

Stiddicombe Wood

Ecological Survey & Management Recommendations

I visited the wood on the 19th June 2002 to carry out an ecological survey on behalf of the Aune Conservation Association.

The woodland extends to 4.1 hectares on a steep north-facing slope on the banks of the River Avon. The wood is some 400 metres long by 110 metres at the widest point and it rises from sea level to 50 metres ASL. Mature sweet chestnut, sycamores and some sessile oaks dominate the wood. There were a number of mature Scots pines growing close to the waters edge on the northern side of the wood, but only one of these appears to have survived. This one tree is being heavily overshadowed by a taller sycamore and is already dying back, as many others have done previously, due to lack of light. Some, but not all, of the Scots pines have been blown down in storms. These pines provided favoured nesting sites for a heronry until the trees died or fell over. The herons now nest in pines further down the river. Severe storm damage was suffered at the western end of the wood during the gales of October 1987 and January 1990, particularly during the latter. The decision was taken not to clear the large number of fallen trees after these events.

This raises an important point about the lack of active management within the wood for many years. Most of the wood was planted with a commercial species mix during the latter part of the 19th C, but it is not clear how the estate proposed to extract the timber. Not only is the wood on a very steep slope, but also access over farmland between the top of the wood and Higher Aunemouth is inadequate for timber lorries. Extraction to the river could cause unacceptable levels of damage to the cliff and the use of barges to transport the timber to a roadside loading point is not feasible. As a result, the timber has not been cropped and it is now considered to be uneconomic to fell and then extract it. Fences around the wood have not been effective for many years and there is now an extensive pattern of cattle tracks within the wood. The fact that cattle have been using Stiddicombe as a wood pasture for many years has adversely influenced the ground flora. This may have resulted in some herbs and shrubs becoming very scarce or temporarily absent.

The wood is very 'top-heavy', with a dense canopy of tall sweet chestnuts and sycamores. In the past, these have shaded out a great deal of the shrub layer and ground flora throughout most of the wood. More light is now able to penetrate to the forest floor in the wind damaged western end of the wood and in those areas near the eastern end, which have already been thinned by Terry Lane. Much of the centre of the wood is still very dark, however, and the growth of large numbers of small sycamores further reduces the amount of light available at ground level. Managers of the wood are faced with the difficult decision as to how much timber to fell, in order to encourage biodiversity, without increasing the risk of wind throw to unacceptable levels. Some of the chestnuts which have been felled are being used to make cleft stakes and posts. However, the majority of

the trees to be taken down will be cut up and left to decompose in habitat piles or lines within the wood. The feasibility to ring barking some trees to provide standing dead trees needs to be considered, since this would add another important dimension to habitat diversity for fungi, insects and birds. Trees growing close to the paths could not be ring-barked, because they could become a danger to walkers. Allowing trees to die and decompose 'on the hoof' has the added advantage that damage which can be caused by wind throw at the edges of felled glades, can be significantly reduced.

The list of plants and birds noted during the survey are listed in the appendix. Whilst the list appears to be rather short, this can be attributed to a lack of light in much of the wood and damage caused by cattle trampling and grazing over the years. This should not discourage either the Evans Estate nor the Avon Conservation Association, because the wood offers tremendous scope for enhancement of its amenity and wildlife value. Because Stiddicombe does not appear to contain any rarities, this allows far greater scope for creative management. There are signs of ancient woodland status, however, and the presence of sanicle, tutsan, wood sorrel, pignut, dog's mercury and bluebell indicate that this is indeed the site of a much older woodland.

MANAGEMENT TASKS AND THINGS TO DO

It is suggested that thought be given to carrying out some or all of the following management tasks:-

- a. fence the wood to exclude cattle and sheep and provide stiles at both ends;
- b. continue to thin the canopy to about one half of its existing density, but leave the western end largely untouched. Plant ash with some wild cherry and shrubs in the mix;
- c. plant the remainder of the wood with ash (where the canopy is thin enough), sessile oak, hornbeam, small-leaved lime, hazel and holly. Wild cherry, rowan, wild service tree and guelder rose can be planted close to the margins of the wood. Butcher's broom could be planted close to the water's edge, using seed from a local source;
- d. clear the poor groups of conifers at the top of the wood to waste and replant with Scots pines;
- e. ring bark some sycamore and sweet chestnuts, but well away from paths, and leave these standing to create woodpecker feeding and nesting trees;
- f. stack cut timber into log piles held in place at both ends with cleft stakes;
- g. pile all the cut brushwood into windrow lines running up and down the slope, rather than as round heaps. This should make bramble control more straightforward.

I would be delighted to meet Messrs Seager Berry, Lane and Crawford on site, so we can discuss options for management of the wood, to agree our respective inputs and an appropriate timescale.

The plant species recorded on the 19th June included the following. They are arranged in

accordance with the classification set out in third edition of *The Flora of the British Isles* by Clapham, Tutin and Moore (1989). I have used both the common and latin names: -

Common Polypody Fern	(<i>Polypodium vulgare</i>)
Hart's-tongue Fern	(<i>Asplenium scolopendrium</i>)
Lady-fern	(<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i>)
Soft Shield-fern	(<i>Polystichum setiferum</i>)
Male-fern	(<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>)
Hay-scented Buckler-fern	(<i>Dryopteris aemula</i>)
Broad Buckler-fern	(<i>Dryopteris dilatata</i>)
Scot's Pine	(<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>)
Silver fir	(<i>Picea alba</i>)
Celandine	(<i>Ranunculus ficaria</i>)
Aconite	(<i>Eranthis hyemalis</i>)
Creeping Buttercup	(<i>Ranunculus repens</i>)
Common Violet	(<i>Viola riviniana</i>)
Red Campion	(<i>Silene dioica</i>)
Greater Stitchwort	(<i>Stellaria holostea</i>)
Tutsan	(<i>Hypericum androsaemum</i>)
Herb Robert	(<i>Geranium robertianum</i>)
Holly	(<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>)
Wood-sorrel	(<i>Oxalis acetosella</i>)
Blackthorn	(<i>Prunus spinosa</i>)
Hawthorn	(<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>)
Blackberry	(<i>Rubus spp.</i>)
Wood Avens or Herb Bennet	(<i>Geum urbanum</i>)
Pennywort or Navelwort	(<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>)
Rosebay Willow-herb	(<i>Epilobium angustifolium</i>)
Epiphanter's Nightshade	(<i>Circaea lutetiana</i>)
Sanicle	(<i>Sanicula europaea</i>)
Hemlock	(<i>Conium maculatum</i>)
Pignut	(<i>Conopodium majus</i>)
Ivy	(<i>Hedera helix</i>)
Elder	(<i>Sambucus nigra</i>)
Honeysuckle	(<i>Lonicera periclymenum</i>)
Cleavers	(<i>Gafium aparine</i>)
Common Burdock	(<i>Arctium pubens</i>)
Marsh Thistle	(<i>Cirsium palustre</i>)
Nipple-wort	(<i>Lapsana communis</i>)
Yellow pimpernel	(<i>Lysimachia nemorum</i>)
Primrose	(<i>Primula vulgaris</i>)
Ash	(<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>)
Woody Nightshade	(<i>Solanum dulcamara</i>)
Foxglove	(<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>)
Persian Speedwell	(<i>Veronica persica</i>)
Ground Ivy	(<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>)
Wood Woundwort	(<i>Stachys sylvatica</i>)
Self-heal	(<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>)
Red-veined Dock	(<i>Rumex sanguineus</i>)
Dog's Mercury	(<i>Mercurialis perennis</i>)
Stinging Nettle	(<i>Urtica dioica</i>)
Sessile Oak	(<i>Quercus petraea</i>)
Beech	(<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>)
Sweet Chestnut	(<i>Castanea sativa</i>)
Wild Garlic or Ramsoms	(<i>Allium ursinum</i>)
Bluebell	(<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>)
Cuckoo-pint	(<i>Arum maculatum</i>)
Cocksfoot	(<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>)
Rough Meadow-grass	(<i>Poa trivialis</i>)

This assemblage of plants indicates a range of growth conditions within the wood, with different parts showing mildly acidic, neutral or slightly basic soils. Parts of the wood are damp as indicated by the presence of Yellow Pimpernel and Lady-fern. Ramsons are very prolific and these thrive on the stiff clayey soils found throughout the wood. Strong growths of bramble and patches of Stinging Nettle indicate good soil fertility. The brambles are likely to become a problem, when parts of the wood have been opened up to encourage biodiversity. This plant will require some form of management to keep it under control.

Because the wood has a particularly thick top canopy and a correspondingly thin shrub layer, it is not inviting as a good feeding or nesting habitat for birds - for the time being anyway. This value can be increased significantly as glades are opened up and some of the taller trees are ring barked to create dead standing timber. The following birds were recorded on the 19th June 2002.

Greater-spotted Woodpecker	<i>(Dendrocopos major)</i>
Nuthatch	<i>(Sitta europaea)</i>
Wren	<i>(Troglodytes troglodytes)</i>
Robin	<i>(Erithacus rubecula)</i>
Chiff-chaff	<i>(Phylloscopus collybita)</i>
Heron	<i>(Ardea cinerea)</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>(Falco peregrinus)</i>

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NOTE added October 2009:

A useful photographic guide to wild flowers, weeds, trees and shrubs of Devon and Cornwall may be found at :- www.aphotoflora.com or more generally, of the British Isles at www.ukwildflowers.com.

