



## Talking Trail at Aston Rowant NNR

Evaluation Report by Outdoor Culture CIC



*'Congratulations to everyone who participated in creating this unique enhancement to our much loved reserve'*

(Visitor feedback)

# Overview

The Talking Trail is a sound and sculpture walk at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve in Oxfordshire, produced by Outdoor Culture in partnership with Natural England. The project was supported by Heritage Lottery Fund and Natural England.

The trail combines wind-up listening posts with 6 sculptural installations to animate the hidden history and ecology of the site. The audio includes information on each sculpture, as well as stories, poems, songs, challenges and personal reflections from conservation staff and volunteers. The sculptures are made from sustainable, local timber, much of it harvested from the reserve itself.

The Talking Trail was designed and built through a participatory process, in which 217 local people worked with heritage practitioners and artists between February and July 2012.

The project aimed to use the creation of the trail as an opportunity for local groups to deepen their understanding of the site, to strengthen their connection to it, and to help new visitors to appreciate the special qualities of the nature reserve.

Despite the wettest summer for 100 years, the project was completed on time, within budget, and has been judged a great success by participants and early audiences.



# Aims and Outcomes

The project had five stated aims:

1. To engage the community in the ecology and history of the site, through their participation in its interpretation
2. To increase local people's sense of ownership and stewardship of the reserve
3. To make the site's hidden heritage accessible to a diverse range of audiences using a range of techniques which appeal to different senses
4. To attract new visitors to Aston Rowant and deepen their understanding of the site
5. To exemplify best practice in creative, sustainable, community-led interpretation

## How well were the aims met?

- 1. To engage the community in the ecology and history of the site, through their participation in its interpretation**

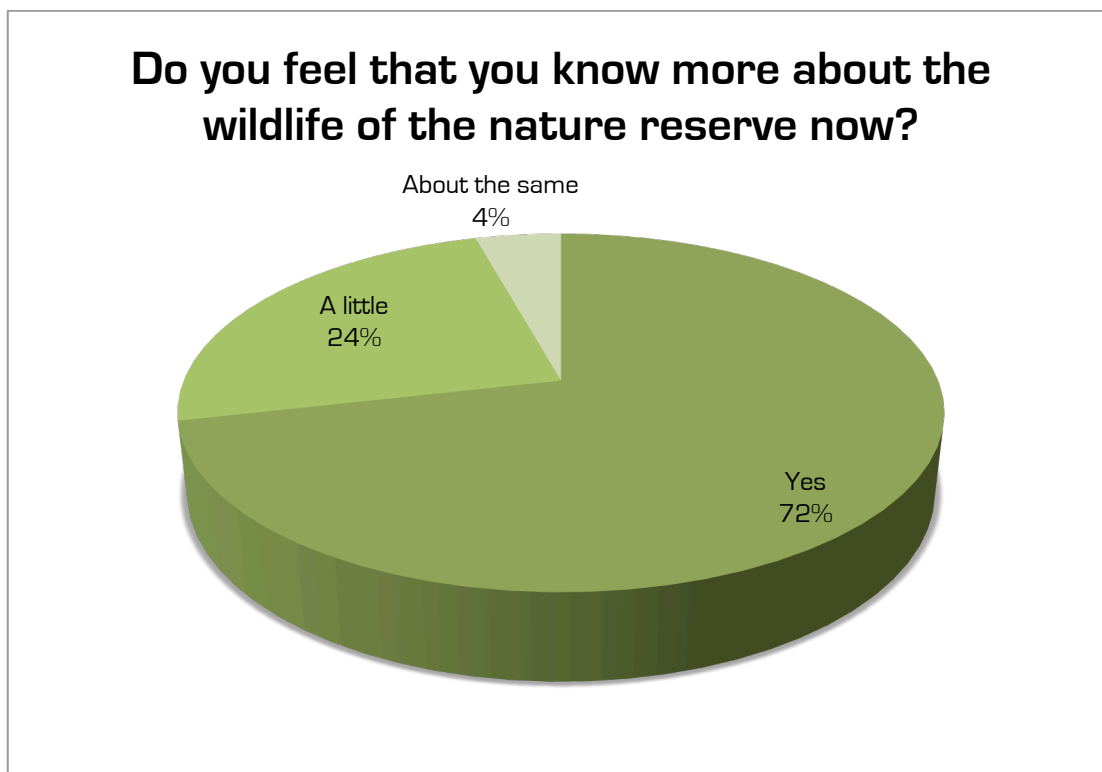
There is lots of evidence that this aim was well met: photographs documenting participant engagement, feedback questionnaires and the finished interpretation itself, particularly the audio.

217 people participated in the project, learning about the site's heritage and expressing this through sculpture and audio. The project was concerned with the ecology of 12 key plant and animal species that are actively conserved at Aston Rowant, and the natural and human history of the place.

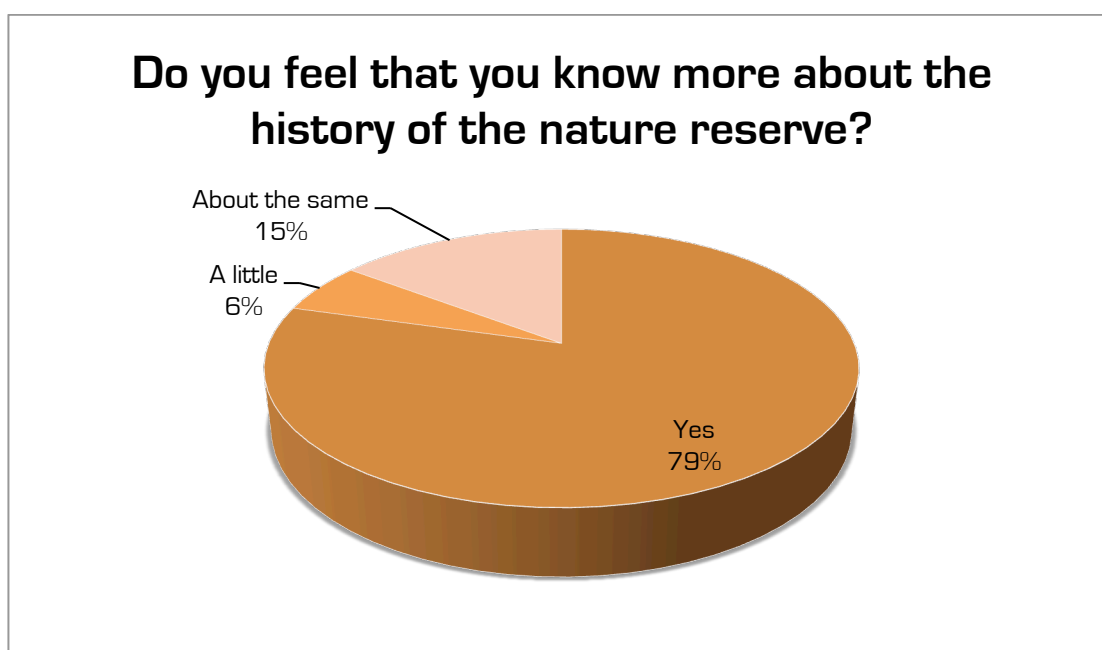


Participants attended 'Discovery' sessions on the nature reserve, and followed this up with independent research, guided by a project-specific resource pack that offered information and online links for further study. Arts practitioners then worked with participants to help shape this knowledge into forms that could be shared with audiences.

One of the clearest outcomes shown by participant feedback is that the vast majority of people who took part in the project learned new things about wildlife:



The feedback shows a more mixed range of engagement with the historical aspects of the site's heritage:



Participants were asked to mention a few facts they had learned:

*Pipistrelles are bats they eat insects and live in holes in the trees*

*Dormice have up to 9 babies*

*Yew trees are poisonous*

*I have learned that bodgers used many different tools*

The audio created by participants for the trail demonstrates a relatively sophisticated knowledge of the site's heritage:

*Beams were held in place by metal hooks called dogs*

*A two man saw was used to cut the logs*

*The top-dog stood up top, and pulled with all his might*

*And the underdog got sawdust in his eyes*

(The Sawyers' Song, Song Trail)

*Spots of silver skipping over blue chalk hills*

*stop a moment to feed at thistles.*

*The silver spotted skipper basks*

*in rabbit scrapes or sun-baked paths*

*to show white spots beneath hindwings*

*as to a blade of grass it clings.*

(Butterfly Poem, Poem Trail)

*Later he told me the cart man wasn't going to buy any more chair legs; he said the factory was buying them in from abroad because the wood was cheaper. He said not to worry, he'll find some other work, but I miss the woods ...*

(Bodger's Story, Story Trail)



## 2. To increase local people's sense of ownership and stewardship of the reserve

Our intention in offering participants four sessions actually on the reserve as part of the project was to help them develop a personal connection with the place, that might translate into feelings of attachment and guardianship.

Observations of children from Oakridge School highlighted their growing confidence on the reserve, as they got used to what to expect and began to feel more relaxed and at home there.

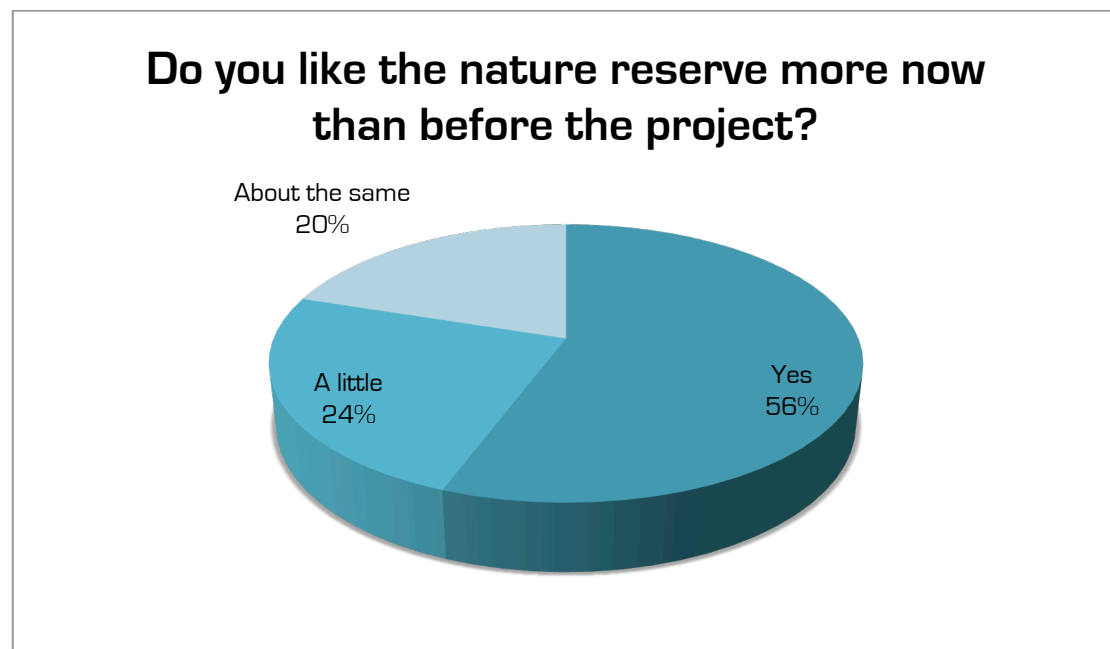
Some participants reflected very positively on their relationship with the reserve for the 'My National Nature Reserve' channel for the audio of the trail:

*My favourite place in the nature reserve is that holly tree, because you can go inside it ...*

*I like the peace and quiet: how beautiful it is ...*

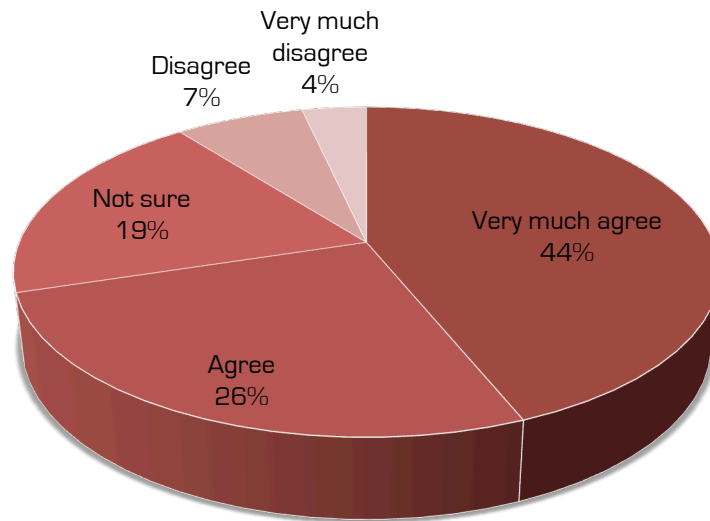
*It just calms me, and takes away the stress of the day ...*

There is clear evidence that most participants feel more fondly towards the reserve than they did prior to the project:



However, participant feedback suggests that there is a wide range of personal responses to spending time on the reserve:

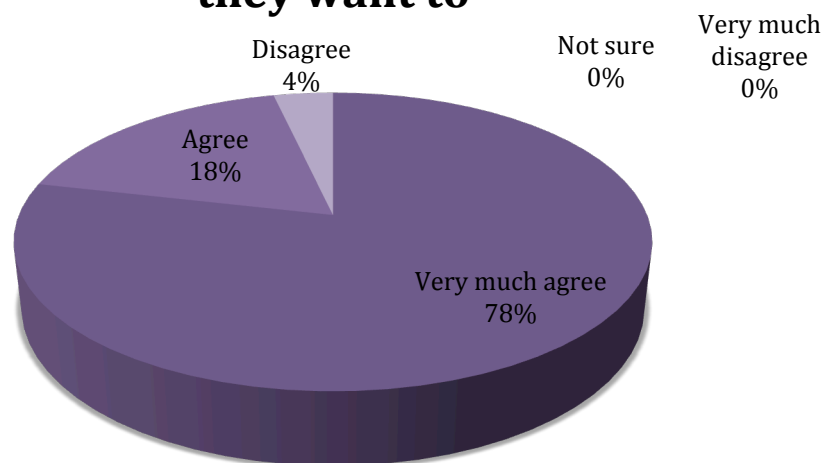
**I feel that the nature reserve is somewhere I belong, and I feel happy and comfortable there**



Whilst the majority of respondents agreed with the statement above, a significant minority did not. This issue would be interesting to explore in the future: especially the challenge of helping children feel 'comfortable' outdoors in poor weather.

Feedback does demonstrate a very clear understanding that Aston Rowant is a resource that serves the local community, and that it is theirs to visit whenever they please:

**The nature reserve is somewhere my family and friends can visit any time they want to**



### **3. To make the site's hidden heritage accessible to a diverse range of audiences using a range of techniques which appeal to different senses**

We have met this aim by making extensive use of audio interpretation via the trail's six listening posts, by offering a wide range of audio delivery styles, by using hand-powered dynamos for the listening posts that encourage and reward physical interaction, and by creating tactile sculptural installations that invite touch and smell. We have also focussed on aspects of the site's heritage that can be hidden from the casual visitor, such as its nocturnal wildlife like bats, glow worms and dormice, and its history as an industrial rural landscape.

The trail is not 100% accessible to all wheelchair users as it includes some short but steep-ish and potentially slippery sections, but the route can be used by tramper vehicles and more determined users of wheelchairs. Where possible, the listening posts have been located at the pathside to make them as accessible as possible: but two of the six of the listening posts are not easily accessed by wheelchair users, as a result of topography and concerns to maximise artistic impact. The route of the Talking Trail was chosen to take the flattest, most accessible route possible across the most suitable part of the nature reserve.

The trail's emphasis on audio makes it a heritage interpretation experience that is particularly accessible for visually impaired visitors. The variety of audio channels allow for information to be delivered in different modes, such as through songs, poems, challenges, stories or personal reflections – the intention being that there is a channel for everyone, to suit their personal taste, interest and learning style.





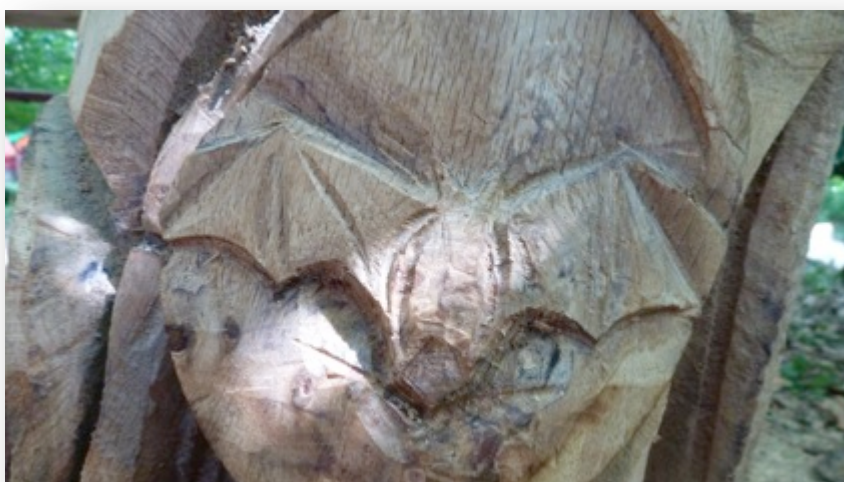
A visitor recently commented that the recordings *'brought us together with others walking the route and prompted conversations which otherwise just wouldn't have happened'*.

Another visitor commented:

*'It was lovely to see the children, and all ages! so engaged - wanting to touch them, and turn the dial to 'make it work!' and stopping patiently to listen to take in the fascinating, informative and often very moving verbal commentaries'*

The sculptural installations that frame the listening posts are all reflective of either the human history of the reserve or some of the key species that inhabit that part of the site: and in several cases they reference both history and wildlife.

The sculptures invite tactile interaction – for example the first intervention is a physical embodiment both of the bats' echolocation process and is inspired by the 'bat and moth' game that school groups played in their Discovery sessions as a way of understanding echolocation through a kinesthetic learning process. The artist's voice on the listening post gives instructions to trace the lines engraved on the sculpture that connect the predator with its prey.



#### **4. To attract new visitors to Aston Rowant and deepen their understanding of the site**

It is too early to evaluate how well this aim has been met by the project, particularly since no exact visitor numbers are known for the year previous to the creation of the trail. It is also problematic to count visitors as there are a number of entry and exit points that are used on different sections of the trail.

We do, however, know that the listening posts are being used, and that a significant number of visitors are learning about the site through this process. The audio players record listening statistics that are being monitored by Natural England, and in the first two months since the trail's installation, each installation recorded between 1,500 and 2,700 listens.

A visitor survey is planned, to investigate how many of the users of the listening posts visited the reserve specifically to experience the Talking Trail, and what kinds of impact the trail is having on their understanding of the site.

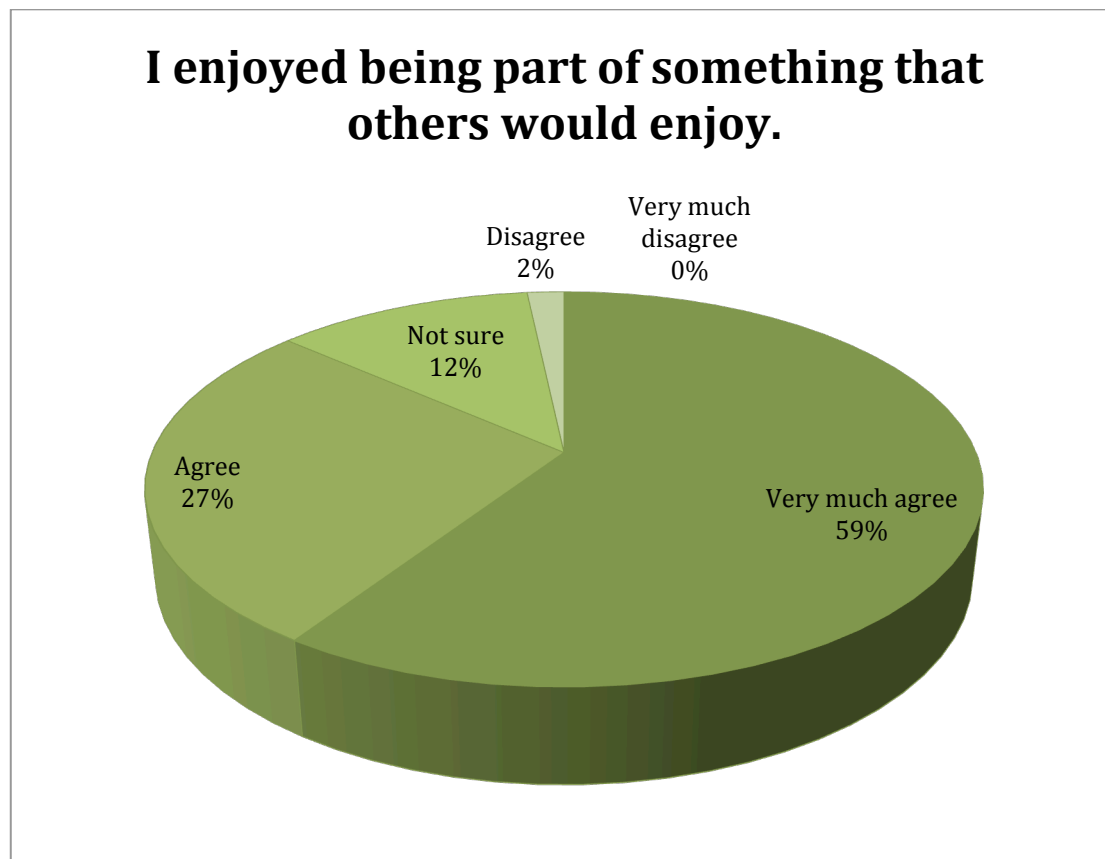
We are also in the process of creating a leaflet for the Talking Trail to help publicise it, and organising open events for the spring to raise the profile of our new attraction. Finally, word of the Talking Trail's existence is beginning to spread through word of mouth, social media and interested journalists.

Anecdotal reports suggest that the trail succeeds in deepening visitor understanding by communicating a substantial amount of heritage information: one visitor praised the trail's ability to be accessible to a wide audience 'without dumbing down' the complexity of the messages.



## 5. To exemplify best practice in creative, sustainable, community-led interpretation

The project succeeded in giving participants a rewarding experience of heritage interpretation, as evidenced by written feedback.



Good practice in the project emphasised the importance of participant voice in shaping and delivering the direction and material used in the trail's audio and sculptures. Much of the physical building of the sculptures was done by participants, as was much of the writing, voicing and recording of the audio.

The approach of combining the expertise of different heritage practitioners worked well, giving participants a process of knowledge input on the initial Discovery session, followed by independent research and a creative learning journey that led to the design and creation of the sculptures and audio.

One participant wrote of his Discovery session:

*'I learned more about Aston Rowant NNR that day than in two years of volunteering'*

Another participant wrote that the artist and woodcraft practitioner Nick Garnett *'took on our ideas and made them come alive in the sculptures. And made each session hands-on, interesting and fun'*

For Outdoor Culture, the project was a first experience of working with adult participant groups on such a big and complex project. Some adult participants were less than satisfied with communication during the project between them and Outdoor Culture, and this is something

for us to take on board for the future. As well as their communication needs being different to school groups, we also observed that adult groups had less predictable attendance figures and required more flexibility in terms of how their engagement with the project was structured.

Other lessons learned include the need for a greater amount of time contingency: practitioner recruitment problems and bad weather were setbacks that were only overcome by the hard work and dedication of the project team.

The use of hand-powered listening posts and very local, natural materials add to the project's sustainability credentials. The installations each balance durability, aesthetic and function in differing ways: we look forward to seeing them age and mature with time, and we are cautiously optimistic about the as yet unproven longevity of the audio players.

The finished Talking Trail is a fine example of what a community-led approach can achieve in terms of creative outdoor interpretation: there is lots of information and lots of visitor choice in how it is consumed.

The sculptural installations, intended as bespoke and sympathetic enhancements of their locations, are an artistic success:

*'... it was a joy to discover the sculptures along the trail; each was perfectly located and already looked so completely at home, that the spaces would now have seemed incomplete without them' (Visitor)*

But perhaps the real success of the Talking Trail is its integration of sculpture, sound art and community-led interpretation:

*'We liked the sculptures' playfulness and capacity for interaction. I guess that's where we benefit from the recordings so much – explaining all the things we might miss and also shedding light onto the process leading up to the installation' (Visitor)*

*'I learnt a lot about the past history of the reserve and the fact that some of the signs of its history are still to be seen today' (Participant)*

## Links

For project photos, please visit

[http://www.outdoorculture.com/oc/Works/Pages/Talking\\_Trail.html](http://www.outdoorculture.com/oc/Works/Pages/Talking_Trail.html)

For Talking Trail visitor information, please visit

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designations/nnr/astonrowantalkingtrail.aspx>



# The team

With many thanks to everyone who made the project possible:

Funders:

- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Natural England

Artists/Practitioners:

- Nick Garnett
- Pippa North
- Ben Willis
- Duncan McAfee

Participants:

- Chiltern Society
- Sonning Common Green Gym
- Aston Rowant NNR volunteer group
- Aston Rowant NNR advisory group
- Chiltern Gateway Project
- Lewknor School
- Aston Rowant School
- Oakridge School
- Watlington School

The trail was produced for Outdoor Culture by Alistair Will, in partnership with Jenny Hanwell of Natural England, with support from Mick Venters of Natural England and the Aston Rowant NNR volunteers.

Specialist heritage input on the site's wildlife, ecology, history and geology was provided to the project by:

- Mick Venters and Jenny Hanwell of Natural England
- John Morris of the Chiltern Woodlands Project
- Cathy Rose of the Chilterns Conservation Board
- Haydon Bailey of the Chiltern Society

Many, many people have supported this project and helped to make it a success. Thank-you all so much!

Alistair Will  
Outdoor Culture CIC