



Brookings Down Wood Management Plan

Brookings Down Wood Management Committee

UPDATE MAY 2012

Foreword

This Management Plan is designed to help to develop the wood in response to the needs and the views of the local community; it aims to provide a framework for future management. This is the second update of the Plan, which was originally formulated in April 2001; it will be further reviewed every five years and amended as the need arises. The Management Committee welcomes constructive comments from locals, local organisations and members of the public, as well as expert help and advice. Contact can be made to any member of the Committee directly or through the Secretary; details are given on page 7.

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Appendix: Plan of Brookings Down Wood

Introduction

When Brookings Down Wood was put up for sale at the end of 1998, a number of people recognised that it was already a valuable local amenity which could easily be lost by the local community, unless urgent action was taken. A survey was commissioned by South Hams District Council from Jason Heath, Nature and Conservation Consultant, and it is worth quoting the overall assessment made in this survey in full:

‘One of the few sizeable woodlands in the area, Brookings Down Wood is clearly of value, both as a wildlife site and as a local recreational amenity. Of particular note are the rich bird community and the large quantity of bluebells (now a species afforded special protection due to the international importance of British populations).

As far as can be ascertained at present, continued public use of the site should have no detrimental effects provided it does not exceed the present level. Maintenance of a well-defined footpath should help encourage controlled use of the site, with other areas being kept less disturbed. Other measures... should help to enhance the wood for wildlife.’

The survey noted no less than 20 species of bird in the wood; the recommendations made have been incorporated into this Management Plan. Subsequent surveys and observations have recorded moths and butterflies, bats, flora, fungi and lichens.

Alec Longworth, our first Chairman, led a movement to raise the money needed to buy the wood for the community – a total of nearly £19000 was raised from local residents and organisations. To ensure the long-term future of the wood, whilst involving the local community in its management, the wood was donated to the Woodland Trust, and on 20th January 2000 leased for 99 years to the River Yealm District Association (RYDA). The Brookings Down Wood Management Committee was set up at that time – its present members are listed on page 7. This was an innovation for the Woodland Trust to delegate management to a local committee, while retaining a degree of control, and input to the development of the wood. As a preliminary to preparing the first Management Plan, a questionnaire – “Brookings Down Wood – Future Management” was circulated, and a reasonable consensus obtained. The views expressed were useful in developing this plan.

Objectives

- 1. To maintain Brookings Down as a mixed broadleaf woodland.**
- 2. To conserve the wood for the benefit of the local community and visitors.**
- 3. To encourage biodiversity and wildlife in the wood.**
- 4. To ensure safe access for a wide cross-section of the community, including the less-abled, consistent with conserving other aspects and the character of the wood.**
- 5. To retain sufficient funds to allow for the successful maintenance and development of the wood.**

Summary of Plans Completed 2000 to 2012

1. To encourage visitors to walk around the Wood, welcoming signs were put up at the Hannaford Road and Middlecombe Lane entrances, and double gates, allowing pedestrians easy access, installed. A new entrance with an information board was constructed near the car park, and this has attracted more visitors to the Wood. Waymark posts were made for us and put in suitable positions.
2. We cleared over 1 hectare (2.5 acres) of dense laurel that over the last 20 or more years has suppressed and killed the ancient woodland ground flora, and smothered, and even killed, many of the mature trees it enveloped. As well as cutting back the laurel, we treated the stumps and sprayed any re-growth with a systemic herbicide. The areas cleared have steadily been re-colonised by numerous ground flora and tree species.
3. As well as clearing the laurel as above, we have encouraged natural regeneration by managing bramble and by opening the canopy to provide attractive glades.
4. Regular annual inspections are made with an arboriculturist to check on dangerous trees in the Wood, and any dangerous trees or branches dealt with as soon as practicable. Frequent visits are made to the Wood by Committee members and any dangers are reported in the Accident & Incident Book and dealt with promptly.
5. Where it has been safe to do so, deadwood has been retained as a wildlife habitat.
6. We removed a considerable amount of wire fencing, builders rubbish, corrugated iron etc.
7. An area of nearly an acre near the top of the wood has been classified as 'wild', and visitors discouraged from walking in this area; we are managing it with minimum intervention, with the aim of preserving 'natural' native woodland habitat for small ground-nesting birds.
8. In addition to the new entrance (see 1. above), we have made two zigzag paths (replacing existing paths) and made steps where they were too steep to be easily walked in wet weather. We re-surfaced the track from the Hannaford Road entrance and upgraded the track from the Middlecombe Lane entrance so that it can be used by suitable wheel chairs.
9. We installed 23 bird boxes (including 2 owl boxes and 1 woodpecker box) and 2 bat boxes.
10. We planted about 1000 trees and bushes including oak, ash, hawthorn, hazel, rowan, birch, holly, Monterey pine, spindle, field maple, sweet chestnut and viburnum opulus. We involved a number of children with our planting and used protective tubes. Nearly all of the young trees and bushes are thriving.
11. Regular Working Parties are organised from September to March and these are well supported by local volunteers. Approximately 150 working party days have been organised and an estimated total of 5000 volunteer hours have been worked to date.

12. For several years Devon Moth Group have carried out moth surveys in July and August and noted 197 species and 14 species of butterfly. 43 species of bird have now been recorded over the years and 8 species of mammal including roe deer. A bat survey in 2005 found 4 species. Flora and lichen surveys were carried out in 2003.
13. We won a bronze medal for Woodlands in the 2007 Devon County Show. In 2011 we were awarded the Woodland Trust Volunteer of the Year Award and the Wood was also selected for the BBC Bluebell programme shown on the One Show.

Finances

As explained in the Introduction, we were successful in raising finance. Nearly all the £19000 raised initially was used in the purchase of the wood. A number of further applications were made, but in 2001/2002, only just over £1000 was raised. Thus there was little money available for employing outside services such as tree surgery. Local volunteers, using their own equipment did most of the work, and they continue to make a valuable contribution, at minimal cost. However in 2003, we raised over £9000 in grants, awards and in kind including nearly £3500 from the Forestry Commission, over £2000 from Peoples' Places and £500 each from The Tree Council and by winning an Award from Taylor's Teas; we also took part in a Community Woodland Network Pilot Scheme, which was worth £2000. Our Friends of Brookings Down Wood started in November 2002 and has raised over £3200 to date. 2004 was also a good year for fund raising with another £4000 from Peoples' Places and £80 for sponsoring bird boxes. As we scale down our activity in the Wood, we do not have the major projects requiring large funds and so will not be applying for them, but the costs of maintenance, insurance and some tree felling will continue. The Committee is aware that some fund raising will be needed in the future.

Future Plans – 2012 onwards

1. Continue annual inspections with an arboriculturist and the reporting of dangerous trees, and carrying out any remedial work required.
2. Standing deadwood is a particularly valuable habitat for insects, invertebrates and fungi. We will continue to retain it, where the danger is minimal.
3. We will continue to check the Wood for unwanted material such as builders, household and garden rubbish, and to remove it as soon as we can.
4. To keep the 'wild area' under review and to continue to discourage visitors to this area
5. We will continue to encourage natural regeneration by:
 - removing the laurel as far as possible
 - allowing more light into some areas of the Wood by reducing sycamore re-growth
 - managing the bramble - in some areas by regular strimming once or twice per year, and in some areas only once every 3 years (on a rotation basis); we will also leave bramble uncut, in the wild area for instance.
6. The steps, gates and paths will be maintained and the paths strimmed as necessary to provide safe and attractive access, but we will not try to turn the Wood into a park. Renew the Information Board near the car park off Hannaford Road.
7. The bird and bat boxes will be maintained and monitored annually and records of use kept.

8. All the young trees planted to re-stock the woodland will be maintained annually to ensure that they become fully established and will be managed to create a new under-storey layer in the wood.

Malcolm Allen on behalf of the Woodland Trust, and a member of our Committee, commented as follows in 2005, and the comments are still relevant: ‘Running in parallel to the successful acquisition of Brookings Down Wood, the Woodland Trust were looking at the potential for extending their woodland management objectives out to privately owned and managed woodlands. The wood was leased back to the RYDA (who formed the Brookings Down Wood Management Committee) and this gave the Trust the ideal opportunity to try out these ideas. Partly as a result of the success of this venture the Trust’s Community Woodland Network was set up to assist other such groups in acquiring and managing woodlands themselves.

‘Since 2000 the Management Committee have achieved an amazing amount. They have removed 2.5 acres of dense laurel, planted 1000+ young trees, removed rubbish, erected bird and bat boxes and laid hedges to enhance biodiversity, and created new entrances and paths, installed steps, way-marked trails and information boards, as well as holding open days, guided walks and to enhance public access. Much of this has been achieved by the 7- strong local committee members and a great deal of local resident support through regular volunteer working parties. The major works now almost complete the committee and supporters should now enjoy the fruits of their labours, with just the barest of annual maintenance for access and safety to undertake.’

Our cause is worthwhile, and our needs modest in comparison with the reward – a seedling tree costs little, but given time and good management it can grow to a mighty oak, supporting a host of wildlife – lichens, invertebrates, birds and small mammals; it can be a real benefit to the community.

Brookings Down Wood Management Committee

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