Wild about Westhope

Corfield Bank management Plan 2023 – 2028

1. Introduction

The following report outlines the proposed future management, 2023 – 2028, for the area known as Corfields Bank. The area, see map 1, is approximately 13 hectares of woodlands, meadows , hedges and watercourses located on the Westhope Estate.

Wild about Westhope is a Community Interest Company that was formed in 2021 to promote sustainable land management to benefit both wildlife and people and has a long term lease agreement with the Westhope Estate.

The report will discuss the main themes and broad aspirations associated with the key attributes woodlands, meadows, hedges , watercourses and access before proposing future management interventions.

Detailed description of the land, base line surveys, archived material and recent survey information will be drawn on but not included in the report.

The report will acknowledge the role Corfields Bank has on the wider landscape and how it may influence and be influenced by neighbouring land.

The key aim is to develop a sustainable model of management that will benefit wildlife and people and return an income equal to its expenditure. The 3 main themes - People, Wildlife and Economics will have equal status. It is acknowledged that actions to benefit one theme may be detrimental to the other two and the report will require ongoing adjustments and amendments to maintain a balance.

2. Woodlands

2.1 Broad themes

2.1.1 Wildlife Habitat.

The site has two main woodlands, Corfield Coppice and Black Tree Island. (See plan 2) Although not listed as Ancient woodlands they both have woodland indicator species and plant assemblages associated with natural woodland classifications for W8, W10 for Corfileds Coppice and W10 and W7 for Black island. Where possible management will help promote the range and frequency of plant assemblages associated for each woodland type, this will be achieved mainly by removing non-native species and increasing light levels.

2.1.2 Woodland resilience. Promoting the natural woodland classification may help fragile ecosystems become more robust. However it should be acknowledge that existing natural woodland classifications will be effected by climate change. Increasing the range of different native tree and shrub species and the location of the seed source may help mitigate future loses.

Many of the woodland trees are of a similar age class. Increasing the age range within the woodland will increase resilience and broaden opportunity for successional plant development.

2.1.3 None native invasive species. The woodlands have a range of invasive non -native species primarily laurel, snowberry and Himalayan balsam and the clearance program will help reduce the seed source which perpetuates the problem. It will be beneficial to maintain some of the non - native species, mainly laurel and snowberry, on the woodland boundaries that form a screen and wind break in Corfields Coppice. These areas could remain in the short term until internal planting has been established. Occasional non-native plants may be beneficial to keep to broaden species diversity and maintain a reference to the woodlands former use.

2.1.4 Woodland edge. Woodland edge is a valuable wildlife habitat which has declined significantly in recent years. Creating and maintaining a buffer between pasture and woodland will help establish a wildlife rich zone for a wide range of plant, invertebrate, mammal and bird species. Benefit to wildlife can be improved further by creating scallops along the woodland edge. Woodland edge can be created by felling canopy trees along the woodland boundary, this would be required where the boundary is adjacent to a leased or private ownership. Creating a new woodland edge will be quicker a and easier within the existing adjacent pasture. Both woodland areas are relatively small so increasing the size of woodland would be beneficial. The woodland edge will be created by natural regeneration removing non- native species as they appear.

The area will be managed as 4 zones:

- The existing tree canopy.

- Scrub area – this will be managed to maintain a shrub thicket predominately thorn species. This zone will be cut in rotation every 12- 15 years.

- Herb zone. This area will be managed to maintain a herb layer to establish a wider range of vegetation that will provide cover for longer periods for birds and mammals and areas to overwinter for invertebrates adjacent to the meadow. These areas will be cut in rotation every 3 years.

- The existing meadow.

2.1.5 Standing and lying dead. Where possible standing dead trees will be left and where necessary created to achieve 2 trees per hectare. (trees 20cm dia). Dead trees over footpaths and leaning over neighbours fencing will be removed. A similar amount of dead wood will be left lying on the ground, preferably left in length with branches removed.

2.1.6 Woodland cover and Connectivity. The woodlands are located in the centre of two extensive woodland ridges to the East and West. Creating connectivity between the two woodland ridges will support migration of a range of different species. Woodland corridors will be planted joining all existing woodlands, primarily following existing fence lines and access routes.

2.1.7 Sustainable timber production. Timber production will contribute to the ongoing timber needs of the site and as a source of income. Species selection for tree planting will consider the future timber needs for the site and within the immediate location. Niche and more specialist timber markets will also be considered especially to supply craft activities which can be either sold locally or used to develop a product range for sale. Timber will also be used to produce Charcoal, ideally this will all be sourced from Corfield's Coppice.

2.1.8 Ash die back. Ash die back has been identified in the woodlands. Ash Die back provides opportunity to increase standing dead wood, age and species diversity. To prevent a sudden loss of canopy trees it will be beneficial to establish replacement trees over a longer period. Ash die back effects smaller trees more quickly. The larger mature and over mature ash trees take longer to be effected by Ash die back , have greater wildlife benefit and will be more beneficial as standing dead wood and should not be included in felling programs. Clusters of younger Ash trees , the size of area sufficient to allow tree establishment of different species, will be cleared. A successive program of felling will help establish age diversity.

2.1.9 Wildlife management. Damage to the woodlands is occurring from certain species- primarily squirrels and Deer. The extent of damage is not excessive but it anticipated this will increase over time. Damage to woodlands will be monitored and a base line of acceptability agreed.

2.2 Specific actions

2.2.1 Corfields Coppice . Continue to remove laurel and snow berry and replace with native species. Maintain non – native species where they form a screen on the woodland boundary, until newly planted areas are established.

Create 4 coppice coupes – maintain as coppice with standards on an 8 year rotation ie. Coppice one coup every 2 years. Reduce standard trees to a max 50 % canopy cover, increase standard tree age range through planting and natural regen.

Fell areas of young ash and thin standard oaks if required to create canopy openings approx. 20m in diameter. Restock with planting and natural regen favouring Oak, cherry, Rowan, Hazel holly.

Maintain areas of non- intervention on the North- West woodland slope and boundary.

2.2.2 Black Tree Island. Continue to clear Himalayan balsam from stream margins. Coppice hazel and thin ash canopy , replant with additional hazel, Rowan, Alder and Oak. Manage area as a

coppice on an 12 year rotation with three coupes, one cut every 4 years. Maintain stream edge to encourage scrub growth 8 – 12 years with areas of herb vegetation maintained to allow light onto the water.

3. Meadows

Main themes.

The term meadows has been used to describe all grass land areas within the WAW Nature area. (See plan 3). The meadows consist of 7 areas covering an area approx. 8 Hectares. (not including Princess Rough approx.1 Hectare)

The meadows are managed for grazing with some areas harvested for hay. The aim is to increase sward richness to establish a robust habitat suitable for a range of species primarily invertebrates whilst maintaining a sustainable income.

Traditionally managed hay meadows provide a sustainable model of management. Hay meadows are allowed to grow from the end of February to mid-July. This allows a wide range of flowering and grass species to flower and set seed and form a good source of food and shelter for a wide range of invertebrate species, cover for mammals and potential nesting sites for birds. Hay is traditionally cut during hot dry weather while the sward is still standing and can be cut, dried and stored for winter fodder. Removing the hay each year reduces soil fertility which helps reduce grass species dominance and favours wild flowering species. The hay provides a potential income either through sales for animal fodder or as green hay. The aftermath is grazed from mid – summer to the beginning of March . The grazing stock helps to trample seed into the ground to aid germination and keeps the grass sward short to reduce competition for flowering species during the early spring. Light puddling from grazing stock is valuable but can be detrimental if stock numbers are too high and allowed to graze during prolonged wet weather. The type of stock, the grazing stock density and the period of grazing have a direct effect on the health of the sward with regard to range of species. The recommended stock density for a wildlife meadow is 1 – 2.25 Livestock units per hectare. Having a range of different grazing stock is generally considered beneficial to sward development.

The traditional model does create a robust habitat that may be sustainable if additional sales outlets are nurtured. However cutting hay at this time removes vegetation for invertebrates to over winter, reduces cover for mammals and potential sites for bird nesting. It also reduces the potential for some flowering species, depending on the time of harvest, which have not had time to set seed, favouring some species over others. Cutting the hay later in the year will allow a wider range of seed to develop but will make harvesting more difficult and far less valuable. Cutting areas on a 2- 3 year rotation will increase the amount and range of viable seed, provide cover and over wintering sites. However this will make harvesting more difficult and less financially viable, increase thatch within the sward, increase soil fertility and increase a range of rank competitive species.

Increasing woodland edge as described in Section 2 may provide a suitable compromise especially if these areas were extended to field corners and hedges. Alternatively areas of existing meadows could be divided and managed with different management regimes.

Wood pasture. Wood pasture creates different conditions suitable for a range of species. Trees are established within the pasture with the long term aim to allow them to become over mature

veterans. The value to wildlife increases over time with more specialist species benefiting from the niche environment, primarily from the open aspect ,rotting wood, deep crevices and holes on the trees. In the shorter term the trees provide valuable cover to livestock during both wet, cold and extreme hot weather which is becoming more relevant as the climate changes. Vegetation around the trees which is not able to be cut or topped provides overwintering sites and the trees form perch sites for birds. The value to wildlife can be increased by developing dead wood piles near and under the trees.

Section 4. Hedges.

Broad themes.

Hedges provide valuable habitat, are safe routes for wildlife migration, provide cover and shelter, reduce wind speed and form micro- climates. The need to hold stock is less important with the wide spread use of fencing as the main form of enclosure but they remain an important iconic feature within the English Countryside. The potential value to wildlife is determined by the type of species and the type of hedgerow management.

Cutting hedges each year is a fast and efficient way for maintaining hedges especially in areas near roads and entrances where space and sight lines are a priority. It also prevents hedges becoming over grown and creating a large future management commitment. Culturally keeping hedges 'Tidy' continues to be a driver for annual management. However annual cutting does prevent shrub species fruiting to their full potential, can remove suitable overwintering sites for invertebrates and reduces the cover and suitability as a wildlife corridor. Allowing trees to grow within a hedge line increases shelter for stock and wildlife and perches for bird species. It is acknowledged that allowing a hedge to grow taller and wider will reduce the meadows productivity.

A range of different management regimes specific to each hedge will help increase the wildlife value of the hedge where it is suitable to do so. (See plan 4)

1. Annual cut. Hedges cut annually create a dense thicket suitable for some bird species and is required to maintain sight lines and ease of access along roads and entrances.

2. A 2 year rotation. 50% of the hedge is cut every year. This will allow part of the hedge to bear fruit fully whilst maintaining ease of cutting.

3. A 2 year rotation with preparation for hedge laying. As with (2) but the top of the hedge will not be cut. The sides of the hedge will be cut every other year. This will allow the hedge to fruit, create additional bird nesting and perching opportunities and give the hedge height suitable for hedge laying.

4. Hedge laying. A section of hedge will be laid when appropriate which will be determined by the suitability of the hedge, when a fence needs replacing or after meadow management. Hedge laying may provide a training opportunity .

5. Non – intervention. Hedges may be left with no management. This will be appropriate in areas which are been expanded into woodland corridors and hedges which are difficult to cut but will not create a future issue by allowing them to fully mature.

Hedges do create some timber suitable for fire wood and charcoal. Government land management grant schemes are available for hedge laying as a capital cost. There may also be an opportunity to run hedge laying training courses to generate a small income.

5. Water courses.

Main themes.

Water in the landscape is a unique habitat for many species and is an essential resource for many others to survive. Despite its vital importance it is often the least well known but are the most sensitive and vulnerable to neglect and pollution.

The streams running through the WAW area are part of the network of water courses in the wider landscape and are directly influenced by neighbouring land.

Anecdotal observation suggests the water courses remain free flowing and with a relatively constant level all year round with occasional serve spikes during periods of flooding. The streams are part of a scheme to 'Slow the Flow' to alleviate the risk of flooding by holding on to flood water for longer to help reduce the effects of peak flow further downstream.

Reducing sporadic water levels and flow is generally beneficial to wildlife however different niche habitats can be created by maintaining different conditions including light levels, water flow, depth of water etc.

Achieving a direct economic benefit from water courses will be difficult. However helping to alleviate flooding has huge social and economic benefits within the wider landscape. It is possible that future government funding will recognise and fund the 'Ecosystem services' natural resources provide. There is also potential project led funding to support management.

WAW has a opportunity to improve water quality and habitat within its area but may also be in a position to influence the owners of neighbouring land.

Water ecology and hydrology are specialist areas of interest. There is Insufficient records, site monitoring or knowledge to develop a future plan with confidence.

It is suggested that specialist support is enlisted to survey the existing water courses to help guide recommendations for future management.

6. Access.

6.1 Broad themes.

Encouraging access to nature is core to WAW aims and objectives. The local community and WAW's members and volunteers will have access to WAW Nature area whilst public access will be available during WAW activities.

WAW nature area's will be linked to the surrounding landscape by safeguarding new access routes to create a series of circular footpaths around the area. See Map 5. The aim is to ensure community access remains open irrespective of future land ownership.

Where possible pedestrian gates will be installed and will replace existing stiles. Pedestrian gates will be self- closing.

Vehicle access routes will be required for future land management and these areas will need to be safe guarded. Accommodation roads will be agreed within new lease agreements where vehicle access is required over tenanted land. The route will not require fencing but will allow access with an agreement to make good any excessive damage.

6.2 Visitor parking.

The starting point of the various circular walks and to WAW activities for visitors arriving by vehicle will be determined by the provision of parking. Existing parking is available at Westhope College and Chapel Carpark. It is assumed that this will remain available in the future however a car park facility at the saw mills entrance will be worth allocating.

6.3 Footpaths

6.3.1 Manor woods to Chapel Meadow.

Manor Woodlands. Create an entrance with pedestrian gate off the main road into the Manor woodlands. Create an unsurfaced path from the road to the existing Lime avenue. The footpath leading down the Yew Avenue to the pond will be extended around the pond. This will require access over the pond outfall.

A grass path will be maintained leading from the existing picket gate around the bottom of the Manor meadow past the willow beds to the corner of Black Island. A new footbridge will be required at this point to access Black Island . A new unsurfaced path will be made leading through Black Island to the furthest opposite corner where it will enter Black Tree meadow, a new foot bridge will be needed to cross the stream at this point.

A new picket will be installed to replace the existing shooting stile in the corner of Black Tree Meadow with the Wood pasture. Steps will be required to allow easier access down the bank at this point. The route will cross through the Corridor field and into Chapel meadow.

6.3.2 Chapel Meadow to Edgewood.

The route will be for community based and WAW organised scheduled activities and it is not anticipated to be open public access.

Orchard. Create an entrance within the hedge and fence line, Install steps and grade banks. Install a pedestrian gate positioned at the top of the steps within the orchard and make good the fencing.

Field 1. Create an entrance within the hedge and fence line. Install a pedestrian gate and make good the fencing. Erect stock proof fencing 2.4m parallel with existing field boundary aprox. 100m.

Field 2. Tak. Create an entrance within the hedge and fence line. Grade bank as required. Install a pedestrian gate and make good the fencing.

Field 3. Cow Pasture. Create an entrance within hedge and fence line leading into Prince's Rough. Grade bank as required. Install a pedestrian gate and make good the fencing.

Prince's Rough. Replace existing stile (broken) with a pedestrian gate leading from Prince's rough into Field 4. Long Field

Field 4. Long Field. Erect stock proof fencing 10m parallel with existing field boundary. From the Prince's rough shelter belt to Edgewood boundary approx. 180m.

6.3.3 Edgewood to Titterel Plantation.

This route will follow the existing footpath leading from Edgewood down to Middle Westhope and along the road to Westhope College and up the existing Bridal path, Titterals lane, to Titteral Plantation.

6.3.4 Titterel Plantation to Manor woods

From the top of Titterals lane the route will turn right following the existing bridal path to the disused quarry.

The route will follow a line from the quarry leading diagonally down through the woodland to the field edge. The lower areas of the woodland have existing paths which are accessible to vehicles from the adjoin meadows.

A new vehicle track will be constructed leading down from the quarry to the existing lower vehicle tracks. This will provide future vehicle access to the woodlands for management. It is anticipated that major timber extraction works will require an ongoing agreement with adjoining land owners/tenants.

Create a pedestrian access through the existing hedge and fence line. Grade field bank from the woodland and Install a new self-closing pedestrian gate.

Create pedestrian access through the existing hedge on to the main road opposite Manor woodland. Grade field bank and install a new self-closing pedestrian gate.

6.4 Vehicle access.

6.4.1 Prince's Rough to the Barracks.

Safeguard a 5m wide accommodation vehicle access route leading from the Barracks to Prince's rough.

6.4.2 Titterals to Sitka.

Safeguard a 5m accommodation vehicle access route along the woodland fence line.

6.4.3 Sitka to main road.

Safeguard a 5m accommodation road from Sitka to the College overflow carpark.

6.4.4 Main road to Manor meadow.

Safeguard access along the existing Manor back drive.

6.5 Holding Bay.

Safeguard an area currently used as the College overflow to stockpile timber ready for road side collection.

6.6 Volunteer and event provision.

An area in Corfields Coppice has been developed as a base for volunteers and to hold WAW events and activities. The existing area is basic and will require improvements for long term use. Future improvements will include a more robust and larger covered area and a compost toilet facility. Upgrading the existing vehicle track will aid all year round access for movement of materials required for activities and help broaden accessibility.

The existing and proposed access routes will require on going management. Some routes will travel over areas maintained by tenanted farming practices. Other areas will require fencing and need annual management to maintain ease of access.