

## Waterhouses Woodland Group – Progress Report.

Anyone who happens to walk in Waterhouses woods may have noticed that our intrepid band of volunteers has been making some inroads into the work needed to manage our patch of woods. For those who don't know, our bit of woods is south of the River Deerness between the green footbridge to the east of the village, extending westwards upstream until about level with Sol's Allotment Project, and southwards towards the crest of the hillside. Originally it had a fence surrounding it, but that has long since fallen into disrepair (though still can be found in places).

Entering from the footbridge (Eastern) end of the site, you will notice that we have recently completed a woven entrance made from hazel stems harvested from our woods.

This leads in an area of mostly grass, which we have imaginatively called 'The Meadow'. We are actively managing this area by scything the grass in early September and raking the cut grass to the margins, where it forms shelter for small mammals, amphibians, insects and other invertebrates.

Grass removal also promotes the wild flower growth each year, so as we continue year-on-year, we expect to see this area flourish into a proper wild-flower meadow, with a corresponding increase in the variety of pollinating insects which will be attracted by the flowers.

As you pass through the Meadow, look west, and you will see our charcoal kiln at the margin of the woodland. Waste wood from our thinning operations is loaded into the kiln. The process of making charcoal involves lighting the kiln once it has been carefully stacked with wood and then sealing the kiln. Charcoal is formed by controlling the air which is let in to the kiln, and also controlling the smoke exiting the kiln. At around 450°C, a process called 'pyrolysis' takes place which converts the wood into charcoal which we can bag up and sell to local consumers. This raises some money to help pay for things like insurance and tools. 2024 had a very cool, wet summer (as you might remember) meaning we only carried out two burns, due to the fall in demand for barbecues! In better years, we would carry out three or four burns over the summer months.

Meanwhile, walking along the eastern side of the Meadow, you follow the trees that border one of High Waterhouses Farm's fields. Where the woodland path to Lymington turns away to the left, you will notice that we established a small wildlife pond a couple of years ago. This was done with the co-operation of the council, who provided a work crew and mini digger to reinstate the pathway and restore the earth bank which prevents water spilling into the farm field. We are also working to improve the pathway in this section and have laid stones gathered from on site to reduce the muddiness in this area, hopefully making it easier and more inviting for casual walkers to pass through

without sinking into the mire. The pond itself is developing nicely, with frogs and toads breeding in and around it (also the strong possibility of newts, but no confirmed sightings as yet). It also attracts dragonflies and many other insects through the summer, which in turn attract more insect-eating birds and animals. The pond is fed by a spring which comes out of the hillside next to the site of one of the original drift mines that were active during the last century. The pond empties into a drainage ditch which runs under the tree-line and down to the river. We are building some dams in the ditch, forming a series of shallow pools which will extend the wetland area still further.

From this point, the boundary for our patch heads off up the hill in a roughly south-westerly direction. We are in the process of developing a pathway along this boundary which will provide more scope and interest for walkers. This will be known as the Boundary Path (how do we come up with these names?!) We will let you know when it's open.

From the pond crossing, retrace your steps and cross the Meadow to the kiln site. Pass the kiln site and bear right, leading you towards the river again. Follow the main path, keeping right all the way. This path is known as the Riverside path (there we go again - such imagination!) admiring occasional views of the river. Carrying on along this path, you can catch a view of the houses in Russell Street across the river and through the trees to your right. The path gets a bit indistinct further on, but eventually starts to work its way right, towards the river. You may notice the broken-down old fence around here, which marks our western boundary: beyond that is private woodland. At the boundary point, we intend to make another woven fence to mark the entry/exit to our woods. Following the old fence line up the hill is not recommended at the moment: it's rough walking with many trees and brambles. Eventually, you will emerge onto a track near the top of the hillside. It is pretty easy to spot where our patch of mixed woodland gives way to the private land beyond: in years past the private land was planted with conifers. In the next few years, we intend to open up a new pathway from the river up to the top boundary, which we have called the Western Bypass. (Ha! At last some original thought! Thanks John!) Once again, we will be making another woven fence at the entry/exit point to mark the extent of our woods. Not surprisingly that point will meet up with the other new path I mentioned: the Boundary path. (We will put up some way-signs so you will know where you are.) However, you will notice that both the Boundary path and the Western Bypass both exit onto an existing path which runs from the top of our site right down the middle of our woods to the kiln site at the Meadow. This is known as the Middle path (predictable).

Throughout your walk, you might notice many areas of spindly, overgrown trees (mainly birch and hazel) but quite a few veteran oaks and beech. Also lots of holly, rowan, goat willow and ash. Some of the ash has a disease called die-back, which is prevalent across the UK. However, some ash seems resistant to the disease, so we're hopeful that

the species can recover over the years to come. The birch sets seed very easily and springs up anywhere it can and often dies out when other, slower-growing species get established. Our group is thinning out a lot of the stunted birch, and the harvested wood is taken down to the kiln and turned into charcoal. The hazel is quick-growing and very useful (which is where we get the material to make all our woven fences). It is cut down close to the ground. The hazel root then sends up new shoots to replace the cut stems and the new shoots grow strongly. Hazel can be harvested in this way on a seven-year cycle, the stems being used for a variety of purposes. In this way, the woodland is being managed in a completely sustainable fashion, known as 'coppicing'. This method strongly promotes species diversity due to the additional light which is let into the woodland floor when the choked, spindly areas are cut down. Since we started on this work, we have noticed that many native woodland flowers are popping up all over: bluebells, dog violet and spotted orchids amongst them. Also grasses and ferns grow everywhere. We also leave a good amount of wood lying to decay naturally. This provides a home for many different beetle and other insect larvae, which promotes species diversity and provides a food source for birds and animals. You might also have noticed a variety of bird boxes around the woods: these are mostly made by Tom Finlay in his spare time (thanks Tom) and provide nesting sites for a variety of woodland birds.

Most recently a team of contractors have been appointed by Durham County Council to 'halo' around some of our veteran trees. This just means that the smaller, quicker-growing species are cramping these older, larger trees (some of which are around 100 years old) and removing these encroaching trees will promote the veterans, sustaining their growth and maturity for all to enjoy in the future. Although this work looks as though it makes quite a bit of mess, by the time Spring has passed into Summer, the growth spurt from the newly open forest floor will obliterate the debris. The fallen wood also provides a wide variety of food and lodging for many species of beetles and other organisms that thrive on dead wood.

As we progress with our work, we hope we can welcome more human visitors to our woods over the coming year. We welcome all forms of visitors on foot or on pedal cycles, although we must remind everyone that powered vehicles such as e-bikes, motorbikes and quads are not allowed.

Finally, a mention that we are always keen to welcome new volunteers to our sessions. These run each Friday from 1pm to 4pm, and we meet at the kiln site. Also, we're always keen to stop and chat to visitors who may be interested in finding out what we're doing.