

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 2nd November 2017 at 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

Present: Graham Brandwood, Dave Brookes, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Oliver Fulton, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short, Chris Workman

1. **Apologies:** David Elliott, Tony Finn
2. **Minutes of last meetings:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Damaged manhole in Flora Field (3.1):** United Utilities has finally completed the work. There are three such manhole covers in the arable area. It was agreed that these will be enclosed with hazel stakes to give a constant reminder of their presence (**Ian, Graham**).
 - 3.2. **Missing NE payment (11.2):** Dave's investigations have revealed that NE has put payments to the FA 'on hold'. Over a year ago, the Rural Payments Agency inspected the reserve, but its conclusions have only just been made available. There is a discrepancy between the RPA's measurement and what is specified in the FA's Agreement in respect of hedges and ditches. In consequence the RPA considers that the FA has insufficient points to qualify for the ELS payment. **Dave** will seek more detail from the RPA in order to identify the sources of the discrepancy and also explore ways of increasing the number of points (e.g. will the hedge bordering the Flora Path count). The mapping changes made during the RPA's visit (e.g. incorporating the Fauna footpath) have a very minor effect on the FA's entitlement, but are still not fully accurate.
 - 3.3. **Rotary Club tree offer (12.2):** Two clubs – Lancaster and Lancaster & Loyne – have joined together to offer 105 whips sourced from the Woodland Trust, in return for an acknowledgement on the FA website. The Rotarians are keen to help plant their donations and to continue future contact. **Mick** and **Hilary** are arranging to give them a talk and they will also be given a trip round Pony Wood.
4. **Charging the shed battery:** A timer switch has now been installed to control the lights in the shed. This should significantly reduce the frequency with which the leisure battery needs to be charged. But there are still health and safety issues (weight, ergonomics, spillage of acid) in transporting the battery to a charging point. **Ian** intends to minimise these by lowering the storage shelf, building an appropriate trolley and using a more local charging point (Whitegates).
5. **Bollards on Sunnyside Lane:** There is a problem with the hinges. Repair will be very difficult, so it was agreed to leave them as they are.
6. **Winter hedge and fence work:** Ian has been identifying and costing the extra tools and materials required to undertake the hedging work approved at July FFOG (item 4). In priority order, he has requested:

- **An ‘easy-lift’ harness:** To make it easier and safer for volunteers to use the three existing petrol-driven hedge trimmers. Agreed, but purchase to be delayed whilst the possibility of grant funding is pursued (**Hilary**).
- **Sundries and saplings:** Hedging stakes, fence posts etc for specific maintenance tasks (such as protecting new saplings in West Field from the cattle) and a variety of saplings to thicken and diversify hedges where necessary (e.g. Flora Field south, between Flora Field and Lower Sowerholme). Approved, using the lower of the two sapling quotes circulated if no cheaper supplier of native stock can be identified locally (**Ian**).
- **New hedge trimmer:** Stihl has now introduced a battery powered, telescopic hedge trimmer which is cheaper, lighter, less noisy and noxious than the petrol-driven machines. It was agreed to delay decision until the effectiveness of the harness has been assessed. However, if grant money is available then it should be purchased now (**Hilary**).
- **Fencing work in Lower Sowerholme:** There is a mesh fence preventing cattle gaining access to Lucy Brook. This has a gap of about 70m. Just behind on the field side is a single strand fence that is in a state of disrepair, with several broken posts. At some 400m in length, its renovation would be a job for a contractor rather than volunteers. The meeting’s view was that the mesh fence should be strengthened, but that the single strand fence serves no useful purpose and should be taken out. It was also agreed that there was no urgency for this work. **Ian** will first inform the Graziers of these proposals.

7. **Sowerholme Track:** The former track running north from the Howson’s Gate toward both Upper and Lower Sowerholme fields was surveyed by Ian P, Ian N and Oliver on 9th October, the results presented as annotated sketch maps. Along its western side the former hedge has become a line of hawthorn trees with lots of blackthorn infilling. At its northern end the track becomes an impenetrable mass of bramble. FFOG agreed that there are no obvious ways of improving the area as a wildlife habitat and so it is best left alone. The damaged wall will eventually require repair (when it can be combined with another job requiring a stonemason). **Graham** will keep an eye on its condition.

8. **Working with Volunteers with dementia:** Mick has now had four sessions working with an FA Volunteer who has dementia. The experience has been positive on both sides, and Mick has drawn on it and other research to start preparing Advice Notes, the first draft of which was circulated. Mick’s proposal that the FA becomes a dementia-friendly organisation has already won the support of the Trustees and FA meeting. FFOG was also in agreement, with members prepared to commit to becoming Dementia Friends. **Mick** will now arrange for a dementia audit via the Alzheimers Society and for training as Dementia Friends. The latter is required for a significant number of regular volunteers as well as trustees and committee members and can be achieved by attendance at a workshop lasting a few hours run by a local Dementia Champion. (In practice, the FA may need more than one workshop to cope with the numbers involved and people’s other commitments.) Going through this process may generate wider benefits by increasing the FA’s awareness of how to make the nature reserve more accessible to visitors with dementia.

In discussion, it was decided to adopt a low key approach until experience has been gained and the pros/cons are better known. So initially mentored volunteer work will only be offered to existing FA Volunteers with dementia or in response to a specific request. There are several issues to be resolved: for instance, what will be the impact on the overall amount of work done on the nature reserve as the productivity of the mentors is likely to be reduced; in what circumstances must the Volunteer be accompanied by a carer; does the mentor need to be DBS approved? It was stressed that the FA cannot provide care.

9. Management:

- 9.1. Arable update:** The Arable Farmer has indicated verbally that he is willing to continue next year. Rather than ask him to bring the harvester in for a second cut of just part of the wildflower margin (see FFOG Sept 2017 item 6), it was agreed to try scything – deadline 31st March. **Ian** to co-ordinate with Paul. In an email on 10 October, Sue advised Natural England of the actions the FA now intends to take to renovate the other parts of the wildflower margin. A reply has yet to be received, but the implementation of this renovation will be discussed at January FFOG (**Sue**).
- 9.2. Grazing matters:** There has still been no action by NE on formally incorporating the **new stocking arrangements** into the FA's NE Agreement. (This was requested again in Sue's email to Ben Hibbins on 10th October, which also informed him of the failure of haymaking.) Meanwhile, the FA is now adopting these livestock unit based prescriptions for managing the herd in the reserve fields. At the Graziers' request, a Cattle Access Timetable has been drafted, but is currently on hold pending developments with the herd. The number of animals has recently been brought down from 22 to 16, four having been bought by a breeder who is starting a new White Park herd. She has expressed further interest and is expected to visit in November. Hence the Cattle Access timetable requested by the Graziers is on hold pending further developments. When the situation is clarified, if there remains concern regarding numbers, Dave and Hilary will meet with the Graziers. Following the loss of this year's haylage crop, winter feed will be purchased by the FA in instalments as required – up to a certain limit – from the Graziers' suppliers (FFOG Sept item 9.2). This will ensure that there is no wastage of hay and that the sum spent will be within the cost of haymaking.

Dave and **Hilary** are chasing progress on the nose pump.

The meeting overturned September's decision (item 7.5) to incorporate the installation of a **second gate into School Pond** into the Flora Path tender. School Pond is already suffering from poaching so the extra gate needed as early as possible. **Dave** will seek quotes and **Hilary** will inform the Landscape Architect to delete this element from the tender.

- 9.3. Tree Surgeon's progress:** No action since last FFOG.
- 9.4. Upper Sowerholme:** On 16th September three people from the RSPB joined FA Volunteers in Upper Sowerholme to try to slow the silting up of the reed bed and create some clear patches in the surrounding vegetation, to encourage a mosaic of habitats. To aid the work, the sluice was lowered to reduce the water level. The channel was not cleared completely but there is now a continuous run of clear water. The vegetation from the channel was dumped on the side (it is heavy and it was very hard work). It will grow back but it should last for 2 or 3 years. Bull-rush is problematic because it produces dense clumps and the rhizomes trap silt. Its removal is being continued by **Graham**.

The RSPB recommends that the channel should be cleared (largely from Mare's Tail) back to Lucy Brook. **Graham** is exploring this. Further work on the whole of the US channel will be scheduled for September 2018 (**Glenys** for Arrangements Calendar).

The RSPB team also advocated more active management of water levels in both Upper Sowerholme and Big Meadow. (This mirrored advice to lower the sluices in mid

July and raise again in November given by the contractor who treated the rush.) This drying out should discourage rush and allow grass to grow. It was agreed to experiment in Big Meadow next year by adjusting sluices and monitoring the effect. But more clarification is needed in respect of Upper Sowerholme, as the NE Agreement advocates a much wetter state than envisaged by the RSPB. **Sue** will consult Jon Carter.

A path and wider patches were scythed with the scythings made into "habitat piles" using brash as a base. It was agreed to extend this work (**Ian** to contact Paul).

- 9.5. Pond dye:** Further research on the pond dye confirms that it has no adverse environmental impact, and suggests that it should work quickly and be more effective in keeping ponds clear of algae than the current barley straw. Cost estimated at £30-40. However, it will not work in an open pond where it is diluted by run off. So the sluice would have to be raised if it were to be used in Alder Pond. This flagship pond, though, is not a first candidate and has recently been cleared very well by other means. The proposed trial ponds remain Willow and Flora, But Willow appears to be leaking and the Flora Ponds need to be cleared of vegetation. The algae work is not urgent, so a decision will be deferred until these ponds are judged to be in a suitable state for a trial (**Graham**).

10. Monitoring:

- 10.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections:** Graham's comprehensive reports describe a very wet nature reserve, with all ponds except Willow holding good levels of water and many of them affected by prolific growth of mare's tail, water figwort, soft rush and grass (see item 9.5). Grass is still growing and the presence of water in the scrape presents an opportunity for the cattle to graze West Field. [Note – the cattle are now in.] Inevitably there is a degree of poaching on the reserve, particularly in the gateway between Big and Hay Meadows where the gate itself was found off its hinges. Graham has since effected a partial repair and the gate has been closed. (The Hay Meadow has now been adequately grazed and there is a risk of too much fertilisation and poaching.) **Ian** to notify the Graziers. Noticeboards would benefit from cleaning. **Ian** to contact Andrew, and also enquire about spare keys.

- 10.2. Progress with surveys:** Dan Haywood has submitted this year's breeding bird survey results. He concluded that there was somewhat of a downturn this year with numbers of breeding pairs down in many cases (e.g. Song Thrush, Wren, Blackcap) although the variety encountered over four survey visits (44 species) remained reasonably good. Dan considers that management is paying dividends for the red-listed Grey Partridge with a pair noted in the southern parts of the site found there on three out of four visits. Promising early sightings of both Lapwing and Oystercatcher in the arable field led to no further development, but encouragingly Stock Dove (two pairs) and Shelduck appear to have bred. As this is a snapshot at particular points in time, Dan does not pick up the pair of Little Owls that fledged at least two young this year and have been seen regularly at the south-western corner of the reserve since July. **Sue** has sent Dan's report to Jon Carter (RSPB) for his comments. Residents of Haverbreaks have queried the long-term absence of Curlew from the area. **Ian N.** is investigating (**Sue**).

Still no feedback on butterflies (**Oliver** to follow up).

Results of NLWG's study of mosses and lichens in the Orchard and Big Meadow on 9th June have been received. Essentially common species, but Chris considers that further careful study will reveal some more interesting examples.

10.3. Photographic recording: Chris has been giving training and support to the new photographer. The four sets of photos for 2017 have now been taken, and it is hoped that they will be uploaded onto the FA website shortly (**Chris**).

11. Volunteer activities:

11.1. Volunteer activities: Full reports for September and October are attached. Ian thanked the members of the Ragwort Working Party and Scything Group for their efforts over the summer months. They have managed to keep well on top of NE's 'undesirables' this year. These groups have now morphed into the Hedge Working Party on Wednesday mornings. One of its first tasks, following advice from the Tree Surgeon, was to fell a dead tree in the Play Area. FFOG decided not to replace it. An ash tree just south of the shed has also been felled on safety grounds, following advice from the Tree Surgeon and with permission from the Tree Protection Officer. Two diseased apple trees have been taken out (see FFOG July item 7.4). Replacement to be considered at January FFOG (**Glenys**).

Attempts by Volunteers using spades to clear back grass growing on the recently-resurfaced gravel path around the oak circle in the Orchard have caused damage to the top layer. The options of letting the grass take over or using herbicide were rejected in favour of creating a grass path controlled by mowing (**Ian** to inform David). Tasks for the upcoming Saturday Volunteer session were approved.

11.2. First Aid renewals: Ian, Mick and Ken attended a two-day course in Staveley in October and so have renewed their certification as first aiders for another three years. This course prompted a check on the FA's defibrillator which showed that it was not working. The manufacturer has declared that it cannot be repaired and a new one is being provided under the warranty. Ian also noted that its battery requires regular (and expensive) replacement at regular intervals. **Glenys** to add to Arrangements Calendar.

11.3. Preparations for Volunteers' Buffet: The Storey is available to host this again. **Sue** will select a date in February and provide details to the proposed menu and price for January FFOG.

12. Standing items:

12.1. Arrangements: **Ian** will prepare for the planting of gorse in December/January.

Sue will remind Ian N. to organise this year's nest box monitoring. She will also get written confirmation of the arrangements with the Arable Farmer for 2018 (see item 9.1).

Dave will update his financial spreadsheet for report at January FFOG.

There will be no Special FFOG in February this year because of the pressures of the Flora Path project. It was also agreed to defer the usual January review of the Cycling & Dogs policy until it is appropriate to discuss extending it to the new Flora Path.

12.2. Financial control:

Item 4 – £40 approx. to construct trolley to transport shed battery (Ian)

Item 6 – harness £384 (hopefully grant funded); Stihl hedge trimmer £602 (purchased now only if grant available), sundries and saplings no more than £953 – all inclusive of VAT (Ian)

Item 9.2 – £600 ish for new gate for School Pond (Dave)

Item 12.3 – estimated £300 income from Walk & Talk (Mick)

Dave also noted that he had not received many School Visit forms for submission to NE. He will follow it up with Tony.

12.3. Organised events for notification to FA: The meeting was reminded about Ian N's forthcoming talk on migrating birds at The Storey on 9th October. A winter bird walk is still promised (**Sue**). On 13th November, the annual 'Walk and Talk' for MA students will take place, based at The Storey but incorporating guided tours of the nature reserve. **Mick** is finalising arrangements and is confident he has enough group leaders and helpers.

13. AOB:

13.1. Green Hay Group: The FA has received an offer of green hay to spread in the reserve. FFOG suggested that this might be useful to help renovate the wildflower margin (see 9.1). However, this will require permission from NE. **Hilary** to notify the Green Hay Group of the FA's interest and also raise the possibility of the FA's meadows acting as a source of green hay in future.

13.2. Fork and Spade Offer: Accepted by Ian (**Sue**).

13.3. Lune Rivers Trust: This group has been in contact with both Graham and Hilary expressing an interest in becoming involved with the FA in a variety of ways, including projects and sharing volunteers. **Ian** and **Graham** have arranged a meeting to explore this further.

13.4. New map on shed: Concern was expressed that the new map of the whole reserve installed on the side on the shed fails to distinguish between the permissive paths (Fauna and Flora) and the public footpaths (Pads and Long Pads). [Inspecting the map after the meeting Sue has reported that the signage does make a distinction between permissive paths (orange) and public footpaths (red) but unfortunately the difference is not that obvious.]

14. Date/place of next meetings: Thursday 11th January 2018, Thursday 1st March at 7.30pm. Venue: Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

4th September 2017

JKW sprayed, a single strand near Howson's Gate and about 6 small plants near Lucy Brook.

6th September 2017

The Ragwort Working Party (RWP) met with four volunteers on a dry but autumnal morning. There is little ragwort on the Reserve.

- In preparation for Apple Day we collected samples of three apples from 24 of the Orchard trees, generally of different varieties. Each sample was placed in a bag with a record of the tree number and in those cases where the information was available, the variety name and type.
- Thistles were scythed in the West Field and in the north west segment of Lower Sowerholme. This was the second sweep in these areas to prevent thistle seeding.

In the afternoon the debris from the wild camper in the Orchard woodland was taken to the tip after the posted deadline for collection was passed.

9th September 2017

Only nine volunteers for the monthly Saturday session and three of these only for part of the time. Early threats of heavy showers may have been off putting but it turned into a lovely morning.

- Further work was done cutting back along the path edges in the Orchard.
- Enveloping bindweed was removed from the top of the Pads / Flora Field and Pads / West Field hedges to allow light to the hawthorn.
- A start was made clearing obstructing growth from around the base of field gates. More work to be done here.
- A shopping bag of meadowsweet seeds was collected and six plants potted up for planting out along the Flora Field east flower margin.

13th September 2017

Five volunteers reported for the RWP on a blustery but fine morning.

- The 'Don't pick' signs were removed from the apple trees.
- Overhanging bramble was cut back along the Fauna path.
- Ragwort was dug out of the Big Meadow, the rectangle to the east of the Fauna ash tree being the usual culprit.
- Most of our time was spent scything invasive rush covering the southern two thirds of Big Meadow.

16th September 2017

Eight Fairfield volunteers joined three RSPB staff to increase the diversity of the habitats in Upper Sowerholme by:

- Clearing two ponds and the connecting channel of vegetation to provide more clear water and water flow. We now have a better sense of what we should aim for.
- Scything corridors through the dense undergrowth.

Many thanks to RSPB staff for their advice and hard work on the day.

20th September 2017

Seven volunteers formed the RWP on a cloudy but dry morning. No ragwort found but

- A branch which had fallen from the big ash tree adjacent to the Stump Circle was cut up and cleared.
- We completed the scything work in Lower Sowerholme by clearing nettles and thistles around the edge and pushing the spreading rush back as well as cutting winding corridors through its denser patches.
- Our non-scythers started the trimming of the Lower Sowerholme / Flora Field hedge.
- Undergrowth obstructing gates around Lower Sowerholme was cut back.

27th September 2017

Five volunteers attended the last of this summer's RWPs on a dry and pleasant morning. From next week it's the Hedge Working Party!

- Glenys continued developing her one handed secateurs skills in cutting back overhanging vegetation along the paths.
- We scythed the nettles around the edge of the Paddock and some invasive rush.
- Thistles in the Gun Range were scythed down.
- We gave the winding corridors in the Hay Meadow marsh a second scything. Whilst the mare's tail was prominent it appears that the regrowth of soft rush is much reduced which we thought heartening.
- A small amount of flowering ragwort was dug out of the hay meadows.

This is the last scything session of a very successful summer season.

During September, Associate Volunteers

- Mowed the Orchard grass.
- Sharpened and checked out the hand tools
- Further playground maintenance work

4th October 2017

The first meeting of the season of the Hedge Working Party (HWP) attracted 9 volunteers who agreed a Site Specific Risk Assessment (SSRA) for tree felling.

- Two volunteers cleared a path from the Hay Meadow to Anna's Pool for the flush counters to use.
- The dead alders (one large, one small) in the playground were felled and the resultant logs and brash carted away for both firewood and the habitat pile off the track near the shed. NEED TO DECIDE WHAT TO REPLACE WITH.
- The west and east hedges of the Paddock were cut back but only to the stock fence as a boundary.
- The south hedge of the Paddock was trimmed back to the wire fence on its northern side leaving the top and southern side for trimming in future years on a three year cycle.

- Recycled fence posts, now too short for use as posts, were sharpened for use as hedge stakes.

14th October 2017

Fourteen volunteers attended for all or part of the monthly Saturday session on a cloudy but dry morning.

- Obstructive vegetation preventing gates along the Fauna path opening properly was cleared.
- Invasive vegetation on the path near Cromwell Road was cut back.
- Ragwort was dug out of the Big Meadow near the big Ash Tree. Still some there but it probably won't flower now.
- The nose pump and its stand were retrieved from West Field. Some repair work needed over the winter.
- Padlocks around the Reserve were checked and oiled. Some still need to be done.
- Algae cleared from Alder Pond and barley straw placed in the pond in cages.
- A leaning pear tree was re-staked.
- Grass was cleared from the gravel path around the Oak Circle. We did our best to avoid damaging the path surface but inevitably some of this comes away with the roots. Is glyphosate a necessary evil here?
- Keith and grandsons continued pruning the fruit trees.
- At the break the Volunteer Organiser reviewed Health and Safety procedures with all First Aiders present (6) and the remaining volunteers. The review included:
 - The role of the 'Duty First Aider' especially in keeping close to the First Aid wheelbarrow.
 - Emergency information sheets in each wheelbarrow.
 - The Health and Safety Box in the Volunteer Organiser's bag especially:
 - The Emergency Contacts book
 - The file of volunteers' Medical Conditions. Volunteers were urged to inform the Volunteer Organiser of any such condition.
 - The bag containing the defibrillator and its accompanying equipment (towel, razor....). A safety mask for mouth to mouth resuscitation is also in the bag.
 - The contents of the First Aid box especially:
 - The haemostatic dressing to rapidly control severe bleeding
 - The tick removing tool
 - Aspirin for use in a cardiac arrest

18th October 2017

The HWP attracted 6 volunteers on a lovely warm morning. We continued and completed the trimming of the hedge between Lower Sowerholme and the Flora Field. We left elder and sycamore untrimmed to indicate their location when we come again to fix Eco-plugs. This hedge needs more saplings to increase its diversity.

25th October 2017

Nine volunteers attended the HWP and agreed a SSRA for felling alongside the public footpath near the shed.

- The ash tree adjacent to the path 25 metres south of the shed was felled. It's dangerous split union had been identified by Andy Lee as requiring felling and permission for this had been given by Lancaster City Council (the tree was in the Cannon Hill Conservation Area).
- The resulting timber was made into a habitat pile at the back of the 'wild area' and covered with the tree's brash to prevent theft.
- A notice was posted informing the public of the reason for the felling and asking people not to take the timber. (A replacement tree should be planted later in the winter).
- Two apple trees (58 and 62) were felled as recommended by the Orchard annual report and agreed by the 2nd July FFOG (Minutes item 7.4).
- The brash was carted away and a notice posted informing the public . FFOG should decide on the replacements (Keith to advise).
- A gap in the hedge near the Orchard north noticeboard was plugged with a hazel fence taking stakes and withers from the Orchard.
- Former fence posts (now around a metre long) were sharpened to act as hedge stakes.
- Hedge trimming was started on the hedge between the Pads footpath and Big Meadow.

During October, Associate Volunteers

- Cleared algae from Alder Pond and renewed the barley straw
- Trimmed hedges
- Further playground maintenance work