

SKELSMERGH WOODLAND MANAGEMENT PLAN: MONITORING REPORT AND SECOND REVIEW 2016

The Management Plan, adopted in 2005, provided for a review in 2010 and thereafter at 5-yearly intervals. The first review took place in 2011.

Objectives of the Plan

- To manage the woodland to maturity, encouraging a diverse understorey and ground-flora whilst maintaining access to and views from the seat.
- To encourage wild birds to nest.
- To enhance the local landscape and interest in the site by shrub and wildflower planting.
- To ensure accessibility to the local community.
- To encourage use by local schools.

Assessing achievements against objectives:

1 Managing the trees to maturity and enhancing the local landscape

In the sixteen years of its existence the woodland has achieved the characteristics of an established woodland plantation. A substantial coppice coupe in the alder / willow/ aspen area which had matured most rapidly is recovering well whilst enabling individual oaks within the mix to achieve their potential. Elsewhere, hazel has been coppiced in small groups in each year since 2014 and shows strong regrowth despite some deer browsing. Some birch and ash have reached a stage where thinning would be appropriate. The aim should be to thin small numbers each year to allow slower-growing species, such as oak, to raise their canopy without losing the essential character of the woodland. Small roundwood will have a value as firewood (income has come in from sales so far) and one practical means of continuing this would be to mark trees for felling and invite offers from the public to fell and remove wood subject to conditions including insurance indemnity. Such a proposal would relieve the need to find volunteer work parties for this work. It would be a condition that brash and arisings would be formed into habitat piles to support the wildlife and fungal growth essential to the evolving eco-system.

A moth survey by a local enthusiast in July 2012 yielded a wide range of species. The follow-up in September 2014 was less successful due to cold overnight conditions. A repeat survey should be requested.

Pollarding trees (cutting off somewhat above head height) is an alternative to coppicing and, though not essential, would add an interesting variation of form if carried out on a small selection of oak and ash.

The problems with blackthorn and bramble previously identified have abated to some extent since the treatments applied under the last review. Bramble responds to shading and only needs cutting back where it impedes access. Similarly, in the case of blackthorn. Both have considerable value to wildlife as food and cover, especially for ground-nesting species. Former concerns regarding roe deer are no longer an issue: the creatures are present but at a tolerable level.

No evidence of ash die-back (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) has yet been recorded but it seems inevitable that it will occur at some stage in the future. Appropriate measures in accordance with recommended woodland practice will need to be adopted as and when the infection presents itself. Badly completed work by ENWL in October 2015 led to a re-negotiation of the electricity pole wayleaves and ultimate reinstatement of the access splay. Outstanding payments have been received and will, in future, be accounted for annually. No further action is required.

Proposal 1

To thin ash, birch and hazel in small annual amounts, ash and birch to be marked and offered for sale, hazel to be hand-cut with product offered for sale as bean poles, pea sticks and firewood. Select some examples of oak and ash for pollarding. Ash to be monitored for disease and referred for expert advice if necessary. Repeat moth survey periodically

A canopy has formed over much of the woodland, extinguishing the growth of coarse grasses. A woodland floor is forming aided by introduced ferns and wildflowers, including primrose, bluebell, wild daffodil, snowdrop, wood anemone, wild garlic, and dogs mercury, giving the land a satisfyingly established 'feel'. Every year seed gathered locally has been strewn and it is also evident that the longer established plants are successfully setting seed. By continuing to strew seed natural adaptation will produce over time a ground flora suited to the land. Natural regeneration of tree species is also evident and this is a process to be welcomed (subject to discouragement of sycamore, which tends to be invasive). A baseline wildflower survey was carried out in 2001/12 and this should be repeated.

Proposal 2

To encourage the spread of woodland flora species by further seeding and to selectively manage natural regeneration of tree species. To carry out a further update wildflower survey in 2017. Trees and shrubs below the overhead cables were pruned by United Utilities in 2010. It would be desirable to keep this pruning under local control as far as possible, with the exception of any trees requiring professional climbing skills.

The boundary walls on the East and western sides have received extensive and expert attention from the Dry Stone Walling Association volunteers to whom donations have been made in recognition. Other sections of boundary will need to be monitored during review period.

Proposal 3

Control growth under power cables. Monitor boundaries and seek assistance from DSWA as necessary.

The offer by Mary Chapman to donate a seat for the benefit of the less able but still awaits the acquisition of materials and an appropriate design. The shed and gate require periodic applications of preservative.

Proposal 4

- To install a second seat close to the gate once a design and materials have been decided upon.
- To apply preservative to the shed and gate summer 2016.

In 2009 the Council granted a licence to a beekeeper, Mr D Walmsley, for the siting of hives. This has proved successful and has led to the use of the land as a 'beekeeping' school on summer Sundays. There are multiple benefits in terms of conservation and public education. Though granted for a nominal sum, a valuable donation of honey has produced a useful annual income.

The management plan envisaged the planting of memorial trees of which there are some 19 on site. It is already the council's policy not to mark individual trees but a record is kept to ensure that none are included in any pruning proposals. Opportunities for further planting are bound to be limited but space should be found if the need arises. The council's policy is to ensure that any tree is of a suitable species and simply to ask for a donation which can go to upkeep of the woodland as a whole.

Proposal 5

To permit suitable native trees to be provided with an invitation to donate towards woodland funds.
To maintain a record and discretely mark such trees.

Encouraging wild birds

Making nest boxes has been a popular activity with children on Open days. Many have been put up around the woodland. The owl box was never occupied and sadly has now fallen down. It is being replaced and augmented with boxes suitable for both barn and tawny owls. Bat and bug boxes have also been installed and these, too, have decayed. The bird boxes have done better, most being occupied every year. Metal plates have been fixed to the holes to deter woodpeckers. It would be a good thing to recruit a keen ornithologist to monitor nesting species and their success.

Proposal 6

To recruit a local ornithologist to survey monitor wild birds. To repair and re-erect bird boxes and bat boxes as necessary.

Access for recreation

Local informal use seems to be occasional but organised days have proved popular with parents and children. Anecdotal evidence suggests that visitors have found the woodland enjoyable. There is still plenty of scope for work/fun days for all ages.

Proposal 7

To continue to encourage/organise recreational work/fun days.

Use by schools

Selside Primary School, have been regular visitors since the woodland was established and a varied programme of environmental educational activities have been devised and presented by local volunteers..

Proposal 8

To continue to encourage use of the woodland as an open-air classroom.

Summary

The woodland has established itself as a well-known and appreciated local feature. The original objectives of the plan continue to be relevant and, subject to the eight proposals, should continue to guide the management of the land until the next review in 2021.

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Chairman , Skelsmergh and Scalthwaiterigg Parish Council, September 2016