

**Fairfield Association**  
**Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]**  
**Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 11 June 2015 7.00 pm**  
**at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close**

**Present:** Graham Brandwood, Dave Brookes, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Tony Finn, Ian Fraser, Oliver Fulton, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Rebecca Procter, Anne Murphy, Hilary Short, Mick Short

1. **Apologies:** David Elliott, Helen Hicks, Ian Procter, Chris Workman
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
  - 3.1. **Greenspaces grant application:** Ian's list of proposed tool purchases (totalling just under £1000) was approved as the basis for a bid. The application process is relatively easy, with the form available on the website. Ian will be asked whether he is prepared to make the submission (**Glenys**).
  - 3.2. **Increasing reporting of wildlife sightings:** Sue and the webmaster will set up a hotspot at the Carr House Farm Open Garden on 27th & 28th June. Demonstrations and training on how to use the Fairfield blog will be given.
  - 3.3. **Council Work on the Long Pads path:** Sue has established that this (Lancaster FP no.41) is part of the County Council's Public Rights of Way mowing programme. With the help of Tarja Wilson (Environmental Projects Officer, Lancashire County Council), a compromise has been arranged for the current year: the contractor will cut only one side of the verge and the task will be the last on the list of Lancaster jobs. FA members have already been cutting back encroaching vegetation. Ian Nieduszynski will take photographs to show what the FA can achieve, as evidence for any further campaign on this next year. Sue will also contact County Councillor Gina Dowding. The aim is to achieve sympathetic cutting of the vegetation, avoiding the use of flails, whilst limiting the demands on FA members.
  - 3.4. **Application for designation as Local Green Space:** Submitted.
4. **Review of revised FFOG meeting arrangements:** Meeting members were divided on the issue of monthly meetings versus one every two months. Written reports now play a vital part in allowing a large amount of business to be covered, and members were thanked for their efforts in producing them and reading in preparation for the meetings. **Sue** and **Glenys** will consider whether the Agenda can be streamlined and the possibility of a more flexible approach (such as more frequent meetings in busy periods). The next two meetings will be held on the dates already agreed (see item 14). Sue will continue as chair (although will miss the next meeting).
5. **Orchard Monitoring:** Full report available. On 13th May, Glenys and Keith Taylor carried out the annual assessment of the fruit trees. Overall, there has been little change in their health, which should continue to improve with the decrease in shading and reduction in competing vegetation resulting from changes implemented over the past two years. The fruiting hedge around the oak circle has benefitted considerably from radical pruning and clearing. It is set to crop well this year. The meeting agreed to:

- take out an apple tree that has canker into its root
- plant one new apple and two plum trees
- convene a small group to consider on site and make a policy decision on the fate of three groups of trees struggling amongst other vegetation
- extend the mowing of grass and nettles to the area of pears and medlars between the middle entrance and the old sycamore (the area will have to be strimmed first)

**Glenys** to arrange.

**Ian F.** offered to shear the long vegetation around the bases of the fruit trees.

One of the apple trees is a Lady's Finger variety. **Hilary** will try to locate it so that it can be labelled. It was also noted that some of the fruit trees were planted (well before the NE agreement) without authorisation from the then Orchard Trust. These are not shown on the original planting plan, and more likely to be struggling because of an inappropriate location.

6. **Wildflower strategy:** Six people participated in a walk and talk tour of the reserve on 27th April to consider possible wildflower developments (report available). The extent to which these ideas can be implemented is constrained by the Natural England Agreement (see item 8.7). So it has been decided to restrict sowing seeds collected by volunteers locally or donated to the borders of the Fauna footpath and the area around the Fauna stones which are outside of the agreement. Dallas Road School is keen to be involved and Tony is planning a meeting with Year 3 teachers to establish a plan of action for September. The ground needs to be prepared by removing turf from around the stones – **Tony** to co-ordinate in consultation with **Ian**. (Note: Mick and Ian's experiences are that a rotovator simply digs in the grass and increases fertility and a turf remover is very hard work and not suitable for uneven ground, long grass and deep roots.) It has been suggested that this area and the footpath edges could be scythed just before haymaking. This would have the added benefit of generating more winter feed for the cattle. However it will require the closure of the Fauna path (a permissive path) on safety grounds (**Mick** in liaison with **Ian**).
7. **Offer of access to Lune foreshore:** FA members who own some 27 acres of the foreshore on the east bank close to the picnic tables by the sewage works access point have kindly offered the FA access for activities such as a bird walk or Forest Schools. They are also keen for the wildflowers to be recorded on a monthly basis. **Sue** to discuss with Martin Sherlock and one of the volunteer wildflower seed collectors.
8. **Management:**
  - 8.1. **Rural Payments Agency remapping and field numbers:** No progress (**Dave**).
  - 8.2. **Improvement of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path:** A planning application has been submitted by the Landscape Architect and the project has been costed (over £40000). The Canal and River Trust have advised that the FA must pay the full rate application fee for the new towpath access point, whose costs of construction remain unknown. It was noted that these costs could be avoided by altering the line of the proposed path so that it joins Aldcliffe Road further north, directly opposite an existing entry to the towpath. **Dave** will consider the feasibility and likely

cost of this option. If it appears promising, **Hilary** will then talk to the Landscape Architect. An advantage of such a change is that the sight lines around the road crossing would be better.

- 8.3. Concessionary Path, LNR designation and management plan:** Progress on the Concessionary Path has stalled again. Local nature reserve designation for Fauna has been approved and Ann Wood (Lancaster City Council) is now dealing with the legal issues. **Oliver** will start writing a management plan, drawing on the Natural England Agreement and other existing paperwork.
- 8.4. Edenbreck boundary:** Still no land transfer. To demarcate the boundary, a post and rail fence is under construction during volunteer sessions, largely using materials recycled from other parts of the reserve (**Ian**).
- 8.5. Resurfacing of footpaths:** **Dave** is arranging a site meeting with a proposed contractor. The edges have been reformed on the paths already resurfaced by the Prince's Trust. This is expensive, but should be extended at least to the rest of the Orchard paths. Grass and other vegetation growing in the paths must be taken out before resurfacing. A policy decision will be needed if spraying with glyphosate proves to be the most practical approach.
- 8.6. Tree Surgeon's progress:** Andy Lee will fell the remaining two diseased ash in Little Wood after August 31<sup>st</sup>. His application to the Tree Protection Officer to fell the sycamores along the Orchard / Martins' boundary resulted in a split decision from the Officer, felling of one tree is allowed but not the other two. **Ian** to give Andy the go-ahead.
- 8.7. Soil testing and visit of Natural England adviser:** Ben Hibbins visited on 13th May to take soil samples and tour the reserve. Analysis of the samples will take some time, but it is likely that the composition of the soil will have changed due to the FA's management. He generally seemed pleased with the state of the reserve, and was encouraged by seeing three hares and noting an increase of woodland flora in Pony Wood. He re-iterated that the scattering of wildflower seeds and supplementary wildflower planting is not allowed on land covered by the NE agreement, without prior permission. He is prepared to sanction the planting that has already taken place in Pony Wood, but this area must now be left to regenerate naturally.

Ben suggested changing the management option for Upper Sowerholme from reedbeds to a Fen habitat (which brings in the same payment). His view (supported by others) is that the area is too small and not wet enough to create an area that will attract the species that favour reedbeds. However, the growth of the phragmites in Upper Sowerholme has been hindered by the leak in Anna's Pool that affected the wetness of the area for about two years. Also it was not possible to acquire mature reeds, so the original planting was of small plugs. Graham reported that the reeds appear to be growing more strongly this year. Decision on possible change of designation deferred pending further consultation and monitoring.

- 8.8. Weed wiping and/or pony grazing :** The owner of the Exmoor Ponies that graze the Gait Barrows National Nature Reserve made a site visit on 8th May. She is keen in principle on bringing ponies onto the reserve, and feels they would do an effective job in managing the marsh vegetation and preventing it extending into the grass areas.

Ponies are also likely to graze the bramble patch in Upper Sowerholme, reducing the amount of cover for foxes etc. Consultations have taken place with Natural England, RSPB and the graziers, all of whom have verbally approved their introduction. FFOG authorised **Sue, Mick** and **Oliver** to pursue further this alternative to weed wiping with glyphosate. A meeting has been arranged for 26th June. There is likely to be a modest cost to the FA (to cover electric fencing, transport costs perhaps) and time involved in monitoring, moving and securing boundaries.

**8.9. Arable and margins update:** Due to a miscalculation, last year's margins were too small. In consequence, the FA will lose about £200 of payment from Natural England. To avoid the problem this year, the widths of parts of the margins have been doubled, as shown on a sketch by Mick submitted to and approved by NE. **Mick** was asked to check on the ground that this had actually been executed. The bird seed mix is a slightly different specification this year. As last year, the margins around the marshy area of Flora Field and by the bee hives is still patchy, but Ben accepts that this perennial mix will take time to establish.

**8.10. Farm visit:** On hold until further notice.

**8.11. Grazing agreement and livestock records:** Following discussions with the graziers, the Grazing Agreement is currently in the hands of the solicitor who is finalising the terms relating to the length of the agreement. It anticipated that it will soon be available for signing. The agreement will refer to the latest stocking calendar (dated 24 April 2015) issued by NE (circulated to FFOG members).

As now required by Natural England, **Glenys** is keeping an ongoing record of White Park cattle numbers and their locations at any point in time. This livestock record is held in the FA's dropbox. Should ponies come on to the reserve, then the system will be adapted to record their numbers and whereabouts too.

**8.12. Dealing with vandalism and unauthorised use of Pony Wood:** Since the last meeting there have been a number of incursions into Flora, including two separate groups holding campfires in Pony Wood and another two groups intercepted beforehand. It was agreed to take the following actions:

- post notices on the gates into Flora Field (**Graham**)
- contact the local PCSO (**Hilary**)
- alert people who walk regularly around the reserve to the problem (**FFOG members**)
- continue to monitor the state of the campfire area on a weekly basis (**Graham**)

In discussion, it was noted that children had been observed feeding grass to the cattle. **FFOG members** were asked to discourage this activity if seen: the horns of the cattle could easily cause an injury.

## **9. Monitoring:**

**9.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections:** Graham's full reports (available). Main issues arising: grass growth in Pony Wood is starting to choke the new saplings, sapling sleeves need checking and removing where necessary (**Ian**). Algae in the

ponds is an ongoing problem. Graham has deliberately sunk the barley straw in Alder Pond to minimise the visual impact at a popular viewing point. He expects it to start to be effective as the area becomes drier over the summer and once he has cleared the surface algae allowing the sun to penetrate through. As an experiment, **Graham** will adopt a different method in the Flora Ponds, using floating 'sausages' of barley straw. Oxygenating plants have been introduced, but their establishment is being hindered by the algae. Re-setting the level of the eel pipe in Anna's Pool is on the to-do list (**Graham**).

**9.2. Progress with this year's surveys:** Dan Haywood has made two of his proposed three visits to survey breeding birds (30th April and 2nd June). Graeme Skelcher will undertake his usual wildflower survey of Hay and Carr House meadows on 7th July. In addition, he will set up monitoring schemes for the woodland and field margins, based on the HLS success indicators and broadly using methodology used for Natural England SSSI monitoring. Martin Sherlock is also helping to monitor the wildflowers. On April 27<sup>th</sup> he led a small group in a sweep of Pony Wood from north to south. This has showed an encouraging improvement in the coverage of wildflowers, the frequency of ransoms, wood anemone, and primrose now being sufficient to be classified as 'occasional' and bluebell 'frequent'. Martin has planned further surveys for the Bioblitz events on June 4<sup>th</sup> and July 30<sup>th</sup> 6:30pm. **Sue** will re-contact Gail Armstrong about a bat survey.

**9.3. Birdwatching walk 21st May:** Jon Carter's walk attracted 12 participants. Sightings are reported on the blog on the FA website.

**9.4. Field walking:** Flora Field was walked systematically after the ploughing in April by a group of FA members under the guidance of the archaeologist from UCLAN. There were no significant finds, but lots of broken pottery from 19th and early 20th century was collected. (This is principally kitchen waste disposed of on the fields, standard practice prior to modern rubbish collection regimes.) Some of the pottery resembles Buckley Ware. **Sue** will arrange for the finds to be transferred to the person storing the finds from the metal detecting.

**9.5. Photographic recording:** Chris has met with the webmaster to arrange storage on the website (details to be finalised) and with Glenys to discuss the description of the sites.

## **10. Volunteer activities:**

**10.1. Ragwort report:** The first phase of work throughout the reserve, combining digging out and glyphosate treatment, has been completed. Reassuringly, the fields in the Flora area remain relatively free of ragwort. The meadows will need to be swept again before haymaking. Further work will continue in the other fields to remove any ragwort before it seeds. The proposal to trial in the Paddock the effectiveness of citronella oil (suggested by Ben Hibbins following desk research) in comparison with glyphosate was approved (**Ian**). **Mick** offered to organise a "bog blitz", concentrating on the marsh areas of Upper Sowerholme and Big Meadow. Timings and logistics to be decided. It will be adults only, and advertised at the AGM (as well as elsewhere).

**10.2. Reports for April & May volunteer sessions and proposed tasks:** Ian's full reports are attached at the end. It was agreed that the seedling plugs of yellow rattle and meadowsweet could be planted out in the Carr House and Hay meadows respectively.

As these are from seeds already in the meadows, it will not need approval from Natural England (see item 8.7) (**Ian**).

**11. Finalising the Flora HLF project:** The final report has been submitted and is being processed. Its compilation has proved to be a huge task and Hilary was thanked for her efforts.

**12. Standing items:**

**12.1. Arrangements:** A list of matters to be arranged/set in train during the next two months was circulated prior to the meeting. In particular:

- **Ian** has already asked the contractor for a quote for the mowing, baling and wrapping of the hay crop in Hay and Carr House Meadows and his assurance that this can be done asap after July 15<sup>th</sup>. **Glenys** will check that **Ian** will be taking action to block the point where cattle can currently access Upper Sowerholme and also that he is arranging the mowing of the wildflower and bee friendly margins.
- The composition and coverage of wildflower & bird seed margins in Flora Field will be checked by Graeme Skelcher. Graeme will also advise on whether parts of the wildflower margin will require over-sowing between 1 August & 30th September (**Sue**).
- **Dave** is trying to contact the neighbouring farmer about mowing the grass in West Field for silage/hay after 1st July. There is no ragwort in this field, but some patches of thistle, dock and nettle.
- In previous years, Richard Storton has visited to provide advice on the general state and management of the reserve, covering matters such as the level of wetness, state of the sward and rushes. Such dedicated support is no longer available from the RSPB for this essential element of monitoring. **Mick** will explore alternatives: whether our Natural England adviser is prepared to make an annual visit, whether other contacts within the RSPB have the interest and availability, whether someone could be hired on a consultancy basis.

**12.1. Financial control:**

*Item 8.2* – Application to Canal & River Trust approx. £450 (**Dave**)

*Item 8.4* – Timber for fence £66.36 (**Ian**)

*Item 8.9* – Loss (or reclaim by NE) of £200 income because of shortfall in size of arable margins (**Dave**)

*Item 10.1*– Glyphosate purchase £53 (**Ian**)

*Item 9.2, 14.3* Graeme Skelcher £400 for setting up wildflower surveys (**Sue**)

**12.2. Organised events for notification to the FA:**

- Graham will be running family campfire sessions in Pony Wood on Sat 18th July (2-4pm), Sun 26th July (3-5pm) and Sat 1st August (1-3pm). Pre-booking required.

- Anyone interested is invited to join Graeme Skelcher to monitor wildflowers on Tues 7th July (10.30-12.00).

### 13. AOB:

**13.1. Renewable Ripley:** Ian is back in email contact with the group organiser.

**13.2. Moth traps:** Tony has plans to use the newly purchased traps for school visits.

**14. Date/place of next meetings:** Thurs 23rd July (chair Hilary); Thurs 2nd Sept (chair Sue). Both 7pm Whitegates.

## Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

11<sup>th</sup> April 2015

On a bright, blustery and chilly morning 26 volunteers gathered for the Saturday volunteering session.

Most of our time was spent gathering wood chippings from the West Field and wheelbarrowing it to Pony Wood and the Extension to spread around the tree saplings as a mulch. All the saplings we planted last year received a mulch.

We also planted another batch of woodland plants, again kindly provided by Fiona Sturgess, in Pony Wood. These included ransomes, lady fern and more primroses. The patches were marked with a stake and red tape.

Eleven more volunteers joined up with the John Muir Award.

27<sup>th</sup> April 2015

- a) Six volunteers spent the afternoon on a walk and talk around the Reserve to discuss plans for developing wildflowers on the Reserves. A report for FFOG was produced. In conclusion the party moved to Pony Wood for an informal survey of wildflower and other understorey growth there. Martin will provide a report to FFOG.
- b) A volunteer attended the Lancaster Greenspaces Forum meeting in Poulton War Memorial Hall with about 12 others. After much swapping of news and reports, the meeting moved to the evening's theme – Enhancing for Wildlife. There was mutual exchange of information ranging from bird boxes to arable fields. The FA representative advertised the hedge laying courses provided free each autumn / winter by the County Council.

29<sup>th</sup> April 2015

- 1) Volunteers from the Claver Hill Project took excess wood chippings from the Howsons' Gate area for use on their paths. Many thanks from them to the FA.
- 2) The Volunteer Organiser met with Simon Gershon who had concerns about three trees in the playground area which he considered needed attention to maintain healthy growth. His proposals were agreed and Simon will do the work in his own time.
- 3) In the evening we held our first Wednesday evening volunteer session of the season with 7 volunteers turning out.
  - a) We planted plants in appropriate places – sweet woodruff in the woodland adjacent to the Orchard north entrance, flag iris in the wet corner of the Hay Meadow and ox eye daisy on the slight bank at the northern end of the Meadow.

- b) Part of the Orchard grass which had not been mown because of water intrusion was strimmed and the debris cleared.
- c) The leak in one of the Flora ponds was re-repaired and algae cleared from the other pond.
- d) Some of the brash in the Orchard was tidied and larger stems cut out for log piles.
- e) The eel sluice was inspected and found to be draining the pond rather than the main outlet. This needs attention.

#### 30<sup>th</sup> April 2015

Two volunteers experimentally tried to use a turf cutting machine to remove turf in the Flora Field for a wildflower plot. After a great deal of exhaustive trialling we decided it was not suitable in uneven ground with long grass and deep roots although we did strip the turf from a 10 metre length and sow seeds left over from the field sowing last year.

#### Early May 2015

Note that the new Toro mower has arrived and has now completed two cuts of the Orchard grass. David, our mower, is pleased with it and the increased efficiency it provides.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> May 2015

18 volunteers turned out on a cloudy and blustery morning but the forecast and expected rain kept away.

- We made a start erecting the new fence around the Shed, getting all the posts in and some of the rails fixed. We are now able to estimate how much further timber will be required.
- Brash was cleared from the gateway at the north-west corner of the West Field to allow by our neighbour. The gate was checked and found to be serviceable.
- The barbed wire protecting Little Wood was reinforced.
- Ragwort was dug out of the Hay Meadow and carted back to the Shed.
- Excess vegetation was cleared from around the benches in the Orchard.

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015

Three volunteers completed the repairs in the playground.

#### 26<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Several individuals have been digging out ragwort in the Hay Meadow and Carr House Meadow but this was the first meeting of the Ragwort Working Party(RWP). Four people came along to the morning session, two set to continue digging out in Carr House, the other two started the spraying process. The afternoon session was a singular affair. The Paddock was done and about a quarter of Big Meadow. Whilst glysohate was mixed the opportunity was taken to inspect for JKW in the two locations discovered and treated last year. Small amounts were found at the edge of Flora Field. By Lucy Brook no JKW was found on our side of the Brook.

#### 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Once again four people turned out for the RWP with the same division of labour as yesterday. Digging out continued in the Hay Meadow. We completed spraying another quarter of the Big Meadow and unfortunately found what appears to be JKW alongside the Brook by Big Meadow [*may prove be water figwort - to be monitored*]. In the afternoon two people attended the RWP.



Whilst one continued to dig out in the Hay Meadow the other did a systematic inspection for ragwort in the Flora fields. The results are:

- a) Lower Sowerholme: Some ragwort alongside the Lucy Brook hedgeline. Note that this has been the case in the past and does not indicate spread.
- b) Flora Field. No ragwort observed anywhere in the field. This is surprising as we have generally had some along the Aldcliffe Road boundary bank spreading from the road / canal. I anticipate this coming later but again does not indicate spread from historical incidence.
- c) West Field. No evidence of ragwort anywhere in the field. There are some patches of nettle, thistle and dock.

In the evening four brave souls reported for the monthly evening volunteer session. The promised heavy rain held off until we were packing up so we kept quite dry although rather windswept.

- We continued building the new fence around the Shed, using materials reclaimed from the Reserves.
- The former wire fence was removed and the wire stored away.
- The remaining timber was sorted so that those lengths suitable for the fence were identified and a calculation made of new timber requirement.
- We inspected the Shed green roof and found the sedum to be in a healthy state but infested with sycamore seedlings. Whilst we removed various other weeds we decided to leave and monitor the sycamores on the grounds / hope that a dry spell should kill them off. Otherwise it's a big job especially as getting the root out whole is awkward.
- Bird box 4's roof was replaced although more work needs to be done to secure it.
- A protruding stump was cut out near the fruit circle.
- A bush obstructing a path out of the fruit circle was pruned back.
- The fallen goat willow in the Orchard was reviewed and thought to be safe to leave until the winter tree management programme.
- The broken stock fence near the Lucy Brook crossing was repaired.
- Reports of sheep droppings on the Pads footpath were investigated. We think it is deer droppings.

28<sup>th</sup> May 2015

A volunteer cut up and transported to the tip bits of scrap metal, especially old barbed wire, which had been collected over time.