

Higher Level Stewardship and Friends Vision overview for 2017

In 2016 we undertook a stock take of the Group's activities on the Hillfort as measured against the HLS and Vision (available to be viewed on the Friend's web site). This note assesses our activities in 2017.

Background

1. On 1 Dec 2013 Bedford Borough Council entered into a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Agreement with Natural England (NE) for the management of Mowsbury Hillfort. It runs until Dec 2023. The agreement can be read in full on the Friend's website.
2. On 9 Feb 2016 a site meeting took place at the hillfort between Jon Bishop, Bedford Borough Green Space Guardian, Frances Prince and Sarah Clarkson of NE, David Kenny, Historic England (HE) and Geoff Saunders, Bedford Borough's Archaeological Officer. For the Friends, John Wallace and Lynn Caudrey also attended. A note of the meeting can be read on the Friend's website, the following recommendations were made:
 - Avoid spreading grass cuttings from meadow and courtyard on site.
 - A 10 m length of bramble on the north of the site, beyond the outer ditch, should be removed.
 - The inner island would be easier to interpret without dead hedges around it. NE considered dead hedges to be of limited habitat benefit.
 - NE would look into coring the ponds.
 - HE suggested clearing trees to form a viewpoint east across the golf course.
 - NE suggested coppicing cherry plums on southern perimeter of site and in the old orchard (south).
 - NE suggested coppicing some 5-6 metre glades in the woodland between the old orchard (south) and the old orchard (east).
 - A triangular patch could be coppiced on the south west corner of the hillfort.
 - HE suggested making a viewing point south from the raised walkway by cutting the tops of the trees.
 - The Archaeological Officer recommended action should be taken to discourage rabbits.
 - Two or three interpretation boards could be erected
 - NE undertook to commission a management plan for the site.
3. In April 2016 the Friends drew up a vision document based on the HLS agreement and incorporating recommendations from the site visit, with the exception of the view point east. The Vision can be read in full on the website. It sought to balance the needs of nature and archaeology, whilst taking account of Bedford Borough's duty to make scheduled monuments in their ownership accessible to the public. It runs to 2021. Broadly its aims were:

- **Archaeology** (inner island; medieval moats and raised walkway; west and east ponds and leat; and iron age ramparts, but bearing in mind all the scheduled area may have recoverable archaeology) – **keep these areas clear of scrub and debris.**
- **Wildflower meadows** (Courtyard; Mowsbury Hill meadow) – **mow and remove cuttings annually.**
- **Traditional Orchards** (East and South) – **encourage the health of the fruit trees.**
- **Woodland and scrub** (Courtyard meadow fringe; woodlands east of orchards; hedgerow and boundary strip; western tree belt – **fallen and standing deadwood left in situ.**
- **Public footpath** – **keep clear for access.**

4. Following the recommendations of the February 2016 meeting, the Borough Council has arranged for the removal of grass cuttings from the meadow over the last two years. To deal with grass cuttings from the courtyard, east orchard and ramparts; a burn site was established in 2016, located well outside the Scheduled area. This is also used to dispose of scrub and other cuttings.

In January 2017 some of the Friends raised concerns that too much was being cleared from the site. As a consequence, the recommendations made by NE and HE regarding clearance aimed at increasing bio diversity and creating viewpoints out of the site, have not yet been implemented.

To date there is no management plan and coring has not been arranged. No action has been taken regarding rabbits.

Timothy Hopwell has taken over from Frances Price at NE and is now responsible for the HLS Agreement. He has contacted the Group and Council, and has indicated that a new bid is required for the £32k to undertake the management plan, archaeological and hydrological surveys and install three interpretation boards. This is in hand, as is, hopefully, work on the briefs for the survey work.

2017 overview

Summary of activities

5. **Archaeology** – A viewing strip across the island was brush cut 7 June. The island was brush cut 16 August and cuttings removed to the burn site. Stumps in the north moat were cut level in February. The remaining sawed logs were removed from the south moat. The nettles in the moats were cut in May and August. Nettles and bramble were cut round pond 1 in July. Pond 2 was cleared of nettles twice. Scrub was cleared around pond 3 in February. Scrub, nettles and bramble were cleared around pond 4 in February to let in more light and integrate it into the site. Danny chain sawed the stumps in the leat. Nettles and bramble were cleared from the leat four more times. In January a small amount of bramble was removed from the large patches encroaching on the south east rampart. Three quarters of the rampart was brush cut 4 Oct, and the final southern quarter cut and raked 1 November.
6. **Wildflower meadows** – Mowsbury Hill meadow was cut 3 Oct with cuttings removed 12 Oct. The triangular area at the bottom of the meadow was cut with cuttings left. During the year some patches of dog wood and spindle were cut back manually and common ragwort and creeping thistle pulled.

Bramble was brush cut at the back of the courtyard 7 June in an effort to discourage it. The courtyard was cut 13 Sept and again 27 Sept with cuttings removed to the burn site.

7. **Traditional orchards** – The east orchard was brush cut 3 May to discourage the hogweed and bramble. Some brush previously stacked around the pear tree was removed to the burn site. The east orchard was brush cut and raked 1 and 8 November with cuttings removed to the burn site. No work was done in the south (neglected) orchard.
8. **Woodland and scrub** – The scrub along the old field boundary was trimmed in January to maintain access. No work was done in the other wooded areas. Half a large ash tree was blown down in the courtyard meadow fringe and left in situ.
9. **Public footpath** – The footpath was brush cut 28 June.

Other notable events

10. The wassail took place 10 January and was well attended.
11. Chris organised the weekly butterfly count.
12. The scheduling boundary on the south of the site reaches down almost to the Butts and has been delineated by brush cutting. It was brush cut 4 Oct by which time it was fairly overgrown with bramble.
13. A new welcome sign was attached to the gate into Mowsbury Hill meadow, kindly carved by Nikki.
14. One interpretation board is planned at the entrance to the site.
15. A walk around Putnoe Wood and the Hillfort was arranged for CPRE members on 29 June following the awarding of the CPRE Mark last year. This went well and all enjoyed the tour.
16. Marion organised a visit to the Hillfort from two classes from Renhold Lower School in September. This went well and the children enjoyed it very much.

Conclusions

17. This year has been one of consolidation, with most areas being maintained in a similar state to last year while we observe how our activities are impacting the site. This is confirmed by the updated fixed-point photography, undertaken by Lynn in December. The burn site has been very successful and has meant we can avoid spreading cuttings on the site and obviate the necessity to build further dead-hedging.
18. **Archaeology** – Regrowth of scrub on the main archaeological features has been managed; there are signs of increased flora diversity with cowslips in the south moat and water forget-me-not in the bottom of the east moat. Brooklime, pink water speedwell and celery-leaved buttercup were noted in the base of pond 1. There was an additional patch of yellow rattle on the north-west rampart, but blackthorn increased on the south west rampart. The island is a little more visible. Moschatel appeared there again in April, although rather obscured by dog's mercury.

The 10m length of bramble north of the outer ditch has regrown and the ditch is overgrown with thistles etc.

Rabbit activity is still taking place across the site.

19. **Wildflower meadows** - Wildflower meadows have been cut and cuttings removed. The plant survey on Mowsbury Hill Meadow showed 7 calcareous grassland indicators being frequent or occasional: grass vetchling, fairy flax, adder's tongue fern, agrimony, wild basil, hoary ragwort and perforate St John's wort. The first three are strong indicators. 8 indicators is the minimum required for consideration as CWS. Of the negative indicators, common ragwort seemed less abundant, creeping thistle is still widespread. Areas of scrub were perhaps a little less dominant than last year.

Bramble brush cut at the back of the courtyard in June grew back faster than the other herbs – we can see if it has made a difference to its growth next year. Bramble is generally widespread across the courtyard, but wildflowers are still prolific with field scabious an addition this year.

It proved impractical to use herbicides on the scrub and bramble due to regulations applying to Council owned land. We could focus more effort on hand cutting the bramble in the courtyard and the scrub on the meadow to make an impact.

The hoary ragwort, although an indicator, is poisonous to animals and would present a problem if cuttings were to be used for fodder. The Wildlife Trust suggested the best option might be to burn cuttings if in the future the Borough Council are unable to remove them.

20. **Traditional orchards** – Cutting the east orchard in May kept the hogweed and bramble at a reasonable height; less rain in early summer may also have helped. Other wildflowers such as common spotted orchid, wild basil, wild liquorice and tufted vetch still grew.

We could consider whether we take forward NE suggestion to selectively coppice in the south (neglected) orchard. This is to prolong the lives of the cherry plums and to provide growth at different heights for nesting birds. This orchard appeared mainly full of nettle this year, but was too overgrown to assess.

21. **Woodland and scrub** – not assessed, as no substantive work has been undertaken in these areas.

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Circulation: The Friends Group, Jon Bishop, Geoff Saunders, Timothy Hopwell and David Kenney.