

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 12th November 2015 7.00 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

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

1. **Apologies:** Helen Hicks, Rebecca Procter
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Herbicide spraying course:** The course organiser has now been identified, so **Hilary** will send a letter.
 - 3.2. **Maintenance plans for Long Pads path:** Unexpectedly the County Council did strim the path in September. Ian and Tony confirmed that this was a welcome action. **Sue** will contact Tarja Wilson to propose that the FA maintains the path through the growing season (but only on a year by year basis) with Lancashire CC work at the end of the season.
 - 3.3. **Dead sycamore & horse chestnut in Pony Wood:** The tree surgeon has submitted an application to the Tree Protection Officer to fell these two trees. Ian also noted that the two dead ash trees in Little Wood (where felling was delayed for the nesting season) have now been tackled, as has the permitted work on an over-shading sycamore in the Orchard.
 - 3.4. **Flailing north hedge of West Field:** It proved too late to arrange this with the neighbouring tenant farmer for this year. **Dave** will follow this up for 2016. In the meantime, it will be trimmed as best possible (**Ian**). The sycamore establishing in the hedge will be taken out by the Hedge Working Party (**Ian**).
 - 3.5. **Ragwort in LGGS field and allotments:** The graziers are amenable to switching to the FA's contractor to spray their ragwort next season. **Dave** is still to make contact with the Allotment Committee.
 - 3.6. **Lune foreshore visits:** Meeting members were alerted to the safety warnings at the end of Graeme Skelcher's report (circulated with the September minutes). Anyone venturing out onto the marsh must be aware of tide time and height and ensure that there is a route back to the cycle path that does not involve crossing creeks on an incoming tide.
 - 3.7. **Grazing Agreement:** This is still with the Solicitor whilst a Land Registry hitch in relation to Flora is resolved. It was noted that (as in the current agreement for Fauna) there will be reference to the stipulations in the FA's agreement with Natural England. A copy of the signed document will be stored in Dropbox. FFOG members will be informed when this happens.
4. **Review of the summer's activities in Pony Wood:** It was agreed that it was more appropriate to defer this until the special meeting in February. The results of the nestbox

monitoring to be carried out by Ian N. and **Ian P.** will be available then to inform the discussion.

5. **Extending volunteering:** It was agreed that Ian's report provided a good basis for extending and managing individual volunteering. Tasks should be 'approved' rather than 'allocated' by FFOG. An additional suitable task is controlling nettles around the play area, appropriate for a parent. **Meeting members** were asked to send further suggestions to Ian. He will advertise via the Volunteer email list and the general FA email list for individual volunteers and for a deputy Volunteer Organiser to coordinate their activities and deal with practicalities, such as shed access. A number of volunteers are approaching the end of the first stage of their John Muir award. Working towards subsequent stages requires taking more responsibility and independent working so this a pool of potential individual volunteers that can be tapped (**Graham**).
6. **Damage to playground trees:** Disappointingly, there has been further damage to the bark of the biggest tree. Netting (to be checked by **Ian**) has been wrapped around it in the hope that it will survive. Elsewhere branches have been damaged. Fencing off the copse was rejected as undesirable and probably ineffective.
7. **Bramble in the Fauna path hedge:** There is a particularly dense patch of brambles in the vicinity of the Fauna stones. Richard Storton's advice to leave it alone was accepted (see item 9.2): it creates a thick, low barrier that is wildlife friendly. The bramble will however continued to be tackled as it tries to extend outside the hedge line (**Ian**).
8. **Management:**
 - 8.1. **Improvement of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path:** Planning application has now been submitted.
 - 8.2. **Resurfacing of footpaths:** No progress (**Dave**).
 - 8.3. **LNR designation:** **Oliver** is writing the short 'informal' document explaining the rationale for the reserve and hopes/aspirations/vision for the future. He has circulated a draft for comments, and the amended version will be sent to Natural England to confirm that it is on the right lines. It will then come to FFOG for approval.
 - 8.4. **Arable and margins update:** The margins were finally mown in September by the FA's contractor. The cuttings were hand-blown onto the stubble. Ian's report catalogues a range of problems with trying to adhere to the prescriptions of the NE Agreement: the risk of damaging a) the arable crop trying to take a cut before harvest, and b) expensive machinery (now moderated by NE's indication that the resulting sward can be left higher at 15-20cms) and the practicalities of disposing of the cuttings. It was agreed that **Ian** would work with Mick and Sue to clarify NE's requirements and liaise with the arable farmer and the contractor over the practicalities to achieve a more workable regime. (For January FFOG.)
 - 8.5. **Fauna stones wildflower area:** On 26th & 27th September a total of 60 pupils from two classes at Dallas Road School visited to sow the 30 sq metre plot. They also received training in the safe use of tools, such as forks and rakes. Some seeds appear to be germinating already. The teachers reported that the sessions, led by Tony and Ian, were well run and enjoyable.

8.6. Pony grazing arrangements: Natural England has now agreed to permit grazing throughout the winter by two ponies, provided they have the run of the whole undivided area of Big Meadow, with occasional excursions into School Pond. So the Exmoor ponies are now expected to arrive in early December remaining to the end of March 2016. **Oliver** has the practicalities in hand and noted that the advantage of this arrangement is that there is no need to provide water (the ponies can access Lucy Brook or School Pond throughout) and no need for electric fencing. This will make the volunteer pony-minders' task much simpler, as it will simply involve daily monitoring for health and safety. It also gives more opportunity for the ponies to affect the rush (although it may take more than one winter to make a serious impact). The talk at the Storey Institute on 22nd October by the owner of the ponies attracted a keen audience including a number of different faces.

8.7. Thistle control: Oliver has received the following advice from a Cumbria Wildlife Trust reserve manager:

1. in spring when fast growth starts, keep cattle out for a few weeks until thistles are approx. a foot high
2. bring cattle in to graze off the grass, leaving thistles standing and clearly visible
3. scythe down the thistles (which can be left for the cattle to eat - they love them once they are wilted and they do no harm)
4. keep cattle out for a while to give the grass a head start - it will now outcompete the thistles.
5. pull any remaining crop of thistles before it has gone to seed.

Grazing at the right time is the key. It is suggested that this regime will show significant results within a year. As it also avoids the use of chemicals, it was agreed to try it next season. (**Glenys** to add to Arrangements Calendar.) **Oliver** will ask his contact for advice on controlling docks (For January FFOG).

8.8. Gates between Hay and Carr House Meadows: Ian and Dave met David Hartley on site to discuss how this access can be widened to accommodate haymaking machinery. Their solution of re-using the two existing gates, adding two extra 10 foot gates with removable posts between the pairs to create a 20 foot opening was approved, subject to price (**Ian**).

8.9. Hay store roof: Work on the roof of the hay store/animal shelter in the Gun Range has been scaled down as it was recognised that the hay bales could only be stored unwrapped if there was expensive upgrading of the floor too. So the objective has changed to producing a repair that is more watertight than the previous effort which used corrugated sheets found on the reserve. As a result fewer corrugated sheets have been bought than originally proposed. The materials are on site and installation by FA volunteers expected soon. The expenditure was approved by Chair's action between FFOG meetings. Sue recognised that this project was in a "grey area" where the responsibilities of the FA and the graziers were not clearly defined. But that she felt the grounds were strong enough to sanction this expenditure.

8.10. Wildflower Meadows: soil test results: A report for each of the meadows has been received from Natural England. **Chris** offered to 'translate' the results for discussion at the special FFOG meeting in February. It was noted that Richard Storton (item 9.2) considers trying to make the meadows less acidic would be "fighting against nature" and probably require several years of liming.

8.11. Upper Sowerholme: It was also agreed to defer discussion of the management regime (and potential acquisition of a scythe mower) until February. Richard Storton was encouraged by the growth of the reeds this season, although – given the year or more of sub-optimal habitat because of the leaking bund – they are behind NE's expectations. He is of the opinion that a switch to a fen regime is premature and not necessarily the best approach. Also changing would require considerable volunteer input. **Mick** will ask Ben Hibbins (NE Adviser) for his views to inform the discussion at the special FFOG meeting.

9. Monitoring:

9.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections: Graham's full reports available. He noted that water levels are currently the highest he has seen them and his latest repair to the leaking Flora Pond appears to be holding. West Scrape now contains some water, even though the source of the leak has not been located. The eel pipe in Anna's Pool has been reset and the algae treatment (barley straw) in Alder Pond refreshed. There are a number of self-seeded alder by this pond which need removing (**Ian** to add this as a winter task). Due to the surprise purchase of a prize-winning heifer and her bull calf, the White Park cattle herd is currently over-size. This should be a temporary situation as the graziers have signalled their intention to sell one or two of the animals. Graham reminded **Meeting Members** to copy him in to any emails relating to the cattle or other monitoring/maintenance issues so that he is informed for his inspections.

9.2. Visit by Richard Storton: Richard has kindly offered to continue acting as an Adviser, and his visit to the reserve on 7th November proved very helpful, generating a lot of practical and reassuring advice (see items 7, 8.10 & 8.11). **Mick** will write a full report for discussion at the special FFOG meeting in February.

9.3. Butterfly expert: Arrangements are being made for a talk at the Storey Institute by a member of the Butterfly Conservation Trust. It is hoped to follow this up by establishing a monitoring regime for butterflies (**Sue**).

10. Volunteer activities:

10.1. Volunteer activities: Ian's full reports for September and October are attached. Further tasks have been added to the list for the coming Volunteer session (coppicing hazel in the wild area of the Orchard to provide stakes for hedging work and cutting holly by the south noticeboard). Replacement of the dead saplings in Pony Wood is also scheduled. Oak and birch from the Woodland Trust pack will be used. These are both species prescribed by Natural England. Replacement of like with like cannot be guaranteed as it is difficult to identify the dead specimens (although Ben Hibbins did note that they were mostly oaks on a visit earlier in the year). This replanting was approved.

10.2. Buffet for Volunteers: It was considered a good idea to postpone this to the New Year (February?). The bar area at *Nice* at the Storey Institute is available for group use and their proposed menu is acceptable (although could possibly benefit from a few more vegetarian dishes). **Sue** offered to make the arrangements, following a briefing from **Ian**.

11. Walk and Talk for MA Students: This is becoming a regular fixture in the annual calendar. The students were lucky in timing their visit for a dry spell in a very wet week. Although numbers could have been higher, as usual it provided a productive and enjoyable event for both student participants and the FA.

12. Standing items:

12.1. Arrangements: **Mick** will remind the graziers about the change in cattle access from the 1st December. He will also contact the arable farmer about next year's agreement, and whether one can be established that rolls over or lasts for more than one year. **Glenys** will add a reminder to the calendar to make the arrangements for cutting the grass in West Field (if necessary) early in the season.

12.2. Financial control:

Item 8.9 – Invoice for hay store repairs already submitted £275 (Mick)

Item 10.1 – £360 has been spent on tools using the grant from the Lancaster Community Fund (remaining £140 to be held back for developments) (Ian)

Item 11 – Income of £150 donated by MA Students

Costs of herbicide training course (item 3.1) still unknown. Costs of pony grazing (8.6) unlikely to extend beyond covering the owner's expenses and some polo mints!

Dave's annual financial spreadsheet will be circulated for the next meeting.

12.3. Organised events for notification to the FA: None.

13. AOB:

13.1. Educational visit forms: **Tony** has nine forms which he will submit to Dave as a matter of urgency so that monies can be claimed from Natural England.

13.2. Tree work application: **Hilary** is applying to the Tree Protection Officer for permission to raise the crown on a tree at the Edenbreck end of the reserve.

13.3. West Field: There has been some cattle grazing of the field in the last few weeks, but more is required before the 1st December to achieve a desirable sward height through the winter. However, the boundaries of the field are relatively weak, particularly for containing a young bull who is attracted to heifers in an adjacent field. In the short term, the neighbouring farmer will be approached to ask if the heifers can be re-located. [*Following the meeting, Sue has discovered that the heifers have been taken out to their winter quarters.*] In the medium term the problem will be solved by the sale of this bull (see item 9.1), but longer term a more effective solution is required. The cattle appear reluctant to use the nose pump. However the graziers have indicated that they can use it to fill a trough, if there is insufficient water for the cattle in the scrape.

14. Date/place of next meetings: Thursday 14th January (Chair Sue); Special FFOG Thurs 11th February; Thurs 10 March all 7pm, Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

12th September 2015

Until around 9am it was pouring with rain with more forecast so it was pleasing to find 18 volunteers coming along. We had just one heavy downpour and got ever so much done:

- The edges of the Fauna path were mown to keep the grass from overhanging. The 'new' cleared areas around the medlar and pear trees were mown again. The strip of grass down the side of the Shed was mown and the edge clipped.
- The Pads footpath was checked for overhanging and intruding growth and clipped back.
- The plastic guards and canes along the track between the Shed and the Orchard were checked and replaced.
- The newly cleared areas around the outlying apple trees were scythed and cleared. Just as good if not better than strimming if you know how!
- We continued and completed (for now!) the clearance of the bramble intruding onto the Fauna path.
- The new wildflower plot was forked and flattened ready for the children to prepare and sow the seed.
- Overhanging branches near the Cromwell gate which had obstructed the tractor were cut out.
- Self seeded saplings between the Sunnyside Lane / Orchard track and Edenbreck were cut out.
- The overhanging hedge alongside the Sunnyside Lane / Orchard track was pruned back and the debris cleared.
- A rotten stump in the Stump Circle was removed and a replacement inserted.

13th September 2015

The Oak Circle is cut ready for Apple Day.

During the month a number of volunteers made forays into the Reserves to cull the last of the flowering ragwort.

22nd September 2015

Two volunteers repaired the gate in the north west corner of West Field. We also considered whether it might be replaced by one of the 10 foot gates coming out of the Fauna path. However, the gate gap here is 11 feet. Our repairs are solid and the current gate should hold.

We also repaired to break in the Fauna fence rails.

10th October 2015

18 volunteer gathered on a warm and pleasant autumn morning.

- We planted out donated flowers as follows:
 - Primroses and sweet woodruff in Pony Wood, marking the planting areas with stakes and tape.

- Meadowsweet (from our own seed) and great burnett in the wetter area of the Hay Meadow
- Yarrow, wild strawberry, ox eye daisy, betony and cowslip in plots along the Fauna path and in the Hay meadow
- Old stumps were removed from the area of the apple orchard being re-colonised from nettles.
- The hazel fence, damaged by the cattle, between the Hay Meadow and Upper Sowerholme was repaired with new stakes and withers.
- Cutting back of the overhanging vegetation along the track by the Shed was completed.
- The 'Don't pick' signs in the Orchard were collected and repaired.
- Newly cleared areas of the Orchard were strimmed to keep the nettles at bay.
- The grass and vegetation around the 'rediscovered apple tree adjacent to the Stump Circle was cleared.
- Branches overhanging the paths in the Orchard were cut back to give adequate headroom for pedestrians.
- A start was made trimming back the hedges at the south side of the Paddock and the east side of the Orchard.
- More nettles and brambles removed from alongside the Fauna path.

Mid-month.

A number of volunteers remove ragwort from the Hay Meadow, Big Meadow and School Pond.

For the past month or so two volunteers have been working on repairing the roof of the hay storage sheds.

14th and 18th October 2015

The plants put in last Saturday were watered in this dry spell of weather.

14th to 16th October 2015

Our aquatic specialist volunteer:

- Made another repair on the leak in the Flora Field pond.
- Removed algae and replaced the barley straw in the Alder Pond.
- Adjusted the eel pipe in Anna's Pool.

23rd October 2015

Two volunteers do some preparatory work for the Hedge Working Party, loosening the staples in the fence we need to remove to start hedging.

28th October 2015

The first meeting of the Hedge Working Party is cancelled because of rain. Very frustrating.

30th October 2015

Two of us do more preparatory work on the wire fence so we can get a flying start when we eventually get hedging.