

WW003

**Prior Notification
for
Upgrade of Existing Woodland Access
at
Whitefield Wood, Brading, IOW**

Background:

Whitefield Wood is a planted ancient woodland site (PAWS) extending to just under 33 hectares (approx. 81 acres), located 2km north of Brading and 3 km south of Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The property is a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) – reference C168C, Whitefield Woods West – citation attached (document WW011). The main access to the property is from the minor council road (Harding Shute) at NGR SZ602892. It forms part of the largest block of woodland in the immediate vicinity, in a predominantly agricultural landscape of pasture and arable fields, interspersed with blocks of mixed woodland, and is about 3.5 km from the eastern coast of the island. The property has a westerly aspect and relatively gentle topography and lies between 20m and 40m above sea level.

A woodland management plan was prepared for the property was approved by the Forestry Commission in 2015 (case reference 37958- copy attached- document WW006). It should be noted that the management plan includes additional areas of woodland which are no longer in the same ownership and would not be affected by these proposals. Within the management plan the stated objectives include promotion of sustainable silvicultural practice - optimising timber utilisation, restoring Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites and maintaining biodiversity values. Proposed management activity includes a phased selective felling and thinning throughout the woodland. A felling licence is in place covering the harvesting work proposed in the management plan (ref 39340- copy attached-document WW007) and this is valid until 2025.

The management plan also notes that, being situated on Bembridge clay soils, which have impeded drainage, the woodland is subject to seasonal waterlogging making extraction of timber produce difficult. Improvement of the woodland infrastructure was therefore also included as a management objective. Ensuring that adequate infrastructure is in place is critical to facilitate the regular small-scale interventions necessary to achieve a gradual restoration of the ancient woodland to better ecological condition, whilst ensuring that timber can be extracted without causing undesirable damage (e.g. rutting, run-off, compaction and erosion).

The existing main access track within the woodland runs roughly south to north through the centre of the woodland and although partly stoned it is generally in poor condition and in need of improvement to rectify wet and muddy stretches, and provide additional timber stacking and turning areas for harvesting and extraction machinery. This will ensure that access is not a constraint to effective and appropriate management of the woodland using modern equipment.

Description of development:

The proposed works are necessary to satisfy the reasonable operational needs of forestry operations in the woodland, as outlined above. They will allow thinning, selective felling and other woodland

management operations to be carried out at an appropriate time of year, in a safe manner and without negative environmental impacts.

It is proposed that the spine track A-B shown on the attached maps (Plan **WW002A-F**) will be upgraded by widening as required to provide a 3m wide running surface with additional stoning of softer and wetter sections (using imported material) to provide an all-weather surface suitable for use by small forestry tractors / forwarders. The track will need to be slightly wider on bends to accommodate the turning circle of these vehicles. The total length of track to be upgraded is approximately 1050 metres.

Additionally, new stoned timber stacking area will be created near the forest entrance at point A and a stoned "hammerhead" turning area (10m in length) created at point B. A series of small stoned loading / stacking bays will also be created at strategic points along the main track route. These are required for seasoning of felled material destined for woodfuel/ biomass.

The end result will be a surfaced track network which will allow all-weather management access to all parts of the woodland from the pre-existing access point on Harding Shute.

Method statement:

Site access will be along the line of existing tracks in order to minimise disturbance within the woodland.

Trees will be cleared from the track surface and edges only where necessary to give a 6m wide clearance corridor i.e. track width + 1.5m either side. On the southern section of the ride no tree clearance will be required as there is already sufficient clearance. On the northern section of the ride which is narrower some additional tree clearance may be necessary but as identified in the arboricultural report the trees to be removed are of not of high biodiversity value and will be predominantly conifers along with some suppressed / diseased broadleaved trees. The track line will be adjusted by felling of additional conifers where this will allow the track to avoid / reduce impacts on retained native broadleaved trees. Tree clearance will also be required to accommodate the hammerhead turning - again these trees are predominantly conifers with a minor element of diseased and suppressed immature broadleaved trees.

Removal of these trees is already licensed by the Forestry Commission felling licence (as noted above).

Any soft and loose material and soil will be scraped from the track surface and retained for landscaping the track edges. This will ensure retention of the soil seed bank. Care will be taken to avoid damage to retained trees.

Imported stone surfacing will be laid and compacted to bind the surface and give a finished depth of 150mm (or perhaps deeper where more soft material is encountered). The track will be cambered so as to shed water from the running surface in line with Forestry Commission Operations Note 25.

Track edges will be landscaped by spreading previously excavated topsoil and loose material to soften the edges. The works will not result in any significant alteration to the existing profile of the land, because of the generally gentle topography, and the woodland character of the site will be maintained.

MITIGATION MEASURES:

Protected species:

The SINC citation indicates that red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*), dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*), Bechsteins bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*), White Admiral (*Limentis camilla*) and narrow-leaved lungwort (*Pulmonaria longifolia*) are present within the woodland.

Red squirrel, dormouse, Bechsteins bat and White Admiral are all UK Priority Species. Dormouse and bat species are also European Protected Species. Narrow-leaved lungwort (*Pulmonaria longifolia*) is a nationally scarce plant species.

These species are unlikely to be adversely affected by the surfacing of the track but may be impacted by tree removal either to facilitate construction or in subsequent woodland management operations.

Red squirrel:

Best practice guidance will be followed to minimise the risk injuring red squirrels or of disturbing or damaging squirrel dreys. Any trees scheduled to be felled will be carefully inspected prior to felling to check for the presence of red squirrel dreys. Any trees found to contain dreys will not be felled and a buffer zone will be maintained around them by also retaining immediately adjacent trees. All felling will be undertaken during the winter months avoiding the squirrel breeding season (March – August) when dreys are likely to be used for breeding and rearing young. Care will be taken to ensure that linkage between different parts of the woodland is retained by maintaining canopy cover over parts of the track at 100m intervals to allow passage of squirrels through the canopy.

Dormouse:

Forestry Commission best practice guidance (as pre reference below) will be adhered to in order to minimise the risk of disturbance to dormice. Although dormice are present within the wider woodland much of the habitat adjoining the ride to be upgraded is coniferous plantation and thus likely to be of lesser value as dormouse habitat. Disturbance to pockets of native woodland and scrub, which are likely to be of higher suitability as dormouse habitat, will be avoided and where these pockets occur adjacent to the ride they will be left undisturbed. No tree clearance will be carried out between early June and mid-August to avoid the dormouse breeding season. Because of the scale of the overall woodland the impact of any tree removal on the extent of dormouse habitat will be very small especially as of this most work will be carried out in predominantly coniferous blocks, which provide at best marginal habitat for this species.

In the longer term restoration of the PAWS woodland to predominantly broadleaved cover will result in improved and increased habitat for this species thus delivering nett biodiversity gain.

Bechsteins bat

Forestry Commission best practice guidance will also be followed to ensure that there are no negative impacts on this species as a result of the works. The bat is likely to use woodland for roosting, foraging and probably hibernation and usually makes use of woodpecker holes for roosting although loose bark and tree crevices might also be used. Any trees to be felled will be closely examined for any signs of the presence of bat species and features that could potentially be used as roost sites are present. If there is any signs of bat presence or woodpecker holes in these trees then they will not be felled and a buffer zone of unfelled trees will be retained around the potential roost site. NB It appears for Bechsteins bat that only broadleaved trees are used for roosting and that oak is favoured over other trees. No felling will be undertaken between May and September when maternity roosts may be present.

In the longer term an increase in the proportion of native broadleaves in the canopy through thinning and selective felling of the conifer component will result in improved habitat for this species. Where there is no conflict with health and safety considerations standing and fallen deadwood and veteran trees will be retained to provide potential additional roost sites thus delivering nett biodiversity gain.

White Admiral

The butterfly uses shady woodland and ride edges and it is found in both deciduous and mixed deciduous/coniferous woodland. It is dependent on honeysuckle as a food plant. Ride edges will be unaffected by the proposed stoning operations so there should be minimal impact on this species.

In the longer term it is proposed that the southern ride will be managed by mowing alternate strips each autumn (as recommended in Forestry Commission Operations Note 011) which will ensure that ride edge vegetation is maintained and not overtaken or overshadowed by tree regeneration. This will ensure that the habitat is maintained in good condition for butterflies and other invertebrates and this will ensure foraging habitat for bats is maintained / improved.

Narrow-leaved lungwort

As a woodland specialist species Narrow-leaved lungwort is more likely to be found on the semi-shaded ride edges or deeper within areas of broadleaved woodland than in the centre of the ride (which has in any case already been subject to harvesting damage and disturbance) and therefore it is considered that the likelihood of disturbance to this species during track construction is low. Retention of excavated soil and spreading along the ride edges will ensure that the soil seed bank is conserved.

When stacking areas are no longer required they will be removed and re-vegetated (although this may not be for a number of years as outlined below).

Native broadleaved woodland / trees

The track route will be aligned so as to minimise disturbance to any native broadleaved trees present (i.e. by removing additional conifers along the track edge so as to divert the track to minimise compaction in the RPAs of mature oaks).

Ponds

The track route will be aligned so as to avoid disturbance to the small ephemeral pond present and to pond-side vegetation (i.e. by removing additional conifers along the track edge so as to divert the track away from these features).

COMPENSATION MEASURES:

Description of proposed woodland management:

The proposed long-term management of the woodland can best be described as PAWS restoration, i.e. the restoration of the plantations to predominantly native broadleaved woodland. This will be a gradual process, in line with best practice guidance, to ensure that woodland cover is maintained whilst protecting the important native woodland component. The aim will be to ensure that further loss of ancient woodland features is prevented, and then by a sequence of gradual interventions to move species composition towards a more native broadleaved character. This will be achieved by progressive removal of the conifer component in thinning operations, favouring the surviving broadleaves. Selective felling will be carried out around native broadleaved woodland remnants such as surviving mature trees and areas of native woodland vegetation to remove threat posed by the conifer component, reduce over-shading, and encourage regeneration of both native trees and ground flora. In this way a gradual progressive and sensitive restoration of the woodland will be possible without the need for clear-felling of the conifer component.

Thinning operations:

When thinning operations are carried out, native species will be retained in preference to non-natives. Thinning operations will include careful “halo-thinning” around surviving ancient woodland remnants which are currently being suppressed by the surrounding conifers.

Thinning operations will also include removal of conifers and non-native trees along the ride edges to ensure that they are not overshadowed, and to allow opportunities for further colonisation of ground flora from the rides.

Operations will be spread over a number of years so that some parts of the woodland will remain undisturbed while others are thinned.

PAWS restoration will be a gradual process involving successive thinning and small-scale selective felling operations to reduce the proportion of conifers over time, in line with best practice guidance.

Ride management

In the longer term it is proposed that the southern ride will be managed by mowing alternate strips each autumn (as recommended in Forestry Commission Operations Note 011) which will ensure that ride edge vegetation is maintained and not overtaken by tree regeneration. In conjunction with selective removal of conifers along the edges to prevent over-shading, this will ensure that the flora is conserved, and that the habitat is maintained in good condition for butterflies and other invertebrates. This will also ensure foraging habitat for bats is maintained / improved.

References:

Bat Conservation Trust (2013) - Bechsteins Bat – An introduction for woodland owners

Butterfly Conservation – White Admiral (<https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/white-admiral>)

Forestry Commission (2019) – A protocol for undertaking woodland management in England where dormice are present.

Forestry Commission (2011) - Operations Note 025 – Forest roads and tracks

Pepper, H & Patterson G (1998) Red Squirrel Conservation (Forestry Commission Practice Note 5)

Stephens, P (2005) – Operations Note 011 – Managing open space for wildlife (Forestry Commission publication)

Woodland Trust (2015). Ancient Woodland restoration – an introductory guide to the principles of restoration management.