

Sparrowgrove and Oakwood Copse

Woodland Management Plan Overview

Introduction

The small woods (approximately 13.1 hectares or just under 32.5 acres) of Oakwood Copse and Sparrowgrove are a prominent feature on the terraces on the western edge of the River Itchen valley. They were probably once part of a more extensive block of forest stretching several miles from Shawford to Boyatt Wood.

Now rather isolated by housing they form an important recreational asset well used by local people. In March 2009 they were purchased by the “Sparrowgrove and Oakwood Copse Conservation Trust” - SOCCT – from the then owners Southern Water. SOCCT is a company, limited by guarantee, with charitable status, set up specifically to purchase and maintain this woodland. The purchase monies were raised by donations from local people and by the two Parish Councils – Compton & Shawford and Otterbourne. The key factors identified by local residents in supporting this purchase were to maintain the woods as they are today, to ensure continued informal access by local residents and to support the conservation of the existing flora and fauna. In most people's minds “as they are today” equates to: informal woods, a network of informal access paths and bluebells in spring amongst the coppicing carried out in recent years.

Although there are a number of woodland community groups throughout the UK, SOCCT is one of a handful of such groups which actually own the woodland as well as having responsibility for its day to day management.

Historical

It appears that the area between Otterbourne and Winchester has always been lightly wooded in historical times. There was certainly some woodland shown on maps of this area in the 1800s and the Ancient Woodland Inventory records two thirds of the area: 5 Ha of Sparrowgrove and all of Oakwood Copse as being Ancient. This means that the area has been under woodland since the 1600s and probably much earlier.

A further indication of the age of the woods is the presence of species of plants whose distribution is restricted to sites which have been wooded for a very long period of time. In both Sparrowgrove and Oakwood Copse around 15 such marker species have been identified.

Clues to the past management are given by the trees and some of the surface features. Scattered through the ancient part of Sparrowgrove and as isolated specimens, in the south of Oakwood, are some magnificent spreading ancient oaks. The shape of these would indicate they grew in a fairly open habitat with the trunks being short and a spreading crown. This is likely to have been worked coppice, cut on a short rotation. In Sparrowgrove and East Oakwood this would have been predominantly Hazel coppice, with possibly Ash as the main under-storey in West of Oakwood.

The coppice form of management is likely to have been carried out here for hundreds if not thousands of years. In the Middle Ages mixed coppice would have provided all the household needs of the local population from firewood to fencing and eating bowls and platters. In later times in west and central Hampshire coppicing focused more on Hazel for wattles and spars. The system probably continued here until the Second World War.

Although the woodland edges have changed in recent years there are still in places old boundary banks and internal embankments. These were usually erected from Saxon times as ramparts to keep the free-ranging livestock out of valuable regenerating coppice woods. The banks being topped by a roughly woven dead hedge probably not unlike that made in 1996 to protect the coppice from deer.

There are also many small hollows in the wood, some recent, some probably of great age. Otterbourne lies on an area of geological transition between the chalk to the north and the acid soils of the Reading Beds to the south. A possible explanation would be that they are “borrow pits” for chalky marls to spread on the acid soils of the south of the Parish. A practice carried out for hundreds of years before the advent of commercial fertilisers.

Management Approach

A plan for the management of the woodland over the coming 20 years has been prepared and was approved by the Forestry Commission in Autumn 2010. This detailed plan is available for those interested but the key points of the management approach are summarised here.

The main management strategies:

Maintain the woods as they are today with a wide diversity of species and age classes within the trees and shrubs and a rich flora and fauna.

- Maintain the diverse and varied age structure of the woods.
- Maintain and where necessary restock the in-cycle hazel coppice areas and manage on a 6-7 year cycle depending on market demand.
- Monitor the population of ageing Beech and other species particularly around the boundaries of the woods and carry out tree surveying or felling when necessary.
- Carry out a limited small scale programme of restocking by native species – mainly Hazel, Oak, Ash, Cherry and Beech on any clearings created by felling operations.
- On the secondary woodland areas of Compartment 1 – some limited clearing of old scrub and non-native buddleias and replanting with native species in the clearings.
- Removal of Clematis from the crowns of trees and cutting and poisoning of the cut stumps.
- Maintain the attractive informal path system by regular maintenance and recreate the main under pylon broad path with a range of small clearings with planting to support diversity of flora and the butterfly and moth population.

The woods are, for management purposes, divided into three compartments:

Compartment 1 – Sparrowgrove – Western End (4.6ha or 11.4ac)

This comprises a mixture of old scrub hawthorn and developing woodland with Ash, Birch, Hazel, Crab Apple and Willows adjacent to the Pylon line and in the far north and south of the Compartment in the area of the old water works. The main timber species is a plantation of mature beech covering nearly half the area. This is over 100 years old and of great bird nesting and landscape importance and it is hoped to retain it for the period of the plan.

Compartment 2 – Sparrowgove – Eastern End (4.8ha or 11.9ac)

This is mainly covered by Hazel coppice with Ash and Oak standards. Intensive restoration over much of the area has been moderately successful in re establishing a Hazel coppice cycle. There is still much scope for improving the stock of coppice by planting or layering. Also establishing a new generation of Oak standards to replace the ageing population. Around the edges, particularly in the north, there is high forest of Beech and Oak bordering on the houses.

Compartment 3 – Oakwood Copse (3.7ha or 9.1ac)

There are 2 main resources here. About three quarters of the wood is high forest of mainly Ash with scattered Birch, Beech, Sweet chestnut and Oak. This was heavily thinned 5 years ago and will be due for another thinning in 5-8 years time. The balance of the wood is mainly pure Hazel coppice – Hazel is found throughout the wood but grows weakly under the high forest. In the South East corner growing under a light over storey it is producing some vigorous and potentially commercial coppice poles.

Footpaths and Access.

There is an extensive network of informal, permissive paths in the woods. These will be allowed to develop naturally without surface treatment and with natural repositioning in response to ground state, growing and fallen trees. Access to Sparrowgrove is either from the North East corner (opposite Compton Nursery) or from the South side in Sparrowgrove Road. Access to Oakwood is from a number of points in Waterworks Road and from the open boundary with the Otterbourne playing fields. These access points will remain supported. SOCCT has no objection to adjoining property owners accessing the woods from their properties (see below).

Boundaries

As an important resource in the local Community, SOCCT wishes to ensure that it has the best possible relations with its neighbours in the Community and in particular adjoining property owners.

Adjoining property owners have the normal rights to clear to the boundary including overhanging branches. However care should be taken to ensure that trees as a whole are not damaged and it is quite possible that cutting back to the main trunk may be better for the long term health of the tree and the better management of the boundary; in which case SOCCT will, almost certainly, agree.

When SOCCT carries out woodland work, the cuttings and clippings will normally be stacked in the woods away from paths to provide wildlife habitat; they will never be deposited in neighbouring property. Similarly SOCCT would appreciate neighbours ensuring that the remains of wood and garden work are not deposited in the woodlands. The exception to this is that, where significant woodland leaf fall occurs into neighbouring gardens, the fresh fallen leaves may be returned to the woodland; however the leaves should be spread evenly over the woodland floor.

Where adjoining properties have an unfenced or open boundary owners should feel free to approach SOCCT to discuss clearing of bramble, nettle and thorn from the woodland close to their boundary – it may well be that such clearance can be of benefit to both parties. SOCCT does not object to neighbours having gates in their boundaries to provide informal access to the community woodland.

Tree Risk Management

The woodland will be divided, for risk management purposes, into two zones: a high impact zone and a general zone. The high impact zone will consist of the woodland boundaries adjoining residential properties and the public highway, where trees are of sufficient height to reach either the public highway or residential buildings.

In the high impact zone all trees greater than 150mm in diameter whose height is sufficient to cause damage to residential property and/or to fall on the public highway will be inspected and documented individually on an annual basis. The inspection in this zone will be supported by a qualified arboricultural consultant. Further more frequent inspections will be based on advice from the consultant.

In the general zone, the woods will be inspected on an annual basis and action plans for any high risk trees identified will be prepared on the basis of the impact of any failure.

For both areas the inspections will take place during the winter months after leaf fall and will be carried out by at least two SOCCT trustees with advice and guidance from available local woodland expertise together with, in the case of the 'high impact zone', a qualified arboricultural consultant.

Because trees can fail in situations where visual inspections, even a few days before, show no significant risk SOCCT will continue to ask for the support of the local community especially neighbours, woodland volunteers and the woodland 'caretakers' to report any changes in tree status, limb falls and/or other visual indicators which will be recorded and form part of the inspection record.

Over time SOCCT will reduce the number of high impact trees in the high risk zone irrespective of the risk of failure; these will be replaced, as required by the woodland management plan, with appropriate and (relatively) low growth species.

Nature Conservation and Enhancement

In the short term the basic philosophy will be to continue to manage the woodland to foster the existing flora and fauna. In the future there will be opportunities for enhancement and improved sustainability of the woodland environment and ecology. Such projects will only be embarked on if and when supported by the availability of grant funding and community resources.

Educational Development

There is already significant interest from local schools in the opportunities that the woodlands might provide for educational purposes. Here again the approach will be as for that in the area of Nature Conservation – projects in the education area will need to be supported by appropriate grant funding and other committed resources before being embarked upon.

Resources

SOCCT already has two regular working groups providing general maintenance and boundary maintenance. The use of volunteers from the local community is a key part of the woodland management resourcing and will continue to be pursued and developed. It is planned that volunteers will, in the future, provide some of the coppicing resources and, over time, it is to be hoped that more specialist arboricultural skills may be developed within the volunteer community.

SOCCT is already supported both by ad-hoc donations for specific maintenance purposes and by regular monthly donations from a number of individuals. Both these approaches to provide financial support will continue to be developed. In addition SOCCT will seek grant funding for regular maintenance and enhancement wherever appropriate.

SOCCT

Plan Overview – January 2012