

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Effective date of meeting 5 July 2020

Note: because of the coronavirus pandemic and government restrictions this meeting was held virtually, by email.

Participants: Graham Brandwood, Steve Bullen, David Elliott, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Tony Finn, Clio Graham, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Peter Tilley, Chris Workman

1. **Apologies:** Dave Brookes, Oliver Fulton, Mick Short

2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.

3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**

3.1. Neighbour's hedge in Orchard (3.1): The issue at the back of the Oak Circle has been resolved and Dave and Hilary have reported to Ann Wood at Lancaster City Council. Ian will add saplings for re-planting this area into his Woodland Trust application (see 4.3.6). The few who gave a preference opted for 1, the usual mix of hedging plants with Graham adding a bit of groom and gorse into the mixture (**Ian**).

A firm letter went out to a neighbour in Holker Close. Ian has found a convenient place for him to put the brash *on this occasion*. However, the clearance work appears to have stopped.

Prompted by these issues, the **Trustees** have agreed to write a letter to the neighbours along the whole length of the Orchard boundary. It will be friendly in tone but remind people that they need to respect the Orchard as they would any other neighbour. (It was suggested that a similar letter to neighbours elsewhere may be appropriate at some point.) The first set of photographs for what will be an annual record have been taken (to be stored on the FA's Dropbox, **Hilary**). Meanwhile a request to discuss oak tree maintenance has been received from two of these neighbours. The FA's Tree Surgeon and Hilary have inspected from both sides of the Orchard boundary and discussed the matter with the neighbours. The Tree Surgeon will submit a plan of work to them which will hopefully satisfy all parties.

Another neighbour has commissioned work from the FA's Tree Surgeon; both are in touch with **Ian**. A side effect should be an improvement in the light for the fruit trees. No concerns were received from FFOG members about the proposed work.

3.2. Re-location of dog waste bin (3.2): Nothing to report (**Dave**).

3.3. Water Abstraction Licence (3.8): Sue has spent a considerable amount of time dealing with questions from the Environment Agency. However, her efforts have been rewarded. The EA has concluded that the FA's scheme does not require an abstraction licence as it is a complete realignment of the watercourse. As such, it is covered by the Flood Defence Consent (CA8587) already held by the FA. Consequently the FA's application has been withdrawn and the fee refunded.

4. Management:

4.1. Arable update: Information about the new farmer was reported as an addition to the Minutes of the May meeting. He has asked Sue about using herbicide and said that he would be consulting an agronomist, but has since gone into a black hole. **Sue** will try to contact him again. Mick has advertised the surplus seed butterfly- and bee-friendly seed to Lancaster Green Spaces members. Some has been taken by the *Friends of Greaves Park* and 1kg by the De Vitre Garden project for the perimeter of their orchard trees. **Graham** would like to use some at the ash tree corner of the Fauna path, where the ground is now cleared on both sides of the boardwalk so ready for autumn sowing.

4.2. Grazing matters:

4.2.1. Cattle monitoring: Herd size remains at 26 animals, equivalent to 1.36 LU/ha. Stocking density over the breeding season was 1.0 LU/ha, compliant with the NE prescription. Subject to sward height and maintaining good ground conditions, there is now no stocking limit on the HK10 fields until 1 December.

4.2.2. Preparations for hay making: There has been no response from the usual Contractor. **Sue** will contact him again.

4.2.3. Review meeting with the Graziers: Scheduled to take place on 10 July (**Hilary**).

4.3. Woodland and hedges:

4.3.1. Tree Surgeon's progress: Ian has recently spoken to the Tree Surgeon about the two ash trees in Little Wood and confirmed that the FA still wants this work done. The Tree Surgeon did not mention any of the outstanding other work listed (FFOG March 4.3). Hilary has asked the Tree Surgeon to include the 'large' trees along the public footpath to his annual inspection (this includes the oak referred to in 3.1).

4.3.2. Environment Agency tree planting offer: Hilary has recently managed to re-establish contact. The details have been forwarded to **Peter** for action.

4.3.3. Specimen tree for Paddock: Hilary has been in contact with the donor, who now knows that the tree will not be going in until the winter. She has had an offer from another donor for the protective guard and other planting. Ian and Oliver have investigated the costs (details circulated). As the two donations conveniently cover the costs, there was no objection from Meeting Members to going ahead on the basis outlined. However, Sue has received a belated response to her external enquiries which indicates that the Wild Service Tree may be '*quite a challenge*'. So implementation remains on hold pending further investigation by **Oliver**.

4.3.4. Free trees from Green Lancaster: This University group was seeking alternative homes for tree saplings, grown by the Forestry Commission, that they were unable to plant. Ian snapped up 200 hawthorn and 50 rowan. The bare rooted saplings are currently heeled in, in a damp soil and shady place, awaiting transfer to their permanent locations (**Ian**). They were healthy on 2 July. **Ian** will arrange erection of a protective fence (cheap and cheerful from existing stock) before the cattle come in post haymaking.

4.3.5. Unauthorised tree: The unauthorised tree at the bottom of the path from Townley Close (May 12.2) is not in leaf and thus it is not possible to identify its species. Although its twigs remain supple, it appears dead. To be removed (**Ian**).

4.3.6. Implementing Hedge and Woodland Management Plan: Following on from FFOG May item 8, Sue has emailed NE requesting permission to plant black poplar (Field Expedition P8), alder buckthorn and purging buckthorn (P16) and to increase the scrub area in the West Field corners (P19A). The Adviser at NE has asked for more information and, if supportive in principal, there will need to be approval from the RPA and permanent amendments to the Agreement.

The Green Lancaster saplings and some donations currently in store are insufficient for the agreed winter hedging work. **Ian** was given the go-ahead to submit his application (details circulated) to the Woodland Trust for November delivery.

4.4. Whiteboard for sightings: The Whiteboard is still sitting forlornly furloughed in David's cellar. **David** and **Ian** are keen to get cracking on its installation asap.

4.5. Long Pads path: Passing places have been created and – because of the drought – the growth of vegetation has been much reduced. Consequently there has been no need to involve Lancashire County Council. With lockdown restrictions loosened and significant management becoming urgent, Volunteers (using the 'dispersed group' protocol) cleared from Lucy Brook to Flora Field gates on 1 July. Pedestrians were diverted through West Field.

4.6. Fingerpost by canal: Woodscape are now able to come out but are not prepared to mend the sign again without charge. **Hilary** will pass the pointer to Peter to see if it can be repaired in house. Otherwise, Woodscape have supplied various options and prices.

4.7. Extension to NE Agreement:

4.7.1. Update on progress: The FA has been informed by Joseph Walker (Farmland Conservation Lead Advisor, Natural England) that he is happy to recommend extension of the current Agreement to the RPA. Very positive feedback has been received following the submission of documentary evidence and reference to the website for the photographic survey (see FFOG May 4.10): *"The supporting evidence you have provided and the recent RPA inspection clearly shows the team are working hard with passion to adhere to the (HLS management) options and promote the site for wildlife."* Sue, as Chair of FFOG, is delighted that the hard work and commitment of all of FFOG members and the Volunteers has been recognised. The FA can expect further contact from Joseph Walker in the Autumn or Winter when the RPA formally requests his recommendation for an extension.

As part of the communication with Joe, the FA's revised stocking calendar has finally been formally approved and is now uploaded on NE's systems. He has also confirmed that the way in which FFOG has been interpreting stocking density is correct: the prescriptions relate to an average over a particular time period. Consequently any judgement of stocking density compliance based on observation of the herd on any particular day (as by the RPA see March 4.7) can be misleading.

4.7.2. Management queries resulting: The evidence submitted by the FA prompted a long email from Joseph Walker at NE on 18th May commenting and advising on many aspects of reserve management, which several FFOG members have been asked to consider:

- **scrapes: water and vegetation:** This was addressed in May item 10. Graham adds that the approach will never be totally consistent as the ponds and scrapes vary so much in terms of size, depth and vegetation. Clearing is scheduled to take place over the winter months. Some ponds will be left as late as possible or repeated in March before bird nesting season to aid dragonflies (see 5.2.2). (**Graham**).
- **woodland grass and sycamore; predator perches; hedge heights:** Ian is taking two actions on the woodland grass: scything around immature saplings to prevent them being overwhelmed by grass and nettles and implementing an agreed programme of wildflower seeding for parts of the woodland. Sycamore seedlings will be removed from Pony Wood. **Steve** and **Clio** have agreed to look out for predator perches. They have already reported one perch, dead branches high in an ash between Upper & Lower Sowerholme. This is beyond the scope of Volunteers to deal with, so the matter will be considered at September FFOG (**Glenys** for agenda). On hedge heights Ian comments that, where required by NE, hedge heights are kept to 2 metres but four hedges are being left to grow out prior to laying. Three of these were planted in 2012 and are approaching their first lay (between Lower Sowerholme and Flora Field / south boundary of West Field / between Pads footpath and Big Meadow). The north east hedge of West Field has been added as local desecration of habitat means a better maintained hedge is more urgent.
- **school visits:** Tony has been informed that numbers of attendees can now be as low as six for a school visit to qualify for payment from NE.
- **rush control:** see 9.1

4.7.3. Documentary evidence for future extensions or applications: Sue notes that the FA is now in the situation of year-on-year NE extensions to 2024, after which a new agreement will be needed and/or other sources of funding or funding partners found. There was a fair amount of work in putting together the material to support the extension application. This included starting to modify some documents to make them more fit for this purpose (e.g. the annual bird surveys are now in single excel documents which allow for year to year comparisons – circulated along with a revised and simplified Wildlife Sightings document).

Building on this, the **Trustees** have agreed to set up a folder on Dropbox to collect monitoring reports and surveys with a consistent system for file names – Fairfield Association Title Date(s) (e.g. Fairfield Association Breeding Bird Survey 2012-2019). Sue adds that there should be a distinction between reports which are for discussion at FFOG and ones intended to be seen by outside organisations, which may mean an editing stage. Graham notes that he will continue his reporting to FFOG in the usual manner (see 5.1).

4.8. Flora and West Fields: Triggered by his observations whilst conducting the breeding birds survey, Dan Haywood has contacted Sue to suggest changes in a) the arable routine to benefit Lapwings and Oystercatchers and b) the management of West Field, which he considers is currently of little use to wildlife. On 25th June, several FFOG members started to explore this with Dan in a Zoom meeting hosted by Sue, whilst others made contributions by email. A second Zoom meeting took place on 30th June.

It was very productive, and Sue was grateful to Dan for his clear guidance. **Chris** is writing up a project proposal for Flora Field (to date the meetings have concentrated on this area). Formal feedback and specific proposals arising will go to the September FFOG (**Glenys** for Agenda). A decision has yet to be made on how to progress Dan's ideas for West Field, meanwhile these are on hold whilst the focus is on the arable field.

4.9. Cycling on the Fauna footpath: The number and speed of cyclists on the Fauna path has been increasing and now includes the odd food delivery courier. There has been a report of a near collision between a fast approaching delivery rider and a toddler. Hilary, as FA Chair, has contacted *Deliveroo* and *Just Eat*. The "No Cycling" sign has been moved from the gate into Carr House Meadow to the main Cromwell Road gate (as a temporary measure at least). (**Glenys** to monitor.)

5. Monitoring:

5.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections: Graham's two reports circulated. Ian is aware of the problem with the Pony Wood gate. It can be solved, but is on hold as it will involve two Volunteers working in close proximity. Based on correspondence with NE (see 4.7) and given the exceptionally dry spring, Sue considers the impact of compaction and poaching on grass regrowth is probably overstated. Nevertheless, the shortness of the sward is a management issue, if not alleviated by the current rain. Glenys has reminded Graham of the complexities of commenting on herd size (4.7.1). The comment on cattle stocking density needs to be amended to add the clause: ... *if the herd was in the HK10 fields for the whole of the breeding season* (**Graham**).

Graham submitted a further paper focusing on Upper Sowerholme. He shows that the "bramble" area is providing a diverse and important habitat: there are fruit trees, raspberries (cultivated), honeysuckle. and the scrub undergrowth is alive with bees and insect pollinators as a result. Although the trees are mainly ash and hawthorn, there are also two young horse chestnut, a young beech tree and holly bushes/trees. This area is intended to be a secluded space for wildlife and the current policy is that nothing should be done that might encourage casual access (March 2019 7.1).

Last year (July, 4.7) FFOG was relaxed about a patch of escaped bamboo in Upper Sowerholme, considering it provided an extra habitat. However, it is spreading by rhizomes and is difficult to eradicate. There are currently six stands, with one potentially encroaching on the reedbed. Graham therefore considers that the problem should be addressed sooner rather than later. He suggests cutting down and digging out the roots as the first approach. **Ian** to discuss with **Graham** and add tackling the stand closest to the reedbed to the jobs list in the first instance. **Sue** will inform the neighbour. Advice on the best time to transplant ferns appears to be beyond the expertise of FFOG members!

5.2. Progress with surveys:

5.2.1. Wildflower surveys: Graeme Skelcher carried out his first survey of the wildflower meadows on 28 May. He was unconcerned by the tractor ruts in Carr House Meadow, seeing the turned up bare earth as an advantage that will allow seeds to spread. He did not consider hand spreading some seed to be worth the effort. His preliminary results show that black knapweed, common sorrel and red clover appear to be increasing (to frequent, dominant and abundant respectively). Cuckoo flower (seen previously), greater bird's-foot trefoil and ragged

robin (both G06 and first record) were not found in the survey quadrats but present at the edge of the Hay Meadow as it transitions to the wetter rushy area. Graeme also notes that greater bird's-foot trefoil is a food plant of the common blue butterflies seen during the survey.

Graeme conducted his second survey on July 2nd, accompanied by Clio, Steve, Sue and another FA member. The provisional result: still on the cusp of lowland meadow status. The orchids are spreading, but slowly, whilst the meadow cranesbill is not a qualifying species.

In Carr House Meadow the grass has now grown back well over the damaged ground but there is a fair bit of pineapple weed, indicative of disturbed ground. There is a lot of red clover (good) in the bottom part of the field.

Graeme has seen photographs of the orchids, other than common spotted, that Graham and Sue have found on the reserve. He is confident that they are southern marsh, although northern marsh is a possibility for one at least, noting the southern marsh is best distinguished by its more hollow stem. **Graham** will take his advice to look inside the stems after seeding.

5.2.2. Odonata surveys: Three reports have been circulated. The survey method involves a combination of walking transects between ponds, surveying approximately 2m either side; and by point surveys, standing by a pond for ten minutes and noting everything. The aim is to walk the same route each time, subject to avoiding fields which are occupied by livestock. The first report contains a number of sightings of Azure and Common Blue damselflies, plus a large hawk dragonfly (almost certainly Emperor) on Willow Pond. The odonata were concentrated in those areas still wet, with Anna's Pool "*a veritable damselfly metropolis*".

The second survey on 16 June was more disappointing. There was very little activity for this point in the season and given the number of immature damselflies seen last time: two weeks on this had not really translated into breeding adults. The drought a factor, as again the sightings were in those areas continuing to hold water.

The third survey on 1 July followed heavy rain with at least some water in each of the pools. However, the dull and cool conditions meant that many odonata were probably hiding in the vegetation while Cromwell's Pond was too overgrown (see also 4.7.2). Azure and Common Blue again featured, now joined by Blue-tailed damselflies (which Phil is confident have been mating in Willow Pond). A Common Darter dragonfly was seen flying in Big Meadow and another in the Hay Meadow – early for this species.

5.3. Photographic recording of ash dieback: Ian has already circulated a map identifying the incidence of ash dieback across the reserve. With the leaves now fully out, he met with Chris on 26th June to make a photographic record. Chris notes that most of the ash trees are suffering but there is no safety concern. A detailed report will follow but as no immediate action is recommended this can be deferred until the September FFOG (**Glenys** for Agenda).

5.4. Orchard: Annual review circulated. Because of the coronavirus lockdown, monitoring was six weeks later this year. The delay meant that it followed a prolonged period of drought and a sharp mid-May frost which had had an adverse impact on the Orchard. Whilst 93% of the trees covered by the NE Agreement remain alive, the number classified as '*green, very healthy*' is 47, a net fall of 14. Hopefully they will recover from this year's weather stresses and this downgrading will be temporary. A new gage (H) and plum (I) were planted in March 2020. Whilst the plum is currently growing strongly, the gage promptly succumbed to the drought. As it is the third tree to die in this position, its replacement deserves careful consideration (**Glenys**). **Ian** will arrange for the removal of the remnants of H and the fungus-infected branch of a non-fruit tree (aspen) to increase light to pear 22.

The involvement of the Wednesday Work Group in the ongoing routine management (particularly fruit thinning and summer pruning) continues to help both Keith and the health of the trees. Ian, as Volunteer Organiser, thanked Keith for all the work he puts in to maintain the Orchard.

Three notices were displayed around the edges of the main Orchard from around mid August. This action seemed to help prevent the disappearance of the fruit *en masse* and before fully ripe (**Glenys** to repeat).

The grass is short and 'undesirables' are being kept at bay. Not only in line with NE's requirements, but also creating a desirable community space. The report notes that it was pleasing to see families enjoying this grassy area beneath the fruit trees.

5.5. Bat box request: Will Walton has received a donation of two bat boxes from a supplier who wants him to install and monitor them for a long term project. They are dual-crevice, made from recycled polystyrene and concrete. FFOG raised no objection to their installation on the reserve (**Glenys** to notify Will).

6. Volunteer activities:

6.1. Reports for May and June: As agreed FFOG May item 11, Ian worked up and circulated formal proposals for continuing volunteer maintenance of the Nature Reserve under social distancing rules during the pandemic. Within this framework the Chair of FFOG agreed to go ahead with limited volunteer activity and an email was sent out to Volunteers setting out the tasks and kinds of activity permitted (not group work) and the general rules to be adopted. Work by individuals and pairs principally on scything, ragwort removal and trimming started on 26th May. This mode of working continued throughout June. Several volunteers made an input at various times of their own choosing (see 6.4), average stint estimated at between 1½ and 2 hours. Ian as Volunteer Organiser is very impressed with, and grateful for, the amount of effort individuals and pairs have put in. This flurry of activity means much of the backlog of work – especially scything nettles in Pony Wood, gathering the ragwort and protecting hedge saplings from being overwhelmed – has been caught up. On behalf of FFOG, Sue thanked Ian for his hard work and perseverance when the situation has not only been challenging but constantly changing, making planning very difficult. As a result, she considers the reserve is looking as good as it always does.

6.2. Proposed tasks for early July: Whilst 'catch up' tasks will continue, Ian considers coming tasks will require more of a co-ordinated team approach. Socially distanced teams of up to six volunteers are now permitted following Government loosening of restrictions and are in line with the guidance Lancaster City Council are issuing to linked volunteer groups. With the agreement of the Chair of FFOG, the FA has moved to

working as 'dispersed groups' of up to 6, in regular sessions, as from 1st July. There was no objection to Ian's proposed tasks..

- 6.3. Annual review of Fields Access list and ratification of additions:** Seven Volunteers from the Wednesday Work Group have been given fields access permission to enable them to work as individuals in their own time during the pandemic (several other WWG members were already on the list). One Volunteer has joined on a temporary basis to tend the purple ramping fumitory as it establishes. These additions were ratified by the meeting: One ex-Associate Volunteer has been taken off. The list, which is held on the FA's Dropbox, currently contains 40 names. The reference to ponies and goats will be removed from the Safety Information (**Glenys**).

7. Standing items:

- 7.1. Arrangements:** Sue will remind the Arable Farmer that the crop can be harvested from 31st July and arrange for the first mowing of the wildflower and bee friendly margins and a rotational cut of one of the beetle banks. She will arrange the arable margin survey for late July/early August, and ask the ecologist to include assessment of plant colours (FFOG Mar item 8) in both his meadow survey and margins. Sue will also remind the Graziers to bring the cattle into the Hay & Carr House Meadows following haymaking to graze the aftermath.

Graham will be planning winter work on the ponds and ditches. With the water levels in the ponds currently very low, sluice management is not required, and refreshing of barley straw delayed.

Reseeding of Carr House Meadow is not needed (see 5.2)

Glenys will put out notices in the Orchard about fruit picking, as well as sending messages via Facebook and the FA's email list.

7.2. Financial control:

Refund from the Environment Agency of £1500 expected (Sue 3.3)

7.3. Organised events for notification to FA: None

- 7.4. Morecambe Bay Facilitation Fund partnership:** Newsletter circulated. Nothing further to report.

8. Use of willow in wetland areas: Held over to September (**Glenys** for Agenda).

9. Rush control:

- 9.1. Management implications of NE feedback:** See also 4.7. Paper circulated, with no member disagreeing with the recommendations. Joseph Walker has seen the rush control programme for 2020 approved at the last FFOG meeting and does not object to the FA's current approach. His message is that rush should be controlled as much as possible. His "*advice you might find helpful*" focuses on frequent use of machine cutting (ideally mid-July when re-growth will be weakest) and weed wiping (whilst the rush is growing). Usefully he gives practical guidance, abstracted in the paper circulated. If/when machine cutting and/or weed wiping is to be done a) the FA should adopt NE's

guidance on timing and b) instruct the Contractor of the various practical/technical points made by NE to ensure the work is effective (**Sue, Mick**).

Joe also notes that optimal rush coverage varies according to species: lapwing (10% rush cover) and snipe (30%), both tighter than the NE Agreement's less than 40%. Given the success of Big Meadow in attracting winter snipe, the recommendation is that rush here is managed specifically for their benefit. Aim for rush coverage 30 - 40% (**Sue, Mick**).

Current low rush coverage in Lower Sowerholme and West Field (less than 10%) potentially favours lapwing. As they also prefer short swards, Joe argues that rush cut in July be re-cut in late winter/pre March to take out lengthy re-growth. This alone is surely not sufficient to achieve the HK10 success indicators for lapwing (as well as in conflict with the allowed dates in the NE Agreement). The paper recommends a more holistic consideration of the management of these two fields. These matters should form part of any planning for West Field (see 4.8) (**Sue**).

- 9.2. Proposal for machine cutting 2020:** There is general agreement that the wet weather over the last couple of years has led to the rushes expanding considerably since last cut in 2017. Triggered by the favourable ground conditions of early June, Mick and Sue have been exploring the machine cutting of the rush. They met a potential Contractor (more local than the one used in 2017) on site on 11 June. He has submitted a quote (cheaper than last time) to cut Big Meadow. This will mainly be the perimeter. He will need to use his smaller equipment to get through the gates. Acquiring a sofftrack machine seems too complicated and potentially expensive. The Contractor will bale the cut rush for removal. The Graziers have identified a local farmer who is prepared to take the bales. Work may take place in July.

Glenys and Ian have correctly pointed out that the proposed work has run ahead of FFOG processes. However, both Glenys and Ian are not actually opposed to bringing machine cutting forward to 2020. No other members have objected to the proposed work (although there are reservations about the recent much wetter weather conditions) and time is short if maximum benefit is to be gained from the cutting. Therefore FFOG has agreed for the work to go ahead, subject to **Trustees'** approval of the spend (**Mick**).

Liming and weed-wiping are neither precluded nor necessitated by this decision on machine cutting. If **FFOG members** feel these approaches should be considered too, contact **Glenys** for September agenda.

10. AOB: None.

11. Date/place of next meetings: On or around Thursday 3rd September, Thursday 5th November. Format and location tba.