**Woodland Management Walks**

The following notes and observations stem from a series of visits to woodland sites managed by members of Natural Bsingstoke in 2014 conducted by Barry Bennett who, as a leading members of the Oakley Woodlands Group, has manage two ancient woodland sites in Oakley for over 15 years.

**Cowdown Copse, Oakley Woodland Group 8th February 2014**

Cowdown Copse is a fragment of ancient woodland, i.e. it had been coppiced for at least 400 years. It has a fair range of AWI (Ancient Woodland Indicator) species of flora.

The discussion covered a) coppicing activities and b) management of the “rides”. Barry is mainly interested on the management of rides for invertebrates, especially butterflies.

Readers will find the material from a Wessex AONB course of 2012 - “Woodland Management for Biodiversity” of interest below. Some of the points made in that course material are reflected in OWGs management techniques.

The first lesson we learnt was not to go into woodlands when storms are blowing! A huge oak had been blown down in the recent winds and another lay close by blown down a few years ago. In both cases the roots were surprisingly shallow.

The Copse has an ‘upper storey’ of oak and an ‘under storey’ of hazel which used to be coppiced on a seven-year cycle. The poles produced were used then for all manner of things on Manydown (such as hurdles when it had large numbers of sheep). Coppicing prolongs the life of the hazel to many hundreds of years.

**Coppice Management**

Some stools could be anywhere from 400 to 100 years old. The site has been split into a number of Stoops. There are resident dormice so this affects the period of rotational coppicing. In 15 years they have not completed a single rotation. However, some areas would be left alone anyway.

The management plan laid down by the Borough Council over 20 years ago required them to manage Cowdown Copse in the way it was done by past generations of woodsmen.The OWG have a problem in that, with the techniques they are using, they cannot keep up with the original planned rotation. They do not routinely use chainsaws for coppicing. They do use these for handling larger pieces of timber or wood, but not for coppicing.

A relatively small part of the Copse has been deliberately left as it was, untouched. Some coppiced areas are being left to grow again for many more years than seven – which meant that the trunks became too thick for easy felling. A chain-saw is then used for felling because hand-sawing would take too long.

It was unclear why chainsawing was not used more extensively. I got the impression it was a leadership view that retaining “traditional” methods of hand coppicing would help to retain volunteers. If chainsaws were used for coppicing, while they would be much more effective, the volunteers would be reduced to just processing the arrisings. As they seemed to be overwhelmed by the amount of arrisings they were currently generating, this approach makes sense. However, the rotational management plan is slipping further and further behind.

(This was not mentioned but I have seen a commercial coppicing operation process an area twice or three times the size of Cowdown & St John’s Copses combined, in one season. It was a team of four that worked for three or four months, full-time weather permitting, using chainsaws. The vast majority of the arrisings were also removed.)

From the present coppicing, Oakley Woodlands Group produce bean poles and firewood which are neatly stacked in graduated thicknesses. They also do a week’s charcoal burning every year – hiring the charcoal burner. These products are sold in Oakley to produce significant funds for the Group. The scrap wood is piled in neat heaps where it can decompose and this provides a habitat for beetles and some sort of fearsome ‘tiger spider’! Barry urged that these heaps should be sited away from the edges of the rides because they are unsightly and they become covered and entangled with brambles which are then difficult to clear. . They tend to burn the really fine brash on site, moving the fires around the site to prevent baking of the underlying soil. While the sites are open to the public, they are not on “public access” land, so they are less restricted on the use of fires. Groups working on “public access” land are prohibited from using fires to burn brash. The newly coppiced areas are fenced off by plastic fencing (of the kind used around building sites) or by natural ‘hedges’ constructed from the waste branches to protect the new shoots from the deer.

**Rides Management**

Barry indicated the old rides that had been cleared: those running east-west being wider than those running north-south to allow the sunlight to penetrate. The brambles have been cut back from the edges of the rides in ‘scallop’ shapes which allow the dormant wild flowers to bloom again. A few primroses were just flowering and blue bells were beginning to sprout. Barry pointed out two magnificent oaks which stood at a distance in the centre of a ride. These are believed to be ‘marker’ trees which enabled the old woodsmen to know where they were in the much larger wood that once covered the area between Oakley and Basingstoke.

SAG & DF

The copse has a good display of woodland flora and woodland butterflies. Butterfly transects have been recording species for over 10 years now.

**Old Down Wildlife Park, April 2014**:

Chris Rose led the walk. At first the extent of the park is not apparent. It is grass downland, as may be expected, but it is well broken up by swathes of recently planted trees and shrubs which separate the long, wide rides that are covered at the moment in cowslips. But the shrubs are constantly spreading outwards and threating to take over the grass-land and the conservation group is considering some large-scale cutting back of the new growth of dogwood and hawthorn.

The recently planted trees and shrubs are densely packed together and need drastic thinning out to allow trees to develop to their full height and shape. The conservation group are also considering opening up winding pathways through this tree-planting which could become attractive features for children. There is a small formal play area in the middle of the park surrounded by dense shrubbery and trees.

At the westernmost part of Old Down there are magnificent views towards Pardown Copse and Oakley. The route of the Old Roman Road lies here, though probably its original course lies under the spreading hedgerow – a wide grass ride for walkers has evolved instead which is also under threat from the encroaching hedgerow.

A belt of mature beech trees runs along the northern edge of Old Down and a narrow, winding footpath runs through it, sometimes following an older route marked by a depression in the ground, sometimes deviating. The conservation group is considering opening up the older route where it has become blocked by young trees. The borough council are felling some of the trees that are dangerous and stumps are deliberately left sometimes as high as 3 metres as standing dead wood. There are few wild flowers within this tree belt – just one little clump of bluebells, for instance, even though it is ancient woodland –this is the result of the high tannin content of beeches which constitute the majority of the tree belt, which permeates the soil.

Old Down is threatened by the possibility of accommodating an access road to housing developments on South Manydown post 2029. If this does come to pass, then every effort will be made to obtain a more than equal offset of additional open space to extend Old Down Park westwards into the Oakley Green Gap and to encompass the Old Drove Road from Pardown to Fuzzy Drove.

David Flint

**Chineham Woods, July 2014**

We visited the four woodland areas which comprise Chineham Woods - semi ancient woodland areas now islands of woodland among the housing estates though they are linked by a small brook – Petty’s Brook - which joined the Loddon to the east below the Incinerator. These comprise Great Sorrels Copse – the largest area, Long Copse, Guinea Copse and Tollhouse Meadow Copse.They are all remnants of much larger woods comprised mainly of oak and other standards with a hazel under storey.

We only encountered three joggers (and a few rare butterflies) on the woodland paths which are narrow and easily constrained by bramble each year. Evidence of work done by the voluntary conservation group responsible for these woods was pointed out to us by David Glover but the impact of the conservation group in managing the wood is marginal and they are unable to maintain even an extended coppicing regime.

David Flint