

West Midlands Woodland & Forestry Forum

Meeting: Wednesday 30th June 2010

Theme: Majoring on the International Year for Biodiversity; a series of illustrated talks highlighting the important contribution that trees & woodland make to biodiversity whilst contributing to the regional economy and everyone's quality of life

Venue: Moccas Hill Wood and Moccas Park, Herefordshire
By kind invitation of Woodland Trust and Natural England

There was a large field component to this day, with the walk pleasant but challenging and, although much was downhill, the terrain was quite steep in places. The catering was wonderful and supplied by the ladies of Moccas WI in Moccas Village Hall whilst shuttle bus transport was provided by Nick Maddy.

PROGRAMME:

1. National & Regional Fit: International Year of Biodiversity; IBDA's; BIGs, Regional & Local BAP Targets: Paul Cobbing, GOWM, Chair of the England Biodiversity Group, Local and Regional Strategic Implementation Group

Paul set the theme of the day and stated that although England has a pretty sophisticated approach, biodiversity targets that were agreed in 2002 have not been met in 2010. Sadly, this is true for the rest of the world as much as it is for the UK.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan sets the agenda and a new Framework is in place reflecting much more of an ecosystem approach. This has set national targets and, in turn, regional and local targets have followed. This is very much supported by Local Biodiversity Action Partnerships (LBAPs) and accompanying data collection. However some of the targets rely on baseline evidence of mixed quality.

There are 70 landscape-scale projects planned or underway across the West Midlands with 18 selected as priorities.

There are a number of forthcoming opportunities and challenges facing us if we are to seriously improve biodiversity including:

- The TEEB Report which puts a value on nature – but is it sufficiently qualitative and quantitative
- IBDA's have the potential for something more significant, on a larger scale
- Lawton Report – England's Wildlife Sites; and the need to function coherently
- Period of austerity and likely impacts on funding availability
- Optimism that the new Natural England White Paper may set a new direction

2. Moccas Hill Wood, Welcome from Woodland Trust; Introduction to woodland and management regime to date: Justin Milward, Jeremy Evans, Woodland Trust

The 44ha/110acre plantation comprising semi-mature beech and larch was purchased in 2006 with Woodland Trust providing the capital and then immediately leasing it to Natural England who were providing the revenue and management for a 28-year period. The wood is not SSSI designated but is part of the Moccas Park Historic Park and Garden designation.

Forestry Commission initially planted it in the 1950's solely for timber production but in order to look at the future vision for the wood it was necessary to look back further. Using estate records from 1760 through to the present, including 1940's aerial photographs it was deemed appropriate to earmark the whole area for restoration to wood pasture with veteran trees and deer lawns.

3. Historic environment; archaeological features, including the Bronze Age Burial Site and appropriate management regimes: Neil Rimmington, Countryside Advisor for Herefordshire Council

Neil took us back much further tracing features that were at least 1000 years old detailing how the area had evolved from the medieval period into the Deer Park of today. Formerly, the estate would have extended over into the Golden Valley but with population pressures of the 14th century the remnant wooded landscape would have been squeezed and only occupying the steeper slopes.

Round barrows from the Bronze Age are present within the present woodland boundary – not designated but nevertheless requiring sensitive management, for example, protecting against rhizome damage from the bracken. There are also a range of woodland features including saw pits for both large and smaller trees and many charcoal burning platforms indicating a healthy coppice industry alongside larger timber production in the past. With regards to future management of the site, Neil noted that the registered Historic Park and Garden status was a considerable asset with regard to attracting external funding to assist.

4a. Wood Pasture restoration – Management Plan and constraints: Jeremy Evans, Woodland Trust

Jeremy outlined the plans for wood pasture restoration with the removal of the tree canopy. However, recent survey work indicated that the woodland contained the maternity unit for a Barbastelle bat colony and various Lepidoptera including that of a rare conifer species, had been identified and these would need careful management throughout any transition.

The principle long term aim is to buffer and restore to parkland and wood pasture with appropriate species and the creation of habitats that would provide continuity and sufficient resilience to climate change impacts for the next 300 years. He suggested that present-day species like Pedunculate Oak, Sessile Oak, Sweet and Horse Chestnut may need complementing or replacing with Holm Oak, Cork Oak and even Olives!

Canny management was advocated. In close partnership with the Forestry Commission, Natural England and a local consultation panel, the journey had begun.

4b. Managing trees and woodlands with multiple objectives in a coherent sustainable manner; demonstrable linkages to the local economy, biodiversity targets and non-market value to people's quality of life: Graham Taylor, Pryor & Rickett Silviculture

Graham confirmed that biodiversity targets were currently being missed “big time”. There were so many conflicting interests impacting on the private sector owner, manager, grower's management objectives which may be either sporting, silviculture or amenity led. Too many people were involved wanting too many things from them and in the end it became all too complicated and too costly. The result – 60% of all woodlands were not doing anything.

With regards to biodiversity, most habitats and species numbers could be enhanced by simply letting in more light and by better deer control. Graham advocated the unpicking of some of the “sacred cows” for wider landscape scale improvements; for example, were felling licences for thinning really necessary?

He concluded that there was however cause for optimism. Timber prices and other economic activity were holding up and that was all good for improving biodiversity. Equally, we should note that nature is very, very robust and much has survived despite any of our poor attempts. Legislation does not protect or enhance biodiversity – targeted action (or inaction) depending on species and habitat requirement is what helps.

5a. Transition: Design landscape & archaeology: Neil Rimmington

From the vantage point on the boundary between Moccas Hill Wood and the Upper Park, the landscape extended across to the Radnor Hills and across the River Wye to North Herefordshire. The small rural village of Moccas was a monastic settlement back in the 5th century. Evidence of its long history can be found at the 12th century church, and at the medieval Moccas Deer Park, part of the Chester-Master Estate and one of the most important sites of surviving woodland pasture in the country. Nestling just 12 miles west of Hereford, the Park is internationally renowned for its wildlife and forest fauna and is second only to Windsor among forests and parkland in Britain.

The park has probably been in existence since 1290. It was landscaped by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in the late 1700s, Humphrey Repton did further work in the 1790s with Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, founders of the Picturesque Movement, advising during the 1800s.

5b. Connecting the landscape; trees outside woods: Justin Milward, Woodland Trust.

Quoting from the West Midlands Forestry Framework Manifesto that had been launched earlier that morning to “Significantly increase tree and woodland cover; supporting the Coalition Government’s national tree planting campaign”, Justin drew attention to the archetypal landscape.

There is now clearly increased impetus behind woodland creation but this is really challenging. More trees are needed; not just in woodland but in creating hedgerows, copses, shelterbelts as well – creating wildlife corridors that interconnect the landscape. This also has a major urban dimension too – minimising the impact of the “heat island” effects, for health and wellbeing and as part of the trees and green infrastructure that can transform the image of urban areas.

Justin announced the launch of the Woodland Trust’s exciting new campaign: More Trees, More Good – to double UK native woodland cover. For more details, see: <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/more-trees-more-good/Pages/campaign.aspx?gclid=CMD7-7aZ3qICFRculAodh3LNPw>

5c. Opportunities for Woodland Creation, EWGS Grant Support: Ewan Calcott, Forestry Commission

Taking into account comments made, Ewan defended the Forestry Commission’s approach but acknowledged that they too were looking at ways of trying to reduce the levels of regulation and bureaucracy that affected woodland creation and management. Under EWGS, Herefordshire benefited from some £10,000 per annum covering 150 Ha.

Through the work of the Forum’s Woodland Opportunities Mapping Task Group, woodland targeting had become a major landscape planning tool and there were now significant grant incentives in place for both woodland creation and management. Additional contributions of £2,000 were available for Woodland Opportunity Map priorities – for over 70% of the region. Additionally Farm Woodland Payment rates have been adjusted to allow Single Farm Payments to continue after land is converted to woodland. This means that average woodland creation grant allocations have risen to as much as £11,500 per Ha.

For further details, see: www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-73UBPP

6. Climate Change, Biodiversity & Plant Health: Keith Kirby, Natural England

On entering the Upper Park and descending along the old carriage drive the next stop was at the “Bonsai Oak”. Here, Keith introduced the subject listing a number of expectations:

- Warmer summers particularly in south-east
- Wetter winters, drier summers
- But extremes more critical than the mean temperatures – e.g. effects of cold winter compared to run of mild ones
- Possible long-term effects on wildlife
 - Changes in timing of event and the breakdown in links between species
 - Changes in growth and competitiveness
 - Changes in distribution of species
 - Re-assemblage of species
 - New pests and diseases (invasion, or just because more species under stress)

With these in mind, there is a need to prepare in terms of designations and conservation objectives, of approaches to future native (frontier) species, what species we grow – having to survive through the next 50 yrs as well as being suitable for future conditions.

Keith advocated a number of adaptation measures as well as working at a larger landscape scale:

- Looking after currently rich areas; the “jewels” – essential as sources
- Mixtures of species, mixed structures to provide heterogeneity
- Using management to create micro-climate variation
- Avoid marginal sites where species may be stressed
- Remove other sources of stress (deer, shade, enrichment) so build up source populations
- Create new habitat, but don't be too prescriptive; quantity rather than quality may prove more important

He concluded with a hopeful message – our trees and woods have survived incredible changes, they may yet surprise us and prove more resilient than we think.

7. Grey Squirrels: Impacts and challenges for woodland managers: Bede Howell

At the fenced natural regeneration site in the Upper Park, Bede drew the analogy of the journey through life of a tree as compared to that of us humans. At the age of six years (the youngest recorded), if a tree gets damaged by grey squirrels then it becomes seriously disadvantaged and will fall behind. Many of these trees are planted with the assistance of public money and in this period of austerity, it is criminal to see such money wasted if adequate protection against squirrels is not put in place.

Grey squirrels require three things: food; a safe place to live; and to breed. The latter is believed to be the only truly effective way of reducing numbers and therefore research and implementation of breeding control is advocated. This is already happening elsewhere in Europe.

Bede stressed that the growing of wood is the essence onto which we grafted all the multi-benefits that trees and woodland bring. Grey squirrels are therefore a challenge for all and eradication must actively be pursued by volunteers and professionals working together.

8. Deer Management on a landscape scale: Greg Jones, The Deer Initiative

Descending into the Lower Park overlooking Lawn Pool, Greg again reinforced the message that deer were the biggest threat to forestry and wider land management with numbers reaching the 2 million mark and increasing.

The Deer Initiative is a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private interests dedicated to "ensuring the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales ". They do not have any statutory powers but do have responsibility for determining policy and setting priorities.

There are six different species of wild deer to be found in this country and Moccas is renowned for its fallow deer herd. The Deer Initiative has continued to work to develop Deer Management Groups in England and Wales and complete impact research. They have also been working recently with partners to provide training to owners, managers and agents.

A range of guides on wild deer management topics:

<http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/html/bestpractice.htm>

9. Butterfly & Moth Conservation – how can woodland accommodate, improve and enhance invertebrate populations: Dr Jenny Joy & Dave Grundy, Butterfly Conservation

Keeping the Lawn Pool to the right, we traversed the Lower Park arriving at the Old Man of Moccas alias the "Hypebaeus Tree"(Moccas Beetle Tree). Here Jenny introduced Butterfly Conservation which operates 33 nature reserves and are involved in 67 landscape-scale projects to conserve habitats.

The charity has almost 15,000 members in the UK and 31 volunteer Branches throughout the British Isles. They employ over 50 people including many highly qualified scientists, making us the world's largest research institute for butterflies and moths. They do keep a national database but much of Herefordshire is under-recorded. Nationally, they have seen a 80% decline in open habitat species between 1990 and 2006. However woodland species have increased in numbers; probably due to more and better woodland management and simple changes such as introducing coppice cycles. However, more is needing to be done and partnership schemes are advocated.

Dave Gundy noted that invertebrates are super indicators; particularly moth sites. A woodland or wood pasture setting has:

- Wide structural variation
- Diverse habitats
- Rare grassland species can also be found
- Ancientness and continuity of sites

During surveys taken recently over five nights at Moccas two previously unrecorded species were logged:

1. Four-spotted footman
2. Marbled bug
3. 9 bat species were also recorded

For more details:

<http://www.butterfly-conservation.org>

The meeting concluded with an excellent networking lunch