

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest Management Plan Steering Group Epping Forest & Commons	13 th November 2013
Subject:	Public
Epping Forest Work Programme Out-turn 2012-2013	
Report of:	For Information
Superintendent of Epping Forest	

Summary

This report summarises the work completed as part of the access and habitat Work programme for Epping Forest from April 2012 to March 2013. The work was completed against the backdrop of highly unusual weather conditions, beginning with drought and followed by one of the wettest spring and summer periods on record.

Amongst the highlights of the work by staff and contractors were:

- the re-surfacing of over 2.5km of surfaced rides;
- the completion of work on 89 Keystone Beech trees in a revised *Branching Out* programme, modified due to the weather conditions;
- the pollarding of more than 150 Hornbeams and “haloing” of many other ancient and veteran pollards in 15 Forest compartments (Appendix 1);
- the completion of 10 years work in restoring the ancient wood-pasture and Oaks of Lords Bushes;
- the harvesting of over 20 hectares of haylage from the Forest in addition to the crop taken from the Buffer Lands;
- the start of the new grazing contract with Wildlife & Countryside Services and the introduction of Redpoll cattle to the Buffer Lands.

In addition, of the two main volunteers’ groups, the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV) and the Epping Forest Centenary Trust, carried out work on over 40 sites. During the year, the EFCV agreed to consolidate its volunteering effort on 8 core sites across the Forest. The Scout Project 823 was a success, with the highlight being the construction of the walkway at Connaught Water.

The habitats work programme is supported by significant annual income from the agri-environment grants administered by the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England which this year amounted to £313,741.91 in total. In addition, further income was received from the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Tubney Charitable Trust for the trees and grazing management elements of the *Branching Out* Project.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. This report reviews the conservation projects, habitat management and tree safety work achieved during the year 2012 – 13 by the Operations and Conservation Teams and volunteer groups.
2. The programme is drawn from the Epping Forest Management Plan approved in 2004 and the *Branching Out* Project, which began in 2009. Background details of the projects can be found in the main Management Plan and in the other documents listed below under '*Background Papers*'.

Current Position

3. The habitats work programme is supported financially by Natural England through its Environmental Stewardship Scheme as well as other agri-environment income administered by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA).
4. The management of most of the grasslands in the Forest and on the Buffer Lands is covered by payments under the Entry Level Scheme (ELS), with additional income for grassland management from the Single Payment Scheme.
5. Other habitats work in the Forest, especially within the scrub and wooded areas, is supported by specific Higher Level Scheme (HLS) payments at higher rates of payment and this includes cattle grazing, wood-pasture restoration and scrub coppicing.
6. The total of income from these sources this year amounted to £313,741.91.
7. This year's work by volunteers was carried out at over 40 sites across the Forest by the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV), Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT), The Wren Group and other groups organised by the Volunteer Development Officer.
8. The EFCV further agreed with a proposal from the Ecologist to consolidate its efforts and dedicate the majority of its volunteer hours to 8 core sites: Gilbert's Slade, Walthamstow Forest, Fernhills, Lord's Bushes, Chingford Plain, Rushey Plain, Long Running and Swaines Green.
9. Additional projects and operations requiring specialist equipment (e.g. hay-making and pond excavation) made use of external contractors.
10. The unusual weather patterns during the year dominated the work programme, affecting both tree work and also the timing of the cutting programme.

Car Parks, Barrier Gates, fences and hedges

11. The cyclical work programme of maintenance was carried out on these features, although more extensive work will be required in future to replace the Fernhills fence. The new Head of Operations, who took up his post in November 2012, began devising a new long-term programme to encompass this work.

Rides & Trails Network

12. The Rifle Butts and Wormleyton Pits Rides were re-surfaced and in addition extensive repair work was carried out on the slope of the surfaced ride at Warren Hill due to damage from a burst water main which had required its temporary closure. This work amounted to over 2,500 metres of ride work for the year.
13. The tree hazard survey was completed along the unsurfaced ride and paths network and, in addition, a programme of cutting back overhanging vegetation was completed across the network during early 2013.

Keystone Trees Strategy

14. The cold and very wet summer of 2012 following on from drought conditions of the late winter and the previous autumn had an impact on the tree population. This was previewed in the proposed annual work programme report to Committee (SEF 12/12). Significant numbers of Oak trees, including veteran pollards, showed signs of physiological stress with stem bleeds. However, Beech tree leaf size, which had been below average during 2010 and 2011, seemed to be improved during summer 2012
15. As a result any work on Oak pollards was deferred until 2013-14. Instead a revised programme of crown retrenchments was completed on the Keystone Beech trees for the *Branching Out* Project. A target of 100 Beech trees was agreed with Heritage Lottery Fund for the winter, although in the end only 89 Beech trees were completed by March 2013 across 4 compartments – Monks Wood, St Thomas's Qtrs, Rushey Plain and Compartment 19 at Clay Road Heath (see location map at **Appendix 1**). The total of 89 trees was completed despite mechanical problems with the cherry pickers, which put them out of action for more than 2 weeks.

Wood-pasture Restoration and other woodland work

16. The pollarding and re-pollarding of over 150 Hornbeam pollards was completed as planned, along with "halo" clearances around pollards and new pollard creation across 15 compartments (see location map at **Appendix 1**). The annual Scout Project, supported by the Epping Forest arborists, achieved a significant amount of clearance work within the pollarded areas alongside Jubilee Ride in Bury Wood. A major Orienteering event was then able to make use of this cleared area as its start and finish point during November 2012 and complimentary comments were made about the work.

17. Some of the Turkey Oak was removed from Barn Hoppitt and, in addition, this species was also removed from along the Green Ride adjacent to Chingford Plain and Connaught Water.
18. A highlight was the completion of the 10th year of wood-pasture restoration work at Lords Bushes, for which a recently-completed MSc study (Imperial College) of the Oak pollards (co-supervised by the Head of Conservation) showed a significant improvement in the condition of the trees, especially due to “haloing” and the removal of competing and over-shading younger trees.
19. A further highlight was the arrival and successful inductions of the 10th, 11th and 12th apprentices into the arborist teams.

Tree safety work

20. Over 300 trees were completed (a reduction from previous years totals as more trees have now been dealt with) along the surfaced ride network and in the areas of highest priority (red zones) alongside roads.

Grazing

21. The Grazing Expansion Plan was approved by Committee during the year which also saw the beginning of the new contract with Wildlife & Countryside Services (Mr Roger Beecroft) as the grazier.
22. The *Boviguard* Invisible fencing network at Bury Wood and Hill Wood allowed extensive grazing across Fairmead and into Bury Wood with English Longhorns grazing here and also at the traditional areas across Chingford Plain and the heathlands. A 2012 survey of Almshouse Plain revealed that the rare Lousewort had continued to spread and increase both its population size and cover since 2007 when it was last surveyed at this grassland site.
23. The grazier’s herd of Redpoll cattle (another rare conservation breed) was trialled at Warlies Park throughout the summer where the sward management was targeted at Ragwort control.

Grassland Mowing and other open sites work

24. Over 20 hectares of grassland from 5 sites in the Forest itself were harvested for haylage (a form of hay that is cut earlier with more moisture and has to be wrapped in plastic rolls for winter storage) by a specialist contractor.
25. The Grassland Team completed the rest of the extensive Environmental Stewardship grassland programme and the amenity work despite the wet weather, a remarkable effort in the circumstances. Only a few places were left uncut.
26. The MBDC site at Wanstead Flats was re-seeded in autumn 2012 as planned and began to “green up” before the end of the year.

Scrub Management & control

27. *Project Nightingale* continued as in previous years, involving many volunteer hours as well as staff time. New coppicing work was carried out at Warren Wood Slopes as well as around Chingford Plain.
28. An area of scrub, with non-native plants, was removed around the “Fairmead Oaks” in a volunteer effort coordinated by the Friends of Epping Forest.
29. The Scout Project 823 cleared invading scrub from the areas of Heather alongside the Woodchip Ride (part of Clay Road Heath and the old Sandpit Plain) in Compartment 19 near Loughton Camp – restoring the heathy nature of this area.

Wetland Management

30. Work began on the restoration of Jubilee Pond at Wanstead Flats, working with the City Surveyor’s Department.
31. Work at clearing the invasive and smothering *Crassula* was continued at Bulrush Pond as part of the annual Scout Project.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

32. There are no further implications to highlight as this report is a summary of completed operations that were planned and approved by Committee and the Management Plan Steering Group between May and July 2012.

Conclusion

33. The unusual weather patterns during the year dominated the work programme. The cold and wet summer of 2012 following on from drought conditions of the spring and the previous autumn significantly affected the tree populations and this restricted the *Keystone Tree* work. However, despite these extreme conditions the work programme overall was still completed, including the grassland mowing sites with only a few places left uncut. The grazing programme still awaited the new infrastructure and so was maintained at a similar level to previous years, but with the introduction and successful trial of Redpoll cattle at Warlies.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1:** Map of Forest compartments showing those in which Wood-pasture restoration (15) and *Keystone Tree* operations (4 of the 15) were completed.

Background Papers:

- *Epping Forest Annual Work Programme for access and habitats 2012-13. Report to EF&C Committee 14th May 2012 (SEF 12/12).*
- *The Epping Forest Management Plan 2004 – 2010*
- *The Barn Hoppitt Wood-pasture Restoration Plan 2006 – 2011*

- *The Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods Integrated Site Plan 2004 – 2010*
- *The Wanstead Flats Integrated Site Plan 2006 – 2011*
- *Branching Out Stage Project Plan (Nov 2008) (Chapters 15 Keystone Trees Strategy and 16 Grazing Strategy)*
- *Environmental Stewardship guidelines (Natural England)*

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