

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 7th March 2018 at 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

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

1. **Apologies:** Graham Brandwood, Tony Finn
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Latch on Pony Wood gate (item Jan 5.1):** Now operational, if temperamental.
 - 3.2. **Elm coppicing in Little Wood (5.1):** The advice from the Tree Surgeon is that this might help prevent dutch elm disease, but would alter the form of the tree. Work would need the permission of the Tree Protection Officer. **Oliver** will seek further advice, and discuss with **Ian**.
 - 3.3. **Wych elm permission for Pony Wood (5.1):** **Sue** has contacted the FA's Natural England Adviser (asking about herbicide use in the arable and some of the sapling species in the Woodland Trust hedging package at the same time). Her email has been acknowledged but nothing more. She will email again, to say that the FA will go ahead unless hear otherwise.
 - 3.4. **Hedging plants from Woodland Trust (8):** The WT has again kindly agreed to supply saplings (1450) for the new path around Pony Wood (see 6.1). They were delivered this morning, and will be supplemented with 20 holly saplings in stock from last year. The WT has supplied plastic spirals, canes and tree guards to augment existing stocks. Once the main hedge is planted, the health of the saplings damaged by last summer's drought will be investigated, and those that are still usable planted out in appropriate places on the Reserve.

The regular Saturday morning volunteering session on 9th March will be devoted to commencing the planting of these hedge saplings. It is hoped to continue in the afternoon, with any outstanding work completed by the Wednesday Work Group.

The FA meeting on the 20th February agreed that, where the path side of the fence is wide enough, the hedge should go on the PATH side of the fence rather than all on the field side as per the Landscape Architect's plan. The line that Ian has marked on the ground was confirmed as being correct.

Ian raised an environmental concern about the plastic spirals. It was agreed that they have a role in aiding the establishment of the saplings, but noted that they become brittle and disintegrate over time. The aim will now be to remove spirals before they reach this point (**Ian**).
 - 3.5. **Viewing area/platform in Upper Sowerholme (9):** A group of FFOG members made a site inspection on 25th January. It was concluded that a path alone is adequate here. Upper Sowerholme is intended to be a secluded space for wildlife and nothing should be done that might encourage casual access (see also 5.1).

- 3.6. Survey clarifications (5.2):** Sue has consulted Graeme Skelcher about the divergence between his wildflower targets and those in the FA's revised NE Agreement. His advice is that there is an error in the NE targets in that the official definition of a lowland meadow has not changed. However, his survey results enable progress against both sets of targets to be identified. He has provided a list of G06 (lowland meadow) indicator species. This year's surveys have been commissioned by Sue (see 7.2).

Sue has also queried the butterfly survey commentary: "*Reduced number of counts.*" This means that Christine stopped in fewer places.

4. Management:

- 4.1. Arable update:** Flora Field has now been manured. The blue bits noticed in Graham's reserve inspection (5.1) are paper from the cattle bedding. Sue and Ian N. have marked out the border of the buffer zone in anticipation of the ploughing. The dominance of fodder radish in the seed mix for the bird friendly margin is a concern, although this plant provides good cover and a long term supply of seed. **Mick** will contact both the seed supplier and Richard Storton (who created the mix) for advice.
- 4.2. Grazing matters:** The formal change to the NE Agreement in respect of the stocking calendar remains in a black hole. However, Dave did report receipt of a letter from NE notifying that a new regional office is being established and that a further payment is in the pipeline. [Another notification since the meeting suggests that holding breath would be unwise!]

The Contractors have finished the work on rejuvenating the cattle crossing between Big Meadow and Lower Sowerholme and have added gravel to the gateways into Lower Sowerholme and West Field.

The cattle have been in the HK10 fields on the reserve for 23 out of the 97 days of the winter period to date. This is well below the maximum stocking density permitted by NE. From 1st April, the cattle will move onto the breeding season prescriptions (see 7.1) and will not be allowed into Hay and Carr House Meadows. **Sue** will ask the Graziers to bring the cattle into these fields before the end of March to take down the level of the sward to favour the emerging wildflowers.

- 4.3. Wetland management:** Three land drains have finally been located and blocked in West Field. The amount of water in the scrape has increased significantly, although the level now seems to be stabilising. As a result of the Contractor's work there has been a marked change in the number and variety of birds, including redshank.
- 4.4. Tree surgeon's progress:** The thinning of the oak tree in the Orchard boundary has been completed. Work on the forked sycamore has yet to be done, although there is good news in that Ian has been notified by Andy Lee that he will be able to provide a bracing system at no cost to the FA.

Two other trees in the Orchard are now giving cause for concern: the veteran sycamore looks to be deteriorating rapidly; an aspen poplar has severe rot in the trunk. **Ian** will contact Andy Lee about these and prompt him about the bracing work too.

- 4.5. Treatment of the West Field hedge (Long Pads):** This eastern hedge was flailed unexpectedly by the neighbouring farmer when he undertook the (commissioned) work on the north and west hedges. The meeting felt that management of this eastern hedge

would be better left to Volunteers in future years (**Ian**). Trimming is less 'brutal' and gives an opportunity for de-brambling. It was also suggested that the cut hedge is too low. The NE prescription is for a maximum height of 2m for West Field, but measured from which side? It was agreed to be less severe and create some gaps to allow walkers on the Long Pads to see into the field (**Ian**).

- 4.6. Lancashire Meadow Group:** The FA has been approached to host a moth trapping exercise between 14–21 June. A resident close to the Orchard is kindly prepared to supply electricity to power LMG's trap. The FA has its own battery operated trap, and the meeting suggested that this could be used at the same time in Upper Sowerholme. Participants will be members of LMG plus a moth expert/trainer to analyse the results. Selected members of the FA (**Sue**) and NLWG (**Chris**) will be invited too. **Sue** will liaise with the LMG Co-ordinator, including providing the safety information relating to fields access in the reserve.

5. Monitoring:

- 5.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections:** Graham's reports circulated. Two sweet chestnuts in Pony Wood look unhealthy and the large willow by the pond in Lower Sowerholme has shed some branches. Action is not urgent as they do not pose a safety risk. It was decided to re-evaluate when they come into leaf and, as necessary, add to the Tree Surgeon's annual survey to be commissioned after the next FFOG meeting (**Ian**). A number of fence posts between Carr House Meadow and the Gun Range need replacing, as do at least two in the Big Meadow fence by the ash tree.

The willow play domes introduced in the Orchard last year have been extended. With Graham absent, no one could remember whether this development had been through FFOG. [After the meeting it was confirmed that at the 3rd May 2018 meeting, item 4.3, it was recorded that there was scope for more wigwams at the north end of the Orchard.] Some concern was expressed about the potential effect on the nearby wilder area which is being left as a wildlife refuge (to be monitored).

Some garden waste has been deposited into the bramble patch in Upper Sowerholme. **Mick** and **Hilary** will deal with this. This incident reinforces the need to make access to Upper Sowerholme unattractive (see 3.5).

- 5.2. Progress with surveys:** Dan Haywood's winter bird survey was circulated. Dan is prepared to conduct his breeding bird survey again this year. (**Sue** will encourage him to submit a commentary with his surveys.)

Ians N and P have provided a spreadsheet detailing the findings of their annual survey of the nestboxes. Results in Pony and Little Woods are disappointing in that only 5 out of 14 boxes had full nests in them. By contrast, seventeen of the twenty-four boxes in the Orchard and Fauna areas have been occupied, mostly by great and blue tits.

Sue has collated the results of the above-mentioned surveys and sightings posted on the FA wildlife blog and provided a commentary. This paper also included three proposals relating to specific hedges which were accepted (**Ian**).

Notable amongst species that appear to have been lost from the reserve are grey partridge (absent for the first time in 2018 – possibly predated) and lapwing (no evidence of nesting since 2016). On the positive side, 37 species were recorded as breeding on site, including 2 pairs of tree sparrows, one using a nest box in the

Orchard. There was an increase in the number of stock doves and greenfinch (both nationally declining). and large flocks of linnets, fieldfare and redwing continue to be seen in winter.

Meeting members are aware that hares and tawny owls are still on the reserve, despite the lack of reported sightings. It was suggested that collated wildlife results be circulated as a draft next year with the invitation to contribute additions/amendments (**Sue**). A few more snipe are appearing in Willow Pond and the arable field. Although informally covered by Graham during his inspections, these areas are currently outside the flush count route. Before the start of next winter's counts, a decision will be made as to whether it is worth extending to these other areas (**Glenys**).

It is hoped to add bats to the list of surveys. **Ian** is in contact with William Walton.

Oliver will continue to monitor bumblebees. It was suggested that Christine Bennett has the expertise to record sightings of other types of bees (**Sue** to approach).

6. Volunteer activities:

6.1. Volunteer activities: Full reports for January and February are attached. Ian showed the broken shed handle to the meeting. It is an expensive lock. **Hilary** is making enquiries about its replacement. Proposals for the Saturday Volunteer session were covered in 3.4.

6.2. Review of Associate Volunteers Scheme: Ian circulated the updated list of Associate Volunteers, identifying the jobs that they do on the reserve *in their own time*. There are now 14 active AVs. This is one down on last year, although Ian pointed out that several people have switched their main effort from AV work to being part of the WWG. The AVs continue to make a significant contribution in a variety of areas, ranging from tasks such as tool maintenance to care of fruit trees and clearing ponds. Although there are no new names on the list, there are new activities, such as making signs. A new AV is due to start imminently. Ian considers that the AV team is currently of an appropriate size for the work in hand. An appeal for extra members will be made as and when necessary, especially if there is a particular task to be done (**Ian**).

6.3. Working with Volunteers with dementia: The Dementia Friends induction session intended for February has been postponed until further notice. A new Volunteer will be starting work with Mick in the reserve on Saturday. **Mick** is also following up an interest expressed through the FA website by a local group.

7. Standing items:

7.1. Arrangements:

NE key dates: Arable farmer allowed to remove and re-establish bird seed margin in Flora Field from 15th March. Change in cattle access from 1 April: cattle out of Hay & Carr House Meadows until after haymaking; West Field, Big Meadow & Lower Sowerholme grazed for average stocking density of no more than 1.2LU/ha to 30th June.

Sue will commission a) Pony & Little Wood flora survey for end April/early May b) early survey of wildflowers in Hay & Carr House Meadows for May and c) breeding bird survey. She will contact the Public Rights of Way team at Lancaster County Council

about the maintenance arrangement for the Long Pads path and liaise with Ian. How to prepare for the LGGs run will be discussed at May FFOG (**Glenys** for Agenda).

Ian will arrange path and grass/nettle cutting regime for Orchard; add removal of weeds and saplings from green roof of storage building to volunteer task list for April; plan programme for tackling undesirables and invasive aliens; put out the nose pump as necessary in West Field.

Glenys will organise monitoring of Orchard fruit trees for 'blossom time'.

Sue, Ian and Graham will carry out the annual review of herbicide spraying COSHH and Site Assessment forms.

Dave/Hilary will arrange the annual review meeting with the Graziers for June. Matters to be raised to be considered at May FFOG (**Glenys** for Agenda).

7.2. Financial control:

Item 5.2 – Winter bird survey invoice for £150. The quote for this year's wildflower surveys has increased to £650. (**Sue**)

Repairs to the mower £265 (**Ian**)

Grant application for the purchase of new mower is due to be considered shortly by Lancashire Community Fund.

7.3. Organised events for notification to FA: NLWG annual field visit scheduled for 31st July. Study to focus on the wildflower meadows plus the margins and beetle banks in the arable field.

- 8. Rush control review and proposals:** The report circulated noted that, for the second year, the soft rush has been managed essentially by scything carried out by Volunteers. The power scythe proved an effective complement. The FA has the resources to make a significant impact in the time available, particularly if the number of trained scythers can be increased. Rides were cut through the denser areas of soft rush and its outward expansion into main grazing and wildflower areas prevented. Work concentrated on the Hay and Big Meadows.

Snipe numbers are miserably low this winter. This appears to be due to the weather being uncharacteristically mild and often very wet for the flush counts, rather than a problem with the character of the rush. Natural England's concern is with presence of snipe rather than specific numbers, so a relaxed approach to this reduction can be adopted.

The current management approach will continue, with efforts concentrated on creating new rides in the remaining dense areas of the Big Meadow marsh and tackling expansion at the SE edge. The power scythe will be used as necessary to reduce the cut height further, particularly around pond margins. Steps will be taken to increase the pool of trained scythers (**Glenys & Ian**).

During the winter of 2018-19, the rush in School Pond has again been heavily cropped by the cattle affecting the amount of cover for snipe. Points made in discussion included:

- whether a different management approach would be more appropriate for School Pond (e.g. promoting biodiversity rather than a specific species by allowing the pond area to evolve, developing as an area for herons and other more visible birds to interest and inform users of the adjacent path).
- compliance with the prescriptions of the FA's Natural England Agreement
- the FA has permission to include School Pond in the reserve, but it is not the FA's land
- the Graziers are sometimes unsure as to which fields the cattle can use at different times. Changes (e.g. to the NE stocking calendar and when the Flora path contractors have been on site) have not helped.

It was agreed to consider School Pond at the annual review meeting with the Graziers (**Hilary, Dave**). Greater use of both the water trough and the reserve fields would reduce the pressures of poaching and rush cropping in any one area during winter. It was also decided to back up the cattle timetable issued to the Graziers by explicitly reminding them of changes in the cattle access conditions (such as the start of the bird breeding season - see 7.1) (**Sue**).

9. AOB:

9.1. MP visit 26th April: Plans for this visit not yet decided.

9.2. Opening of the Flora path: This is awaiting the creation of an access point onto the canal. It is hoped that the Canal and River Trust will give formal agreement to this by the end of March. Lancashire County Council work on the build out at the Aldcliffe Road entrance is also outstanding. **Dave** will investigate the provision of signs for motorists.

10. Date/place of next meetings: Thursday 2nd May, Thursday 4th July at 7.30pm. Venue: Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

2nd January 2019

Twelve volunteers formed the Wednesday Work Group (WWG) on a bright, chilly morning. We agreed the Site Specific Risk Assessment (SSRA) for hedge laying using a chain saw.

- We continued laying the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and Ayrton's field.
- We ensured that the field was stock proof, fixing a number of new fence posts.
- The southern hedge between the West Field and Ayrton's land was trimmed.
- Plastic sapling protectors, playthings of the cattle, were collected up in the West Field.
- We retrieved an old but still serviceable gate post and delivered it to Lower Sowerholme for use in the new stile between that field and Upper Sowerholme.
- Graham completed his living fence between the Hay Meadow and Upper Sowerholme. Added later – looks really good!

9th January 2019

Twelve volunteers attended the WWG on a beautiful winter's morning. We agreed the SSRA as above.

- We continued laying the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and Ayrton's field.
- The hedge on the south side of the extension woodland was trimmed.
- The hedge to the south border of the Flora field was de-brambled after the farmer had flailed it. More work to be done here.
- The leak in the Anna's Pool bund was repaired.

- The tarpaulin covering part of Lucy's Pool was removed. We will continue to monitor whether it halted the spread of mare's tail in the pond.
- The bund around the Alder Pond was strengthened.

12th January 2019

The Saturday volunteer session attracted 14 volunteers on a dull but dry morning.

- The shed area was cleared of fallen leaves and generally tidied.
- The saplings down the track from the shed to the Orchard were checked for supporting sticks and protectors.
- Habitat piles through the Orchard were tidied and stray brash added to them
- The Orchard was given a general 'de-brambling', digging out where practical, cutting off otherwise.
- Self-seeding suckers were cut back throughout the Orchard.
- The 'channel' between the fruit trees and the Orchard / Pads hedge was cleared of debris.
- Three post stumps, left proud by the path work, were cut down to protect the mower.
- The new saplings in the Old Damson Copse were cleared of surrounding vegetation to maximise their growth chances.

16th January 2019

The early morning rain was off-putting but six volunteers formed the WWG and were rewarded by an improving morning.

The objective was to fit a wire fence in the gap between Upper and Lower Sowerholme. This included:

- Removing old staples and wire from two former gateposts, recycled from the Reserve, to act as supports for the stile.
- Transporting the timber and wire from the shed to the site.
- Removing and storing the barbed wire we had used as a temporary stop gap.
- Building a wire fence across the gap.
- Building a stile across the fence.

Very satisfying to complete the job in one morning.



NOTE: Oliver took the photo and Julia had to leave earlier but contributed to the stile building.

23rd January 2019

A rare frosty morning attracted 13 volunteers for the WWG.

- We did the final tidying up after the Wassailing.
- Trimmed along the West Field / Long Pads hedge where the flail had left bramble embedded or overhanging and ready to root.
- Ditto, the Flora Field southern hedge.
- Continued hedge trimming and de-brambling

along the Flora Field / Long Pads hedge

- Repaired broken wire in the fence between Lower Sowerholme and Flora Field.
- Completed the laying of the hedge between the Canal Track and the concrete wall.
- Ensuring that the laid hedge was secure by adding extra hedge stakes.
- Fitting new posts so that the adjacent fence was stock proof.

30th January 2019

A beautiful winter's morning saw 9 volunteers from the WWG.

- After agreeing the SSRA for tree felling two silver birch were felled in the Orchard. Both were dying and leaning over paths.
- From the timber:
 - Discs were cut for Julia to use as signs across the Reserve
 - Two logs were cut to act as reserve stumps in the Stump Circle
 - A pole was cut and fitted to the recently built stile to provide a safer crossing.
 - The remnant was formed into a habitat pile.
- A fencing post was driven into the ground at the Orchard end of the Fauna path to act as the support for a no cycling sign.
- Considerable work was done on the hedge between the southern end of the Orchard and the Lucy Brook dogleg of the Pads footpath removing bramble and trimming the hedge.

Associate volunteers in January

- Trimmed Pads / Big Meadow hedge
- Sourced fencing posts
- Litter pick in the 'wild' part of the Orchard
- Design and build prototype duck nesting cage

6th February 2019

The Wednesday Work Group (WWG) included 10 volunteers on a pleasant winter's morning. The Site Specific Risk assessment (SSRA) for brash burning in Flora Field was agreed.

- We continued stripping bramble and trimming the hedge at the southern boundary of Flora Field.
- All the bramble accumulated there over several sessions was brought down for burning.
- We continued stripping bramble and trimming the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and the Flora Field.
- All the bramble accumulated there over several sessions was brought to the fire for burning.
- The brash resulting from the earlier laying of the adjacent hedge was burnt siting the bonfire on the Flora Field stubble.
- The path was cleared of debris.
- The fire was checked for safety at 3pm

9th February 2019

After the gales of Storm Erik 13 volunteers formed the Saturday volunteer group and enjoyed a bright and breezy morning.

- The priority was to complete the trimming and de-brambling of the hedge from the southern end of the Orchard to Lucy Brook. This had become very overgrown over the last few years and needed a good clear-out which revealed three stretches which need re-planting at some point.
- A stretch of fence between the Hay Meadow and Upper Sowerholme was re-posted.
- New posts were fitted to replace broken posts on the Fauna path and between Big Meadow and the Hay meadow.
- Storm Erik had brought down a old hawthorn in the Orchard which was cut back and cleared.

13th February 2019

Eight volunteers formed the WWG on a dull but dry morning.

A good start was made to pruning and interweaving the willow living screen around School Pond. Willow rods were set aside for further work.

20th February 2019

Nine volunteers formed the WWG on what turned into a thoroughly wet morning.

- We cleared some of the grass growing in Alder Pond. The grass was difficult to extract but we think we have enough clear water for the pond to thrive.
- Barley straw cages were filled and placed in Alder Pond to deter the algae.
- Graham's patent design of duck nests were placed as follows:
 - Cromwell Pond – Emma and Glenys
 - Lucy Pond – Lucy, Lizzie and Angie
 - Upper Sowerholme channel – Julia
 - Upper Sowerholme Pond – Laura
 - Anna's Pool – Alice and Patricia
- We inspected the big willow which has split near Willow Pond and decided to leave well alone at the moment

27th February 2019

Twelve volunteers formed the WWG on an abnormally warm and sunny morning.

Our main job was maintaining and extending the Orchard willow domes. This included:

- Removing the remnant of the blue liner used last year.
- Trimming and weaving in last years growth on the domes / tunnel.
- Replacing the former blue liner with a permeable membrane which will not flood.
- Cutting further long rods from the Fauna path willow screen
- Transporting the rods to the Orchard
- Fixing the liner with new rods
- Clearing extra ground
- Building three new 'domes' in different shapes and connecting tunnels.
- Fixing the permeable liner in these.

We also removed redundant plastic tree liners in the Orchard.

Ian and Graham inspected

- One of the aspen trees at the bottom of Towneley path which shows signs of rot at the base of the trunk, possibly strimmer damage years ago which allowed a fungus to access.
- The veteran sycamore which has a lot of dead wood high up.

Both of these need Andy Lee's inspection and possibly his attention.

We had an incident when the handle of the right hand shed door broke off in a volunteer's hand. On inspection it seemed to us that the steel bar inside the handle was too short and the force had been applied not to this but to the cast aluminium handle. This has eventually sheared off. Fortunately, we are still able to open the door.

Various solutions to this issue were proposed. For the moment taping off the sneck and just using a key to open the lock bolts seems a good idea. I am sceptical about volunteers unscrewing the lock casing as I don't want a situation where we cannot leave the door secure. On the other hand, a locksmith will be expensive. Let's try the taping off.

Associate volunteers in February

- Trimmed the hedge between the Pads footpath and Big Meadow.
- Repaired and replaced bird boxes.
- Prepared the ground for willow screen work.
- Designed and built prototype duck nests