



Merton Community Woodland Group

Report to the Parish Council, 22nd May 2017

Introduction

Merton Wood stands on the reclaimed site of a former sewage works. It was planted during 2001 and 2002, and was formally taken over by Merton Parish Council in 2007 from the site's previous owner, Thames Water. Since taking on responsibility for the wood, the Parish Council's principal tasks have been to keep the footpaths and rides mown, and to remove the internal fencing within the woodland that was originally erected to protect the young saplings from deer.

In September 2016, signs of ash dieback were seen in the wood. Following a consultation with the Forestry Commission and BBOWT (Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust), a more detailed management plan for the wood was set up. An informal group of local volunteers was established, which then began to carry out a variety of maintenance tasks in October 2016. Some of that work was assisted by the Vale Countryside Volunteers, the Bicester Green Gym and the Wendlebury Woodland Project.

The volunteer group continued working on the wood throughout the winter and into spring 2017, before becoming formally constituted as the Merton Community Woodland Group on 2nd March 2017 – the date of its inaugural meeting and the signing of its constitution. The group is independent of the Parish Council, but operates under its oversight. All substantive changes within the woodland must first gain approval from the Parish Council.

While the Woodland Group operates on a purely voluntary basis, it nevertheless requires funding for many of its activities – principally to buy tools and materials, and on occasion, to hire in contractors for larger tasks. That funding comes from a variety of sources – from grant aiding, from fund-raising, and from the Parish Council itself. At present, the Parish Council directly contracts and pays for the grass-cutting in the woodland, while all other activities are dealt with by the Woodland Group.

Activities to Date

Back in September 2016, it was established that although there are signs of ash die-back in the woodland, the disease is not yet severe enough to require the felling or replacement of any of the trees.

One of the first tasks to be undertaken was to lay the blackthorn hedge that runs along the north-east side of the woodland, to prevent it from encroaching across the ride and to provide new growth which encourages Brown Hairstreak butterflies. Due to the need for specialist advice and assistance with this work, the Vale Countryside Volunteers group was brought in. This involved a small payment to cover the group's travel and equipment costs. The hedge is to be laid in sections (around 30 metres each year), over the next several years.

The next major task was to begin coppicing the stands of hazel. Once again, this is being done in rotation. So far, the area of hazel to the south-east of the "crossroads" on the figure-8 footpath has been coppiced. Initially the cut timber was used to build woven hazel fences to replace the original post and wire fences, to separate the ride from the footpath. Three separate sections of fencing have been built – at the south-west and north-east corners of the

wood nearest to the entrances from the road, and immediately south-east of the figure-8 path, adjacent to the pond.

As there was a considerable amount of cut hazel left over after this work was completed, it was decided to make items for sale from some of the remainder. These were all gardening items, and included bundles of pea-sticks, runner bean frames, tripod obelisks for growing climbing beans, and hurdles. On 13th May 2017, these were taken to the Otmoor Gardening Society plant sale at Charlton School, where £198 was made for the Woodland Group funds.

On the financial side, the Woodland Group has also been awarded a grant from the Cherwell District Council SPARK fund. In order for this grant to be paid, the group had to open a bank account, which was set up in early May this year. The grant of £672.50 will be paid into the account in the near future.

A significant number of hazel items remain to be sold, and it is intended to seek further outlets for these materials – by direct sale to interested individuals, at other plant and garden society events, and possibly through independent garden centres.

As part of the management plan for the woodland, it was decided to reduce the mowing width on the bridleway and paths, leaving unmown margins to allow a greater variety of plants to become established and soften the edges of the woodland. In addition, there was a proposal to create a meandering “wilderness walkway” through the area occupied by the cricket bat willows. In the longer term (subject to funding), it is also intended to build a bridge or culverted crossing over the ditch draining the pond, to keep the walkway separated from the bridleway.

The final element of the current plan is to leave most of the grassy “lawn” at the top (road) end of the woodland uncut, and to mow only a single strip along the woodland margin for the bridleway. It is intended to cut the rest of the area in late August or early September, and then rake off the cut grass, with the aim of establishing a wildflower meadow in this area.

In relation to these plans, an on-site meeting was held between Michael Cross, the contractor who does the grass cutting in the woodland, and two of the Woodland Group (Chris Bottrell and Fred Foxon). This meeting took place on Tuesday 5th May, immediately after which Mr Cross was due to do a cut of the paths and rides. It was clear at the meeting that Mr Cross was fully sympathetic to our plans, and a subsequent inspection showed that he had done an excellent job, fully in keeping with what was desired.

On the basis of all of the above issues, the management of the woodland appears to be progressing very satisfactorily along the intended lines. It therefore remains only to thank all of the Woodland Group volunteers for the large amount of time, work and ideas that they have contributed to this valuable community asset.



Fred Foxon (Chair of Merton Community Woodland Group), 22nd May 2017
On behalf of the Woodland Group committee and members.