

Henfield Common Site Meeting 12th November 2019

This is a brief summary of the key points raised and discussed by attendees at the site meeting at Henfield Common on 12/11/2019. Representatives of Henfield Commons Joint Committee, Henfield Parish Council and Horsham District Council were present along with Jake Everitt (Countryside and Ecology Manager HDC), Sam Fosberry (HDC Ranger) and Kate Ryland (Dolphin Ecological Surveys, author of the 2018 site management plan).

Management Achievements 2018/19

- Henfield Parish Council Grounds Staff and the Henfield Common Volunteers have made significant and very impressive progress with some of the actions contained in the new site management plan.
- A major achievement is completion of the new glade in the North Woodland. This has allowed much needed light into the wood and appears to be a very popular route. The ground has remained remarkably dry considering recent rainfall so this project can be considered a success for access purposes as well as demonstrating good habitat management.
- The first phase of invasive species control in the North Woodland has been excellent. Major progress has been made with preliminary removal and control of bamboo and cherry laurel along the northern path.
- The large oak near the causeway has had its crown lifted and scrub has been cleared from under the canopy. This has made a huge difference to the appearance of the tree as an isolated landscape feature as well as opening up herbaceous vegetation on the edge of the marsh. Taking off one more large, drooping lower limb would be beneficial to stop it layering into the marsh.
- The willow scrub alongside the northern half of the causeway has been removed which has opened up the path very well. The ditches will get more light and if their vegetation is managed on rotation as per the 2018 plan then breeding amphibians may well return to this part of the Common.
- In the South Woodland the halo thinning around major oaks and scrub clearance to allow rabbit control by ferreting have both been very effective in opening up the eastern end of this area.
- A preliminary public consultation on grazing the Common was carried out earlier in 2019. The results were predictably mixed but not overwhelmingly negative. There were (and still are) concerns voiced by local people about the possible nature of livestock interactions with dogs and people. It was suggested that Jake could arrange a visit to see another Sussex site with high levels of public access where livestock are used for conservation grazing. Perhaps Chesworth Farm HDC Reserve or Stedham Common SWT Reserve.

South Common

- The scrub and tree saplings along the edges of the access track should be cut back. Managing these track edges in future by mowing in alternate years would allow tall herb/grassland vegetation to develop (equivalent to tall margins in the other grassland areas) but will prevent woody species becoming established.
- South Common grassland areas have the potential to be enhanced in future using species-rich green hay harvested from North Common, perhaps combined with yellow rattle seed to reduce grass vigour. This should be considered for future years but is of lower priority than getting management of the existing high value grassland right on North Common.

North Common

- Grassland management remains the main challenge in this area of the Common. In 2019 hay bales were again deposited at Broadmare Common but this practice is unsustainable and potentially damaging to the ecology of that site. Instead mown vegetation should be taken loose (not baled) to

Olus for recycling. Jake and Sam use a contractor on Horsham DC sites who can provide this service. It was recommended that the current grassland contractor used by HCJC and the HDC contractor should both be asked to provide a quote for carrying out the grassland mowing without baling and with transportation of arisings to Olus in 2020.

- Leaving unmown margins around the main grassland areas when they are cut would be really valuable. These should be cut in sections on rotation late in the season.
- Grazing with livestock remains the optimum management option for much of Henfield Common (as per the management plan). A trial grazing area would be feasible in the wet grassland triangle in the west of the Common. In future, if the trial is successful, it may be more realistic to graze the Common in small sections rather than fence the entire open area. An experienced conservation grazer is essential to the success of such a venture to ensure that conflict is avoided between visitors, dogs and grazing animals.
- Different types of livestock fencing could be considered. An unobtrusive option is underground electric “invisible fencing” that is used in combination with livestock collars. An example of this technique being used by the National Trust is described here <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/headley-heath/features/cattle-grazing-and-our-new-invisible-fencing-on-headley-heath>
- Cutting the reedbed has just started but the ground is dry enough for Dick and Brian to continue this task over the next few weeks. Henfield Conservation Volunteers will rake up the cut reed. Some willow stems have already been cut by hand from the reedbed.
- The reedbed would benefit from having some of the larger willow roots removed using a mini-digger, which would also create small, water-filled hollows.
- A willow and a couple of oaks that are established within the edge of the reedbed near the damp woodland could be removed or at least have their canopies cut back. The aim would be to restore the open reedbed margin to where there is gorse and birch on a slight sandy bank.

South Woodland

- Further selective thinning of small oaks and coppicing of hazel could be done to show off the two largest open grown oak trees near the car park.
- Gorse and scrub along the southern edge of South Woodland should be cut in sections on rotation. The aim is to create varied age structure and a wavy edge to the woodland/grassland interface.

The Causeway

- Most of the oaks along the southern half of the causeway could be removed to allow the best 2-3 trees more light and a better chance of thriving. Raise the canopy of the retained oaks.
- Manage the scrub along the path edges by cutting back sections on rotation. The aim is to improve access for people, allow in more light to the path and ditches and create more varied vegetation structure on the path sides.

North Woodland

- The stand of Wilson’s honeysuckle should be removed when time allows.
- Invasive species control has begun and control of regrowth will inevitably be needed.
- The woodland edge and ditch alongside Memorial Field may need to have some of the more spindly and unstable oaks removed if they are considered a safety risk.

Kate Ryland

12/11/2019