

Melton Park Management Company

A Management Plan for our woodlands - Sept 2020

Background

Since taking over responsibility for the woods from Hopkins Homes we have been gradually improving the health and species diversity of the woodlands at the same time as ensuring the safety of residents using the woods for recreation. What this incremental approach has lacked is a longer-term strategic vision for future decades. The prevalence of disease among several species of forest trees - ash die-back, acute oak decline and leaf miner in horse chestnuts - has brought the need for a more strategic approach into sharp focus. Unless we take action now, we could lose many of our mature trees without having planted successor trees to replace them.

Last year we employed arboricultural consultants New Woods Forestry to draw up a Management Plan using the Forestry Commission template and guidelines. They have now completed their report and it has been approved by the Forestry Commission. This Plan provides us with recommendations for work over the next 10 years and allows us to implement a programme of felling and replanting in line with these recommendations. It is worth noting that the Management Plan does not commit us to implementing any of the recommendations. Our approach to implementation is at the discretion of the Board, with approval from the AGM.

The Plan

The Management Plan is quite a technical, repetitive and rather bureaucratic document containing many charts, tables and appendices. The summary here is intended to communicate the main points.

1. The overall aims of the Plan are given in the 'Vision' statement:

"Hospital Grove and the surrounding woodland associated with the Melton Park development are a unique asset for the local residents (known collectively as the Melton Park woodland). This management plan will help to secure the future viability of the woodland by creating conditions to allow the next generation of trees to invigorate the woodland with no detriment to the current conservation value.

There are existing gaps in the canopy created as a result of tree diseases and previous management. By widening these existing gaps through small scale felling operations, a successful planting regime can be implemented helping to regenerate the woodland. Implementing a thinning regime across the rest of the woodland will help to secure the safety of visitors and ensure the best formed trees can get growing to their full potential, whilst permitting higher light levels for the diverse ground flora."

For MPMC these two paragraphs are probably the most important part of the Plan. They specify our intentions - to secure the future viability of the woodlands - and the means of achieving this - through thinning, small scale felling and replanting.

2. A detailed description of the woods is given.

The Plan notes the soil types, the diversity of flora and fauna and the age of the woods. According to the DEFRA online mapping system Hospital Grove is not technically ancient woodland - ie. being present on maps dating back to 1600 - but the report says, 'it is characteristic of ancient woodland and should be managed sympathetically to this designation'.

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Tree species are predominantly mature ash and oak with some sycamore and wild cherry. The shrub layer contains hazel coppice, holly, field maple and bramble. Acute oak decline is having an effect on some mature oaks and if we are to maintain the current proportion of oak in the overstay new planting will be essential. Ash dieback is having an effect, particularly among mature trees and this is likely to continue. Those species which could replace ash are existing sycamore and replanted wild service, silver birch, field maple and hornbeam.

Looking at the structure of the woodland, the report notes that whilst there is some understory - trees and shrubs below the canopy - these are not the right kind of trees to act as successors to our current overstory trees. For MPMC, this means removing dying trees in places where this will allow us to replant with more disease resistant species, promoting greater diversity and also acting as successor trees in the overstory.

3. Objectives and methods are then given. These are quite general and little guidance is detailed on how they might be applied in the specific context of our woods. It stresses the importance of conservation by retaining some dead and dying trees as valuable habitat and by carrying out inspections prior to any forestry operations to check effects on the habitats of plant and animals.

4. The Plan recommends a 5 year review to check that the objectives are being achieved. What it does not do is specify a timetable or a programme for implementation. This is up to MPMC.

Recommendations

The Board has had some preliminary discussions of the Plan, we have consulted with our woodsman Jason Roberts and with an outside consultant, Alice Martin, a specialist in arboriculture and urban forestry. Our recommendations are:

- That we propose to our shareholders that the plan is implemented in accordance with the 'Vision' described above.
- That if agreed, the Board proceeds in a gradual and incremental way, concentrating on specific sections of the woodland each year,
- Please note that we intend to undertake some long overdue work this winter in that part of the woodland designated " 2b" in the Plan, in the south east corner of Hospital Grove, which has also been endorsed by the latest woodland "health and safety" report. It would be sensible for us to undertake this work in accordance with the recommendations of the Report. This section has had very little work since we took over responsibility for the woods. It has a lot of recent growth trees, probably dating from the 1987 storm, and quite a lot of dying ash. We would aim to thin about one third of trees to allow more light in and more space for remaining trees to develop. Depending on time and resources, we may also be able to open up one of 3 clearings recommended in the Plan to allow new planting, particularly of oak. This would be alongside a short section of the bridleway running down towards Yarmouth Road from the turn of Thomas Churchyard Close.

It is very difficult to assess the costs of implementing the Plan. Our estimate is that it will add approximately £5k per annum to the existing spending on woodland management.