

Fairfield Association
Fauna, Flora and Orchard Management Group [FOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 5th June 2014, 7.30 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

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

1. **Apologies:** Andrew Brennand, Ian Fraser, Oliver Fulton, Rebecca Procter, Chris Workman
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** The date on the Minutes should read 1st rather than 5th May. On item 10.3, Hilary noted that the action should have referred to consulting an ecologist rather than a naturalist. Otherwise approved.
3. **Current/recent developments:**
 - 3.1. **Damage to Aldcliffe Road wall:** A car has demolished a 12 foot stretch of the wall close to the Howsons gate. Police have been involved and Andrew has contacted the driver's insurance company about paying for the damage (no response yet). Hilary has asked Mr Edwards to estimate the cost of re-building. (The job could be combined with repairing the other gap in this wall.)
 - 3.2. **Sheep in arable:** Some of the neighbouring farmer's sheep were able to get through the boundary at the south end of Flora Field. They did little damage, being more interested in the grass and buttercups on the margin than the crop, and were promptly re-homed by the farmer. The security of this boundary is the responsibility of the farmer and Aldcliffe Hall Estates. Sheep are now back in the adjacent field, although it is not clear whether the fence has actually been strengthened.
 - 3.3. **Aldcliffe Road drain:** Lancaster City Council is investigating a drainage problem which is causing flooding on Aldcliffe Road. The drain heads into Flora Field and permission has been requested for access to investigate further. This has been granted, although the Council has been advised by Dave that Natural England would have to be consulted if using machinery was proposed, because of nesting birds,. The Council will contact **Dave** again when they are ready to start work.
 - 3.4. **Vacuum dispenser:** This 9 litre capacity insulated urn, with a tap and legs has been offered for sale to the FA. Several possible uses were identified, the extra capacity being particularly helpful given the recent increase in numbers at volunteer sessions. **Dave** was asked to establish how long it will keep water hot. Subject to a favourable response, it was agreed to recommend its purchase to the FA, using funding from the Community Spaces Sustainability Grant (or HLF).
4. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 4.1. **Identification badges:** These have been produced by Graham and will be available in the Storage Building for collection by any FA representative who would like one.
 - 4.2. **Camper in Little Wood:** The camper has now left. and the site has been cleared. Extra wire still needs to be added to the fencing to help deter unauthorised entry (**Ian**).
5. **Names for Flora ponds:** The following were agreed: Flora Ponds for the two in Flora Field by Aldcliffe Road, Willow Tree Pond (Lower Sowerholme) and West Scrape (West Field). The

suggestion of 'Dew Ponds' for the two small ponds in the north east corner of Flora Field needs further investigation (**Sue**).

6. **Access to Pony Wood:** Graham questioned what arrangements would be made regarding public access to Pony Wood once the proposed Flora path is in place. (it has already been agreed that Little Wood will become open to the public.) This is a decision for the FA, but the meeting felt that it was appropriate to begin the debate, particularly as the outcome will affect designs and funding bids for the path (see item 11.5). Graham argued that access should be restricted in order to create a space where children on educational visits, people attending campfire sessions and so on can roam freely without concern for dog mess. Mick was also in favour on wildlife grounds, On the other hand, it was argued that informal paths through the wood would offer a contrast to the rest of the nature reserve and provide a different amenity for the community. It was also recognised that part of the area could be open access and the rest, centred on the campfire circle, could be fenced off for authorised activities.

The meeting was in agreement on two points:

- that Pony Wood should be fenced off at least until the new planting is established
- that it is easier to open up an area to access in the future than it is to take away access that has already been granted

Consequently it was agreed to recommend to the FA that:

- temporary fencing is erected on both sides of the Flora path to protect the saplings
- once the new planting is sufficiently well-established the matter is revisited.

(**Glenys** to notify Andrew.)

7. **Adoption of Catchment Sensitive Officer's recommendations:** The last meeting decided that certain recommendations in the CSO's report needed further investigation. Mick has now consulted with the FA's Natural England Adviser about the recommendation to *Fence all ponds to prevent stock access*. She is unhappy with this, arguing that if the pond edges are not grazed it could deter breeding and overwintering birds, for which NE is providing funding. Since FOG also has its doubts (see FOG 1 May, item 6) this measure will not be implemented. However, our NE Adviser did support the recommendation to *alleviate compaction in gateway areas*. The practicalities of this still need to be followed up with the farmer, but not until the autumn (**Mick**).
8. **Orchard: annual health check of fruit trees:** The full report of the inspection carried out by Glenys and Keith Taylor on 29th April is available. Overall, the health of the fruit trees has improved since last year, with them responding to the regular attention from volunteers and the reduction of shading following laying of the hedge along the Pads path and other actions. 50 of the 98 trees assessed are now rated as thriving. FOG made the following decisions in discussing the report's recommendations:
- 1) It was confirmed that fruit trees nos 29, 58 and 92 would be removed (**Ian**)
 - 2) It was confirmed that laying of the hedge adjacent to fruit trees nos 74 to 81 will be a priority task for winter 2014 (**Ian**).
 - 3) Brambles, blackthorn thicket, sycamore surrounding the two pear trees nos 80 and 81 will be cleared (**Ian**). **Graham** will review his 'pet' willow.

- 4) The copse area impacting adversely on trees nos. 36, 37, 97 and 98 will be inspected during a volunteer session to decide whether it should be thinned or whether the fruit trees should be taken out instead (**Ian** to arrange).
- 5) Mick reminded the meeting of the wildlife value of nettles and the need to maintain a suitable corridor. However, it was agreed that the part of the Orchard to the north of the Towneley Close path should be strimmed or mowed much more extensively. Given the current depth of the vegetation, this is a priority for the next volunteer session (**Ian**).
- 6) Action to clear the fruiting hedge around the Oak Circle is already scheduled for the upcoming volunteer session. **Ian** will seek advice from Keith about the extent to which the fruit bushes should be pruned.
- 7) **Hilary** will pass the original planting plan for the Orchard to Keith, to help identify the prunus trees around the Oak Circle as the first step in determining how best to manage them. Specialist advice will then be sought if necessary.
- 8) **Ian** will contact Andy Lee and the Martins for an update on the situation regarding permission to reduce the height of the sycamores (subject to TPOs) on the west side of the Orchard.

9. Arrangements:

- 9.1. **Tree survey:** **Ian** will arrange for Andy Lee to inspect the Orchard/Fauna trees. (Last report was submitted in April 2013, when it was advised that the next inspection should be within two years and in summer.) The semi-dead oak in the Hay Meadow will be added to the list, as well as Little Wood, in preparation for making it open access (see item 6).
- 9.2. **July Hay Meadow Flower Survey:** This is the key wildflower survey of the year, and so needs to be of the same standard, methodology and approach as previous years. **Sue** will contact with Martin Sherlock, co-ordinator of the FA's Wildflower Group, to establish whether he is willing to participate, either directing the survey himself or in conjunction with Graeme Skelcher. As in previous years, it is hoped that a number of FA members can be involved in the survey. It has to be completed before haymaking,
- 9.3. **Haymaking:** **Ian** will contact Lancashire Wildlife Trust to establish whether they are prepared to offer their services again and get an estimate of the cost.
- 9.4. **RSPB annual monitoring visit:** **Glenys** will contact Richard Storton to make arrangements for him to walk through Fauna and Flora, accompanied by some FOG members, to assess progress and provide advice on matters such as the degree of wetness, sward height, development of the reeds in Upper Sowerholme, density of the rushes. In agreeing a time, priority will be given to the availability of Graham who undertakes the FA's monthly monitoring.

10. **Fields Access List review:** The policy document and safety requirements have again been updated to reflect changes in circumstances (such as a prescription in the new NE agreement relating to disturbance of birds and the introduction of beehives). With minor amendment, these revisions were accepted. Permission to access the fields was extended for another year to all those individuals already approved. It was agreed to add Helen Hicks

and David Herrod to the list. (**Glenys** to send out revised safety information to everyone on the list.)

11. Management:

11.1. Anna's Pool repairs: No progress.

11.2. Rural Payments Agency remapping and field numbers: Dave has ordered maps from the RPA.

11.3. Algae treatment in Alder Pond: There are some tentative signs that the barley straw is starting to have an effect - this would be the right timescale. **Graham** will also rake out the algae before adding watercress from elsewhere on the reserve. .

11.4. Boundary stone repairs: Henry and Ken are pondering how to effect the repair without causing the stone to crack.

11.5. Widening of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path: Waiting on Georgina Peacock's design. **Dave** has yet to follow up with the Canal and River Trust about their proposed charges for creating an access onto the towpath. **Glenys** asked whether it was planned to create an observation point into the West Field, as the existing viewing points are all some distance from the scrape. But it might be better for the birds to keep this field secluded - a question for Richard Storton.

11.6. West Field: land drain & grass length: Volunteers have blocked the drain close to its outlet into Lucy Brook. Disappointingly, there has been no material increase in the depth of water in West Scrape. It is too early to conclude that the intervention has failed, so consideration of any further actions will be deferred until the Autumn.

The graziers are unwilling to split the herd to enable it to be grazed by the permitted number of 3 cows. In this circumstance, the NE Agreement prescribes leaving the field ungrazed during the bird breeding season. But the consequence is that the sward is now twice the height specified in the NE Agreement. Moreover, it has been suggested that when the whole herd is finally allowed in from 1st July the cattle may refuse to eat the grass. If so, a different approach will have to be adopted next year. Either NE is have to be approached to modify the agreement to permit occasional mob-grazing during the breeding season (as suggested by Richard Storton) or 3 cows from a different source are brought in to graze during this period.

11.7. Arable field update: The farmer is slightly concerned about the slow rate of growth of the arable crop and has been given permission to add lime. He will also be inspecting for weeds, and apply herbicide if judged necessary. It is expected that this will happen by the end of the week, so Mick has informed Keith Taylor that it should be safe to introduce his beehives into Flora Field from next week. The bird-seed plot mix and the bee/butterfly-friendly seeds are germinating well. In contrast, there are doubts about the floristically enhanced grass margin. **Mick** will query with Richard Storton and the farmer. [The response from Richard is that it is germinating, but slowly, because it was sown fairly late. As a result, some of the wildflowers in the mix may not bloom until next year.] The exciting news is that two lapwing chicks are known to have hatched, and there is possibly a second nest as two pairs of lapwings have been spotted.

11.8. Concessionary Path: Oliver has re-established contact with Ann Wood at Lancaster City Council about this matter. He will chivvy her again if there is no sign of progress in the next 3-4 weeks.

12. Monitoring:

12.1. Maintenance inspection: Graham's full report available. Still waiting for the contractors to undertake remedial work on the new gates. Sue and Glenys, whilst walking the fields to consider pond names, wondered whether there was a leak in the northern Flora Pond, as the level of water is lower than in the southern one.

12.2. HLS habitat inspection: Full report available. Mick has asked Richard Storton about the number of young trees appearing in the marshes in Upper Sowerholme and Big Meadow. [Response received subsequent to the meeting. Richard advises pulling out or coppicing and spraying any re-growth to prevent the marshes reverting to woodland.] The herd of White Park cattle is still larger than permitted by the new Natural England Agreement. Mick and Dave have approached NE and obtained a derogation but the new deadline for reducing the herd size is fast approaching. School Pond is recovering very well now from earlier poaching, but it is still considered desirable to leave the cattle out for the time being.

12.3. Results of Woodland Flora Survey and May Meadow Wildflower Survey: Sue will prompt Martin about submitting reports. Two people joined Martin to carry out the hay meadow survey on 25th May. A quadrat approach was used, with more than 10 sampling areas covered..

12.4. Wildlife and wildflower photographic recording: David Herrod turned out during the wildflower survey to take a series of views of the Hay Meadow from specific points. Close-ups of the quadrats were not taken as it was felt by participants that they would not be very helpful. The view photographs will be repeated in conjunction with the July survey (item 8.2) and in subsequent years to provide a record of how the meadow habitat is changing. A new section of the FA website has been set up to record sightings of wildflowers, herbs and grasses supplemented with photographs taken on the nature reserve. Ian has already made a significant contribution.

12.5. Soil testing: No action. Item to be deferred for re-consideration in the light of the results of the July Hay Meadow Wildflower survey.

13. Volunteer activities: Ian's written report for May is attached at the end. The high turnout for the Saturday sessions continues (27 this time, including 3 from Green Lancaster) and considerable progress was achieved, focusing primarily on tasks in the Orchard and Pony Wood. The Ragwort Working Party has been meeting on a regular basis. It concentrated initially on the two meadows that will be cut for hay, where the relatively small amount of ragwort found has been dug out. In contrast there are some very heavy infestations in Big Meadow. It is thought that these second year plants that were not treated at the end of last season because of time constraints. These are being sprayed. There will be a further round of spraying in September hopefully to prevent a similar problem next year. Once the dry areas have been swept, the RWP will move on to deal with the marshy areas, including Upper Sowerholme. There are also odd bits of ragwort along the paths and in the Orchard to be removed. Ian noted that the Grammar School Field currently appears ragwort-free.

It was agreed to accept the kind offer of indigenous wetland plants, which will to be located by Anna's Pool. There was discussion as to whether to experiment with using a black plastic

sheet to kill nettles. It was agreed that it was worth trying as an alternative to spraying, although it was noted that it would take a long time and the roots would have to be pulled out once the top-growth had been killed. The original plan to experiment in West Field was rejected, because the cattle would be too nose-y. So clumps of nettles in Pony Wood will be tackled instead (**Ian**). Hilary confirmed that the £500 tool grant awarded by Lancashire Community Fund was now available for spending and **Ian** will use it to buy a second chain saw in preparation for winter work.

14. Educational activities:

14.1. Update from Tony: Seven school visits to the nature reserve as part of the HLF funded Flora Schools project have already been booked for June. Arrangements are being made for a further four. The children and their teachers are excited and enthusiastic about seeing the reserve after two sessions of hearing about it in class. Tony will be fixing numbers to certain trees in Pony Wood that he wants the children to identify. It was agreed that these could be left *in situ* between visits, although Tony was warned to have spares in case they are removed. Coaches will be parked on Willow Lane. Pupils will arrive via the Long Pads path and **Ian** was asked to ensure that any brambles and nettles protruding at child-height were taken back. The log circle in Pony Wood will be used as the assembly area. **Tony** is arranging help to transport and erect the toilet tent before each session.

14.2. Ripley School projects: **Ian** has no further contact from Ripley. He will follow up.

15. Go Wild

15.1. Campfires: Despite the weather causing disruptions, the series of family and adult campfire evenings went very well. A total of 31 people took part, including 12 families and 17 children and £87 pounds was raised for funds. In setting up for the sessions, it became clear to Graham that the campfire site (in Pony Wood) had been used by at least two unauthorised groups over the period. **Graham** will arrange for local residents to monitor activity in this area.

15.2. Bioblitz: **Chris** is arranging this for Sunday 22 June, starting at 10am. The focus will be on recording the wildflower margins and beetle banks in Flora Field, to establish a baseline against which later surveys can be compared to evaluate the impact of management. He anticipates at least four members of North Lancs Naturalists Group will be available to lead the session. **Glenys** will prompt Chris about publicising the event.

16. DBS checks: Progress is now being made, with Michael Sheppard sending the applications to a new agency for processing.

17. Financial control: Item 3.4: To be confirmed – purchase of vacuum dispenser for £47, funded from Community Spaces Sustainability Grant or HLF, public exhibition. Item 13 - **Ian** will shortly be spending the £500 Lancashire Community Fund grant on a chain saw and other tools. Tony noted that he has managed to buy binoculars etc. at a discount price, reducing the bill from around £250 to about £190 (Community Spaces Sustainability Grant). Item 15.1 – £87 generated from Go Wild campfire sessions.

18. AOB: Mick and Dave are investigating the possible acquisition of a cattle crush.

- 19. Date/place of next meetings:** Thursday 3rd July, 7pm at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close. At that meeting it will be decided whether to have a break in August or hold a meeting on Thursday 7th.

Ian Procter's Volunteer Items: Volunteer activities May 2014

29th April 2014

Two volunteers continued to erect shelves in the Storage Building.

30th April 2014

Eight volunteers attended the first of the summer evening sessions on a warm and dry night.

- The grass paths were mown
- We dug a hole in the Flora West Field to expose the drain through which water is leaking.
- Bee friendly seed left over from the Flora seeding was sown at various points around the fields.
- The area between the path and the Pads hedge was cut back to control the nettle growth.
- The brambles enveloping the hedge saplings between the Fauna path and the Grammar School field were cut out.
- Firewood was collected from the Paddock
- More of the redundant plastic spirals and canes were retrieved from the Pads / Big Meadow hedgeline

1st May 2014

An inventory was made of the tools and equipment in the Storage Building. Partly overlaps with Ruth's inventory of events equipment and supplies. The new inventory is in a notebook kept by Ian.

2nd May 2014

Two volunteers blocked the land drain in the West Field with the aim of allowing the wet area to flood.

Inspection of the JKW near the Howson's gate showed it responding well to glyphosate. We also investigated the outbreak of JKW in Sowerholme and found it confined to one area. It was sprayed with glyphosate.

One volunteer returned to finish spraying the nettle beds around Pony Wood.

10th May 2014

Despite a dreadful weather forecast 24 local volunteers (plus three students from *Green Lancaster*) turned out for the Saturday volunteer session. In fact it remained dry if rather damp throughout the morning.

- The grass paths in the Orchard were mown and the cuttings fed to the cows, still eager despite having much more grass to eat than over the last several years..
- A considerable area of nettle and long grass around the apple trees was cut back and carted away.
- Logs left in Pony Wood by the tree surgeon were positioned to act as seating (still more to do).

- The larger saplings planted in Pony Wood and the Extension were staked and some re-planted where the root was loose.
- The pedestrian gate at the treble gates was further adjusted to enable it to open properly.
- The broken rail at the cattle crossing was repaired.
- The redundant Flora fence was stripped down to separate out good stakes, still useable wire netting and scrap. (One volunteer returned later to complete this and the scrap is now ready for collection)
- Self seeded saplings were lopped in the Orchard and the new Paddock west hedge .
- The path behind the fruit hedge was cut back to allow pedestrian access.
- A few more spirals and canes were retrieved from the Pads footpath / Big Meadow hedge.
- The gates to the Paddock and Lower Sowerholme were left unlocked and at least one local resident collected firewood left by the contractors.
- There was ongoing discussion between experienced volunteers about how to dispose of the abandoned camp in Little Wood. It was agreed that there was too much rubbish to barrow away. A number of plans and contingencies were agreed.

18th May 2014

Volunteers cleared away the awful mess left by the camper in Pony Wood carting it away to the tip on a trailer. Aside from the wholly irresponsible state in which the 'camp' was abandoned these matters take up an enormous amount of time, what with contacting the police, charitable agencies and the council, borrowing equipment and coordinating the operation.

27th May 2014

The first meeting of the Ragwort Working Party (RWP) saw three volunteers attend the morning session. We started in the Hay Meadow and Carr House Meadow and as the ragwort seemed not so dense there we experimented with digging it out rather than spraying.

The three volunteers attended in the afternoon but as the weather was dry and the forecast for the morrow wet we moved to spot spraying in Big Meadow. Here the infestation is severe and some of the clumps very large risking leaving roots if dug.

28th May 2014

Three volunteers attended the RWP on a damp morning. The weather dictated that we returned to the meadows and the initial sweep of these two fields was completed by digging out the ragwort.

In the evening the damp and dreary weather seemed to put people off and only two volunteers turned out for the Wednesday evening volunteer session. We

- Mowed the Orchard grass paths and carted the cuttings to the ever appreciative cattle
- Trimmed back the overhanging vegetation in part of the Long Pads footpath.

29th May 2014

The Cromwell Road sub-group of the RWP made a start digging out ragwort from the Hay meadow bog area.

31st May 2014

The RWP was a singular affair but on a lovely day a good chunk of the Big Meadow was spot sprayed.

Proposed tasks for volunteer session on Saturday 14th May 2014.

- Mow the Orchard paths.
- Clean graffiti from the playground
- Clear encroaching nettles in the playground in preparation for Fun Day
- Strim the Orchard area between the main path and the Pads hedge. We are particularly trying to keep the nettles down in this area.
- Cut back and clear further areas of nettles around the fruit trees.
- Prune the hawthorn / blackthorn in the fruit hedge round the Oak circle which are currently overwhelming the soft fruit. There is also the odd sycamore and elder to get out. In addition, the path is narrowing here so some work is needed cutting back encroaching growth.
- The path from the Stump Circle round the back towards the Martins' House is getting narrow and overgrown and should be cleared.
- Trim around benches and stumps.
- Continue to trim the worst of overhanging vegetation on the Long Pads path – this is just a trim with shears NOT a pruning which might disturb any birds.
- Review the fallen willow in the Orchard. This is leaning against a pear tree but is a fecund source of willow branches.

Note: we will unlock the Paddock and Lower Sowerholme gates for firewood collectors

Other points for FOG

1. Fiona Sturgess has donated a small number of wetland plants (bulrush, flag iris and marsh marigold. As these are all indigenous to the area I have accepted them. I hope FOG approves and, if so, can add their planting to the list above. I propose the wet area of the hay meadow near Anna's Pond.
2. Two matters to do with the West Field:
 - a. Blocking the drain – has it worked?????
 - b. There are beds of nettles in the field. They are fairly small and compact – should we try covering with black plastic sheet as an alternative to spraying?
3. The Greenspaces Groups meeting on 30th June