

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 10th September 2015 7.00 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

Present: Dave Brookes, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Tony Finn, Ian Fraser, Helen Hicks, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short, Chris Workman

1. **Apologies:** Graham Brandwood, David Elliott, Oliver Fulton, Rebecca Procter
2. **Minutes of last meeting:** Approved.
3. **Matters arising from Minutes:**
 - 3.1. **FFOG Meetings:** Mick suggested that preparation for meetings should be more forward looking, with more lead time on reports and major items (**Meeting Members**).
 - 3.2. **NE response on proposed new plum and apple trees:** Ben Hibbens (NE Adviser) has approved the proposed varieties, subject to suitable rootstocks. **Glenys** is awaiting a response from Keith Taylor on this. It was agreed that the two new apples would be Keith's preferred choice: Greensleeves.
 - 3.3. **Lady's Finger trees:** The two Lady's Finger of Lancaster apple trees have been located (nos . 34 and 35, near the old damson copse). **Ian** will check whether there are labels in the shed.
 - 3.4. **Annual monitoring of reserve – search for a replacement adviser:** **Mick** will continue his efforts to trace Richard Storton. Other advisers have been suggested, and it may be useful to have more than one. Details of potential advisers should be sent to Sue for collation, with an indication as to whether payment will be required, for November FFOG (**Meeting Members**).
 - 3.5. **Herbicide spraying course:** Hilary has drafted a letter asking to be charged a charity rate. **Ian** will make enquiries as to who at Myerscough College is the most appropriate addressee.
4. **Approach to maintenance of the Long Pads path next year:** The consensus was that the work carried out on the vegetation by the FA (notably Ian F. who was thanked and commended for his efforts) had not been unduly demanding and had succeeded in keeping a clear path with minimal adverse impact on the wildflowers and wildlife in the hedges. It was agreed that the FA would continue to take on this task but only on a year by year basis (**Sue** to inform Tarja Wilson).
5. **Celebrating volunteers - meal or alternative?:** A meal in late Autumn has become an enjoyable and well attended annual fixture. However socialising is constrained by the current sit-down format. Ian's suggestion of a buffet instead was welcomed. Jonathan Tansley is willing to make the arrangements again. It was also agreed that 'fun' awards would be made to selected volunteers (**Ian**, who would appreciate ideas for awards and recipients sent directly to him by **Meeting Members**).

6. **Volunteering matters:** A number of matters for discussion have arisen from recent volunteering activities (see also item 9.2):

- 6.1. **Ragwort outside the reserve:** Despite spraying by a contractor, the ragwort in the LGGS field has been worse this year. One reason is that the boom cannot reach the edges. The problem has been addressed by FA volunteers spot spraying and dead heading. **Ian** will discuss with the graziers how to tackle this more effectively next year. There are also hot spots of ragwort within the allotments. **Dave** will approach Allotment Committee members. Generally ragwort plants within seeding distance of the reserve are being taken out by FA volunteers where accessible.
- 6.2. **Thistles:** This year has seen an unexpected explosion of thistles, particularly in Lower Sowerholme. Mick was thanked for his herculean efforts removing these and averting a seeding crisis. This approach is too demanding to repeat in future years. Instead the suggestion is to approach Natural England for permission to weed wipe as necessary. (This is better than spot spraying as it will not damage the grass beneath the thistles.) However, some thistles would be left untreated and allowed to flower for bees and other insects. These would then be deadheaded before seeding and scythed. **Mick** to discuss this with Ben Hibbens, who may have other suggestions.
- 6.3. **Gates between Hay and Carr House Meadows:** The contractor used for haymaking has advised the FA to widen this pair of gates. His 'small' machinery barely fits, and in the future the hay crop may be ruined because the FA cannot find a contractor able to access these fields. The suggestion is to insert 12 foot gates, installed at a 'diagonal' to retain the ability to block the path, and perhaps move them northwards to improve the turning angle. **Ian** will clarify the requirements with the haymaking contractor, and liaise with **Dave** who will approach landscaping contractors. It may be feasible to combine this job with work on either the Flora path or path resurfacing.
- 6.4. **Extending volunteering:** More help is always appreciated and, in particular, it is sometimes difficult attracting enough support for task-oriented activities such as ragworting and tackling thistles.

Mick has made three suggestions to start the discussion:

a) *increasing the amount of informal volunteering.* There are already a handful of people who volunteer on the reserve at times of their own choosing (mowing the Orchard, trimming hedges for instance). These people have been given permission by the Volunteer Organiser to undertake approved work, and have to be added to the Access list if their tasks take them into the fields.

b) *recruiting people to watch over particular parts of the reserve and alert FFOG to any issues.* This would widen involvement and increase the sense of 'ownership', as well as possibly generating more volunteer work.

c) *increasing the number of regular volunteer sessions.* Adding a second Saturday through the year (in the summer as replacement for the Wednesday evening sessions which attract fewer participants). But might this simply dilute attendance whilst increasing the burden on the Volunteer Organiser?

Whilst supporting Mick's a) and b), **Ian P.** felt that c) was unnecessary. He considers that the Saturday volunteer sessions continue to attract a good number of participants,

and generate enough effort to keep on top of regular jobs on the reserve through the year.

Meeting Members were asked to consider these and other ideas for extending volunteering (and send thoughts to Ian and Mick) in preparation for further discussion and decision in November. (The specifics such as how and who would be a follow-exercise.)

7. Management:

7.1. Improvement of the Long Pads path and creation of the Flora path: The status of the FA's planning application is unclear. **Hilary** to contact the Landscape Architect.

7.2. Resurfacing of footpaths: **Dave** to re-contact a contractor for a quote.

7.3. LNR designation: Gareth Lawler and David Jeffreys from Natural England visited on 18th August to advise on the City Council's proposed application to designate Flora, Fauna and the Orchard (more precisely the whole area within the legal boundaries of all our properties) as a Local Nature Reserve. After a tour of the site, they went to the Town Hall for a short meeting with Ann Wood, who will manage the process on behalf of the City Council. They came fully prepared to be supportive after reading our website and our HLS documentation and were still more enthusiastic after walking round and meeting our delegation (Oliver, Dave, Hilary, Mick and Glenys). They foresee little problem in achieving designation, which gives a third tier of protection below National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, etc. The final stages involve the Council drawing up a legal declaration, sending it to NE for formal consultation, and once approved by NE, signing and sealing it and posting notices (on site, in the press, etc) to publicise it. The FA needs to provide a short 'informal' document explaining the rationale for the reserve and hopes/aspirations/vision for the future. This should mention encouraging public access (an aspect NE is keen to develop). **Oliver** has offered to draft document. **Meeting Members** are asked to send ideas to him directly. A requirement is that the City Council has some input into our management of the LNR. **Dave**, who is also a local Councillor, satisfies these criteria, and hopefully the City Council will officially appoint him to this role. Bylaws can be established as part of the designation process. It was decided not to do this as the expense involved outweighs the limited benefits.

7.4. Arable and margins update: The first mowing of the floristically enhanced grass margin has been delayed because of the risk of the machinery damaging the arable crop. The wheat has now been cut, so the mowing can go ahead (**Ian**). Our NE Adviser is comfortable with this later mowing, noting that the Agreement specifies 'start after' dates but no 'latest' date. However he considers the margin should definitely be mown twice per year to avoid a build up of thatch. A second cut may be scheduled for October if there is sufficient growth (**Ian**). Ben Hibbens also urges patience with the establishment of this margin, and suggests no re-sowing, even of the wet parts of the margin, for a couple more years.

7.5. Fauna stones wildflower area: An area of turf has now been cleared by a contractor creating plots for two classes of Year 3 pupils from Dallas Road School to sow with wildflowers. **Tony** will be going into school shortly to discuss the project with the children. This will be followed by two morning visits to the plot to prepare the ground and sow the seeds, before moving into the Orchard to study seeds and berries.

7.6. Pony grazing arrangements: 2 or 3 elderly female Exmoor ponies are expected to be on the reserve through October and November. Ben Hibbens is concerned that – as they will be confined to small areas by electric fencing – they will disturb snipe if they remain on site any longer through the winter. They will start in School Pond before moving into Big Meadow. **Oliver** is finalising arrangements, and this will include a visit by their owner for a final check. The safety information relating to access to the fields has been sent to Oliver who will disseminate it to the pony minders as part of their briefing. He will compile a list of all those who will be granted access to the fields for this limited period and send a copy to Glenys. Some outstanding issues:

i) despite Andrew's efforts, the insurance position has still to be clarified. [*Now confirmed as OK.*]

ii) co-ordination with the graziers over the locations of the cattle a) to prepare the vegetation for the introduction of the ponies and b) to prevent conflicts

iii) there is a potential conflict in School Pond with the first flush count scheduled for October 5th

7.7. Pony Wood sapling replacement: A number of the new plantings have failed to establish (not helped by nibbling roe deer). **Ian** has applied for another Woodland Trust pack to provide replacements and also supplies for gapping up hedges over the winter. If his application is successful, the replanting in the wood will take place in the November Volunteer session.

8. Monitoring:

8.1. Maintenance and HLS habitat inspections: Graham's full reports available. **Graham** will undertake the remedial work identified on the ponds during October. The grass in West Field has not been grazed since it was cut. The graziers have promised to send the cattle in shortly, and a local resident has agreed to act as 'eyes' in this more distant part of the reserve. Mick will remind the graziers about this and also the need to bring the cattle into Carr House Meadow post haymaking (they have already been into the Hay Meadow to trample the aftermath). The calves born in the spring are now six months old. From NE's perspective they have now become followers (until the age of 2 years). Herd size therefore is still compliant with the NE Agreement. A sycamore in Pony Wood has suddenly died (**Ian** to contact the tree surgeon).

8.2. Progress with this year's surveys: Graeme Skelcher's full report covering surveys of the meadows, Pony Wood and the arable margins was circulated. Dan Haywood's report of his Breeding Birds survey has just been submitted and will accompany these Minutes. In depth discussion of all the year's surveys, and hopefully feedback from a new adviser (item 3.2), will be deferred for a special FFOG meeting in February.

8.3. Bioblitz feedback: **Chris** is still collating the results. His report will be circulated when available, and also deferred for discussion in February.

9. Volunteer activities:

9.1. Revised documentation: In addition to strengthening the references to ticks, volunteer-related risk assessments etc have been updated (e.g. to incorporate Flora). **Ian** will send the files to Andrew to be held centrally on Dropbox.

- 9.2. Volunteer activities:** Ian's full reports for end July & August attached. Removal of 'undesirables' continued to dominate. Haymaking was badly delayed by machinery problems and the weather. It finally took place on 18th August with five volunteers helping the contractor to produce 221 bales to feed the cattle over winter. **Ian** is now making preparations for the hedging season. The Hedge Working Party will re-convene in late October to start work on the west hedge of Flora Field. A contractor will again be hired to chip the brash at the end. Ian warned that this is likely to cost more this year. It was agreed to leave untouched the stand of ash trees by the treble gates. It is impractical to lay the hedge at the north edge of West Field which abuts Lucy Brook. As a matter of urgency, **Dave** will contact the neighbouring tenant farm to arrange for this to be flailed by his contractor. Approval was given for **Ian** to purchase the replacement consumables required by the HWP. Removal of self-seeded saplings at the top of the path by Edenbreck will be added to the volunteer task list (**Ian**). Helen noted that she has re-qualified as a first aider, taking a course provided free by the City Council.
- 9.3. FFOG involvement in Apple Day:** **Tony** has arrangements in hand and will be reporting more fully to the FA meeting. FFOG needs to ensure that the Orchard is prepared for the event, notably around the Log and Oak circles. The latter has not been cut this summer in an attempt to encourage the establishment of wildflowers. The resulting long grass is not suitable for mowing and strimming or scything will be a substantial job. **Ian** to liaise with **Tony**.
- 10. Fruit picking and incursions into the cattle fields:** There have been reports of people picking fruit for more than just their own use and of picking fruit before it is ripe. And 'bored lads' have been seen in the fields approaching the cattle, even engaging in the potentially dangerous activity of playing matadors. **Hilary** has reported the latter to the PCSO. Also a message has been posted on Facebook and shared quite widely. By alerting the community, it is hoped that people will be more prepared to report and/or help deal with such problems in the future. It was suggested that Facebook could also be used to educate people about the right time to pick fruit (**Sue**).
- 11. Lune foreshore update:** On September 7th, Sue accompanied ecologist Graeme Skelcher on a fascinating walk around the foreshore near Stodday (report circulated with these Minutes). A future FFOG meeting will discuss ways of making better use of the access to this land which the FA has been granted by its owners.
- 12. Local Green Space application:** Members of the City Council's planning department will be arranging a visit to the reserve to help them assess our application (**Sue**). **Dave** offered to attend the October meeting of the Greenspaces Forum which will be discussing local green spaces.
- 13. Standing items:**
- 13.1. Arrangements:** In hand – covered elsewhere.
- 13.2. Financial control:**
- Item 7.5* – Contractor hire to prepare wildflower plot cost £260 (Ian)
- Item 9.2* – Invoice for haymaking anticipated shortly. The wrapping element alone will cost over £500. (Ian)
- Approval given to buy consumables for hedging. Itemised list totals £157. (Ian)

Costs of herbicide training course (item 3.5) and introducing ponies (item 7.6) still to be confirmed.

13.3. Organised events for notification to the FA:

- Dallas Road schoolchildren around the Fauna stones and in the Orchard end September/early October (Item 7.5) **Tony**.
- Talk on conservation grazing by the owner of the Exmoor ponies at the Storey Institute 22nd October (**Sue**)

14. **AOB: Hay store roof:** The haylage bales are stored in an old shed in the Gun Range, which is also used as an animal shelter. Its roof has been improved by recycling corrugated sheets found on the reserve but is still not fully waterproof. If a dry shed can be achieved, one of the benefits would be that the considerable time and cost of wrapping the hay crop can be avoided. **Chris** offered to investigate a supplier for the materials required and advise Mick.

15. **Date/place of next meetings:** Thursday 12th November (Chair Sue) 7pm Whitegates.

Ian Procter's Report on Volunteer Activities:

20th July 2015

Two volunteers put in a long day to get the second spraying of Big Meadow finished and make a start on the Grammar School Fields. *N.B. these are not really our business but the spray the graziers applied earlier in the summer has not been very effective and in any case leaves a wide margin in and around the stock fence where monster ragwort grow. These are well into flowering and may well seed. If we have time we will remove the heads. We ought to have a word about ragwort management with the graziers.*

In the evening a volunteer attends the *Lancaster Green Spaces Forum* at the Storey Gardens. & groups are represented by 12 people. There is follow up on recent tree training (which clashed with our Volunteer Saturday) and notice about further training possibilities. There was a discussion of groups' experience of working with the Council. The main theme of the evening was *Public Accessibility*. There was discussion of working with schools, children and roaming, vandalism, older people, and the lack of public transport and footpaths.

21st July 2015

A volunteer finished spraying the Grammar School fields, cleared the School pond area of ragwort (2 bags), and checked the JKW. On the latter a) There is now none along Lucy Brook near Cromwell Pond b) Near the Howson's gate there were three small growth points which were given another spray of glyphosate.

24th July 2015

As noted above the ragwort in the Grammar School fields was flowering so a volunteer went round cutting off the flowering heads, collecting 9 bags in the process. Finished off on the 26th with 1 more bag.

25th July 2015

Two volunteers did further ragwort work in the Hay Meadow wet area collecting 4 bags of ragwort and thistle. Running total of bags is now 76.

28th to 31st July 2015

The second *Ragwort Blitz* with advertised meetings to clear ragwort in Big Meadow each afternoon and evening.

Tuesday:

Afternoon: 3 volunteers 7 bags

Evening: 5 volunteers (including visitors from Japan and New Zealand!!!!) 5 bags. We finish off the marsh area.

Wednesday: now in the pasture area.

Afternoon: 2 volunteers 3 bags

Evening: 5 volunteers 6 bags

Thursday:

Afternoon: 1 volunteer 2 bags

Evening: 1 volunteer took a careful of ragwort bags to the tip,

1 volunteer, 3 bags including 1 with a monster plant from the Flora flower margin, alerted by the Bio-blitz folk.

Friday:

Afternoon: 3 volunteers 3 bags

Evening: 3 volunteers 2 bags

By the end of the day we had not only cleared the Big Meadow pasture but done a further sweep through the Hay and Carr House meadows. So, a successful conclusion to the week's programme. 31 bags of ragwort. Running total for the summer 107 bags.

1st August 2015

Several large ragwort in the Paddock / Allotment hedgeline had previously been sprayed with (old) citronella but were still thriving. Their flowering heads were removed and further sprayed with (new) citronella. Other ragwort in the Paddock dealt with. One more bag, running total for the summer: 108

8th August 2015

The Saturday volunteering session saw 21 volunteers assemble on a warm and sunny morning.

- We cleared the remnants of the scythed grass around the Fauna stones in preparation for the wildflower plot to be dug out later this month.
- Vegetation around the benches in the Orchard and along the Pads footpath was strimmed back.
- Overhanging vegetation along the Orchard grass paths was cut back, along with that surrounding the south noticeboard.
- Fruit bushes overhanging the path were tied back.
- The wildflower bed adjacent to the stump circle was cleared of bramble and self seeding thorns.
- Vegetation surrounding fruit trees was cut back. In areas we cleared last time we strimmed and then mowed to continue the process of getting these areas back to grass.

- Overhanging vegetation was cleared from all along the Pads footpath.
- We ran the mower along the edges of the Fauna path to stop encroachment onto the path.
- More work done removing brambles encroaching onto the Fauna path.
- The gap in the Pads / Orchard hedge was repaired with hazel withers.
- The 'Don't pick too early' signs were tied to the apple trees.

9th August 2015

Another bag of ragwort removed from the hay meadow marsh area. Running total: 109.

13th August 2015

A volunteer continued work removing thistles from various sites. 4 bags. RT 113

14th August 2015

Another bag of ragwort removed from the hay meadow marsh area. RT114

15th August 2015

Late flowering ragwort removed from School Pond, the Paddock and the northern third of Big Meadow. 2 bags RT 116

16th August 2015

6 bags of thistles removed from Lower Sowerholme. RT 122

18th August 2015

Five volunteers assisted in the haymaking by rowing up and then loading the bales. 221 bales harvested. This compares with 200 last year.

NOTE: Our contractor strongly recommends we fit larger gates between Carr House and the Hay Meadow. Despite his expert driving the current machinery only just gets through and as he says 'the machines are getting bigger all the time'.

To illustrate



20th August 2015

Two volunteers continued to ragwort in the Big Meadow whilst more thistles were deflowered in Lower Sowerholme. In the afternoon the occasional ragwort was removed from Lower Sowerholme and the beetle banks in Flora Field. The bag count has become confused so will be discounted. A lot of bags is the upshot!

21st August 2015

Further ragwort work in Big Meadow. Ditto 24th August.

NOTE: I have rather lost track of the detail but Mick has put in an enormous effort to remove seeding thistles from the Lower Sowerholme area. We need to discuss this at FFOG to work out a strategy for the longer term.

25th August 2015

The last Wednesday evening volunteer session of the summer attracted 6 volunteers.

- Two volunteers spent the two hours removing sycamore saplings from the Shed roof.
- Nettles around the fence of the toddler playground were trimmed back and the debris cleared.
- The area of ground around the meddler and pear trees 'reclaimed' for grass was re-mown.
- The nettles and other growth around the Orchard south noticeboard were cut back.
- The wildflower patch near the Stump Circle was cleared of dying back plants to prevent re-fertilizing the land. However, a patch of newly growing red clover was left alone.
- Further work was done removing encroaching bramble from the Fauna path.

27th August 2015

A volunteer spent the morning ragworting in Upper Sowerholme resulting in 6 bags. As earlier in the year much better than in previous years. I was also struck by the number of reeds thriving there.