

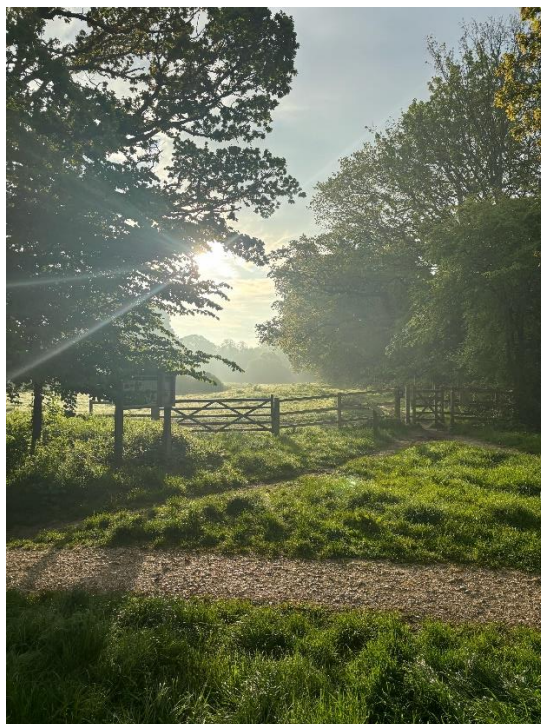
FRIENDS OF BALLARD WATER MEADOW

BALLARD MEADOW AND WOODLAND

ANNUAL REPORT FOR APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025

INTRODUCTION

This is The Friends of Ballard Water Meadow's (FBWM) fourth annual report. As in the past, our work on the site is directed by the five-year Management Plan (2025) where the volunteers follow the Work Programme from which our Annual Work Plan and monthly work schedules are derived. Like many land management plans, and our work plan is no different, most of the work has been achieved whilst some tasks, usually outside our control, remain wanting.



MANAGEMENT PLANNING

The original five-year Management Plan was written in 2020 and covered the period to December 2024. A revision was drafted in late 2024. Like before, the new plan will run for five years (from 1st January 2025 – 31st March 2030) and will form the framework for future activities. It had been requested by New Milton Town Council (NMTC) that this draft plan should be widely circulated for comment before being adopted. This was the case and one comment was received. The revised Management Plan 2025-2030 was adopted by the Amenities Committee of the Town Council.

As with any land management work, our work is becoming seasonal and cyclical.

RECORDING

Surveys and transects to record a variety of wildlife groups continued in previous years. March sees the start of the Common Bird Census and April heralds the Butterfly and Bumblebee Transects. This year we saw the welcome return of Bryan Pinchen who has resumed his survey of insects after a year's absence. Plants are recorded year-round.

Only two stream surveys were undertaken in June and October. The stream runs from September to May in most years. The moth trap was deployed on three occasions.

We have installed two corrugated sheets and these are checked monthly for reptiles and small mammals.

CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT

1. Meadow

The volunteers try to keep April free of physical management work in order to allow wildlife a disturbance-free period. We also encourage the landowner to liaise with the grazier to remove cattle before the ground becomes too wet. Cattle create bare-ground by their actions, but if the ground is too wet, too much bare ground is created (called poaching). This creates an imbalance in the fine sward of the more delicate meadow plants, allowing more aggressive species like Hemlock Water-dropwort or Broad-leaved Dock to become dominant.

With the cattle still in the meadow, the Air Ambulance dropped-in. Cattle, being curious, nudged the aircraft and the pilot was reluctant to lift-off until a specialist had checked all the hose connections.



The cows escaped through one of the kissing gates and were rounded-up in a garden in Leigh Road and fortunately little damage caused before they were let back into the meadow within a few hours. They were not removed from the meadow until 21st April and had caused considerable damage to the meadow surface, particularly in the wetter eastern end.

In two selected compartments Hemlock Water-dropwort was cut and removed to try and reduce the amount of seed-fall. This is a long process and will take many years to see any reduction in dominance. Two meadow compartments are selected for more hands-on management each year. Bramble and oak seedlings were also cleared in readiness for the compartments to be machine cut in July.



The District Council, jointly with New Milton Town Council purchased a specialist grass-cutting machine – a BCS Scythe mower. We had a demonstration of what it could do in July and the machine was used in only one compartment (restricted use because of resource constraints) in August. All arisings were cleared away in early September. Also in August, a large clump of bramble was cut and burned at the eastern end of the meadow.

Three Dexter cattle were re-introduced into the meadow on 29th September however, in early November they escaped from the meadow for a second time and were taken off-site. The grazier was not happy with the arrangements.

Each year the volunteers request free trees from the Woodland Trust. We were given over 60 and these were planted alongside the stream between the stream and the boundary fence in November. This planting was augmented later, in December, with over 200 native hedgerow species/trees as a result of a generous grant from the Hampshire Hedgerow Project.



In January the broken sleeper-bridge was repaired by New Milton Town Council and a bench at the northern end of the meadow was dedicated in memory of Sue Buckle – long-time supporter of the FBWM. The family raised a considerable sum of money, donated to FBWM and this was used to purchase specialised equipment for volunteer use.

More large bramble patches were cleared early in 2025, in the compartments planned to be cut in the summer. This opens up the ground for meadow plant seeds to germinate, thus expanding the area of open grassland and wildflowers.



2. Woodland

As we returned to normal work-parties in May, our first task was to install a gravel path at the northern end of the woodland, connecting the section done in the previous year and the Green Way. This short length had become very wide as people avoided the wetter sections, and in so doing, were compacting and trampling Wood Anemones, Bluebells and other delicate woodland flora. The path has been successful and now funnels visitors along a prescribed route, leaving the edges to re-grow. Thanks to NMTC for providing materials.

In July, half-way along the Green Way through the woodland a memorial bench was purchased by family members (installed by the Town Council), in memory of our former Chairman, Richard Prime.

Bramble grows fast, so the volunteers are constantly trimming back the leading shoots which arch over the gravel path. Much of July was spent controlling this species through the woodland. In September a start was made on cutting and clearing the low-growing vegetation in the northern glade and later, in October we began to clear the bramble understorey in our selected coppice compartment. The southern glade was also cut and cleared at this time. Most of the arisings from this clearance work was burnt-up on our first bonfire of the season in November. Two oak trees had their crowns removed and four large holly trees were felled – all to allow more light into the compartment. All of the larger timber is stacked onto our wood-walls. Work in the coppice compartment cutting bramble and understorey shrubs continued until February. With a generous donation from New Milton Crematorium (The Westerleigh Group), we purchased and planted 200 hazel saplings in February. These were staked and guarded and, to prevent damage from trampling, a temporary rope-barrier was fixed around the compartment. We are fortunate that little vandalism takes place on this site. However, in early March, someone dug-up our developing clump of Snowdrops from the woodland near to our work-base.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In April we invited New Milton Town Council councillors and officers for a walk around the site to observe wildlife and see the work the volunteers do.

We had our Annual General Meeting in May. Once again, many thanks to the Westerleigh Group and New Milton Crematorium for allowing us to use their premises. Also in May we trialled a Dawn Chorus walk. This was very successful and was attended by 20 people, who were rewarded with birdsong and a breakfast coffee and snack!

To celebrate our traditional wildflower meadows across the country, Plantlife (the national wildflower meadows charity) encourages wildflower management groups to come together on National Meadows Day. This is designed to raise awareness of our disappearing wildflower meadows. They are still under threat from mismanagement, building development and upgrading public access by covering with tarmac or gravel.



This year, our Meadows Day celebration was blessed with fine, dry weather and was well attended. Our Town Mayor, councillor Alvin Reid, also called-in to say hello. We had our stall set-up at a Volunteer Networking event in the Memorial Hall in July and also a pitch on New Milton market close to Christmas.

Also, it is not all work on the site. From time-to-time the volunteers visit local wildlife sites, by way of a change, to see habitats and their management away from New Milton. We visited; Rhinefield Arboretum and a guided tour with a Forestry England ranger, NMSB Downton restoration site, Noth Baddesley butterfly meadow, North Solent NNR (Sims Wood), Fishlake Meadows (Romsey) and Barry's Wood (near Martin).

Throughout the year we send out a quarterly newsletter to signed-up members. On site we display posters informing visitors about the changing seasons and wildlife present and what to look-out for, as well as small information boards explaining the management work that is taking place.

MEMBERSHIP

At the end of the year (March 2025) the Friends of Ballard Water Meadow membership stood at 70.

It is with great sadness that the year ended with the loss of a colleague and great supporter of the Friends of Ballard Water Meadow. Paul Brockman BEM was a champion of wildlife and particularly woodland management and the benefits both can bring to society. He regularly visited Ballard Meadow and Woodland with school groups keen to learn about traditional woodland management and craft skills. Our condolences go to his wife, Zena.

Bob Lord
Chairman
Friends of Ballard Water Meadow
June 2025

Thanks to members for providing photographs.