

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 5th March 2020 at 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

Present: Graham Brandwood, Dave Brookes, Steve Bullen, David Elliott, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Oliver Fulton, Clio Graham, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short, Peter Tilley, Chris Workman

1. **Apologies:** None
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Fauna information board (3.1):** The Landscape Architect is still considering alterations. As replacement is not urgent, **Hilary** will seek grant funding to cover the total cost of the project.
 - 3.2. **Neighbour's hedge in Orchard (3.2):** The two neighbours have started erecting a replacement fence, but it encroaches about 2m into the FA's land. **Hilary** has spoken to one of them, and will speak to the other as soon as she is able, about reverting to the original line and will reinforce the message with a letter.
 - 3.3. **Replacement pond signs (3.3):** In hand, but no urgency (**Mick**).
 - 3.4. **FA membership of *Charter for Trees* (3.4):** Application completed. Hilary has requested a section in the FA website. **Ian** has agreed to take responsibility for the Charter.
 - 3.5. **Flora path gate repair (5.1):** The pedestrian gate by Little Wood pre-dates the Flora path and has rotted from the inside over the years. It has been repaired by installing a plate on each side of the top bar. However, Peter noted that a new gate may be required in a couple of years. He added that he is in the process of checking and servicing all the gates on the reserve.
 - 3.6. **Flora path closure policy (9.1):** The Flora path will be closed when there is a Met Office amber warning for strong winds. Small signs will be installed advising the public that the concessionary path may be closed on safety grounds. **Sue** will take responsibility for operating the policy, with **Ian, Mick, Hilary, Graham** and **David** all indicating their willingness to effect the closure if required.
 - 3.7. **Re-location of dog waste bin (9.2):** The Dog Warden is considering the matter (**Dave**). (See also 9.1)
 - 3.8. **Water Abstraction Licence (4.4):** There has been no communication from the Environment Agency since the FA's application was acknowledged. Sue has written a letter to MP Cat Smith to express the FA's dissatisfaction with the process.
4. **Management:**
 - 4.1. **Arable update:** Sue has reminded the arable farmer that Natural England now allows him to plough in the stubble. There has been no sign of any work, not even muck-

spreading. It is probably all too wet, particularly in the corner by the beehives. **Sue** will contact him again to inform him that the bird seed margin can be removed and re-established from 15th March.

- 4.2. Grazing matters:** Four calves (one male) have been born, bringing herd size to 22 animals, with a stocking density of 1.26 livestock units per hectare. The cattle are now starting to spend more time in the reserve fields. The current prediction is that the stocking density over the winter period will be close to, but within Natural England's winter prescription (**Glenys** to monitor). Concern was expressed about the extent of poaching given the herd size and the very wet conditions.

For the breeding season period starting 1 April, NE's requirement is for a maximum average of 1.20 LU/ha. Stocking density, already in excess of this, is projected to rise as more calves are born etc. **Sue** to advise the Graziers about these compliance issues relating to the winter and breeding seasons.

There has been a report of a dog in the Paddock where newly-born calves tend to be housed. Possible case of mistaken identity – a fast moving calf in a coat instead? Anyway, volunteers have taken steps to make the field boundary more dog-proof. **Sue** to report to Graziers.

The cattle have now run out of the reserve's crop of haylage. A delivery of hay was made on 25th February into the ring feeder which had been moved into Carr House Meadow. This was promptly spotted and the Graziers reminded of NE's prohibition of supplementary feeding in the reserve. A second hay delivery on 28th February consequently went into the LGGs Field (outside the NE Agreement). Unfortunately, the cattle and tractor have churned the ground in CHM. Sue has received advice not to worry from an MBFF contact: little extra nutrient will have been added; some wildflowers, such as devil's bit scabious, do well in disturbed ground; the ruts may flatten over time. However, it may exacerbate the thistle problem. The Graziers' offer to harrow the field will be turned down as this would need NE permission (**Sue**). It was agreed to review the situation in six months time, with a view to reseeding wildflowers if necessary. (The MBFF contact's offer of a donation of cowslip seed is to be accepted, although for verges as supplementary seeding is not allowed in the meadows – **Sue**).

- 4.3. Woodland and hedges:** The **Tree Surgeon** has removed more dead sections from the old sycamore (534). The other work agreed (detailed in an email from Ian 12 January) has yet to be started. Consent for the felling of two ash trees in Little Wood to increase light levels has just been received from the Tree Protection Officer. As usual, all felled timber will be left on site. Oliver has received further advice in about the proposed elm-coppicing in Little Wood. The decision now is to leave the elm trees alone as they may be disease resistant specimens (**Ian**). Monitoring of the ash trees in the reserve will begin when they come into leaf (**Ian, Chris**).

Hilary has responded to the **Environment Agency's tree planting offer** (Jan 8.3), proposing a meeting. She will repeat this, and then share the matter with **Peter**.

Hanafins can supply an appropriate guard for the **proposed specimen tree in the Paddock** (Jan 8.4). Aspen was selected from the list of species offered to the donor. Unfortunately aspen may not be appropriate in this field because the cattle are rarely in this field to control its suckers. A wild service tree might be too small. There is also the issue of compatibility with the companion species in the guard. **Oliver** offered to

contact a tree nursery for advice. **Hilary** will then return to the donor with the revised choices.

- 4.4. **Whiteboard for sightings: David** is soon to purchase a 900mm x 600mm board.
- 4.5. **West Field drainage:** Graham has been carrying out further work. He is fairly confident that a second drain has been blocked, although the extremely wet conditions have made the task very difficult and the hole is still not entirely filled. The Graziers were warned as the cattle were being taken into the field. Chris still has plans to use a ground radar machine to identify water flows. Assuming the current repairs hold, Graham is not intending to pursue the possible third drain at the moment.
- 4.6. **Anti-social behaviour on the Flora path:** See Volunteer Report 22 Jan below. Hilary has had advice from the PCSO. It is hoped that this is a one-off.
- 4.7. **RPA Inspection:** Dave has recently received the results of an unannounced inspection by the Rural Payments Agency that took place in May 2019. It was undertaken under the 'risk' selection methodology (as opposed to 'random' or 'targeted') but there is no information as to what this means (**Dave** to investigate). The conclusion was that no action is needed. Stocking density was shown as 94% of allowable. This has been wrongly calculated (too high) but there is no need to challenge it.

5. **Monitoring:**

- 5.1. **Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections:** Graham's reports circulated. A further attempt has been made to repair the leaking bund in Alder Pond. Clearance of algae from ponds is ongoing and duck nesting platforms are being refurbished and re-installed (this trial is being extended for a second year).
- 5.2. **Progress with surveys:** It is hoped to add dragonfly monitoring this year. A potential surveyor has been identified and **Glenys** is arranging to take him on a tour of the reserve once dragonflies start to emerge. Peter noted that he also has a keen interest in dragonflies and Glenys will liaise with him too.

Will Walton has submitted the first report of his ongoing project, *Fairfield Bats*. He has so far found some evidence of four species: common pipistrelle and soprano pipistrelle (seen and recorded by detector in and around Pony Wood, along the footpath by Abraham Heights and over Alder Pond), Natterers recorded at the Townley Close end of the Orchard, and a call identified as a potential Noctule picked up by the Anabat detectors in December. Meeting Members were heartened by his conclusion the reserve already covers numerous habitats (woodland, orchard, hedgerows, water, open pasture, adjacent homes, gardens and allotments) that support bats in terms of both feeding and shelter. On the downside he has found virtually no signs that bat boxes are being used. Will makes several proposals:

- get the existing boxes into better working order and – if this does not improve their use – move them to more appropriate locations
- survey the trees on the reserve for Potential Roost Features
- continue acoustic surveys

The meeting was very happy to support this proposed work, all to be done by appropriately qualified, insured and licensed personnel. (**Glenys** to contact Will).

Ian N. and P. have carried out their annual inspection of the nestboxes. Throughout the reserve only 16 of the 40 boxes had been occupied in 2019, mostly by great and blue tits. The wet weather conditions last spring did not help. Highlight was the evidence of a tree sparrow in box O11. Repair work plus installation of metal plates and two new boxes has been done. A nuthatch has recently been seen inspecting box O14 – a promising sign for next year's survey?.

The field maps for Dan Haywood's winter bird survey were circulated for the Special FFOG on 27th February. His spreadsheet and report have still not been received. **Sue** to remind him and commission a breeding bird survey.

6. Volunteer activities:

6.1. Volunteer sessions: Full reports for January and February are attached. This includes references to work done in Wednesday Work Group sessions starting on 29th January (eventually finishing 4 March) on the Fauna path/School Field hedge with the aim of increasing its value for wildlife. This is the boundary between the reserve and land, owned by Lancaster Girls Grammar School, with the Graziers tenants of LGGs. It was pointed out that the work on the hedge had not been approved by FFOG and that the hedge belongs to the Grazier, not the FA. The FA is therefore not permitted to cut it other than to make sure that it does not obstruct the path..

6.2. Review of Associate Volunteer Scheme: This continues to work well. There are currently 14 AVs carrying out work outside formal volunteer sessions. This is the same total as last year. Ian's report lists 20 examples of how AVs are making a significant contribution, including machine and tool maintenance, path clearing, hedge trimming, transporting waste material to the tip. Ian considers the current number of AVs to be adequate, especially as attendance at formal volunteer sessions is holding up well (a record 18 people at WWG on 22 January).

6.3. Review of John Muir Award: The FA has been offering this award since 2016. Over this period, 49 certificates have been presented to FA Volunteers of all ages: 28 *Discovery*, 11 *Explorer*, 10 at the top level of *Conservator*. Some have received awards at more than one level. Young people remain poorly represented amongst FA volunteers, although a few more are starting to attend the monthly sessions. The meeting agreed that this scheme remains a good way of recognising and rewarding volunteer effort and supported continuing the FA's membership of the John Muir Trust.

7. Standing items:

7.1. Arrangements:

Sue has the following in hand:

- Commission Pony & Little Wood flora survey for end April/early May.
- Commission early survey of wildflowers in Hay & Carr House Meadows for May.
- Commission breeding bird survey (see 5.2)
- Organise maintenance arrangement for Long Pads Path by contacting Lancaster County Council. (**Ian** will start maintenance of this vegetation if the existing arrangement is confirmed.)
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Ian will:

- Arrange the 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
- Convene a FFOG site visit (“Field Expedition”) to consider a management plan for the trees and hedges for 2020/21 (FFOG July 2019), and to include consideration of various proposals made at the Special FFOG meeting (see item 8). He will circulate an itinerary along with a choice of dates.

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

Glenys will:

- Organise monitoring of Orchard fruit trees for ‘blossom time’
- Review last year’s rush control and plan programme for coming year
- With Sue, assess whether it is necessary for the cattle to be brought into HM & CHM before 31st March for low sward for wildflowers

Dave will make arrangements, including obtaining a derogation from NE, to enable a hay crop to be taken from West Field if necessary (July 2019 5.1)

The FFOG Agenda for May will include: a) Preparations for annual grazing review meeting b) Discussion of digger work in ponds & US (from Nov 2018 4.1 and May 2019 7.1) **All**

7.2. Financial control:

Tree guard expected to cost approx £200 (4.3)

Mick will soon be making the annual purchase of seeds for the arable margins (about £250)

Peter will be making a payment to Lancashire County Council for an estimated £300. This is the fee for depositing a statement and statutory declaration under the Highways Act (1980) in respect of the concessionary footpaths.

The Treasurer has been trying to reconcile the discrepancy between Dave’s anticipated costs of running the reserve and the actual costs recorded (Jan 7.2). This will be considered by the Trustees before being reported to FFOG.

7.3. Organised events for notification to FA: a) Members of North Lancashire Wildlife Group will be studying the ponds and wet areas on 19th April (**Chris**) b) **Steve** and **Clio** will lead a winter bird walk on 25th April.

7.4. Morecambe Bay Facilitation Fund partnership: On 30 January, Christine Bennett and Laura Booth attended a meeting on Meadows and Pollinators at Leighton Moss. On 14th February, Graham, Steve, Clio, Mick, Hilary and Sue all took part on a Wilding/Habitat Regeneration conference at the Lake District National Park offices in Kendal. Reports from these meetings fed into the Special FFOG (see 8). It was agreed that membership of MBFF is generating some very good training and providing a wealth of useful information to help improve habitat on the reserve.

- 8. Follow-up from Special Meeting 27th February:** A very productive meeting, held at the Toll House Inn. It continued consideration of the wildlife value of the reserve started at the Special Meeting on 17th October. Hilary's announcement that the Trustees had made the decision to accept an extension to the FA's Agreement with Natural England, if offered, set the context for discussion. Matters arising from the previous meeting were raised before turning to consider how the wildlife value of the reserve might be developed within the constraints of the NE Agreement (see SM Report for further detail).

FFOG has now agreed the following actions:

SM1 Assess the soil health in the arable field (**Chris**). (Further tests in the Hay Meadow should wait at least a year to pick up any changes.)

SM2 Try three approaches to nettle control in Pony Wood a) scything, to start soon b) using mulch of wood chippings c) following some further research by **Sue**, planting hazel clumps, locations to be identified (**Ian**)

SM3 Sow yellow rattle (plus others) along the Flora path (**Ian**, in September, after seed collection)

SM10 Encourage bees: a) Sow a bee-friendly mix again (**Mick**). The area by the beehives is currently much too wet to be ploughed. Instead it was suggested that seed should just be scattered here. b) Assess the range of colours in the margins and meadows with a view to introducing more blue, pink and purple if poorly represented (**All** to note) c) Construct additional hotels for solitary bees (**Graham**)

SM2c, 4, 6 and 11–16 to be considered as part of the Field Expedition (see 7.1), leading to proposals for FFOG (**Ian**)

Chris asked that the Field Expedition also identify any extra locations or details which would enhance the photographic survey of the reserve.

9. AOB:

9.1. Dog poo: Peter reported an encounter with a dog walker. He was able to convince her of the need to collect her dog poo, but explaining the reasons. He would like to explore "human training" as a way of dealing with this issue (**Peter**).

9.2. Safeguarding policy: The FA's safeguarding policy will be delivered to Volunteers by a Trustee at the Saturday session in April. A separate arrangement will be made for the Wednesday Work Group (**Hilary**).

9.3. Useful contact: A Natural England manager involved in reserves in Silverdale is keen to show FA members the 'scrubbing up' and wilding approach that is being developed there. He has also expressed an interest in visiting the Fairfield Reserve. In the first instance, **Oliver** will identify a date and acceptable numbers for an excursion to Silverdale.

- 10. Date/place of next meetings:** Thursday 7th May, Thursday 2nd July both Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

8th January 2020

Eleven volunteers formed the first Wednesday Work Group of the new year on a (far too!) warm and dry morning.

- A fallen willow alongside Lucy Brook was cut back to allow the completion of the hedge planting in that section.
- The new hedge around two sides of Little Wood was completed. These two plantings finished off the last 50 of the Woodland Trust saplings.
- An assessment of woodland plants (especially ferns) in Upper Sowerholme was made to plan work for the coming Saturday session.
- Dense clumps of dead bindweed and goose grass were removed from hedges along the Long Pads footpath. This included a discussion of when to leave hedges alone. We concluded that once a hedge had become established after planting or laying then it should be left alone within restrictions required by Natural England.
- A start was made to the winter pruning of the Orchard fruit trees.
- The gate to the Pony Wood path alongside Little Wood has become damaged. Two volunteers made an assessment of what is needed to make a repair in the near future.
- The hedge saplings alongside the woodland extension were weeded. These were planted in March 2018, the attrition rate is very low and the growth rate impressive.
- Redundant plastic guards were removed from trees in the woodland extension, now that surrounding vegetation has died back and access is possible.
- The Millennium Oak had some light lower limb pruning in preparation for wassailing.

11th January 2020

The Saturday volunteer session attracted 13 volunteers on what turned out to be a dry if blustery morning. The forecast had been for heavy and persistent rain so the good attendance was a tribute to our volunteers' fortitude.

- We continued the winter pruning of the Orchard fruit trees.
- Invasive bramble was cut back throughout the Orchard.
- Self-seeded and rooted saplings, mostly willow I think, were trimmed back where they are growing inappropriately.
- The area around the base of the fruit trees alongside the Pads hedge was trimmed back to allow room for the mower later in the year.
- Ferns and hart's tongue were dug out of Lower Sowerholme, barrowed to Pony Wood and planted there to increase the ground diversity in the wood.
- We continued the weeding of the Pony Wood path hedge saplings planted March 2019.
- Preparations were made for next week's Wassailing.

15th January 2020

13 volunteers assembled for the WWG on a lovely sunny morning.

- We continued the winter pruning of the fruit trees.
- The redundant fence between the Pads footpath and Flora Field was cut out to allow the hedge to widen without enveloping the metal fence.
- The fence was transported back to the shed.
- The brush from earlier hedge laying and the redundant wood from the fence clearance was burnt. Prior to this, those involved agreed a Site Specific Risk Assessment for the job.

- We finished off the weeding of the hedge saplings running from Pony Wood to the canal.
- The broken gate giving entry from the Pads footpath to the Pony Wood path was repaired. This required considerable ingenuity from our volunteers as the top bar of the gate is rotten as it joins the upright. We need to keep an eye on it and replace in the fulness of time.

22nd January 2020

On a murky and misty morning 18 volunteers formed the WWG, smashing the previous record attendance.

- One group worked with Keith on the winter pruning of the fruit trees and brought this up to date.
- One group excavated a channel from a persistent large puddle down the track from the shed to drain it into the Paddock.
- A third group coppiced the Orchard hazels, trimming them into useful rods and withies and then carting these to the shed.
- We investigated what had been reported as fly tipping on the Pony Wood path but found this was in fact drug related paraphernalia. This was gathered up, the area checked for needles and the material stored in the shed. The Volunteer Organiser to inform the Association Chair and await instruction.
- The final group trimmed the Orchard / Pads footpath hedge. This was to be Josh's Associate Volunteer job for the winter but he has hurt his back and can't proceed for this year. Note, we are only trimming it low where it is alongside fruit trees and / or adjacent to a bench where a vista view is required. The remaining hedge to grow high and wide on the Orchard side.
- Peter checked over some of the petrol driven machines.

29th January 2020

On a chilly, breezy but dry morning 13 volunteers formed the WWG.

- The trimming of the Orchard / Pads hedge was completed.
- Excessive brash which had accumulated under this hedge was moved to more appropriate habitat piles.
- The hedge saplings between the path and the Paddock were tidied and their protectors renewed.
- Four 'dog sized' gaps in Pads path hedges were blocked using hazel rods and withies coppiced last week.
- We began the cutting back and intertwining of the Fauna path willow screen.
- We began the trimming of the Fauna path / School Field hedge, initially to trim around the standard trees so that they are left clearly exposed when the flail arrives. Some careful trimming of the path side is also required.
- We checked out the gate fitting between the School Field and School Pond. This needs adjustment.

Associate volunteers in January:

- Checked the bonfire on the afternoon of the 15th (above) to see it was out and gather up bits of wire and staples.
- Old wire fence to the tip.
- Repairs to tools.
- Clearing out ponds to create open water.
- Ensuring access to willow screen prior to pruning.

5th February 2020

Twelve volunteers formed the Wednesday Work Group (WWG) on a fine morning.

- We continued the pruning and tying down of the willow screen alongside School Pond.
- We began the trimming of the Fauna path / Grammar School Field hedge beyond the ash tree corner working toward Cromwell Road. This hedge should be laid but as we don't have agreement for this, we are trying to encourage low, bushy growth on the path side. To this end we are trimming the higher growth on the path side whilst leaving it high on the field side to accommodate Mr Loxam's wishes. This includes trimming around our standard trees so that they are prominent to a tractor driver. Unfortunately, whilst doing this with the ash we found it infected with ash dieback.
- The 'new' gate between the Grammar School Field and Pond was repaired so that the catch fixes again.

8th February 2020

A calm and sunny day, prior to Storm Ciara, attracted 18 volunteers to the Saturday volunteer session. Unfortunately, they did not all arrive at the set time so that allocation of people to tasks was difficult and too much time was spent hanging about. I shall add a request for punctuality to the next of Jonathan's emails.

- The Flora Field margins were marked out with stakes so that clear instructions can be given to the tractor driver before ploughing.
- Similarly, the beetle banks were staked.
- The three inspection covers along the Flora Field water pipeline were reinforced with hazel rods and circled with hazel / willow withies so clearly mark them.
- Three potential gaps in the Pads / Flora Field hedge were blocked by fencing constructed from our hazel rods and hazel / willow withies.
- Transporting 70 stakes and bundles of withies from the shed to Flora Field was a major logistical effort.
- A hole was dug in West Field to discover the second field drain exit into Lucy Brook. It was eventually found and the drain blocked.
- We continued to trim the Fauna path / School Field hedge as above.
- Volunteers expressed interest in the elms in Little Wood so we had a look at them and a discussion of the plans for the wood.

12th February 2020

A rather different morning for the WWG. Nine volunteers joined David Redmore at the 'Beyond the Castle' meadow on a cold and blustery morning. David explained how and where we were to plant wild flower plants and plugs. He then had to leave whilst our volunteers got on with planting the best part of 1,000 plants. (Ian's guestimate).

19th February 2020

Eleven volunteers gathered for the WWG on an initially dry morning but the rain arrived and we had to finish around noon.

- Andy Lee had pointed out a potentially dangerous split damson in the Old Damson copse. We cut off the split bough and cleared the debris to habitat piles making sure that the larger logs were hidden beneath brash.
- A new post was positioned at the second gate to School Pond so the gate could be latched back. We made the post low enough so that it would not act as a scratching post for the cattle.
- We continued the trimming and clearance of the Fauna path hedge.

26th February 2020

Ten volunteers formed the WWG on a pleasant winter's morning under Graham's leadership as Ian was away hedge laying.

- The Orchard willow domes were tidied and strengthened.
- The domes were extended with two new domes and connecting tunnel.

Associate volunteers in February:

- Trimmed the recently coppiced hazel to form useable rods.
- Repaired wheelbarrow.
- Finished off and refilled the West Field drain blocking