

Merton Wood Management Plan

Objectives

The Parish Council's management plan for the woodland has two principal objectives:

- a) **Amenity:** To manage the woodland in a manner that maintains and enhances its amenity value to the local community. In this regard, its principal uses encompass walking (including dog-walking), horse-riding, and the enjoyment and appreciation of the natural environment.
- b) **Wildlife:** To maintain and develop the woodland's range of wildlife habitats, to encourage species diversity and ecosystem health.

On occasion, these two objectives can come into conflict. For example, allowing dogs to run free can have an adverse impact on wildlife (particularly ground-nesting birds); on the other hand, allowing plant growth to become too rich and diverse may render much of the woodland inaccessible to walkers.

In this respect, the overall aim is to create a balance between these two competing objectives – maximising the wildlife potential of the area without unduly compromising its accessibility for walkers and riders. In so doing, the hope is to create an area that is not only an enjoyable recreational facility for the community, but also one that enables and encourages its users to experience and appreciate a diverse range of wildlife and habitats.

In the longer term, there may also be potential for a third objective, subject to community interest, namely:

- c) **Resources:** Provision of community resources. Once the trees have reached a size where they need thinning (or where overhanging branches or diseased trees have to be removed), they can provide firewood for the community. Likewise, coppiced hazel can be used for pea-sticks in the garden. Finally, the cricket-bat willows can eventually be harvested and sold, providing funds for community projects. Hopefully the prospect of benefitting from these resources may encourage villagers to volunteer with woodland maintenance!

Note that as well as benefiting walkers, riders and wildlife, a regular management plan should represent a saving to the Parish Council (especially if using volunteers), compared to having to engage a contractor to carry out such (non-grass-cutting) work.

Finally, it must be emphasised that this plan is neither intended to be definitive nor inflexible. Rather, its aim is to guide the management of the woodland, while remaining open to modification in the light of experience and changing circumstances

Detailed Management Tasks (see appended Google Maps image)

1. **North eastern boundary hedge:** this principally comprises blackthorn, which has now grown sufficiently tall that the stems will eventually become top-heavy and may start to encroach across the ride. In addition, the understory is now becoming too sparse to provide full screening of the adjoining field and road. Remedy: over several years, create a laid blackthorn hedge. For a detailed management plan, see Notes (i) & (ii) below.
2. **Area of cricket-bat willows:** rather than keeping the entire area mown, allow many of the bramble clumps to re-grow. Mow a straight ride (approx. 3m wide) along the woodland's south-eastern margin, plus a narrower meandering path & clearings, including maintaining open ground around each of the willows. Aim: maximum extent of bramble patches to be around 3 x 3 metres.
3. **Footpaths & rides:** mow the central strip regularly (approx. 3m wide on rides, approx. 2m wide on paths), and once a year, mow alternate sides up to the woodland edge and

allow to re-grow (or preferable, mow alternate sides for approx. 30 metres each side, to leave a meandering mown margin on either side of the main path). This will allow growth of wildflowers and other low-growing plants, while preventing the undergrowth from encroaching across the paths. See Note (iii) below.

4. **Lawn:** mow a ride along the woodland margin, plus a narrower meandering path tight against the line of trees bordering the road to allow fruit- and berry-picking. The aim is to create a wildflower meadow in the central area (between the mown path and ride). This section should be cut in late July and again in mid-September, removing the hay if possible (especially on the earlier cut). Following the September cut, rake and scarify the area before scattering wildflower seeds (with the help of volunteers). More precise sowing may be required for certain species (e.g. Yellow Rattle) to get them established.

5. **Trees:** Several maintenance tasks have been identified for the woodland itself:

- Safety: cut back any potentially dangerous or low branches overhanging the paths and rides.
- Coppicing: at the “crossroads” at the centre of the figure-8 path, coppice the hazel in rotation – the first section to be done in around a year’s time, then the others in following years. Re-coppice when required. See Note (iv) below.
- Ash die-back: leave for the time being, and continue to monitor the situation.
- Diversity: at some point in the future, it may be useful to clear-fell and re-plant some areas of the woodland, to increase the diversity of the woodland in terms of the age, species and stature of the trees.

Regarding the possible use as wood-fuel of any pruning, coppicing and felling of timber, some of this material should also be left on-site as habitat for additional species such as small vertebrates, invertebrates and cavity-nesting birds, as well as various plant species.

6. **Ground-nesting birds:** Erect signs during the critical periods for these species, advising dog-owners to keep their dogs on a lead.
7. **Further advice:** contact Sam Riley (Forestry Commission Woodland Officer for Oxfordshire) – email sam.riley@forestry.gsi.gov.uk, or Tim Read (Buckinghamshire Reserves Officer (North), BBOWT) – timread@bbowt.org.uk.

Notes

- (i) **Laying of the blackthorn hedge:** this should be done in stages, each comprising an extent of around 30 metres. In detail, measure the overall length and divide into groups of 30 metre blocks, thus:

Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	...
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During the period October to February, in Year 1, lay all of the Block 1 sections; in Year 2, lay all of the Block 2 sections; in Year 3, lay all of the Block 3 sections. Subsequently, re-lay each block approximately every 10 years.

For assistance contact Vale Countryside Volunteers (<http://www.vcv.org.uk/>) at VCV, Haydon Mill, Rabans Lane, Aylesbury HP19 8RU; email: info@vcv.org.uk; tel: 07952 045546; 07837 380802; 01296 427972.

- (ii) **Wildlife value of blackthorn:** there are two nationally-rare butterfly species in the area, namely Black and Brown Hairstreak. Both feed on blackthorn in their larval stage, but each has a different preference for the age and height of the blackthorn. Managing the blackthorn as per the plan will provide growth which is potentially suitable for both species. Currently only Brown Hairstreak has been recorded in Merton Wood, but colonies of Black are found in other woods nearby.

- (iii) **Paths & rides:** for the sake of clarity, the designated rides (intended for both riders and walkers) comprise the approximately rectangular route around the outside of the woodland, while the footpaths restricted to walkers only) comprise the figure-8 route within the body of the woodland itself (see appended image, below).
- (iv) **Coppicing:** to protect the new hazel growth from grazing deer, brash from the blackthorn can be piled on top of the stumps. Alternatively, the old chicken wire that formed the rabbit fence (and is in rolls under the apple trees near the road) may be used to create enclosures for individual hazel stools.

Management Tasks in Merton Wood

