less chance to enjoy them. Some rare plants only appearing in a few places were dwindling away as they had their foliage cut early year after year and were unable to make seed. These include rare grasses like *quaking grass* and flowers such as *harebell and orchids*. In the last 20 years the way our verges are managed has changed. Nowadays cutting happens by tractor mounted cutter set at a fixed height, the driver is high up in a closed cab and can get the parish verges done in a couple of days. It is noticeable that in Gloucestershire the verges often get an early summer cut just as wild flowers are coming into bloom. This is the very worst timing for wildflower survival. A few decades ago the verges were cut by hand with scythes and it was easier to avoid special plants and alter the heights.

### **STEPS**

In 2008-2009 Two verge areas with many species of wildflowers and rare grasses were identified by botanical surveys and put on the GCC register of Conservation Status Verges with help from the County Ecologist and botanists in the community.

2009-2018 Each year the community kept watch to try and prevent these special verges being cut at the wrong time and too short (when wildflowers were in bloom). In 5 years out of 10 the contractors cut the areas, against GCC Conservation Verge rules.

2019- We realised that the best way to secure the long term survival of our rare verge wildflowers and grasses was to take on the verge management so that the timing and location of cutting could be tuned to local conditions. We negotiated with Gloucestershire County Council Highways to get payments direct to our Parish Council to hire our own contractors for verge management. Release of funds is slow so we rely on the Parish to use reserves for the contractors then get refunded.

### **Our Management approach for roadside verges outside the village**

- ❖ Our two Conservation Status Verge areas at Nine Acre Hill and Gilbert's Grave are carefully managed. Villagers check the condition of the verges and agree the best timing for ONE ANNUAL CUT ideally once seed has set. This is usually late August or early September. In some years extra work is done to control scrub encroachment.
- ❖ Sight lines on bends and junctions are managed for safety and are cut several times in the year
- ❖ We have adopted the ONE ANNUAL CUT system for all the B road verges in the parish (except for safety sight lines)

### **Indicators of success**

- ❖ **More wild flowers seen.** Very quickly we saw more wild flowers on the Conservation Verges and they have set seed in most years.
- ❖ **Enhancement of other verges.** Already the once a year cut is making it possible for wild flowers to be established on other roadside verges using plug plants and locally gathered seed
- ❖ **Countywide policy shift** Across Gloucestershire we still see costly and destructive verge mowing but more and more there is a shift to just once a year cutting in autumn thus allowing wild flowers to bloom and their seed to set.

### **Other bio-diversity initiatives in the parish**

On private land, especially farms there are many wildlife initiatives and care of special habitats. Some gardens are managed organically and have high wildlife value. But we also look for opportunities on public land.

2007 We began mapping wildlife sightings and identified important habitat areas and wildlife corridors in the parish and village area. Every few years a photographic exhibition is displayed to help encourage awareness in the community

2009 Keen villagers formed a **Nurture Nature Group** and we started an experiment to manage a small area of verge within the village by hand, and contrast this with heavily mowed areas. The range of wild flowers and grasses has increased dramatically

2019 With funds from the village Fayre, a “Bulb Lawn” is being established on a small area of verge in the village alongside the path to the school playing field. To support important insects we have planted snow drops, aconites, English blue bells and crocus and also encourage wild flowers for pollen and nectar. The area is managed to control nettles and thistles by hand and just cut once a year in early autumn after seed has set.

2020 A roadside verge with low wildflower richness is being enhanced by adding wild flower plug plants and seeds and grass removal strategies to reduce fertility so that competition with wildflowers will reduce over the years.

2021 In response to the Ash Die Back event the community are working together to encourage planting of other native trees in hedge rows and existing ash woodlands in the years ahead. This could be an opportunity to support and enhance wildlife corridors

2021 The churchyard has been identified as a vital wildlife habitat area and a working group has been set up. A trial agreement is in place to manage some areas for wild flowers and cut grass less frequently (waiting until wild flowers have seeded) and to raise the mowing height on frequently mowed areas. Enrichment planting with English Blue bells, snow drops and primroses began in Spring 2021.