

STUDLAND ORCHARD, MEADOW & COMMON

Management Progress Report

It is now three years since we cleared Scrub Block (1) on Studland Common. It was the first year of the ten-year HLS management agreement to reduce scrub from the main part of the Common and to commence Dexter cattle grazing on the Orchard, Meadow and Common.

I think it was Julie Melin-Stubbs who said that we would start to see the benefits of scrub clearance and grazing after about five-years. We are now only three into the conservation management and we thought that we should report on how things are developing.

On Monday 6th June 2016, Tony Locke (MCV Chairman), Angela Peters (New Forest Land Advice Service), Gary Palmer (Naturalist) and I walked around the Orchard, Meadow and each of the scrub blocks (1), (2) and (3) on Studland Common to check on progress.

Orchard: The initial clearance consisted flailing, burning of much blackthorn, the planting of about 20 fruit trees and the removal of garden furniture and rubble. The site is now much improved visually. Most of the blackthorn scrub areas are quickly returning to grassland, which was one of the primary objectives. There are still numerous garden plants on site, but in some ways this enhances this contained area. New wildflower species are also beginning to come through. This orchard is developing into a real community asset.

In terms of management, we consider that annual flailing of the Orchard should continue for the immediate future and that cattle should also continue to graze this area. (The Dexter's can often be found tucked away in this favoured and sheltered corner of the meadow). The planted trees are mostly doing well and we have a nearby resident checking on them to make sure that they do not dry out. The trees will in time need to be pruned to keep them in good productive order. Further trees should continue to be planted until we have a total of about 35-40 trees, including those that were in the gardens prior to the site's development as a community orchard. It is important that the arisings from the annual flail should continue to be deposited in one location as per last year.

The smallest part of the orchard (the land closest to the access gate) is being nurtured as a wild area, with bramble and nettle dominating and although we have planted a couple of cherry trees in this area, we do not envisage planting further trees here.

The Orchard attracts butterflies, bumblebees and many bird species, including Goldfinch, Greenfinch and the occasional summer Whitethroat.



Marbled White on Common Knapweed

Meadow: Because of past heavy pony grazing and signs that the land has been ploughed in previous generations the field is dominated by Creeping and Meadow Buttercup, although there is a rich area of four very small species of clover towards the northern gate just past the cattle ‘wallowing area’ to the right of the footpath. The clovers were identified by Martin Rand – County Recorder. The natural ponding here attracts large numbers of invertebrates when it is full of water with muddy fringes.

Grazing and hay-making are having a positive effect on the Meadow, though the number of cattle and length of period they are on this site means that it will take many years to enhance the flora range of the Meadow. The Land Advice Service has suggested that it might be worth considering volunteers collecting seed from plants on the Common i.e. a nearby natural seed provenance to redistribute in the Meadow. This might be time-consuming, but would in my opinion be preferable to sowing a mix of wildflower seed brought in from further afield. Some of the ground would have to be scarified to give the seed the best chance of germinating (this could be in selective areas most likely to benefit from re-seeding).

The annual hay cut by Richard and Sarah Harvey should continue, with the baled hay being given to the grazier in return for cutting the meadow. The hay cut should continue to leave a scalloped band around the edges allowing wildlife and invertebrates to migrate and for moths and butterflies to lay their

eggs for the following season. The scalloped edges should be cut rotationally i.e. leaving some bands uncut for 2-3 years before re-cutting.

Studland Common - Scrub Block (1): The site is located at the third gate across the Meadow starting to the north of the fenceline with the water trough in it. The access point is along the main footpath to the east of the scrub block, though the cattle have also created an alternative access point north of the water trough, which has since been opened up a little more by MCV in agreement with the PC to provide secondary access for the public. Scrub and trees were removed from this site in 2013/14 (one year later than the original scheduled start date). Soon after clearance, grass started to return to this former rich grassland site for the first time in 40-50 years. Users are now able to walk through this block, which was almost impenetrable for so many years.

We recognised that the scrub clearance would also provide an initial habitat that would colonise with several unwanted species e.g. bramble, ground ivy, spear and creeping thistle, which need ongoing management for the foreseeable future and for which HLS funding is paid to the Parish Council for this clearance work. The thistles were targeted in June/July 2016 and some 3,000 have now been pulled by hand. Advice on whether a licenced sprayer is required should be sought, in which case the PC needs to arrange this prior to flowering and seeding taking place in 2017. Removing the thistles by hand before they seed will only hold the species at bay, but will not reduce their rhizome system below ground level. Thistle currently dominates some areas of Scrub Block (1).



Spear Thistle

Grazing is having a positive beneficial effect on the ground flora in Scrub Block (1) and three or four good stands of bluebell were noticeable in spring at various locations around the site. It should be noted that in the first year after scrub clearance, the cattle were left on site too late into the early spring growing season, which allowed them to graze off the emerging bluebell plants, which resulted in many not flowering. Since then, the cattle have been taken off the Common early enough to allow bluebell growth to reach their flowering stage. The practice of removing the cattle early enough in the season, should be retained throughout the ten-year management plan.

Cattle have recently been put back on to the Common, but will need to be taken back off again for TB testing (mid-July) and during the school summer holidays (as agreed under the management agreement).

There are still dominant trees stands in Scrub Block (1) shading out substantial areas of the site. Recent aerial photographs show how little canopy has really been removed from the block and further selective thinning (about another ten medium-sized scrub/trees – mostly hawthorn) should be further considered for removal to help bring the objective of opening up 0.5ha of grassland at this site.

Annual autumn flailing of the central interior should continue for the immediate future (say at least another three years 2016, 17 and 18) but with scalloping around the interior hedgerow sides being rotationally cut allowing a

graduated edge to the block interior i.e. hedgerow trees on the outside (for nesting birds), longer scrub edge herbage up to 30-60cm in height (for invertebrates – including butterfly food plants etc.) and a shorter grassland interior (for ground flora to thrive as nectar sources for bees and butterflies.)

This site is now starting to provide clear evidence of the blackthorn scrub area returning to grassland with ground flora, which is the primary objective. See plant list below, which was surveyed on 6th June 2016, but which is not an exhaustive list. Wildflowers, including some which are synonymous with semi-improved grassland habitats. The latter of which are indicated as **(G)** below:

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| Common Knapweed (G) | Common Bird's-foot Trefoil (G) |
| Lesser Stitchwort (G) | Common Figwort |
| Heath Speedwell (G) | Common Vetch (G) |
| Woody Nightshade (Bittersweet) | Foxglove |
| Cat's-ear (G) | Groundsel |
| Wild Strawberry (G) | Creeping Buttercup (G) |
| Bulbous Buttercup (G) | Ribwort Plantain (G) |
| Spear Thistle | Creeping Thistle |
| Common Sorrel (G) | Marsh Thistle (G) |
| Perforate St John's Wort (G) | Trailing St John's Wort (G) |
| Hedge Bedstraw (G) | Common Mouse-ear (G) |
| Red Clover (G) | White Clover (G) |
| Changing Forget-me-not (G) | Daisy (G) |



Creeping Buttercup

Scrub Block (2): This site is southeast of Scrub Block (1) and was undertaken two years ago. Its main access point is along the main northwest/southeast footpath heading across to Colin's Bench. The top northwest part of the site leads towards the gate where the second interpretation board in the Pleasure Grounds is situated. Grasses started to reappear after the first year following scrub clearance and flailing and is closely mirroring what happened in Scrub Block (1) in that a variety of low growing herbs have also appeared, indicative of semi-improved grassland. This block has a fairly high portion of bracken along its boundary with the Pleasure Grounds and reminds us that the new fenceline installed in 2012/13 was erected well into the common and not on its original line that separated the common from the woodland much closer to the ancient ditch. The bracken needs continuous pulling/cutting to weaken its long-lived rhizome root system. The PC receives annual HLS payments for having this treated/removed annually. At present, we are pulling and cutting new growth in addition to the annual flail, which should continue to tackle this bracken regrowth each season to help weaken this ferns rhizome system.

One of our MCV members specifically looks after Scrub Block (2) and has made sure that the blackthorn regrowth is kept under control. In thus doing, he has also ensured a lovely growth of Foxglove, though this plant will gradually disappear as other grasses and herbs finally favour this site.



Foxglove

Grazing is having a positive effect in this block, though again, cattle numbers and limited time on site means that the site will be slow to deliver its objectives.

Where blackthorn and gorse scrub has been cleared, new growth of gorse is just starting to come back and from a conservation point of view, this should be allowed to grow as it will provide good habitat for Whitethroat and possibly even Dartford Warbler. The gorse that was cut from this same area had grown for many years unmanaged and had gone extremely 'leggy' and did not provide good habitat. The new gorse should be left to develop, but should be re-cut once it gets to an age when it is no longer a suitable habitat. (Action - Determine age whereby it will need to be rotationally re-cut).

Scrub Block (3): This comprises two adjacent blocks with a grass footpath separating each block and was cut last winter (2015/16). Signs of returning grassland habitat has already been noted. Some felled wood still needs to be removed from this site and laying deadwood placed into a single site to rot down to provide additional invertebrate habitat.

This latest block also appears to be developing along the same lines as Scrub Block (1) so is about three years behind. There are two or three sycamore and one or two holm oak that still need to be removed as this work was not completed last year. There are two additional sycamore in the hedgerow line that also need to be removed, whilst retaining the hedgerow.

Scrub Block (4): This winter's scrub block removal work will be marked off for inspection and will be agreed with the PC before work commences. The scrub block site location is south of Scrub Block (1) and is 0.2ha.

Again, a hedgerow will be retained around the perimeter of the site, which will have two access points (to be confirmed). There is a mix of Pedunculate (English), Turkey and Holm Oaks. The latter two species to be removed under the HLS agreement.

A fairly dense belt of trees and scrub will be retained along the boundary adjoining the Meadow so that when viewed from the meadow, no appreciable change will be seen. We achieved this with Scrub Block (1) so have no doubt that this will also be achieved with Scrub Block (4).

Wildlife Surveys: The MCV has been recording birds at all three sites (the Orchard, Meadow and Common), as have butterflies, where we now regularly carry out a Transect Survey as part of the national Butterfly Conservation project under the guidance of the County Recorder – Bob Annell. Regular moth trapping is also taking place on the Common (monthly between March and September – subject to weather) and is undertaken by one of MCVs knowledgeable members. Flora is also being monitored and recorded, with the help and guidance of the County Recorder – Martin Rand.

It is MCVs intention to try to find recorders specifically for grasses, sedges, rushes, lichens and fungi as we currently do not have 'expertise' in these areas within the MCV.

Summary Opinion: It has been pleasing to see so much good work being undertaken by MCV under the HLS conservation management plans approved by the Parish Council.

While there will always be differences of 'opinion' about management strategies, we appear to be gradually winning over some of the users who were previously reticent about introducing the HLS scheme on the Common.

The biggest benefits at Studland is that by the time the fourth scrub block has been removed this winter, nearly 1 hectare of scrub will have been opened up for public (and wildlife) use (1 hectare is equal to about 30 doubles tennis courts or one and a half football pitches) where previously the land was almost impenetrable. People, and in general dogs and cattle seem to muddle

along together and we have not had any major issues since the ponies were removed from the Meadow several years ago, except for irresponsible dog owners allowing their animals to foul the grounds without picking up or throwing filled bags into the hedgerows!

Whilst cattle do leave plenty of ‘deposits’ of their own around the site and do, during the recent wet winters churn up softer ground, we know that this ultimately benefits both plants and animals, which in turn is appreciated by all users interested in seeing a variety of wildlife.



Blackcap (Male)

We hope that this report will provide an up to date assessment of the present position of the 10-Year Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) management plan agreed with the Parish Council following its initial lengthy public consultation period. HLS progress continues to be monitored once or twice a year by the Woodland/Common Interest Group.

The advice received from the New Forest Land Advice Service has been central to the plan for this community facility, which is developing in the way envisaged by the Council, the Land Advice Service, Natural England and the Milford Conservation Volunteers (who carry out much of the voluntary work) in the Orchard, Meadow and the Common for the benefit of wildlife and the wider community and holidaymakers who regularly use the asset.