

Higher Level Stewardship and Friends Vision overview for 2016

This note has been prepared by way of a stock take of the Group's activities on the Hillfort in 2016 in delivering against the HLS and Vision.

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; iron age ramparts) – **keep these areas clear of scrub and debris.**

- **Wildflower meadow** (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. The Vision sought to extend the protected area of the site by including the small outer pond, together with the Old Butts and the leat. It also proposed pursuing, with the Wildlife Trust, the possibility of including Mowsbury Hill Meadow within the County Wildlife Site. Alternative methods of disposing of brush and cuttings were to be considered.

2016 overview

Summary of activities

5. **Archaeology** – The inner island was brush cut in February and August. In April patches of moschatel appeared. Later in the year nettle, burdock, elder and St John's wort predominated. A length of dead hedge was removed from the island edge. The moats were brush cut and a fallen hawthorn tree removed. Felled tree trunks were chain sawed, split and removed from the south moat. The north arm of the moat was cleared of scrub and debris, some stumps and bramble remain. Pond 1 was partially cleared of scrub and there is a view through to pond 2 (just about). Pink water speedwell and celery-leaved buttercup flowered on the banks in Sept. Pond 2 was cleared of nettles twice. Pond 3 was untouched – half of it is filled with a dead tree and other debris. The leat was cleared of bramble and we hope to have the stumps chain sawed level. The rampart was cleared of bramble, hogweed and hemlock in June and brush cut in October. The 10m length of bramble north of the outer ditch was cleared and regrowth will need to be managed.
6. **Wildflower meadows** – Mowsbury Hill meadow was cut and bales removed from site. Ragwort remains a problem if the grass is to be used for fodder in future. The courtyard was brush cut and raked. Danny helped us to create a burn site which has been very successful for disposing of cuttings from the courtyard and the ramparts. The bramble in the courtyard is still widespread and the edges are less species rich with courser species present.
7. **Traditional orchards** – The trees in the east orchard are thriving, but the orchard became very overgrown with hogweed and bramble before it was mown at the end of July. Danny has suggested an additional mowing in March to try to control these courser plants. The cuttings were put on a compost heap just outside the scheduled area. This is not working particularly well as the quantity was too large and it is taking too long to compost down. Next year cuttings can go to the burn site. No work was done in the south orchard.
8. **Woodland and scrub** – A small triangle on the south west corner of the hillfort was coppiced, otherwise woodland areas were untouched.
9. **Public footpath** – The footpath was mown and brush cut in July following complaints that it was impassable.

Other notable events

10. Geoff Saunders, The Borough's Archaeology Officer, kindly agreed that the leat should be included as part of the site in the Historic Environment Record (HER). He has amended the record accordingly and also included the small outer pond within the boundary of the site. Although the HER carries no statutory protection, it is an acknowledgement of archaeology beyond the scheduling.
11. Chris organised a wild flower survey on Mowsbury Hill Meadow in June and July. This was very successful, despite the rain, and showed a good range of wild flowers on the meadow. Laura Taylor of the Wildlife Trust reviewed the data and, whilst the strong indicators of neutral grasslands are not yet frequent enough to meet County Wildlife Site status, there is a good chance we might meet it in one to two years.
12. The Friends preferred not to expend time on the Old Butts, but agreed to a watching brief as it forms part of the natural habitat and historic landscape around the hillfort.
13. The scheduling boundary on the south of the site reaches down almost to the Butts and it has been delineated by brush cutting. This needs regular management to be effective.
14. Nothing has been done about rabbits as no ferrets responded to the job advert.
15. One interpretation board is planned at the entrance to the site.
16. Marion organised a very successful visit to Scott Lower School, followed by a field trip to the hillfort.
17. The hillfort was awarded a CPRE Mark by Bedfordshire Council for Protection of Rural England, beating other shortlisted sites.

Conclusions

18. This has been a very positive (award winning) year, with good progress made against the Vision action plan and HLS agreement. The addition of the burn area, now gives us an effective means of disposing of scrub and cuttings, which will assist in the longer-term management of the Hillfort site.