

Fairfield Association
Fauna, Flora and Orchard management sub-Group [FOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 3rd April 2014, 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

Present: Graham Brandwood, Dave Brookes, Glenys Ferguson (mins), Tony Finn, Helen Hicks, Ian Procter, Rebecca Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short (chair)

1. **Apologies:** Andrew Brennand, Oliver Fulton, Sue Nieduszynska,
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved. On item 7.1, Ian clarified that padlocks would be restocked when finances allow.
3. **Current/recent developments:**
 - 3.1. **Fields Access List:** The addition of Ken Taylor and Julia McDowell was ratified.
 - 3.2. **Camper in Little Wood:** Hilary has contacted the PCSO to ask the camper, who has already been moved on from the Triangle, to leave. The landowner has the legal power to instruct someone to leave and is also allowed to dismantle the tent and store (or take to Police Station). **Graham** offered to talk to the camper. **Ian** will produce a sign to clarify that Little Wood is private land.
 - 3.3. **Visit of Catchment Sensitive Officer:** Dave and Ian had a site meeting today with Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Officer. She made a number of points, some of which appear elsewhere in the minutes. The visit will be discussed more fully in next month's meeting, once her report is received.
4. **Matters arising from Minutes: Tool shed key:** Returned by the builder. Now held by Graham.
5. **Monitoring of the new Natural England Agreement:** Papers circulated outlining the proposed monitoring scheme for Flora, Fauna and the Orchard, Whilst the monitoring is framed in relation to the NE agreement, its underlying purpose is wider. It will provide a basis for identifying how the nature reserve is changing, whether such changes are desirable or not, and enabling interventions, as necessary, to alter the path of change. The monitoring is based on the 'features' and 'indicators of success' specified in the NE agreement. It builds on the existing arrangements in place for Fauna and the Orchard, adapted as necessary in the light of changes in the agreement and extended to cover Flora. **Graham's** monthly monitoring (see item 11.2) will continue to play a key role. The approach proposed was approved by FOG.

Glenys drew attention to some changes in success indicators. In Hay and Carr House Meadows the requirement has been tightened to at least 4 GO6 species frequent in the sward and 2 occasional and a soil phosphate index between 0 and 1 has been added. (It was 2 in the 2010 soil survey.) These meadows may need to be managed more actively to achieve these indicators – to be discussed further after this year's wildflower surveys have been conducted. The Catchment Sensitive Officer has advised that NE can provide free soil tests (**Dave** to follow up). For the Orchard, there is a new indicator 'cover of undesirable should be less than 5%'. There are large swathes of nettles in the Orchard, some of which can be considered 'desirable'. However, it was decided to experiment with controlling those around the fruit trees this year by mowing (**Ian**).

Photographs will provide a good way of judging progress against some of the indicators (e.g. the requirement for 40% of wildflowers in Hay Meadow to be in flower during May & June).

Glenys to arrange with **Helen**.

Arrangements have been made with Dan Haywood to carry out the breeding bird survey, with a report to be submitted by mid August. Under the NE agreement, certain specified wildflowers should eventually be present in Pony Wood and the new extension. It was agreed that a survey should be undertaken at end April/early May to establish the baseline position. This would be repeated in future years to see how the area is regenerating naturally and decide whether specific planting is required. It was considered likely that the FA's wildflower research group (set up as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund programme) would be willing and able to carry out this survey. The same group will also be approached to undertake a survey of Hay and Carr House Meadows during May. Both of these surveys need to be conducted using Graeme Skelcher's methodology. A decision on who to approach for the July wildflower survey will be made at the June meeting. More generally, the monitoring plans and details of key species will be shared with the leaders of the three research groups (birds, wildflowers and invertebrates). **Glenys** will liaise with **Sue** about contacting and briefing research group leaders.

6. **Names for Flora fields and ponds:** **Sue** and **Helen** will first identify earlier names by contacting Adrian Gifford the previous tenant, and David Loxam. They will bring proposals to the next meeting.
7. **Go Wild preparations:** **Sue** is following up on a proposed bioblitz. Jon Carter is willing for the bird research group's activities to be included in Go Wild. Sue is waiting to hear back from the other research group leaders. Tree surgeon Andy Lee's field walk is scheduled for 8th May. Graham has chosen four dates in May for campfire sessions and produced posters for display. He will also provide the details to the FA webmaster and to Ruth Haigh for inclusion in any imminent newsletter. **Graham** will prepare the campfire area, with help from volunteers if necessary.
8. **Ripley School projects:** **Ian** met with teachers and members of the Renewable Ripley group on site on 27th March. They have offered to undertake two projects for the FA during the summer term: producing a stand for the cattle nose pump and making a set of finger posts. FOG agreed to share costs equally with Ripley. Before anything is constructed, the students will be asked to submit a drawing of the stand and a prototype of the finger post, indicating – with options – how the text will be displayed (**Ian**). **Ian's** suggested number of signs and their proposed locations was approved. However, there was a query as to whether the name 'Fairfield Nature Reserve' has been formally adopted as the official name. If not, then a collective name for Flora, Fauna and Orchard needs to be decided by the FA meeting. **Glenys** to contact **Andrew**.
9. **Fauna:**
 - 9.1. **Paddock hedging:** The sapling planting on the allotment side has been completed by the contractors. Restoration of the boundary along the Pads path has also been finished by the Hedge Working Party.
 - 9.2. **Anna's Pool repairs:** No progress yet, but anticipated shortly. The leak is now flowing strongly, but it is thought that it should not get much worse. The old pipe and bend has been taken away for re-use by one of Richard Storton's contacts. Richard will be reminded that a donation to the FA had been agreed (**Mick**).

9.3. Rural Payments Agency remapping and field numbers: Capital works claim has now been made, so it is deemed 'safe' to put the amendments in although there is no urgency. **Dave** to do at an appropriate moment.

9.4. Concessionary Path Agreement: Oliver has exchanged maps with the Ordnance Survey who will add the path to the next revision, once they are satisfied with the drawing. Other features such as ponds will not be added until the next full survey.

9.5. Algae treatment in Alder Pond: Graham has introduced barley straw. The Catchment Sensitive Officer (item 3.3) was rather sceptical about their success, but acknowledged that they will do no harm. She considers that the cattle are to blame for the problem, although the type of algae is 'harmless'. Her report (to be discussed further at next meeting.) will recommend fencing off this pond – if not all of them – with breast wire. Funding from S2S may be available. Dave's research has identified a barley straw extract that can be applied as a liquid on a weekly basis. To be investigated further, as a means of getting the algae under control (**Dave**). This will allow aquatic plants that will keep the pond healthy to be introduced. Meanwhile **Graham** will have another attempt at raking.

10. Flora:

10.1. Formal declaration of 'no right of way': Oliver's declaration form has been accepted by Lancashire Council County. It will be digitised and added to the legal register. A re-submission may be needed in 10 years or if there is an issue.

10.2. Historical artefacts:

- **Boundary stone:** Henry Hicks and Ken Capewell will be effecting the repair. Henry already has the top. Moving the main part of the stone is a task for the next volunteer session (**Ian**).
- **Metal detecting:** The first phase in the arable field is finished. The metal detectorists will return when the ploughing has been done (**Mick** to alert Ian Sharp). Natural England has given permission for the West and Gleesons fields to be detected, as long as it is outside the bird nesting season (Mick has informed Ian.) It was agreed that detecting would continue to be restricted to the Flora fields which are owned by the FA. at least for the time being as Lancaster City Council will need to be consulted for Fauna. Tony has been provided with a display case showing a range of finds. It is already generating a lot of interest in the schools. Ian will be presenting his finds on 22 May as part of the Open Learning Programme funded by the Heritage Lottery.
- **Field-walking post ploughing:** Sue and Mick have had a meeting with Dr Vicki Cummings, Reader in Archaeology at UCLAN. She has agreed to oversee the field-walking and supply any equipment. Her students will help to train FA volunteers and join in the exercise. They will also take away any finds for examination and report. The field-walking will now take place next spring. LiDar images, overlaid with current OS map data, should soon be available (**Sue**).

10.3. Single payment scheme entitlements: Details of the new scheme and the FA's likely eligibility are still unclear. A decision on applying will be deferred until July, even though this means losing a potential payment for the current year.

10.4. Widening of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path: Georgina Peacock has submitted a quote for her design work. **Hilary** was asked to commission the work. It is hoped that these costs will eventually be covered by a grant. **Dave** is querying the charges proposed by the Canal and Rivers Trust for opening an access onto the towpath opposite the proposed exit from Flora onto Aldcliffe Road. It is also hoped to cover these costs in the funding bid (**Hilary**).

10.5. Bee hives in Flora: Natural England has now given approval for the bee hives to be located in the arable field close to the boundary to the north of the Howsons gate. The bees have been locally bred, but their parentage cannot be guaranteed to be 'native' as they mate with drones of unknown origin. It was agreed that they should not come onto the site until the field has been ploughed and any herbicide applied (see item 10.7). (**Glenys** to inform the beekeeper.)

10.6. Land drains in West Field: These have not been adequately plugged. The Catchment Sensitive Officer also spotted a further drain which has an outlet into Lucy Brook. Exploratory work is needed before the drains are plugged in a couple of places, including close to the outlet. Although this problem will be reducing the wetness of the field, it is not a matter of urgency. **Ian** will add the task to a future volunteer session.

10.7. Ploughing update: Arrangements for ploughing and sowing the arable field and margins are again 'up in the air'. A local farmer, introduced by Richard Storton (RSPB) and who also has an agreement with Natural England, had agreed to do the job on a no-cost basis in return for a viable crop. But he is now unwilling to proceed unless herbicide is used (he has been advised by an agronomist that he risks bringing weed seed back into his own farm).

A no-cost financial arrangement has taken on a greater importance to the FA now that SPS money (10.3) is most unlikely to be available to subsidise the costs of producing an arable crop that is good for little more than compost. The consensus attitude of the FA is that herbicide use is best avoided but acceptable when there is no viable or practical alternative. In this case there appears to be little option, at least for this year where time for establishing a crop is running out. Natural England's position is very clear. The arable fields must be ploughed this season otherwise management payments are likely to be withheld and penalties may be imposed. NE also endorses herbicide use (from their approved list) as an initial step in cases such as this where fields have been heavily fertilised in the past. (On the plus side, the fields will not have to be ploughed as deeply. Moreover, NE does not permit spraying of the wildflower margins and beetle banks, and further application of herbicide after sowing requires the approval.)

FOG took the decision not to regard the farmer's requirement to use herbicide this season as a deal-breaker. But before finalising the arrangement, the following actions will be taken (**Mick, Dave**):

- to seek further advice from Richard Storton
- to get assurances over the extent, type and method of herbicide use
- to clarify the cost position
- to draw up a written agreement
- to consult with another local contractor who may be able to adopt a more organic approach (with a view to stepping in this year if necessary and feasible, or possibly taking on the job next year)

The proposed start to ploughing will be delayed until at least the week beginning 14th April for these actions to be taken, and also for the seed for the wild bird seed and floristically enhanced grass margins to be acquired by Richard Storton.

11. Monitoring

11.1. Maintenance inspection: Graham's full report is available. Despite attempts to fix it, the pedestrian gate into Pony Wood is still sticking. Opening the gate and hammering in the hinges has been suggested. **Ian** will try and the job will be referred back to the contractors if this fails. It needs to be fixed before Graham's campfire sessions in May. **Ian** will add repairing the break in the slats on the cattle crossing to his task list.

11.2. HLS habitat inspection: Report available. The sward is generally in good condition. Mick and Oliver are in the process of re-drafting the grazing agreement to incorporate Flora. However, it was noted that the existing agreement already recognises the graziers financial responsibility for any penalties imposed on the FA by NE because of non-adherence to the stipulations relating to herd size, composition and location of the cattle.

11.3. Annual review of brown hare sightings and snipe counts: Figures available. Adding in two sightings by Graham right at the end of the month, each of two individuals, brings the total sightings for March to eight and for the twelve month period to 30. On some occasions, two and three hares have been seen. These figures are simply from blogs on the FA website, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn. However, they do suggest a healthy presence of brown hare on the nature reserve.

The number of snipe recorded in the flush counts over the last winter season have been collated. The total over the six counts is 311, peaking at 100 on 6 January. Last year only two counts were made, so totals cannot be compared. However there are notable differences in the locations of the birds. Last winter they were concentrated in the Big Meadow marsh. This winter they have been split more equally between School Pond and Big Meadow, despite the former being a much smaller area. There are probably two explanations here: a) this winter the cattle have been largely excluded from School Pond and b) the rush in School Pond is less dense, which is possibly a more attractive habitat. (To be discussed with Richard Storton on his annual monitoring visit - **Glenys**.)

12. Volunteer activities:

12.1. Report for March volunteer sessions: See the end for Ian's full report on activities during March, including the last Hedge Working Party of the season. From November 20th and March 26th the HWP met on 21 occasions, with an average attendance of just over 7 volunteers. Significant progress was made with laying hedges in West Field and along the Pads path in the Orchard. The Heritage Lottery Funded chain-saw training was put to good use and speeded up the work substantially.

12.2. Proposed tasks for April: Tasks for the volunteer session on 12th April are listed at the end. Extra tasks to be added are the removal of a) the many self-seeded sycamores appearing on the roof of the storage building, and b) the buried fence in Pony Wood. Repair of the hazel fence by Anna's Pool will, however, be deferred. The cattle will be out of this area until after haymaking and the Catchment Sensitive Officer has proposed a breast wire instead. **Tony** will arrange a substitute to provide the

refreshments for this session. FOG also gave consent for two glyphosate spot-spraying jobs for the week beginning Sunday 13th April. Firstly, the edge of the Fauna path. It has previously been agreed that spraying is the only way to protect the width of the path from invading grass without damaging the gravel. Secondly, the nettle beds in and around Pony Wood. (Glyphosate spraying is usually kept separate from routine volunteer sessions as it needs to be closely supervised.)

13. Educational activities:

13.1. Update from Tony: The Ridge Primary School visited the nature reserve for three hours today. As well as familiarising themselves with the area that they have been considering in class sessions as part of the HLF Flora Schools project, the children participated in orienteering and map work. A farm visit form for 2014/15 will be completed and passed to Dave (**Tony**). Tony is currently in the middle of delivering the second set of class-based Flora Schools sessions.

13.2. Natural England Farm Visit forms: Dave will soon be able to submit seven evaluation forms to NE for the year 2013/14. Mick and Hilary have made as much progress as they can with the Farm Facts leaflet and have passed it to **Dave** to finalise and submit.

14. DBS checks: No report.

15. Financial control: Item 5: £100 committed to pay for breeding bird survey (general funds, by mid August). Item 8: Half share of the £100 to £200 cost for nose pump stand & finger posts (HLF, to be vired from underspend on travel for volunteers). Item 10.4: quote for design of paths of £860 - hopefully to be covered by a future grant. Sue anticipates an underspend of around £250 on the Open Learning Programme (HLF). A grant of £500 has been awarded by Lancashire Community Fund for the purchase of extra tools, including a chain saw (**Ian**).

16. AOB: Dave proposed a picnic. It was decided that it was not appropriate to use Pony Wood until the ground has been cleared and the trees fenced off. So the idea of reverting to the traditional blossom picnic was suggested, for the 10th May, following the volunteer session. Item to passed to the FA (**Glenys** to contact **Andrew**).

Helen reported that her trees overhanging the Sunnyside Lane end of the Pads path have been surveyed by Andy Lee. He will be seeking permission from the Tree Protection Officer to carry out significant work on five of them.

17. Date/place of next meetings: It was agreed to experiment with the earlier start time again for the May meeting and then review. Thursday 1st May at 7pm at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close and Thursday 5th June, time to be advised.

Ian Procter's Volunteer Items:

Volunteer activities March 2014

1st March 2014

The Hedge Working Party (HWP) met and agreed the Site Specific Risk Assessment (SSRA), five volunteers attending. The laying of the west hedge was concluded with tidying, staking and gapping up. Brash moved up to the hedge except in one or two areas where we are missing plastic spirals.

5th March 2014

Five volunteers attended the HWP, moving on to the Paddock hedge alongside the track from Sunnyside Lane. This requires a good deal of debris and vegetation clearing before some thorn can be laid and the gaps filled with saplings.

The fallen elder alongside the Towneley path brush pile was made safe and cut up.

8th March 2014

On a thankfully dry but blustery Saturday 46 volunteers gathered including 12 *Green Lancaster* students meaning that no less than 34 local people came along. They were very welcome as we had the major task of planting 558 saplings in Pony Wood and the Woodland Extension of Flora. We achieved this objective. There is a more detailed report in the FOG papers for 13th March. We should also mention that two volunteers undertook the measurement of Flora fences, hedges and ponds for the NE agreement. It might also be noted that this was the first occasion on which the portable toilet was used.

12th March 2014

6 volunteers attended the HWP.

- One volunteer assisted Richard in fixing 16 bird boxes in Pony Wood and Little Wood.
- We continued to lay and gap up the Paddock hedge adjoining the path from Sunnyside.
- Considerable dead wood was also cut out of this hedge line.
- The resulting brash was carted to Fraser's bonfire which was operational today.
- We repaired the barbed wire stock fence in the Sowerholme corner of the ex-Gleesons field to make the field secure for cattle and prevent them using Lucy Brook other than at the new cattle drinking bay / crossing point.
- Withers were cut to repair the fence at Anna's Pool.
- We tidied the old fencing now made redundant by the new post and rail fence alongside the shed resulting in 6 good stakes and some bits of netting wire.

Lots of wildlife as spring is in the air (see the Blog for today's date).

18th March 2014

Two volunteers recycled the former fence to complete the sealing off of Pony Wood. As it was dark when the work finished just how stock proof the seal was unknown (see 22nd below).

19th March 2014

5 volunteers attended the HWP.

- The felled sycamore in the West hedge was logged up and tidied.
- The remaining brash adjacent to the West hedge was moved up alongside the laid and gapped up hedge.
- 70 saplings were planted in the Pony Wood extension (filling the gap made evident by the newly installed fence) and in two gaps left on the recent Volunteer Saturday.
- Thorn saplings were planted at the 'dogleg' of the Pads footpath.
- In both the aforementioned plantings we used recycled plastic spirals and canes, some retrieved this morning from in the Pads / Big Meadow hedge where they are redundant.

- A fallen hawthorn leaning on the fence between the ex-Gleeson's field and Sowerholme was cut up.
- The remnants of an iron fence running east from the northern tip of Pony Wood was further investigated and a report made.

22nd March 2014

Two volunteers checked the stockproofing of the fence around the woodland (see above 18th March) and plugged one or two potential weak spots.

We tried to adjust the setting of the pedestrian gate to the Woodland Extension but without great success. We have to decide whether to do further work ourselves (planing the wood) or put it on the contractor's snagging list.

The cows have been disturbing the sapling planting in the south hedgeline of the arable fields. Former fencing was carted across from Pony Wood and fastened so as to deter the beasts.

The boundary stone needs to be transported to Henry Hicks' workshop. We established that it is too heavy for two people to lift but four should do it.

26th March 2014

The last meeting of the HWP attracted four volunteers. We completed the laying / replanting of the Paddock / Sunnyside Lane hedgeline after clearing our excess ivy, elder and sycamore self seeders and coppicing hazel, retrieving useful withers. Plastic spirals and canes were recycled from the Pads footpath for use with the new saplings down the hedge. The wire fencing and posts recently displaced by the new post and rail was re-deployed to seal off the Paddock.

27th March 2014

The last 20 or so thorn saplings are planted in the gaps adjacent to the new Pads gates.

Just as a resumé, the HWP met on 21 occasions between November 20th and March 26th with an average attendance of just over 7 volunteers. Thanks to everyone who contributed so much this winter.

Proposed tasks for volunteering Saturday 12th April 2014

- Mow the grass
- Stake the larger saplings in Pony Wood and the Extension
- Move the boundary stone in the Woodland Extension to Henry Hick's garage for repair.
- Cut back bramble enveloping saplings alongside the Fauna path
- Repair the hazel fence near Anna's Pool
- Move rubbish from Pony Wood to the treble gate area
- Move logs in Pony Wood to the viewing area / firepan circle
- Flatten ruts left by contractors especially in Big Meadow
- Retrieve plastic spirals and canes from flourishing saplings along the Pads footpath. Store for future re-use

Note: these are in rough priority order but just how we tackle them depends upon how many volunteers attend. I envisage asking three of our team leaders, plus myself, to lead four working groups if numbers permit.