

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 5th September 2019 at 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

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

1. **Apologies:** Dave Brookes, Tony Finn
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Decision on fern offer (4.4):** The FA's ecologist has approved adding ferns in Pony Wood, so the offer has been accepted.
 - 3.2. **West Field trough (5.1):** The handle is not missing, just being moved by the cattle. Graham has also noted that the water going into the trough is rather muddy. Given that the trough is about to be taken out of action for the winter, it was agreed to defer any investigation until next year unless the Graziers express concern.
 - 3.3. **Ragwort in LGGS Field (5.1):** Last meeting's decision to leave ragwort in the LGGS field this season has had to be overturned as lots of sizeable plants have appeared. So on 31st July, the Wednesday Work Group made significant inroads into the ragwort closest to the nature reserve fields. **Ian** considers that the FA has sufficient volunteers to tackle the whole of the LGGS Field. Consequently next year will revert to the previous approach of removing ragwort across the whole of the field, starting at an earlier point in the year, to prevent a worsening of the infestation and avoid the use of herbicide.
4. **Management:**
 - 4.1. **Arable update:** The Arable Farmer applied an NE-approved herbicide (*Eagle*) on 6th July. This does not appear to have been very effective. The crop was harvested and first cut of the floristically enhanced grass margin made on 19th August. No-one has contacted Sue to expressed an interest in investigating more environmentally-friendly ways of managing the arable crop. **Sue** will arrange the next cut of the margins.
 - 4.2. **Grazing matters:** Haymaking took place on 24th July. Twenty nine bales produced – a significant increase on last year. They have been stacked as requested by the Graziers. The cattle have been grazing the aftermath and trampling in the wildflower seed in the Hay Meadow, but have yet to go into Carr House Meadow. Given that a lot of wildflowers are regenerating there, the meeting felt there was no urgency for this, but the need for it to be grazed before too much longer will be mentioned informally to the Graziers.

The final calf has been born and the herd bull has been taken off. So herd size remains at 18 animals, with a livestock unit per hectare measure of 0.9. This is fine at the moment, but potentially problematic unless there are reductions in the herd this autumn.

- 4.3. **Woodland and hedges:** Ian is concerned that work on the veteran sycamore 534 has still not been done. **Hilary** will clarify with the Tree Surgeon and also ask about progress with the survey of the play area and Aldcliffe Road triangle.

The application to the Woodland Trust for some 1200 saplings has been successful although the price has increased.

- 4.4. **Matters relating to the Flora path:** The map for the noticeboard is at the printers. It is hoped that this will be installed in time for the formal opening of the path by Jon Barry (date to be confirmed) (**Hilary**). No action as regards *Harries View* (**Mick**).

- 4.5. **NCS seed planting:** A National Citizens Service group, keen to introduce bee friendly plants and seeds in the local area, has contacted the FA via the website. Sue responded positively but pointed out that the FA must ensure provenance and suggested alternative areas that might welcome this social action project. She has not received a reply.

However, this item triggered other thoughts:

a) **Sue** remembered that she is holding seed left over from re-sowing the wildflower margin. She will pass it on to **Ian** to join the stock of yellow rattle and other wildflower seeds to be sown in October. Some will be added to the margin strip between Pony Wood and Aldcliffe Road which was sown rather too thinly earlier.

b) Seed has been collected from the purple ramping fumitory spotted by the FA's ecologist in the arable margin. Some of this will be sown direct into disturbed soil, some passed to John Payne for nurturing in pots (**Ian**).

c) Graham's suggestion of turning the nettle-dominated corner of the Fauna path by ash 538 into another wildflower pocket was welcomed. It was suggested that meadowsweet might work well in the wetter part opposite. (**Ian**)

- 4.6. **Whiteboard for sightings:** After considering various potential locations, it was decided the best place to install a board (900 by 600mm) is close to the pedestrian gate into Pony Wood. It could be screwed onto two fencing posts with a small roof to protect it from rain. This approach has the advantages of being cheap and temporary, if it proves problematic. However, the practicalities will be investigated further before FFOG gives the go-ahead (**David**). Sue drew attention to small A4 noticeboards that she has seen elsewhere being used by volunteers to draw attention to particular points of interest. Also to be considered further.

- 4.7. **Water Abstraction licence:** The Environment Agency has contacted Dave following the introduction of new rules that mean the FA may need a licence for diverting water from Lucy Brook into the nature reserve. An application plus payment (refunded if it is found that no licence is needed) must be made promptly to meet the EA's timings which recommend submission by 30 September (**Dave**). Abstraction of less than 20 cubic metres per day is exempt. **Chris** has offered to help Dave measure the water flow at the cattle crossing to calculate the amount of abstraction. However, the meeting

pointed out that this was downstream from the diversion point in Upper Sowerholme and where the flow in the brook is augmented by run off through Big Meadow. Another measurement higher up the brook was therefore advised, particularly if that at the cattle crossing proves too high. **Mick/Hilary** will arrange an 'expert' to check the calculations.

- 4.8. Neighbour's hedge in Orchard:** The boundary has been removed and brambles cut back between the Orchard and one of the adjacent properties. Hilary and Andrew have met the owner who plans to install a green fence, after which the FA can reinstate the area as appropriate. To be followed up at next FFOG (**Hilary**).

5. Monitoring:

- 5.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections:** Graham's reports circulated. The Upper Sowerholme pond and channel are holding a good level of water, although totally overgrown with vegetation. Plans are already in place for the Wednesday Work Group to start dealing with this (**Ian, Graham**). (The meeting was reminded that it may be necessary to revert to a digger next year.) Clear water is advised here, but hand clearing will inevitably leave some vegetation. On the general issue of clearing ponds, advice from an amphibian expert at NLWG is that leaving grass (for instance, in Alder Pond) is desirable as long as it is not too thick. However, a blanket of algae is undesirable because of the reduction in light.

Graham is continuing to create a narrow perimeter pathway to permit movement within Upper Sowerholme.

Vegetation starting to encroach on gates in the Flora area of the reserve will be added to **Ian's** list of jobs.

- 5.2. Progress with surveys:** Reports on the breeding birds and wildflowers surveys are promised soon. **Sue** will check on the butterfly surveying.
- 5.3. NLWG field visit 31st July:** **Chris** is writing a report.
- 5.4. Bats:** The study of bats by two licensed surveyors is progressing. A transect survey has identified three species: common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle and Natterer's, although no evidence has been found that bat boxes are being used. Between meetings, FFOG members gave permission for acoustic recorders to detect bat calls to be installed on trees in the reserve.
- 5.5. Bumblebees:** Oliver's survey results were circulated. Average numbers in the hay meadows have held up well and even improved during the peak flowering season of late May-early July compared with last year. There has also been a good variety of species. **Oliver** asked to defer further discussion until national figures are available for comparison.

6. Volunteer activities:

6.1. Volunteer sessions: Full reports for July and August are attached. Work on the edges of the Fauna path in early July revealed the inadequacies of the current trimmers. Ian has asked for a more powerful machine for next summer. **Hilary** will pursue a grant (cost about £400).

Ian was concerned that Volunteers were wasting time and effort creating piles of scythed rush, which are then scattered by the cattle. The meeting was reminded that the rush heaps are a compromise reached with Natural England. (NE's preference, as the way to reduce fertility, is for cuttings to be removed – a much harder task.) Given that the scattering tends to leave the material close by, it was agreed to continue creating the heaps.

So far at least, the notices posted in the Orchard appear to have resulted in more responsible picking of the fruit. They have now been refreshed with ones that reference Apple Day. The lower branches of the fruit trees will be removed over the winter, to make mowing safer (**Ian**).

Tasks proposed for the session on Saturday 14th September were approved. Sue questioned why the tasks for the Saturday Volunteers sessions came to FFOG, but not those for the Wednesday Work Group sessions. Ian pointed to the impracticality of scheduling in detail work for a weekly activity over the two month period between meetings. He also pointed out that all the specific tasks related to general work activities sanctioned by FFOG. In contrast, having a list of jobs on offer is required for inclusion in the Volunteer Coordinator's advertising of the monthly Saturday sessions, so may as well come to FFOG.

Hilary will provide **Ian** with details of a cleaning product for the back of the marquee. This will be tried for Apple Day. If unsuccessful, a new back will be purchased (approx £79).

6.2. Scything training: One member of the Wednesday Work Group attended a professionally-run scything course on 26th July. He found it very useful. Three others spent a WWG morning undertaking training in-house. This was also received very favourably by the participants. All four have since had lots of opportunities to practice their newly-acquired skills on the reserve! The aim will be to offer in-house training to a small group in subsequent years to ensure the FA maintains a good pool of trained scythers (**Glenys, Ian**). Given the amount of work now required on the reserve, **Ian** intends to start scything earlier next year.

6.3. First Aid training: The number of qualified first aiders on the FA's list is down to five, making it harder to ensure adequate first aid cover at volunteer sessions and FA events. The approach has been to qualify people via a two-day course held in Staveley (cost £120 per person). The WWG had the idea of increasing considerably the number of first aiders by offering a tailor-made, one-day course, held locally. Ian developed this approach and its advantages in an email to gain support in principle from FFOG. He has now received a quote from the Staveley trainer of £370 for up to 12 people, with room hire as an additional cost. Wednesday is considered the preferred day because of its likely feasibility for WWG members, although the chance to participate will be offered across the FA membership. If spaces are not filled: a) Graham, Ian and Mick could

renew their certificates slightly early, b) other local groups, such as Lancashire Green Spaces, could be invited without charge as a goodwill gesture (agreed by **Hilary**). **Ian** was given the green light to continue the arrangements.

7. Standing items:

7.1. Arrangements:

Ian will

- stop rush cutting in the HK10 fields by 30th September as required by NE.
- add clearing Anna's Stone to the next Saturday Volunteer session.
- arrange for the neighbouring farmer to flail the north hedge of West Field and instruct him not to touch the east or west hedges (to be tackled by volunteers).
- be alert for falling temperature and remove the West Field pump before it freezes.
- review and update first aid equipment, including the annual check of defibrillator including battery. Also remind First Aiders of what there is and where it can be found at the November Volunteer session.

It was agreed that the two volunteers holding valid certificates should be able to cope with the amount of chainsaw work currently required, so no renewal courses will offered at the moment.

Sue will

- commission the winter bird survey
- remind Lancashire County Council to do end of season work on Long Pads path vegetation [since confirmed that this will happen in the next few weeks]

Ideas for the Volunteers Buffet in February will be considered at the next meeting (**all**)

7.2. Financial control:

Haymaking invoice expected soon (4.2 – **Sue**)

Sapling order about £500 (4.3 – **Ian**)

Water abstraction licence application £1500 (4.7 – **Dave**)

Repair of the toro mower £113. (The charge for the un-requested service has been removed.)

Ian noted that the FA is short of tables for events. It was agreed to defer purchasing any until the Easter Hunt is imminent. In the meantime, **Hilary** will seek funding.

7.3. Organised events for notification to FA: Five FA members hosted a 'Walk and talk' site visit for 15 members from 11 organisations affiliated to the *Green Forum* on 1st August. A report on the event by one of the participants will be circulated (**ian**). [Done]

8. Outcomes from meeting with Forestry Commission expert: On 9th July, six FA members met Andy Bennett (the Forestry Commission Officer with responsibility for South Lakeland

and much of Lancashire). They spent 2 hours showing him around all parts of the Nature Reserve. It was clear that the woodland element is too small to be of much interest to the Forestry Commission, however a good contact has been made.

The main points from the visit have been summarised by Ian, and circulated to FFOG along with additional comments from Oliver, Mick and Sue. This report raises a number of long-term issues, which it was felt inappropriate for the current meeting. Instead it was decided – given the approaching end of the NE Agreement, the growing interest in the concept of re-wilding etc – to discuss such matters as part of a more wide-ranging review of the reserve and the FA's management practices. To kick-start the process, it was finally agreed that FFOG would meet for an hour or so at a different time and place (**Sue** to arrange). **Sue** and **Glenys** will generate some sort of focus/framework for the meeting.

However, the following decisions were taken:

- ash dieback will be monitored using photographs (twice a year). **Chris** will approach the FA's photographer. He will need to meet with **Ian**, who can identify the infected trees.
- in the Orchard, the diseased aspen will be felled and wilting cherry pollarded at about 3m to maintain the dead wood.
- in Little Wood, one of the elms will be coppiced.
- Lancaster Whitebeam will be introduced into Pony Wood. **Sue** to contact Morecambe Bay Facilitation Fund to find a source. [Done, and a promising offer received.]

9. **Dogs on Nature reserves:** Following on from July item 4.8, the research Sue has managed to locate is rather dated. It also relates to the impact of dogs on wildlife in areas of open access. In contrast, dogs on the Fairfield Reserve are confined to footpaths and frequently screened (which will increase over time as the newer hedges establish). She could find no direct evidence that dogs under close control on footpaths disturb wildlife. Although the rarer cases of dogs out of control are more of a concern, she concluded that the FA should accept the current situation as regards dogs.

An encouraging note: David – citing his experience of mowing the grass – observed that dog mess in the Orchard seems less of a problem than it has been in the past.

10. **AOB:** None

11. **Date/place of next meetings:** Thursday **14th** November [**note: later date than usual**], Thursday 9th January 2020 at 7.30pm. Venue: Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

3rd July 2019

Eight volunteers formed the Wednesday Work Group (WWG) on a sunny, warm morning.

- We conducted a second sweep of the hay meadows extracting ragwort.

- The overhanging hedge alongside the benches on the Fauna path was cut back.
- We began to trim the edges of the Fauna path of overhanging vegetation. This led to much frustration with the inadequacies of our trimming machines. Peter and Winston, who know about landscape machines, urge the FA to get a better quality machine and Ian will follow up.
- After consulting by phone with Keith, we began the thinning of the fruit trees, removing excess fruit to leave single apples and pears.

9th July 2019

The first meeting this season of the Scything Group (SG) attracted 4 volunteers. The top priority was the thistle in the Flora Field beetle banks which were in full flower and in danger of seeding the field. Scything them was not straightforward as the ground is uneven and the thistles tangled with thick grass. Clearing them was even more difficult and we resolved to leave the debris to dry out and to burn it later in the summer.

10th July 2019

The predicted wet weather did not materialise and the WWG enjoyed a dry if muggy morning. Despite the forecast 14 volunteers turned out, a record for the WWG I think.

- A second ragwort sweep of the Paddock and Big Meadow produced 17 bags.
- We continued the summer pruning and thinning of the Orchard fruit trees, clearing away the debris.
- The base of the fruit trees was trimmed and any suckers removed.
- The second cattle battered duck nesting platform was rescued, from School Pond. If they are to be used again, they will have to be away from the cattle.

13th July 2019

The Saturday volunteering session attracted 13 volunteers on a warm and dry summer's morning.

- Mick led two volunteers with health issues down the Pads footpath to trim back overhanging bramble.
- The main task of the day was to re-configure the ground under two of the gates between Carr House Meadow and the Hay Meadow which was obstructing the opening of the gates. This involved:
 - Digging out the turf and soil under the gates and between it and the path to a depth of about 30 mm.
 - The debris was piled in the small triangle of land adjacent to the gates.
 - Meanwhile bags of gravel, left over from the re-surfacing of the path, was transported by truck and barrow to the site.
 - A Geotech membrane was laid to stop the growth of grass and nettles.
 - The area was back filled with gravel, well stamped down.
 The west gate was almost completed; the east gate was begun but more work to do.
- The boundary between Upper Sowerholme and neighbours' gardens had been noted as a point of possible cattle escape. Old barbed wire was removed and, new posts rammed home and one strand of wire put in place. More work needed.
- Overhanging vegetation from the Fauna path hedge was trimmed back.
- Yellow rattle seeds were collected with a view to using them in our two wild flower beds.

16th July 2019

A much better turnout of 8 volunteers for the SG. We also took better rakes and the 2 new pitch fork for clearing up so altogether a better evening's work. We got stuck into the nettle beds in Pony Wood and made good progress.

17th July 2019

Fifteen volunteers formed the WWG so last week's record turnout was surpassed! A lovely summer's morning, not too hot and not too chilly!

We had arranged this session to include Paul Ferguson giving an 'in house' training session for three of the WWG. This was very successful. It included experience of scything nettles, thistles, soft rush and grass in various locations.

Other volunteers had a 'finishing off' morning:

- The gate work between Carr House Meadow and the Hay Meadow was finished. Fortunately, the left-over gravel from the winter path work was just sufficient to do the job.
- We finished off the new fence at the back of Upper Sowerholme securing neighbouring gardens from potential cattle visitation.
- The strimming of the Fauna path edge was completed, without the frustrations of the 3rd July.
- We continued to gather yellow rattle seed for the wildflower beds.
- And we planted 11 hemp agrimony plants, donated by John Payne, in the wildflower bed at Howson's gate.

Here are two yellow rattlers hard at work



23rd July 2019

Six volunteers formed the SG on a hot night for working.

- Two volunteers made a start on scything and clearing the thistle in the Gun Range.
- The remainder continued work in Pony Wood scything the nettles and clearing to habitat piles.

24th July 2019

Thirteen volunteers formed the WWG on a warm but pleasant summer's morning.

- We completed this phase of scything and clearing the Gun Range.
- A narrow path was cut through the western fringe

of Upper Sowerholme.

- Those not pushing barrows carried shears to 'work whilst walking' along the Pads footpath cutting overhanging bramble and nettle.
- The scything of the Pony Woods nettle beds was completed and the debris stacked in habitat piles.
- The path edges of the new Pony Wood path were strimmed insofar as they were not bird friendly flowers. The debris was cleared.
- We began the latest phase of trimming around the hedge saplings of the new Pony Wood hedge.
- We identified the purple ramping fumitory discovered by Graeme Skelcher and marked it with an old fence post.

30th July 2019

Unfortunately, heavy thunder showers led to the cancellation of the SG.

31st July 2019

Fourteen volunteers formed the WWG and were fortunate to have a dry morning when heavy downpours were forecast.

- Keith continued to prune and thin the fruit trees.
- Graham continued to construct the new path in Upper Sowerholme.
- Newly trained scythers cut down thistles in Lower Sowerholme and the Grammar School fields.
- Most of the group cleared ragwort which has come into flower. Areas covered were Big Meadow and the Grammar School fields. It was noticeable how much insect life was feeding on the ragwort. Whilst we need to keep our own grazing pasture and meadow clear, the policy of letting ragwort grow in selected areas should be continued. In the Grammar School fields we concentrated on those plants adjacent to our hay meadows. The

amount of ragwort in the Grammar School fields, which we have ignored until this late in the 'season' shows how quickly high infestation levels will be re-established.

- Bags of ragwort were carted back to the shed and five barrows fully loaded to go to the tip in the next day or so. Protected from the predicted downpours by a poly sheet

Associate volunteers in July:

- Replaced the 'Dogs on leads' signs on the Pony Wood path with signs with more appropriate symbol and wording.
- Refixed the No Cycling sign at the join of the Pads track and the Pads footpath which someone had unscrewed!
- Mowed the Orchard grass.
- Kept the shrub saplings in the Old Damson Copse clear of envelopment.
- Fixed a special camera to record the moorhen in the Alice duck nest on Anna's Pool.
- Ragworting in Hay Meadow marsh.
- Shed tidying.
- Transported the tables, marquee, gazebos etc back from the Triangle to the shed.

6th August 2019

The Scything Group (SG) had only two members but we made good progress scything thistles in West Field.

7th August 2019

The Wednesday Work Group (WWG) attracted 11 volunteers on what turned out to be a bright and breezy morning without the forecast showers.

- Graham continued his path construction in Upper Sowerholme and removed a small amount of ragwort from there and Lower Sowerholme.
- Three scythers completed the scything of thistles in West Field and Lower Sowerholme.
- We 'worked whilst we walked' along the Pads footpath cutting back overhanging nettles and bramble.
- We continued and completed the trimming around the new Pony Wood hedge saplings. Both the 2018 and 2019 plantings are looking very healthy.
- The purple ramping fumitory was checked. On this occasion Keith was present so he took a sample to compare with the plants which grow in his garden.

10th August 2019

For the monthly Saturday volunteer session the weather forecast was for heavy and persistent rain. Again, see June! Rather than cancel we went ahead. The actual weather was extremely heavy rain, not quite persistent but not far off! Despite this, 12 volunteers bravely turned out and we did a foreshortened but productive morning.

- Keith led a team continuing the summer pruning and thinning of the fruit trees.
- Others trimmed around the perimeter of the Orchard mowing area cutting back overhang.
- We discovered that an Orchard neighbour had invaded FA land behind the soft fruit circle, cutting down shrubs and piling them in such a way as to block the path around the circle. The FA Chair was asked to come down and take details for further action.
- After taking photographs the invasive brash was pushed back to enable the staking of the collapsed gorse to clear a way along the path.

13th August 2019

Five volunteers formed the SG and began the scything of soft rush in Big Meadow to a) create rides through older rush in the marsh and b) cut back where the rush is expanding into the meadow beyond the marsh. The curiosity of the cows meant we had to finish just a few minutes early as we were becoming too much the centre of their attention.

As we left, I watched the cows playfully destroying the piles of rush we had just created. As raking up the rush into these piles is by far the most demanding aspect of scything the rushes, it makes

one question whether it is a sensible use of our efforts when the cows almost always spread the piles out.

14th August 2019

Fifteen volunteers again made for a record turnout for the WWG on a rain-threatening morning. Fortunately, it held off until the last half hour, just enough to wet everything through.

- Graham dealt with the Orchard willow which has cast off major limbs. He was able to cut willow rods from the brash and pile the brash into a habitat pile.
- We posted notices in the Orchard asking people to show restraint in picking the apples both in terms of waiting until they are ripe and only taking sufficient for personal use.
- Plants from John Payne were planted out, a couple of hemp agrimony in the Fauna Stones flower bed and agrimony and red campion in the Howson's gate flower bed. The latter is retaining water despite our drain channels although it has been particularly wet over the last few days. Ian needs to check and we probably need to think of a wetland seed mix.
- We continued the summer pruning and thinning of the Orchard fruit trees and clearing away the debris. Almost done this big job.
- Five of the trained scythers cut back thistle in the School Fields and Gun Range. This can lay on the ground for the cattle to clear in time although we are careful to clear away any ragwort which gets cut.
- Trimming of overhanging bramble and nettles through the Orchard, Fauna footpath and Pads footpath.

21st August 2019

Nine volunteers formed the WWG with Winston in charge in Ian's absence.

- The intruding bramble and nettles around the Paddock were cut back to the stock fence.
- Further work was done scything pathways through the Big Meadow soft rush.
- The resulting debris was put into piles.

27th August 2019

Four volunteers formed the SG and continued work in Big Meadow scything the marsh fringes and cutting paths through the soft rush.

The rush was cleared into piles.

28th August 2019

Twelve volunteers formed the WWG on a damp morning. The rain was light but later became heavy so we called it a day at 12 noon.

- We completed the scything work in Big Meadow.
- With the soft rush raked into piles.
- A further ragwort sweep of Big meadow was made.
- The Pads footpath was trimmed as the rain was weighing down overhang.



Associate volunteers in August:

- Took 36 bags of ragwort to the tip.
 - Mowed the Orchard grass
- N.B. REQUEST FROM DAVID, CAN THE LOWER BRANCHES OF THE FRUIT TREES BE REMOVED, IT'S GETTING DANGEROUS. SPOKEN WITH KEITH, WE WILL AIM FOR THIS OVER THE WINTER.
- Sharpened and cleaned the chain saws.
 - Made safe the fallen willow branches in the Orchard.
 - Further 4 bags of ragwort to the tip plus scrap barbed wire.