

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 10th March 2016 7.00 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

Present: Graham Brandwood, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Tony Finn, Ian Fraser, Oliver Fulton, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short

1. **Apologies:** Helen Hicks, Chris Workman
2. **Minutes of last meetings (January and February):** Approved with an amendment to February item 3.8 relating to the scrape in West Field. This should read: “Graham has inspected during the very wet weather *and worked his way along Lucy Brook to where the land drain used to empty into the brook. Despite all the standing water in the field he could not see any water coming out of the land drain i.e. the land drain has been effectively blocked so the leakage from the scrape is due to other factors.*”
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **Group use of Little Wood (Jan item 12.3):** Hilary has contacted the organiser of Calico Kids Club, who has decided not to take things further at the moment.
 - 3.2. **Strengthening West Field boundary (Jan item 4):** Mick, Ian, Graham have inspected the fence behind the far hedge in West Field. The wire is in place, but a number of the old fence posts have broken off or become unstable. The neighbouring tenant farmer is happy for the FA to repair this to make it more stockproof before 1st July when the NE Agreement permits grazing by the whole herd of White Park cattle. This repair will require some 30-odd posts. The gateway in the northwest corner is beyond further repair. The graziers have offered a spare metal gate which can hopefully be made to fit. **Ian** will explore the costs of using a contractor for these jobs. It was pointed out that the fence in Lower Sowerholme is quite low adjacent to the Pads path. This is more of a priority as the cattle will have access from 1st April. It will be re-inforced with extra barbed wire by Volunteers (**Ian**).
 - 3.3. **H&S when working at height (Jan item 12.8):** Michael Sheppard will be incorporating guidance into the FA’s Health and Safety policy (**Hilary**).
 - 3.4. **Brash disposal (Jan item 9.1):** With the permission of Natural England, two brash burning sessions have been held, with a third to follow. Although heavy work, this is proving a very cheap and effective means of disposing of the hedge-laying debris.
 - 3.5. **Sourcing phragmites (Feb 3.3):** **Mick** has yet to ask the arable farmer. Graham suggested that an extra source might not be needed. He has been transplanting phragmites plants from Lucy Brook into Upper Sowerholme and is hopeful about the expansion of the existing natural patch, which he is monitoring.
 - 3.6. **Bird feeding station (Feb 4.8):** Sue has explored the potential costs. With feed alone likely to cost around £400 per year it was decided to take no further action for now at least. Some seed has recently been distributed in Flora Field.
4. **Survey of dog walkers:** Following on from the review of the cycling and dogs policy (January item 6) Graham had developed ideas for a day in April/May to be spent on a survey

taking the form of directed conversations, not just with dog walkers, but with all users of the Fauna footpath. His paper was welcomed as helping to crystallise thoughts and stimulate debate. Discussion covered scope (e.g. dog walkers only? all users?), purpose (discourage dog mess? discourage dogs off lead? provide information on path usage?), format (tick boxes? conversations? formal questionnaire?), practicalities (number of people required, risk of confrontations), potential effectiveness and value of results. It was recognised that behaviour inappropriate to a nature reserve is an inevitable consequence of providing a path, particularly when its proximity to population makes it so well used. It was decided not to take Graham's approach further for logistical reasons and because the general feel of the meeting was that it is likely to have little effect on the amount of dog mess or the problem of dogs off leads. Instead contact will be made with the Dog Warden, particularly about the regular dog mess between Sunnyside Lane and the Orchard entrance (**Mick**). **Oliver** will produce some extra notices drawing attention to the bird nesting season to try to reduce the number of dogs running freely on the Fauna footpath. A count of the number users of the Fauna footpath was considered useful, but not urgent, and will be deferred until the Flora footpath has been constructed. A new map and noticeboards are in preparation. This should make it more obvious that the area is a nature reserve.

5. **Planting of plugs in wetter part of the Hay Meadow:** **Ian** will identify suppliers of suitable, local plug plants. **Sue** will then double-check the proposed planting list with the FA's Natural England Adviser.

6. **Management:**

- 6.1. **Improvement of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path:** Still no decision on the planning application. Queries over the green footpath element may have caused a delay.

- 6.2. **Resurfacing of footpaths, including treatment of grass:** No progress (**Dave**). At the January FA meeting Hilary raised the matter of spot spraying the grass that is starting to colonise those paths in the Orchard that were resurfaced last year (see FFOG Jan item 8.2). Permission was given to make an exception to the prohibition on herbicide use in the Orchard for this case, use to be limited to the minimum (once per year if possible) and avoiding when the trees are fruiting.

- 6.3. **Local Nature Reserve designation:** Oliver thanked meeting members for their thoughtful suggestions which have been incorporated into the final document. This has now been sent to Ann Wood at Lancaster City Council for comments. Oliver will chase Ann about progress on the FA's application after the end of the final year. On the Concessionary Path Agreement, the promised progress with the FA's application has failed to materialise and it is unclear who will be dealing with it as a result of imminent reorganisation at Lancashire County Council (**Oliver** to pursue).

- 6.4. **Arable update:** The farmer is happy in principle to carry on with the no-cost agreement in the future, but is not currently convenient for him to enter into a formal long term agreement. He has agreed to undertake the first mowing of the wildflower margin (blowing the cuttings into the middle of the field) straight after the crop has been harvested. This leaves an arrangement to be made for the second mowing after 31st August. (**Glenys** to incorporate into Arrangements calendar.) Mick has purchased the seed for this year's bird-friendly margin, ordering slightly more than last year.

6.5. Grazing matters: The cattle have been routinely tested for TB and given the all clear. Having a particular number of breeding-stock cattle specified in the Natural England Agreement does not give much flexibility: for instance, it could be too many for the amount of grass available during drought conditions and with several followers getting close to being counted as breeding stock. And with the graziers being unwilling to split the herd during the April-July period, the grass in West Field will have to be managed by cutting. Should the need arise, Oliver is aware of a fairly local non-organic grazier with a herd of heritage cattle. The ponies have finally started to eat the marsh vegetation, having made a significant impact on the amount of grass in Big Meadow. So when the cattle are permitted into the reserve from 1st April, they will probably have to go into Lower Sowerholme. Perhaps the ponies should be brought in earlier and taken off earlier? A question for the review of pony grazing scheduled for the next meeting (**Oliver**).

6.6. Gates between Hay and Carr House Meadows: The work has been delayed as the gates are still on order.

6.7. Horses on footpath: An FA member has reported seeing a group of 3 to 5 horse riders on several occasions using the Long Pads path between the canal and Willow Lane. This is a narrow footpath, not a bridleway, and such behaviour is not only incompatible with the nature reserve but also potentially dangerous. **Meeting Members** were asked to watch out, particularly at weekends, and challenge the riders. **Glenys** will ask Andrew to circulate a message on Facebook. If this behaviour continues, an effort will be made to track down where the horses come from (**Sue**).

7. Monitoring:

7.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections: Graham's full reports available. The dead horse chestnut in Pony Wood will be dealt with by the tree surgeon in the next few weeks. As with the sycamore, it is not feasible to cut this high. It will have to be felled into the arable field and the timber removed from the crop area. The flush count on 7th March yielded a record number of 160 snipe (more detail on the wildlife blog on the FA website).

7.2. Temporary replacement monitor: **Oliver** has offered to take this on, and will produce the usual reports for FFOG. **Ian P.** and/or **Glenys** will provide back-up and company.

7.3. Replacement/additional photographer monitor: No report (**Chris**).

7.4. Bird monitoring: Sue circulated a spreadsheet to be used to monitor birds (and other wildlife, notably brown hare) on a regular basis to complement the information currently gleaned from the breeding bird survey, flush counts and blog reports. In the first instance, monitoring will be undertaken by **Sue** with Ian N. Results will be provided to FFOG and posted on the FA's wildlife blog as appropriate. Meeting Members considered this a good idea. Jon Carter (RSPB) is providing advice on the best approach.

7.5. Butterfly walk: Sue, Ian P. and Suzanne P. met Butterfly Conservation's Tom Dunbar to introduce him to the FA and the habitat available on the reserve. A key point he made is that the availability of sites suitable for overwintering and egg laying is more important than the availability of nectar plants. Tom will be giving a talk at the Storey Institute on 7th April and it is hoped that this will lead on to further walks during the

summer as well as the establishment of a system for monitoring butterflies on the reserve (**Sue**).

8. Volunteer activities:

8.1. Volunteer activities: Ian's full reports for January and February are attached. He noted that the activities of the Associate Volunteers, working outside of formal sessions, are now being listed. The Hedge Working Party has been making faster progress recently (a good turnout of 8 at the last session), but is still unlikely to finish the laying of the eastern hedge along the Long Pads path this season. Hedging work will be the main focus of the Volunteer session on 12th March. The western hedge in West Field which was tackled three winters ago must now be trimmed to bring down the top growth. If not completed, two Associate Volunteers will continue this task. Manure created by the ponies has been collected to reduce fertility in Big Meadow. It will be offered to locals for collection during the Volunteer Session.

8.2. Herbicide spraying course: Ian and Graham will attend a course at Myerscough College on 15th and 16th March, and then be assessed. The College has agreed to the FA's request for a reduced fee, and is charging 'student rate' (see 9.2). During the course, Ian will make enquiries in an effort to find a contractor willing to undertake spot-spraying of ragwort (to reduce the burden on volunteers).

8.3. Buffet for Volunteers: Held in the bar area at *Nice* at the Storey Institute on Thursday 4th February, this attracted around 25 volunteers and their guests, It was generally agreed that a buffet provided a better format than a formal meal, and would be repeated next year. (Although, with *Nice* closing, a different venue may be required.) The consensus was that February was a better time for the event than November (change to Arrangements Calendar, **Glenys**).

8.4. Review of John Muir Award: Graham has been offering this scheme to encourage and reward volunteers for just over a year. Between 20 and 30 volunteers have signed up during the period, and 8 awards have been achieved to date. Participants include some teenagers who are also enrolled for the Duke of Edinburgh award. Last year, the FA joined the John Muir Trust so as to be able to offer its award. However, it now appears that membership is not a pre-requisite. The FA's membership of the Trust is now up for renewal. **Hilary** will consult the FA meeting about whether or not to renew this membership. (**Graham** to brief her with more specific information).

9. Standing items:

9.1. Arrangements: During March, **Sue** will commission a Pony Wood flora survey for end April/early May and the breeding bird survey. During April, she will commission the early survey of wildflowers in Hay & Carr House Meadows for May. In April, **Sue** will also contact the the Public Rights of Way team at Lancaster County Council to confirm the maintenance arrangement for the Long Pads path. If the job, is not taken back by Lancashire County Council, Ian will arrange to start maintenance of Long Pads path vegetation.

Ian will discuss the path and grass/nettle cutting regime for Orchard with David, add removal of weeds and saplings from green roof of storage building to the volunteer task list for April, plan the thistle management regime (co-ordinating with the graziers and arranging scything and pulling tasks at appropriate times).

Graham will refresh the barley straw algae treatment in the ponds before his sabbatical.

Glenys will arrange the monitoring of Orchard fruit trees for 'blossom time'.

Oliver will arrange for the ponies to leave the reserve.

9.2. Financial control:

Item 3.2 – Subsequent to the meeting Mick has purchased 40 fencing posts for £117.12.

tem 6.4 – Mick has spent £35 on bird seed (already re-imbursed).

Item 8.2 – The herbicide spraying course will cost a total of £600 for the two participants (this student rate has saved £240).

The mower has now been serviced – £160.

Oliver will be receiving an invoice for the cost of the ponies when they leave the reserve at the end of March.

9.3. Organised events: Tony reminded the meeting that the Orchard needs to be made ready for the Easter Egg Hunt on 28th March (**Ian**). He also reported that Year 3 pupils from Dallas Road School will be visiting on 30th March to look for signs on spring and check the progress of their wildflower plots.

10. AOB: A message has been received via the website requesting the introduction of some lighting in the Orchard to make it more accessible in the evenings and at night. Hilary pointed out that there had been considerable discussion of this matter during the public consultation when the footpath from Towneley Close was proposed and agreed in 2008/9. The decision taken was that the considerations of the nature reserve should take precedence over the convenience of local people, so there is a no lighting policy in the Orchard. **Glenys** will respond, advising taking a torch or using an alternative route.

11. Date/place of next meetings: Thurs 5th May, Thurs 7th July both 7pm, Whitegates Sunnyside Close.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

6th January 2016

4 volunteers turned out for the Hedge Working Party (HWP). The Site Specific Risk Assessment (SSRA) was agreed and work continued laying the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and the Flora Field. The newish hedge alongside the former NACRO strip was trimmed.

7th January 2016

The pony damaged fence near the Lucy Brook crossing was repaired. More work needed.

9th January 2016

The Saturday morning volunteer session saw 22 volunteers attend despite miserable wet weather at the start. The weather did improve.

- Hedges were trimmed:
 - Between the Pads footpath and the Orchard.
 - Near the large ash tree on the Fauna path.
 - Between the Fauna path and Carr House Meadow.
 - Between Carr House Meadow and the Grammar School field
- Unwanted self seeded saplings, particularly willow, were cut back in a large section of the Orchard.
- Enveloping vegetation along the hedge between the Pads footpath and Big Meadow was cleared to give the hedge saplings a better chance. We can also estimate how many replacement saplings are needed. Hopefully we will keep a close eye on these gap areas this summer and allow the saplings to grow.
- New saplings were planted in the gaps in the newly laid hedge between the Long Pads footpath and Lower Sowerholme. A mix of hawthorne, blackthorn, hazel and rowan from the Woodlands Trust.
- Overhanging branches at the Cromwell Road gate to Carr House Meadow were pruned back to provide better vehicular access.
- The willow 'living fence' between the Fauna path and School Pond was repaired and upgraded.
- Orchard fruit trees were pruned, especially those with stems going too high.
- Mud was cleared from the paths in the Orchard.
- A member of the Fairfield Allotments joined the session to prune back the hedge between the allotments and the Grammar School field.

10th January 2016

Completed the repair work on the fence (above 7th)

11th January 20156

Two volunteers worked on the repairs to the Hay shed roof in the Gun Range

Two volunteers undertook the annual nest box survey.

13th January 2016

Five volunteers formed the HWP, agreed the SSRA and continued laying the Long Pads / Flora Field hedge.

20th January 2016

Six volunteers formed the HWP, agreed the SSRA and continued laying the Long Pads / Flora Field hedge. Three volunteers took time out to inspect the fencing on the west side of West Field and to suggest a solution to cattle escaping.

On this and the previous Wednesday Keith has been pruning the fruit trees in the Orchard.

26th January 2016

Our aquatic specialist cleared excessive growth from the channel and pond in Upper Sowerholme.

27th January 2016

Four volunteers formed the HWP, agreed the SSRA and made very good progress with the Long Pads / Flora Field Hedge.

During January Associate volunteers:

- Trimmed the hedge between the Pads footpath and Big Meadow.
- Planted replacement saplings in the gaps in this hedge,
- Sharpened the chain saws.

2nd February 2016

Seven volunteers gathered to burn the brash so far generated by hedge laying in the Flora Field. We agreed the Site Specific Risk Assessment (SSRA) and set to work to get the fire going on a windy day. Once it took we were away and the brash was burnt.

3rd February 2016

The Hedge Working Party (HWP) attracted 5 volunteers who agreed the SSRA and made further progress on the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and the Flora Field.

It was good to see that the ash pile from the brash fire (above) had burnt down to virtually nothing.

10th February 2016

The Hedge Working Party (HWP) attracted 5 volunteers who agreed the SSRA and made further progress on the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and the Flora Field.

13th February 2016

16 volunteers gathered on a pleasant winter's morning.

- The Flora Field beetle banks were marked out with hedge stakes in preparation for ploughing.
- Four fencing posts were put in in the Orchard in preparation for the replacement fruit trees.
- Six fencing posts were put in along the Pads footpath / Flora Field hedgerow replacing posts which broke when the fence was temporarily removed for hedging.
- Rushes were strimmed / brushcut back alongside the ponds /scrapes in the Hay Meadow. It was found to be impractical to gather up the rush due to the wet and muddy conditions.
- Excess vegetation around saplings in the Pads and Long Pads hedge was removed including the section just to the south of the concrete wall.
- Mould was removed from the Orchard benches and they were given a cleansing scrub.
- Brash left over from fruit tree pruning was cleared to appropriate habitat piles.
- Invasive bramble was dug out or cut back in several areas of the Orchard
- Mud was cleared from the path between Sunnyside lane and the Orchard

17th February 2016

The HWP scheduled for today was cancelled due to heavy and persistent rain

24th February 2016

5 volunteers formed the HWP, agreed the SSRA and continued with the hedge between the Long Pads footpath and the Flora Field.

During February Associate Volunteers:

- Planted replacement saplings in gaps the newly laid Long Pads east hedge
- Continued the trimming of the Pads footpath / Big Meadow hedge
- Completed the trimming of the Fauna path hedge between the ash tree dogleg and the Cromwell Road entrance.
- Sharpened the chain saws
- Planted four replacement fruit trees in the Orchard

New Associate Volunteer

Name	Date began	Job(s)	Shed key	Tools	Fields access
Shirley Rawsthorne	Feb 2016	Ragwort pulling	No	Loan of ragfork	Yes