

HAMPTON IN ARDEN CONSERVATION GROUP

A REVIEW OF THE 2016/2017 WORKING PARTY SEASON



Produced by the Conservation Group
of the
Hampton in Arden Society

July 2017

Introduction

Whilst a lot of detail relating to the work done by the Conservation Group of the Hampton in Arden Society has been documented over the 22 years since its inception, much of it is not publicly available. The Church and Village Chronicle has carried regular articles, initially penned by Ray Parker and more recently by Dave Grimshaw, which often included the work of the Group, never before has the programme for a single season been collated in one place and the reasons for the individual tasks explained. This document looks at the 2016/2017 season from that perspective.

The Scope of the Conservation Group

Whilst the group was initially conceived with the sole aim of looking after the Parish Council owned Spinney, its actual scope was always more than that. In fact its very existence is due to the efforts of villagers to save Spinney pond from being filled in by rubbish in 1995. These same villagers went on to press for the Spinney and pond to become a Local Nature Reserve. This did not come about but, under the wing of the Hampton in Arden Society, the Conservation Group was formed to maintain the Spinney and associated pond. The pond was, and still is, on land owned by the Trust who passed over management of the pond to the new group in 1995.

In recent years the 'conservation' aspects of our work have been greatly extended by introduction of the bird box, small mammal, bat and amphibian projects. The bird boxes are split evenly between Trust /Parish Council land, the amphibian work is all on Trust land (including Spinney pond) as is the small mammal project. Our Bat boxes are mostly positioned along the boundary between Trust woodland and the Spinney. The bird boxes are scheduled into our official group work programme and involve the whole of the group, whereas the other three are run by a subset of members outside of our official working parties. The bird box and Bat box work has been funded principally by both the Society and the Trust. Our other projects are privately funded. Further information on our project work can be found at the end of the annual work summary.

This increase in scope of our work has only been possible by extending the working party season (now seven months) and some individuals putting in many hours in addition to this.

I feel we are now in a position to fully justify the word 'Conservation' in our title and there is no doubt that these projects, particularly the bird boxes, give our members some very rewarding and enjoyable work.

Membership of the Group

At the start of the season we nominally had a membership of six, with five actively attending working parties. Mid season we were boosted by the return of a former member and three new members arrived for the last few working parties in March 2017. Overall, the average attendance was five. If all choose to return this Autumn then we could have a membership of ten. This would be more than in any year since 2004.

The 2016/2017 Season – Report of Activities

Working party Sessions

Where necessary some background information is included to help clarify why this work has been included in our programme.

During this season two working parties had to be cancelled due to wet weather and high winds. This is less than the historic average.

September 8th 2016

The season started in the usual way with a sweep along all paths in the Spinney to cut back any tree or ground foliage that was impinging on the paths. Bramble is the chief culprit, growing by three or more feet in a single season. Bramble is cut back to at least two feet either side of the path edge. The little used 'return' path is usually completely blocked for at least twenty metres. Rapid growing Holly and Laurel were also cut back where necessary. Also, a start was made on a long term project to reduce Laurel at the top of the Spinney between Shadowbrook Lane and the main path. This involves removing very large Branches. Hopefully, we will eventually be able to plant Hazel in the cleared areas.

September 22nd

For the first time we devoted a session to 'topping' selected trees. A large number of Hawthorn and a few Field Maples were cut off at about 5 feet. This is now a well

established management practice in many woodlands. We topped a small number of trees three years ago and the results were impressive.

A problem with the vast majority of British woodlands is a lack of under storey. This is the result of poor management now that most woods are no longer coppiced. Cutting trees down to anywhere between ground level and five feet is one of the methods used to improve the density of growth below the canopy. This provides better habitat for birds etc. Hawthorn, Willow, Alder and field Maple are the best species to be treated in this way.

October 6th

Bird box checking and cleaning. All boxes within the Spinney visited to record whether used or not. Any damaged boxes removed for repair. To ensure all boxes could be reached with a single ladder section, some were moved to lower positions on the tree. We are in the process of upgrading all Mk 1 boxes (30) to being front opening (rather than top opening) as they are easier to access and clean. They are also far less prone to damp ingress as the weatherproofing does not crack along the hinge line. Six boxes were removed for upgrading.

October 20th

Clearing Yellow Flag from the Sheila Apted Reserve pond. As the pond had completely dried out, it was the ideal time for this work. Approximately one third of the area of Yellow Flag was dug out by hand. This had the added advantage of deepening this shallow pond. A further section, on the periphery of the pond area, was sprayed.

Yellow Flag has an appealing bright Yellow flower and is a popular pond plant. However, it is now realised how invasive it can be, choking ponds and ditches to the detriment of other species. It also takes up very large amounts of water and can quickly dry up even deep water. It is partly responsible for this small pond completely drying up almost every year.

The Sheila Apted pond is our most important amphibian site, with breeding frogs and Common Newts.

November 3rd

Further work on the Sheila Apted Reserve. Manually cutting back undergrowth on and around 'Primrose Bank' on the Arboretum side of the pond. Also, removing selected branches from the Field Maple on top of the bank to minimise shading of the water surface.

This south facing slope down to the pond has many Primrose and Cowslips which are a major attraction during Spring. However, later in the year it quickly becomes overgrown with long grass, Bramble and many small trees. Without annual cutting the flowers would disappear within two years.

November 17th

Second session on checking our bird boxes. This time those principally on Trust land. Otherwise comments as for October 6th.

December 1st

This session was taken up by a routine task, clearing Bramble and Sycamore re growth from the central area of the Spinney opposite the small bench. This was cleared of Sycamore trees about six years ago, making it the most open area in the Spinney. This increased light levels reaching the woodland floor resulting in a more varied flora than anywhere else in the Spinney. A second area alongside Spinney pond was also treated in this way.

December 15th

The Group cut the hedge that marks the boundary between the Spinney and Trust woodland and runs down to Spinney pond (there is also a metal railing fence). This is cut back every four years or so to allow more light into this section of the Spinney. This was the second initiative to encourage ground flora, especially flowers. It has been less successful than the central section mentioned earlier, probably because more trees were left in place.

December 29th

Cancelled due to severe weather.

January 12th 2017

Health and survey sweep of the Spinney. This involves walking around all the paths removing any small or medium sized trees that are, or could, endanger visitors. Normally, this would have been done with a chainsaw operative present but our regular support from Solihull was not available this year. This problem is discussed later. Around 20 trees were removed, manually cut up and stacked in Habitat piles. This is now an annual work item.

January 26th

This session was entirely on Trust land. We went up to the 'far' pond, also known as Crowfoot pond and cut back bank side trees, mostly Willow and Hawthorn. This was made possible by the very low water levels. These had not been cut back for many years with numerous branches reaching far into the water. We successfully opened up the pond to allow more light onto the water surface. This pond has a huge diversity of plants and insects, especially Damselflies and Dragonflies. It also has a growing number of breeding frogs and is the best of the three ponds (all on Trust land) for breeding Newts.

February 9th

For this working party we were joined by Adam Noon (acting Chief Ecologist, Solihull Council) and six of his volunteers. We had applied for, and been awarded, free trees under a scheme being run by the Council.

The combined party planted 240 young shrubs/trees of varied mixed as a hedge along a 30 metre section of the main path in the centre of the Spinney. The aim was to create a barrier to stop serious damage to one of our best patches of Bluebells made by off lead dogs. Despite the very dry weather, to date we have only lost a few of those planted.

February 23rd

Session Cancelled due to very high winds.

March 9th

The group created a secondary barrier, principally of cut Holly, placed on the inside of the new hedge. This was to deter dogs from going through the hedge so

preventing damage whilst it gets established. The second part of the morning was spent tidying up the considerable storm damage of recent weeks. Fallen branches and some trees were converted into habitat piles.

March 23rd

We Planted 50 young, bare rooted Hazel trees in the Spinney. These were provided by Solihull under their free tree scheme. The rest of this, the final session of the season, was spent in the section of the Spinney nearest the railway line. This area was planted with young trees about fifteen years ago. We removed tree guards, cut back Bramble and organised dead wood into habitat piles.

A spreadsheet format summary of the work carried out by the Conservation Group in 2016/17, on both Parish Council and Trust land, is shown in Appendix 1.

Summary of Conservation 'Project' work carried out by the Group

Bird Boxes

The results from our network of nearly about sixty five boxes are published every year in the Church Chronicle. Whilst there is a heavy workload associated with checking, cleaning, maintaining and recording they have proved astonishingly effective with an average occupancy rate of just under 90%. They have the added advantage of being highly visible and, along with habitat piles, wildflower areas, and bat boxes, a reminder to visitors to the Spinney that the woodland is not just for people but for plants and wild animals as well.

Mouse boxes

Originally installed to test whether or not we had any Dormice resident or visiting our area, these were soon found to attract all sorts of animals, but not Dormice! In Winter they are used by hibernating mice, often in very large numbers, and roosting birds. In Spring nesting birds, predominantly Blue Tits, have taken to them and they are becoming increasingly popular with nesting Tree Bees. So, despite there only being a dozen of them, they make a significant contribution to helping a number of species in a small area of Trust woodland.

Amphibians

Over the last five years we have introduced a large amount of Frogspawn, Tadpoles and baby frogs into the three ponds on Trust land. The results have been dramatic. From a handful of frogs breeding in one pond we have progressed to hundreds breeding in all three. For the first time, a mass exodus of baby frogs was seen this June migrating from one pond into nearby woodland.

Frogs, both small and large, are fed on by numerous birds and mammals from Herons to Hedgehogs. They are one of the signs of a healthy ecosystem. What is more, Tadpoles are the food of choice for Newts. Once very common locally, they had slumped to just a few in a single pond. Not surprisingly, these were in the same pond as the few frogs we had left. Now they are found in two ponds and the large number of Tadpoles available should see their numbers increasing.

Bats

Ten large bat boxes were constructed by the Group and installed in 2015. Surveys with bat detectors show a healthy number of these much threatened animals using Parish Council and Trust woodland and meadows. Two species have been identified to date and there should be several more. We are still uncertain as to what use is being made of our boxes and monitoring is ongoing.

Conservation Work for 2016/17

APPENDIX 1

	category	Owner	Outcome	Comment
clearing pathside vegetation, esp bramble	routine	PC	done	
clear central section by bench	routine	PC	done	
clear Primrose Bank and area by spinney pond	routine	T	done	
clear scrub from Apted reserve area	routine	T	part	
trim trees around spinney pond	routine	T	done (field maple)	to increase light to pond
clear winter storm damage	routine	PC	done	
control of poplar suckers	routine	PC	little progress	long term project
Cut back Laurel on shadowbrook lane side of top path	routine	PC	part	Removed with hand saws
H&S sweep of Spinney for trees needing removal	routine	PC	done (for small/medium trees).	
monitor and clean mice project boxes	routine	T	done	
monitor and clean out bird boxes	routine	PC/T	done	
monitor and clean special project boxes	routine	PC	done -two used	
replace or extend logs marking path edges	routine	PC	very little done this season as fewer trees than usual removed	
planting young trees (Spinney + link woodland)	routine	PC/T	230 trees/shrubs into hedge by central entrance. 50 hazel into spinney	some trees have been lost
remove guards, clear brambles in new trees by railway	routine	PC	done	Neil Cameron not available, so no chain saw. Smaller trees done. See below
tree felling	routine	PC	part	biodiversity work done in combination with other tasks
creating habitat piles	routine	PC	done	
continue froglet program	ongoing	PC/T	tadpoles, froglets into 3 ponds	
continue frogspawn program	ongoing	PC/T	frogspawn into big pond	
feed and water car park trees as necessary	ongoing	PC	done	summer of 2016
create amphibian pond on outflow from big pond	one off	T	part	Overrun by greenery in summer
drop high boxes for single ladder access	one off	PC/T	part	done in conjunction with above
frog breeding area in new pond?	one off	T	small area ceated	
H&S work on horse chestnut in spinney	one off	PC	Postponed	to be done by Dawson in early March
new hedge to protect Bluebells	one off	PC	done	30 metres planted. adam noon supplied 230 shrubs plus some volunteer labour
planting young trees rec ground car park	one off	PC	walnut tree planted	
carry out survey of bat types	occasional	PC/T	started	data collected
clear some yellow flag from Apted reserve	occasional	T	done	one third dug out rest sprayed
cut back hedge alongside Spinney to allow light in	occasional	PC/T	part	section nearest pond done
cut back vegetation on crowfoot pond	occasional	T	done	All overhanging trees cut back to allow more light in
cut tops off Hawthorns	occasional	PC	done	probably more next year
install new bird boxes ??	occasional	PC/T	non this season	no proof they are being used
monitor bat boxes	occasional	PC/T	done	30 boxes to do. Need new roof and front access. first six done and reinstalled
repair, renovate Mk 1 boxes	occasional	PC/T	part	
		PC	Parish Council land	
		T	Trust land	
	routine		every working party season	
	ongoing		a number of sequential seasons	
	one off		a single season	
	occasional		on a cycle of a variable number of seasons	