

DRAFT Notes from Old Hall Wood, Bouth, Community Meeting

Wednesday 24th August 2011, Bouth Village Hall

Present: Ken Dean (Colton Parish Councillor, and Chair), Mandy Lane (Clerk, Colton PC, taking notes), Nigel Williams (Forestry Commission, Beat Forester), Mark Birchall (Forestry Commission, Forest Ranger), Jon Beardsley (Forestry Commission, Wildlife Ranger) and 25 members of the local community

1. Introductions

Cllr Dean opened the meeting and introduced representatives from the Forestry Commission.

2. Background and purpose of the meeting

The Forestry Commission (FC) had begun an initiative to involve local communities in the forward planning and management of FC-owned neighbourhood woodlands. To assess local interest in Old Hall Wood, Bouth, an informal meeting and walk through the wood had been held on 15th June. The positive feedback from this day had led to the present more formal meeting being held, the purpose of which was to discuss what the local community wanted for the future of this woodland, how they wanted to get involved with its management, and how liaison with the FC could best be achieved.

3. Old Hall Wood Design Plan 2011 – presentation from the FC

Copies of the design plan for Old Hall wood were circulated:

- The FC had purchased the freehold of this ancient semi-natural woodland of 36ha, in 1976.
- The design plan incorporated required objectives for an ancient woodland, and also regional plan objectives, for example: maintaining and enhancing the broadleaves, a guarantee of sustainable production, enhancement of biodiversity, maintaining landscape value, mitigation against climate change, providing for quiet enjoyment and supporting the local economy.
- The wood included a lot of dead wood, standing and fallen.
- Conifers: the design plan showed that there were scattered stands of unthinned larch and a stand of spruce at the top of the wood. Discussions with the local community on 15th June had led to some modification of the design plan: i) to thin the larch to allow remaining ones to thrive and ii) to leave the spruce to decline and decay naturally, except for those that dominated yew and oak which would be felled. This would leave some conifers in the landscape, which the community wanted, plus they provided winter cover and an important food source for some species of birds (e.g. redpolls, siskins) and red squirrels. The spruce would also have been difficult and expensive to remove.
- Overall, the woodland would be sensitively managed, with one or two light touch improvements suggested such as small-scale coppicing of old hazel coppice to open up glades and views, removal of trees fallen across paths, and unblocking of field drains.
- Any timber removal would be via a small 'forwarder' rather than by opening up a large loading bay, which would be expensive and might have unintended effects such as long-stay parking and littering.

4. Community Use of the Wood, Likes and Dislikes

- Uses of the wood: quiet enjoyment, dog-walking, bird-watching, other wildlife-watching (deer, reptiles, etc.), orienteering, some local children play in the wood,
- Likes: open access on foot; peaceful haven; wildlife; the fact that it also has some level easy access tracks (along the bottom of the wood); its natural and informal nature - no need for lots of management or change; liked the lack of fences, boundaries and formal paths
- Dislikes: the amount of old deer fencing; overgrown coppice – needs opening up for views as it used to be; some paths very overgrown; trail bikes and 4x4s (It was noted that two legal rights of way for motorised traffic pass through the woodland – one Unclassified Country Road (U5204) and one Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT U5203). However, trail bike tracks had been seen on other paths through the wood.)

5. Opportunities for Local Involvement:

5a) What does the community want for the future of the wood?

A summary of the conclusions follow:

- The wood should be left to remain as natural as possible for quiet enjoyment and wildlife, with a 'light touch' management regime; there was no need for any major changes.
- The FC had no intention to clear-fell any areas; any timber extraction would in any case need to be accompanied by detailed operational site plans that would be discussed with the community.
- Some small-scale coppicing of previously coppiced areas would be welcomed to open up views and glades to allow light in for regeneration and to improve wildlife habitat. A survey of the coppiced areas would first be required.
- Deer management: The community liked to see the deer. However, with no natural predators, some occasional low-level control was necessary to check overpopulation and to keep on top of tree and seedling damage, and to avoid having to put up deer fencing.
- Grey squirrels needed controlling – there had been no sightings of reds in the woods for around 5 years.
- Ownership of the wall boundaries needed to be established to clarify responsibilities for maintenance.
- Drains needed clearing and some paths cut back (e.g. fallen trees over path).

5b) Does the community want greater involvement?

The Chairman asked for a show of hands from those who wanted more involvement in the management of the wood: 10 people were keen to get involved. No-one felt that less involvement was desirable.

5c) What involvement would the FC support and what help would they offer?

The FC wished to encourage involvement particularly in the activities which were desirable but for which they had no resource. Jon Beardsley, FC wildlife ranger, welcomed anyone keen to work with him undertaking wildlife surveys, making bird and dormouse boxes, etc. The FC would provide some ranger time and also volunteer expertise to help work in the wood – for example for surveys, bird-monitoring, mist-netting, ringing, etc. Coppice-working might be undertaken by local people keen to learn, under supervision by FC staff, perhaps through a training course (with all the necessary H&S in place). The following people volunteered their effort, in principle:

- Roderick Smith – survey of all the yews, their size, age-class and condition.
- Coppicing – Mark Sharphouse and Neil Croasdell
- Mandy Lane – birds and bat monitoring
- Carol McNeill – could supply orienteering maps that showed land form at large scale.

6. Formation of Liaison Group

It was agreed that a Liaison Group be set up, with 3 members of the FC and 3 members from the local community, one of whom would act as coordinator for activities in the wood. The following people volunteered to join the group and agreed to meet shortly:

Nigel Williams (FC, Beat Forester)
 Mark Birchall (FC, Forest Ranger)
 Jon Beardsley (FC, Wildlife Ranger)
 Ken Dean (Parish Councillor, Bouth)
 Paul Holden (Bouth resident)
 Mark Sharphouse (Bouth resident)

7. AOB/Questions

- Carol McNeill asked if people were happy that occasional orienteering events continued in the wood – there were no objections.
- The FC were asked whether they could give any guarantee that the woodland would not be sold into private hands. They could give no guarantees, unfortunately, but felt that it was unlikely given the strength of public feeling.
- Colin Barr (Chair, Colton Parish Council) felt that the FC should be applauded as a government department taking an active initiative to involve the local community.
- Mr Roderick Smith thanked the Parish Council, Cllr Dean and the Clerk for holding the meeting.

(Note: it was decided that there was no need to address original Agenda item 7. – Definition of the local community)