

The Downlander



Downlands Partnership - creating a better countryside

Newsletter No. 5

Welcome to the fifth e-newsletter of the Downlands partnership team. Since the last newsletter we have worked on over 30 sites carrying out tasks such as ragwort pulling, condition assessments, bridleway surfacing, walk surveys, maintenance of local nature reserves, coppicing, pollarding, brush cutting chalk grassland sites, invasive scrub clearance, way marking, maintenance of 4 ponds and crown lifting landscape trees. It's been a busy 8 months clocking up many thousands of volunteer hours.

We have also grazed our animals, comprising of sheep, cattle and goats across the Downlands Partnership area. This is essential for assisting in the management of chalk grassland, without which this rare habitat would be lost. Lambing is just around the corner, so we are hoping for some very cute little lambs within a few weeks.

The partnerships are an essential part in the maintenance of the local countryside in north east Surrey and south London. Without this management much of the countryside that you love would become a much poorer place which would then risk the loss of any protection status that it may have. This in turn could create more pressure for development. Please help support your local countryside service, either with a donation to our charity The Downlands Trust or by coming out and volunteering for a great sense of achievement and pride that you have done your bit for nature.



Task report May – December 2017

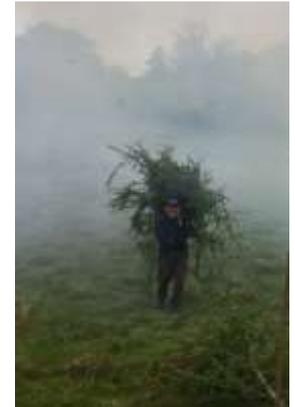
Project Assistant, Tom Thorn reports on what's been happening over the last few months.

May

To start the month we returned to continue the on-going step-building task at Addington Hills. The steps fulfil two purposes, not only assisting the ascent and descent of the numerous ups and downs but act as erosion control for the very erosion-prone pebbly ground. The heavy use and abuse of the site damages the ground flora (including the heather and delicate lichens) which help to bond the hillside in place.



The next week we returned to Park Ham to work on the hawthorn scrub from the quite flat (nursery slope) area along side the bowl followed by Quarry hangers to carry out more scrub clearing on the vicious slopes. Yes, as usual it did rain, but we were still able to get a fair amount done before it did this and the site became interesting under foot.



We ended the month at Oaks Park carrying out some renovation on the Nature Trail with some new waymarkers, new badges (which included the Sutton circular walk) and vegetation clearing. With much rapid progress being done we were able to spend a day at Little Woodcote Wood to carry out some path clearance and general maintenance.

June

Over the last 30 years the Partnership has been involved with setting up numerous walks and eventually these require some maintenance. We spent a couple of days walking the 7 mile Shabden & Upper Gatton Parks Circular Walk carrying out clearance and sign refurbishment. The third day we walked the 7 mile North Downs ridge circular walk carrying out some small jobs along the way.



Next we spent a couple of sizzling weeks at "The Dobbin" carrying out step replacement. A total of 39 steps were replaced with out the help of a Mr Hannay. We will return to do the rest in the summer.

The end of the month and running into July we carried out Condition assessments of our Chalk Grassland sites. This is to monitor the results of our work and what effects it is having. It also gives us a chance to admire the array of flora and fauna on site. A stark contrast from when we were there in the winter months, where everything is brown and lifeless.

July

Following on from condition assessments, we spent time pulling Ragwort and brush cut some choice areas of small Dogwood at Fames Rough and Coney Borough Hill to keep these special sites from being taken over by this rather enthusiastic plant.

August

It was out with the big boys toys for a bit of surfacing work on Sarah's Bridleway. This stretch was increasingly boggy and was the final bad bit. The rest had been done previously by us, but at the time the money didn't stretch this far.



Happy valley was the next port of call, to carry out step replacement using a quick, simple but effective method, to complete 53.

To end a summer of step building tasks we ended on the pièce de résistance of step construction. We set ourselves the challenge of replacing a massive flight on the London Loop walking route. We constructed the originals when the route was first set up but after 21 years they where life expired and no amount of repairing

(which we had done in recent years) was going to stop their rapid decline. We constructed 57 steps with side edging requiring 186 holes dug for the upright supports (Stobs). The central hand rail was not replaced as this was constructed by us much more recently. The steps should be good for the next 20 years. The money for this came from the Croydon community award budget for Kenley, donated by councillors Steve O'Connell and Steve Hollands.



September

Banstead Wildlife Field received another visit by us. We were heavily involved with the creation and management of this site until around 10 years ago. The last couple of years we have made a return to give a helping hand to its upkeep. We brush cut the grassland, coppiced, weeded and cut back the raised sensory beds and removed grass from the wheelchair friendly paths.

Harholt wood was next. This site we planted up between 2003 – 7 and was on the site of the original wood of the same name. Over the years we have kept the paths opened and created a wavy edge

to meet the requirements of the Forestry Commission who funded the original planting scheme. The site was now ripe for Hazel coppicing (where the materials were used at Old Lodge farm for Hedge-laying the following month) and the rest of the trees were thinned to allow space and light for better examples. This work revealed some lost goodies like the rare wild service tree which the Partnership planted.

To end the month we brush cut young scrub in Stagbury A grazing area, as some areas were getting ahead of themselves.

October

We spent a final week at New barn lane steps completing the mammoth task in a total of 12 task days, before returning to Stagbury A, for a final flurry of brush cutting.

The next week was working on a site we hadn't intended to work on, (if at all) Shirley Heath. We worked in the Kennel Wood part of the site, clearing back holly and laurel which were swallowing up stretches of the London Loop walking route. This would leave much better site lines bringing in more light which is safer for walking.

Caterham view point was next and received its annual brush cut. The site is still in the recovery phase from being covered in scrub which our volunteers and contractors cleared over the years. This will require brush cutting for some years yet, to halt the reversion back to scrub. The whole site was brush cut which included the most recent contractor cleared area. 6000m² was brush cut and revealed just how many chalk grassland plants are returning to the hillside as it sweeps down and round.



November

It was Featherbed Lane verge for the brush cutting treatment next. A third gets cut each year, leaving areas of young Blackthorn as these are the egg laying sites for Brown hairstreak butterflies. The site was surveyed for eggs ahead of the task and marked plants were spared the brush cutter. An incredible 80 plus eggs were found making this the best year yet.

Next we were back at Hooley Meadows, scrub clearing this once forgotten site. The area cleared a couple of years ago was looking better than expected which was encouraging, so hopefully this latest clearance work will have the same results, if not better.

The final brush cutting site to receive our nip and tuck treatment was Chapel Bank, before we moved on to coppicing at Rydon's Wood . This was our tenth year here and the woods have been brought back kicking and screaming from the dark sorry little wood it once was.

The last day of November was spent on Merle Common giving the pond some clearance before moving onto the Common to clear Holly back from the paths. As usual with ponds tasks, there was a brief cold snap the night before requiring "ice breaker waders".

December

Usually a Summer task, we were putting in Waymarkers at Lloyd park. This was to form a new circular running route in Croydon , made up of 3 sections starting from here. The short run is just round the park, medium to Addington Hills and the longest carrying on from here as far as Croham Hurst. We had time to put in the waymarkers for Addington hills as well, due to the easy digging conditions (for a change) found round the park. An incredible 31 waymarkers (made back at the Depot) were dug in, paths cleared and arrows fixed to existing infrastructure.



To coincide with another cold snap, it was back to Ponds. Elmore pond was to receive quite a bit of work requiring a lot of digging out of firmly rooted vegetation. Happily after some quite intensive work over the last 2 or 3 years the pond is beginning to look better than it has looked in recent years. We had an afternoon at Church Green pond

just to brush cut round the edges and other small scale works.

And finely to round up the year we were in Little Woodcote Wood. Here we continued thinning , followed by replanting with a mix of native trees and ground flora to make the wood more diverse. Bramble was cut back around previous tree plantings and rubbish cleared.



There was a BBQ at Old lodge farm laid on as a thank you for all the volunteers who have done so much good work and worked so hard over the year. And a jolly nice spread it was too.

Another Downlands success

Grazing Officer, Sean Grufferty gives a glowing report on our chalk grassland management efforts

2017 has been the end of an era; Chipstead Downs, Park Ham and Quarry Hangers, which contain some of our best chalk downland, have come to the end of their ten year stewardships under the Downlands Partnership. Volunteers and livestock alike have worked extremely hard, with some of our sites needing intense management to restore their flower rich beauty.

During our site visits from Natural England, we had met most of their criteria, as to be expected when the task volunteers really shone, mainly through clearing the scrub and rough vegetation. There was nowhere for the invasive scrub to hide when the loppers and bows saws were out, as the task crept over sites leaving nothing but stumps in its wake.



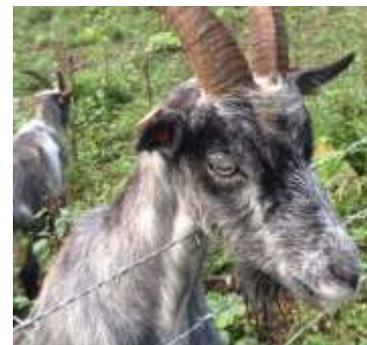
The animals were also given a glowing review of their work, as they were brought in to help weaken the scrub regrowth, grazing off the coarse grasses and keeping the vegetation low to give the vast array of chalk flowering plants space to grow. Watched over by our dedicated stock checking corps there was no scrub, slope or dip for the animals to hide from the insightful glare of their welfare checks.

One paddock which was a fantastic example was Stagbury C on Chipstead Downs LNR. During the winter and early spring – the task vols cleared swathes of scrub regrowth which would have choked out many of the chalk flowers. Followed by the arrival of our new six goats, purchased by The Downslands Trust with money raised by 1st Tadworth Beavers, a whole spring and most of summers grazing kept the scrub regrowth and vegetation low. It's a privilege to



One last hurrah! - the site was given over to a tide of devil's-bit scabious – a hub of bugs as they made the most of this nectar crop in the late summer.

Our dashing young studs were a hit with locals!



be visiting the sites at least once a week, having your eyes opened in a way not possible from reading about it or from seeing the areas on fleeting occasions. Instead you are educated by

nature and witness first-hand how this man-made environment was created in the first place; as a by-product from a traditional grazing system that focused on working the land from which so much of the natural world benefitted and depends upon.

Christmas Workday & BBQ

Senior Project Officer Alan Brown reports



Christmas 2017 was celebrated by holding a work day at Little Woodcote Wood and lunchtime BBQ at Old Lodge Farm as a thank you to our volunteers for all their work over the past year. The day was very well attended by our volunteers and there were also some volunteers from the Lower Moles who were also invited. The day was organised by Sarah Clifford, our SWCA warden who did a fantastic job and was thanked for laying on the spread and the very nice touch of Christmas goodie bags for the volunteers. There was no shortage of volunteers to help on the day with Bob taking the role of Executive Chef with support from numerous Head Chefs, Sous Chefs, Commis Chefs and a number of Kitchen Porters.

The work day in Little Woodcote Woods was led by Tom who organised a day of tree planting some native whips, clearing footpaths and removing dead and fallen trees. The work day was attended very well in the morning session, however after the BBQ there were less volunteers due to being full of food. We did however manage to complete the task.

We would also like to thank Meike from London Borough of Croydon who gave up her morning to support us to thank our volunteers. Meike took responsibility for ensuring the fire stayed alight, cooking the potatoes and keeping an eye on the hot beverage.



On behalf of all Downlands staff we would like to thank all the volunteers for their hard work over the last year. We would also like to thank the Downlands Trust for their continued support which enables us to carry out the work.

Thank you to one
and all.

Surrey Countryside Partnerships Volunteer Survey 2017

Operations Manager, Helen Cocker tells us the facts

Thank you to everyone who filled in the volunteer survey. We sent out the link to the online survey, or a paper copy, to about 400 volunteers on the Downlands and Lower Moles mailing lists. We received 54 responses, that's about 14%.

Of the 54 who had responded 50 had volunteered in the last year. 37 volunteers joined in at least one day per week, and many have been involved for a long time; 7 for more than 11 years, 19 for 6-10 years, 11 for 3-5 years.

There were 10 new volunteers, all of whom strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with their first experience, were made to feel welcome and understood the reason for the work.

The most popular tasks were woodland management, chalk grassland management and working with the livestock. Over 80% praised all aspects of the volunteer experience, with no respondents selecting 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'.

We have carried out volunteer surveys in the past but one of the drivers behind doing one now was the opportunity to try and obtain some indication of whether our volunteers felt that volunteering with us had any effect on their health and well being, so some questions about personal and social gain were included. Of those that answered, about 30% selected stayed the same, with the rest choosing increased or increased greatly, except for the question asking whether volunteering had made any difference to their ability to get paid work, with 28 selecting not relevant, which ties in with 31 stating that they were retired! There was also a higher percentage, about 50%, who selected stayed the same for the questions related to increasing social interaction due to their volunteering with us, although more felt that their involvement in the local community had increased.

18 respondents would like more training opportunities, so we will see what we can do to improve this, perhaps by holding a volunteers forum to seek suggestions for which training people would like, as several people requested more social events and said they would like to attend a forum style event.

The most important result is that 50 of the respondents would recommend us to a friend! The most frequent way people found out about volunteering was by word of mouth, so please go tell your friends....

Dormice at the Dobbin.

Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Warden Sarah Clifford reports on a fantastic success!



These delightful mammals are rare and endangered with many people never seeing them in the wild. This is mainly due to the fact that they are nocturnal and arboreal (living in trees) and also spend up to 6 months asleep. They are also highly protected, with a special licence required to handle and monitor them.

Since finding the first Dormouse at the Dobbin whilst on my Monday task in 2011, we seem to have had a population explosion of these beautiful little critters.

I have now been monitoring the population since 2015, when the all clear was given by Natural England to continue work on the Dobbin in line with the Management Recommendations for Dormice at the

Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area. This was drawn up to run in line with the Management Plan for the area to ensure there is a positive future for them here on the downs. The first nest boxes were put in place in several locations across the site and off we went checking them on a monthly basis. Natural nests started turning up all over the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area, with two nests found in the Croydon Grazing Paddocks in the Skylark Field whilst working on task and more found on Steps Hill. This would confirm that they are spreading across the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area.

After spending 3 years working off a qualified colleagues licence I managed to find an assessor to finally sign off my Dormouse paperwork which I have spent the last three years trying to complete. Bob Francis spent the day with me as we slithered up and down the Dobbin on one of my regular monthly box checks. He joined me, not expecting to find much evidence of Dormice but left exhausted not only due to the quantity of mice we found (over 40 to sex and weigh), but also due to the amount of times I found Bob on the ground as he had fallen over on this slippery slope; in fact 10 times in one day. He was not alone though as I went over several times and at one point doing the splits; something I haven't done for years and don't wish to repeat.

Regular checks are done on boxes from June to November and over the last three years we have had a steady increase in numbers with this year seeing over 75 dormice; up by 33 on the previous year. In one box we had 14 Dormice which, according to my assessor, something he had never seen before. The picture below right shows the very first Dormice that we found at the Dobbin in 2011. Since then and after several years of handling them I am now smitten by these stunning little mammals. They have big brown eyes for seeing in the dark, soft golden fur with

a white patch on their chest, little sticky feet, a prehensile tail and large whiskers. The youngsters can weigh only a few grams less than a weigh bag.

Some of the boxes contain Yellow Neck mice. A testosterone-fuelled beast with teeth to match and if bitten can make a grown man cry like a girl even when wearing ladies black leather driving gloves. Boxes have also had occupants such as Pygmy Shrews, Land Winkles, Tree Snails, a sexton beetle, millipedes and woodlice, leopard slugs and a fully gorged tick, Yuk!



Congratulations to Connor!

Connor, our Grazing Assistant, was recently awarded one of Surrey County Council's Apprentice Awards 2018.

We nominated Connor for the "Past Apprentice Champion of the Year" category, which is for those apprentices who have completed their apprenticeship and are now in a permanent role at the council.

Our nomination was highly praised and he was chosen as the very deserving recipient of the award. Connor was presented with his award by David Hodge, Leader of the Council, at the Apprenticeship Awards Ceremony held at County Hall in Kingston on 8 March.

Well done Connor, a great result for you and the team!

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO DOWNLANDS PARTNERSHIP

May 2018 marks the special 30th anniversary of the Downlands Partnership
née Downlands Countryside Management Project

[National Meadows Day](#) is on Saturday 7 July 2018 and this is the date we are planning to have our main anniversary celebratory event to coincide with this annual initiative, location tbc but probably at Chipstead Downs.

We are also discussing having a second celebratory large scrub bash event at Addington Hills (like we used to arrange annually at Banstead Woods to clear the rhody... but not on quite the same scale!) when the scrub season recommences in September/October, with our partners at Croydon Council.

Full details will be circulated shortly.