

Date: 31/08/2021

Quotation reference: 4146-1

Churt Parish Council,
C/O Paddock House,
Churt,
Surrey,
GU10 2NY

31th August 2021

Dear Churt Parish Council,

Re: Churt Woodland Walkover Survey and Management Advice

Thank you for showing me around the woodland south of pond lane in Churt, GU10 2PZ. The aim of the visit was to undertake a walkover survey of the site so that we could discuss your aims and provide you with management recommendations to benefit the site for biodiversity.

Below are my management recommendations to enhance biodiversity at the woodland south of pond lane. The management measures will also enhance valuable habitat for a variety of wildlife such as commuting bats, resident birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates that are likely in the surrounding area.

Woodland Location

The woodland, approximately 5ha (12acres), is located north of the village of Churt, Surrey at grid reference SU84618 39725. The pond is bordered by Pond Lane to the north and beyond the Thursley, Hankley and Frensham Commons Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI)/Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Areas of woodland, grassland and low density residential properties lie to the east and west and woodland habitat to the south. The survey area is located in the borough of Waverley.

Past Management/Access

The Frensham Inclosure Act of 1855 brought much change to the land around the village of Churt. This area of woodland south of Frensham Great Pond is known as the Old Cricket ground and previous owners of the plot were keen cricketers. In 1921 Churt acquired the present recreation ground as a memorial to the fallen of the First World War. In 1961 Churt trustees had recommended the transfer of the land to the Parish Council. There is one public right of way (public footpath 30a) through the site which runs from the north-west down to the south east. There is also a public bridleway (bridleway 29) which is located nearby just beyond the boundary on the western edge of the site.

Habitat

The woodland here is mixed semi-natural woodland with abundant scots pine, locally frequent pedunculate oak and silver birch. Other species recorded include rowan, beech, hazel, occasional holly, sycamore, yew, common gorse, locally abundant bracken, an abundant feather moss sp., areas of ling and bell heather, common nettle, ground ivy, occasional herb robert, false brome, cock's-foot (along Pond Lane) and locally frequent bilberry.

There are a few lighter areas of woodland indicating where the habitat was more open historically. One of these is upon the area of the old cricket ground where the scots pine are

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less dense (see Figure 1, photograph 2). An area to the south of the site, at grid reference SU84633 39623, supports remnants of lowland heath where ling and bell heather are locally frequent on the woodland floor (see Figure 1, photographs 4 and 5). Google Earth's photographic records indicate that in 1999 this area was a small patch of open heathland within the woodland very close to another patch of heath just beyond the boundary to the south of the site. Broad-leaved trees are more frequent at the northern edge of the site by Pond Lane. The southern edge of the site, south of the remnant heathland mentioned above, supports younger scots pine trees which have a higher stool density some of which are standing dead wood. A non-native laurel species was recorded occasionally across the site.

Churt Woodland Future Management Recommendations

Initial survey work and monitoring

Before any woodland management work begins further surveys would ideally be undertaken to find out what further plant and animal species are present on site to ensure that any work undertaken will not adversely affect any rare or protected species.

Further surveys may also highlight any ecological constraints for the site and sensitivities which will be useful when focusing woodland management work.

Local species interest groups can be approached in order to generate data for a site. Groups such as the Surrey Botanical Society may be interested in visiting during the spring/summer and creating a species list for you. Other species groups to approach include Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group (SARG), Surrey Bat Group and the Surrey Mammal Group. Or you may wish to find someone in the local community who can help further identify some of the plants and then you will be able to see what diversity you have.

Photographs are a useful way of recording the appearance of your woodland through the seasons. Using the same photo monitoring locations is an effective way to keep a consistent visual record. It is recommended that you take before, during and after photographs. This is a useful way to help to illustrate the habitats changes before, during and after any management tasks.

As discussed during the site visit you could also add survey 'stations' by placing some reptile refugia (small sheets of tin or roofing felt approximately 100cm x 50cm) at a few locations along linear habitat features such as woodland edges and also within the woodland. If you add a small block of wood or other material to the top and bottom edge, then this can be used as a handle and the bottom block will stop trapping sheltering wildlife when you put it back down. These can be checked monthly in order to give you an idea of what species are in the area and often are attractive to reptile, amphibians, small mammals and invertebrates. SARG (mentioned above) would be able to provide further information for this type of survey.

Permissions & Timing

It should be noted that felling or thinning trees may require a felling licence issued by the Forestry Commission and any tree management should be undertaken in the winter months between November and February (inclusive) and outside of the bird nesting season. In any calendar quarter you are usually allowed to fell up to five cubic metres on your property without a felling licence (in fallen timber this would look like a small cars worth). You are also allowed to lop off branches without a felling licence and remove trees under around 10cm in diameter at breast height (think bean can width). If in doubt contact the local Forestry Commission area office for further information. More information can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tree-felling-getting-permission>

Also your Local Planning Authority (LPA) will also hold information on any Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) in the area. Land managers should check if any TPOs are present in their woodland before any management activities commence.

Woodland Management

Glades

The structural diversity of the woodland would be improved by lightly thinning some of the smaller/unhealthy trees in the more established glade habitats as mentioned above. This would improve light levels which would encourage increased floral and invertebrate diversity and hopefully restore the heathland habitat at the southern end of the site. Another glade to focus on would be the area of the old cricket ground where the tree density is lower than the surrounding woodland and would require less work to encourage a more diverse field and shrub layer.

Lowland heath, a globally restricted habitat, has diminished by approximately 80% since 1800 and Surrey supports a substantial 13% of the remainder. Some of the restorable heath in Surrey is present beneath coniferous tree plantations and sites close to protected sites like the neighbouring Frensham Common SSSI/SAC. These heathland habitats are rich with many specialist birds, reptiles and invertebrates (Waite, M. 2017). Ordnance survey maps from the early twentieth century indicate that much of the area around the old cricket ground was open and likely lowland heathland habitat.

Bracken

Bracken is dominant in some areas of the site (see Figure 1, photograph 3). If left unchecked this species may dominate the field layer and outcompete other native plants. Bracken can be managed by cutting or treating with herbicide by a suitably qualified operative. If resources allow the bracken could be managed in small areas close to glades habitats to see how it responds. A photographic record of the management (before and after) of the treatment regime should be kept to compare change before, during and after management.

Standing deadwood

A number of standing dead trees were noted across the site and should be maintained where they do not pose a risk to site users. Taller standing dead trees with the potential to fall over in windy conditions could be reduced to a 'monolith' to minimise the chance of falling over while still providing suitable habitat for invertebrates. Some arboriculturists are able to employ cutting techniques in order to create value wildlife features on the tree trunk or limbs.

If close to permissive routes (and not public rights of way) these routes can be moved away from the tree which would also lessen any risk for site users.

In addition to their value for invertebrates these dead wood habitats can create refuge and over-wintering opportunities for a host of wildlife providing cracks and crevices that animals can squeeze into during the colder months.

Health and Safety

Some trees may need to be managed because of health and safety reasons. A number of larger hung up trees were observed and it recommended that these be felled to reduce any risks. Any such trees should be dealt with first, and often larger trees in such a scenario can significantly change the canopy structure and light levels so further management may not be as intense or required in these areas.

Some of the younger scots pine at the southern end of the site (see Figure 1, photograph 6) could be thinned as several dead specimens were also noted in this area. Some of the cut material from this management work should be retained in the woodland as decaying wood habitat. Decaying standing woodland and lying dead wood are vital for the health and longevity of woodland habitat. This valuable dead wood habitat come in many forms from dead twigs to large decaying trunks. Some of the woody material left over from habitat management tasks can provide valuable decaying wood habitat and be placed along the edges of rides and glades as refuge and provide a food source and basking opportunities for many species, especially on south facing edges.

Non-native Invasive Species

A laurel sp. was recorded occasionally throughout the woodland.

If left unmanaged these species can easily spread and will subsequently become even more difficult to eradicate. They tend to form dense stands which prevents natural regeneration of the vegetation beneath and around them severely degrading the biodiversity value of the site.

Removing these species will certainly open some areas up, especially closer to existing corridors and glades, and in time will encourage a more diverse shrub and field layer. It may take a few years to remove this species as they will often sprout back up even if spot treated with herbicide. Mechanical removal using a heavy duty hand operated winch is also an option to consider. This technique can be effective at removing the root systems of these plants from the soil in a shorter timeframe although this may be more labour intensive.

It is recommended that you monitor the status of any non-natives and manage them so that they do not spread into the wider countryside. Ideally non-native species, such as laurel, should be removed from site.

Other Habitats

The overall variety of habitats as well as their management methods are both vital in providing a diversity of ecological niches to support the widest range of wildlife. For example the pockets of gorse scrub might be viewed as 'scruffy, unkempt' areas but in fact are an equally important element of the mosaic of habitats.

Bare ground is a relatively minor habitat but important in its own right, found on paths and trampled areas. It comes in a range of forms including vertical faces such as on ditch edges, edges of paths and the paths themselves. These bare ground areas, especially those exposed to sunlight, can be really beneficial to solitary bees and wasps. Nectar sources need to be close by to enhance the habitat for insects.

Other features for wildlife

Bat and bird boxes can be placed on the mature scattered trees in the area so that any species close by can make use of the nesting and roosting opportunities that these units will provide.

Other micro-habitat management opportunities include creating buried loggeries, insect hotels and brash piles that would benefit invertebrates, small mammals (including hedgehogs), reptiles and amphibians too.

I wish you luck with your woodland going forward. I feel the woodland just needs some minor management to encourage as much diversity as possible and improve access. If you have any other questions or queries please do contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Jamel Guenioui BSc (Hons) ACIEEM
Senior Ecologist

Figure 1: Site Photographs



Photograph 1
Mixed semi-natural woodland



Photograph 2
Area of scots pine at old cricket ground location.



Photograph 3
Bracken locally abundant in some areas.



Photograph 4
Area of heather at the southern end of the site.



Photograph 5
Area of heather at the southern end of the site.



Photograph 6
Dense young scots pine close to southern boundary.

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Photograph 7
Feather moss sp.



Photograph 8
Wood ant nest.



Photograph 9
Deciduous trees more frequent close to Pond Lane.



Photograph 10
View from Pond Lane.

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