

## **BEECHFIELD NATURE AREA**

### **Management and Maintenance Plan**

#### **1. Policy Statement**

Corsham Town Council will work to improve the amenity, recreational and nature conservation value of Beechfield Nature Area, widening its appeal to the people of Corsham, while retaining and enhancing its natural character.

#### **2. Site Description**

Beechfield Nature Area is approximately two hectares of the former grounds of Beechfield House, situated along Middlewick Lane, Corsham.

An interesting range of birds and mammals have been spotted around the site, including: partridges, green woodpeckers, gold finches, pheasants, deer, foxes and rabbits.

The site features open grassland, woodland, mature trees, dry-stone walls, hedges and a pond.

There is nothing of archeological interest recorded in this area.

#### **3. Objectives**

To provide an interesting, accessible, open space, valued by residents for its visual amenity and conservation value.

To increase interest and to encourage a sense of ownership amongst the community by providing up to date information (the interpretation board was updated April 2019) and using local volunteers to carry out improvement/maintenance work.

#### **4. Main Features**

##### Central area

This consists of approximately 1.5ha mown grass where cuttings are not removed. Plants present include: several grass species, dandelion, buttercup, plantain, ragwort, dock, nettle, meadow cranesbill, birdsfoot trefoil, herb robert, meadow vetchling, red bartsia, cowslip and common fleabane.

In autumn 2018, some 30 trees were planted by volunteers (Transcoco) around the margins of the open space. These were a mix of silver birch, rowan and wild cherry.

##### Margin, on west, north and east sides

This is approximately 0.5ha, varying between 10-20m in width from boundary. Grass is left uncut. Mature and young trees present include: birch, sycamore, maple, ash, elm, poplar, cherry, and oak. Some of margin is under sycamore shade, where orchids can be found. Elsewhere bramble, and in places more interesting plants are present such as herb robert and vetch. There are a few dead elms in the wooded margin, but nothing more than 150mm diameter and seven metres tall.

### Woodland

The woodland area consists mainly of sycamore, elm, holly and ash in varying sizes and condition. Ground flora includes bluebell, ground elder, nettles, cow parsley, dog's mercury, celandine and bramble. A dry-stone wall runs along the northern boundary. A small glade was created in the western woodland area following the loss of several elm trees. The glade potentially provides a habitat for several species of butterfly.

### Pond

A wildlife pond was created in the western margin of the central area in 2013 and is gradually becoming established. The pond is home to frogs and a range of insects as well as irises and other aquatic species. Great Crested Newts have reportedly been sighted.

## **5. Access and Public Use**

The majority of users live locally and visit the site on foot. There is very limited parking for vehicles in Middlewick Lane. The only vehicles permitted onto the site are those connected with maintenance. The main entrance is secured with a locked gate and bollard. Visitors will be encouraged to walk to the site rather than to travel by car.

Generally, use of field is confined to walking, normally around the perimeter.

There are no public footpaths crossing the open space but people generally keep to the perimeter and woodland paths.

Camping, bonfires and barbeques are not permitted.

## **6. Recent History (Management & Maintenance)**

Originally when the site formed part of the grounds of Beechfield House, the central area was maintained as a sports pitch.

No artificial or organic fertilisers have been applied to the site since it ceased to be used for sport. This has reduced the density of Rye grasses in the swards allowing a greater number of less dominant grasses and wildflowers to establish.

Developers took over the site in the early 1990's when they built houses in Academy Drive and converted some original buildings into flats. The developers carried out minor landscaping of the open space, primarily at the entrance from Middlewick Lane.

The land was transferred to the Council's ownership in 2002.

Local volunteers have had a valuable input into how the site has developed and been involved in practical maintenance tasks. Routine work is organised through Council staff, volunteers or contractors as appropriate.

Volunteers have been involved in caring for the site with tasks such as Ragwort pulling, removal of litter and debris, assisting with path construction and fitting bird and bat boxes. The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) has also been involved in projects to improve the site.

The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) inspected the site in 2002/03 and suggested a number of options for future management and maintenance including: additional parkland trees; addition of pond; new hedging; introduction of wildflower mix to the meadow; new woodland; and glades and rides. Many of these suggestions were taken forward in a previous Management Plan.

A hedge was newly planted along the southern boundary in 2003/04.

The route of an informal woodland trail was agreed by volunteers. It has been improved and made more interesting and beneficial for visitors and wildlife. This work involved making the path more level and covering it with a bark surface. The work was originally carried out by the BTCV. Nearby dead elm trees were felled.

A seat was installed in the north-west corner of the meadow in 2003 and a small picnic area was created in 2004 in the north east of the site. It consists of an area of close mown grass and timber seat.

Bird and bat boxes were made and fitted to mature trees by the BTCV in 2004.

The dry-stone wall to the rear boundary of the woodland was rebuilt in 2006/07.

In Autumn 2018, thirty trees including silver birch, rowan and wild cherry were planted along the margin of the open grassland.

## **7. Current Maintenance Arrangements**

Current maintenance/management arrangements include:

- The open grassland area is only cut twice a year (in July and October). This low intensity approach is undertaken in order to increase the variety of habitat.
- The paths and picnic area are cut once a month from March to October.
- Hedges are cut once a year (in July).
- The site is visited daily by Council staff to empty the dog/litter bin and to carry out litter picking.
- Trees are regularly visually inspected by Council staff (especially after high winds) and the site forms part of the Council's three yearly Arboricultural report.
- Dead trees within two metres of the woodland walk are removed if they present a safety hazard. Trees that do not pose a health & safety issue are retained and allowed to degenerate naturally. This encourages fungi and saprophytic organisms to take up the decaying matter.

- Ivy is only removed from trees where it is affecting the condition and stability of the tree. The presence of ivy provides good habitat and cover for birds and insects.
- The spread of ragwort is prevented in accordance with the DEFRA Code of Practice.
- The site is subject to an annual site visit to identify repairs and maintenance works required to keep the site in a safe and decent order.
- To avoid any tendency to overcrowd or shade the residential area, the first 30m or so along the southern side has been left unplanted and is managed as a grassland habitat.

## **8. Future Management of the Site**

In April 2019 the Town Council asked representatives from Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (Wild Landscapes Team) to visit the site to advise on its future management. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust made the following suggestions:

### Woodland:

- Creating more open glades in the woodland would allow light to penetrate to the woodland floor and encourage the ground flora to flourish, which will benefit butterflies and insects.
- The use of dead hedges (tree/hedge cuttings piled at the boundary) would encourage saprophytic organisms, create habitat for insects, birds and small mammals and could be used to act as natural fence-lines between features to control public access.
- A less intensive management of hedgerows, perhaps cutting every other year, would provide more cover and food for birds and insects.

### Meadow:

- Sectional cutting would create a habitat mosaic of different sward lengths, benefitting insects including butterflies. Leaving an area uncut over winter would also benefit insects and wildlife in general.
- Green hay seeding would serve to increase the seed bank of the grassland area. The introduction of yellow rattle, which parasites on grass roots would help to maintain an open sward.
- Cutting should be carried out as late as is practical to allow as many flowers as possible to set seed. This will usually be around the end of July. Cutting too late can cause problems as dry, tough plants become harder to cut.

### Pond:

- The platform is very slippery and should be meshed for safety. If the intention is for the platform to be used as a dipping platform a larger platform could be constructed that is closer to the water.
- Clearing the pond in autumn/winter of half of the debris/dead vegetation to create open water spaces would help create a habitat mosaic, benefitting a variety of wildlife.
- Creating hibernacula and log piles on the banks will create areas, close to the water, that could be used by a range of amphibians including frogs, newts and toads as well as reptiles such as grass snakes.

### Butterfly glade:

- The installation of a dead hedge around the glade would provide protection for wildflowers and butterflies as well as a feature border.

- Soil bunds, if sited correctly could provide a warm, south-facing microclimate that will attract butterflies.
- Introducing pollinator wildflower plug plants would provide a variety of food plants for butterflies.

Wiltshire Wildlife Trust also advised leaving patches of nettles as a reliable food plant for common butterfly larvae.

Corsham Town Council will look to implement the measures suggested by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. Where possible, the Council will look to make use of volunteers to carry out works and will ensure that it communicates with users of the site so that they know what is taking place.

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Appendix 1 - Beechfield Nature Area Costs 2019

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Task		Frequency	Unit Cost	Annual Cost
<b>Contract Costs</b>	Cutting paths and picnic area Cutting hedges Cutting meadow area	8 per year 1 per year 2 per year		£2,511.74
<b>General Maintenance</b>	In House maintenance of benches, pond, woodland etc	100 hours per year	£15.00	£1,500
<b>Litter Collection</b>	In House	Daily, but can be for as little as 5 minutes	£15.00	£500
<b>Total Cost</b>				<b>£4,511.74</b>