

### WALMER FREEDOWN FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF THE WOODLAND.

1. Compartment 2 of Walmer Freedown has always been rather miserable, without welcome to visitors, a place devoid of many flowering plants, a place to dump rubbish and without any good structure for wildlife. Being next to the car park it is forbidding and does not stimulate visitors to enter; most people therefore use the chalk track up to the memorial instead of venturing into the gloom. The compartment also acts as a significant source of tree seed which helps maintain the scrub in the lower slopes of the adjacent compartment 3 at the slope of the downland.
2. In order to enhance this part of the down, there is little that can be done without professional help. Unlike the open downland element of the Freedown, where volunteers can manage to work well at maintaining the habitat, the woodland in the compartment 2 area is much bigger and more difficult to work with hand tools.
3. The overall disposition of trees and shrubs in the compartment is somewhat irregular. There are misshapen trees, areas with no trees or shrubs and areas where there are too many trees, whether saplings or older, that crowd together and make the area dark and forbidding.
4. In order to make this situation better, management is required. This has been considered informally, and what follows aims to provide an outline solution to the problems and will make the area better, lighter, and more attractive for both wildlife and people in the future. It will also stimulate what are called ecotones, which is where two habitats meet such as coppiced trees and scrubland or grassland, and as a result of which wildlife generally increases and thrives. At the moment, ecotones are few and far between in the compartment.
5. The area concerned stretches from the road edge to the bottom of the chalk slope, but includes the scrub in the bottom half of the scrub.
6. The following measures are proposed:
  - a. Coppicing. This is the process whereby a broadleaved tree is cut at ground level and then allowed to regrow. It provides a much denser habitat for all sorts of wildlife and can be used to control deformed or ailing trees back to a healthier state. There are a lot of trees in the compartment which could benefit from coppicing which will let light into the ground and allow hidden seeds to germinate and in time make a better and more visually pleasant woodland scene.
  - b. Pollarding. This is where a tree is cut well above ground level, often at a height of six to nine feet or more. Like coppice, new shoots arise, but they will eventually destroy the tree over many decades as they become heavy if unkempt and not occasionally repollarded. There is an existing pollard in the compartment which urgently requires repollarding. Old pollards become extremely good habitats for bats and nesting birds, and are a valuable scenic resource.
  - c. Planting new saplings. This is urgently needed in some parts of the compartment because of gaps in the canopy. Generally, the canopy of the compartment is rather limited in terms of species and management, and there are several species which are no longer present and have died out. Replanting with trees or shrubs is a means of restoring such species and carefully adding new ones as well as rejuvenating the woodland as a whole.
  - d. Controlling Scrub. The scrub on the edge of the compartment where it abuts compartment 3 is the home of one of the rarest snails in Kent. But the habitat is rapidly becoming light woodland and will, if left, become like compartment 2, which will almost certainly lead to the loss of the snail and of other species that depend on light scrub. Scrub control by cutting is therefore urgently needed if this valuable aspect of the fauna of the Freedown is not to be lost.

- e. Developing a hedge along the road edge. The road edge is currently not fenced, and the fact that it is untidy and unattractive is one of the reasons why people dump rubbish in this area. Yet the road edge naturally lends itself to the creation of a hedge, which however managed, would help to deter problems in this area. The hedge would have to be mixed native species but with quite a lot of hawthorn to limit entry. In time it would become a significant feature of the road edge as well as being beautiful in spring when in flower, and a year – round resource for wildlife.
- f. Ivy control. Ivy is a very valuable early autumn source of nectar for hibernating insects when it climbs up a tree, and at the same time is a place for bats to roost and birds to make their nests. However, in places, it has also grown thickly across the ground of the compartment and, in so doing, is suppressing the growth of seedlings of non – woody plants such as bluebell, sedges or chalk woodland plants like sanicle and roast beef plant which are found further along the road edge. Removing ivy from the ground surface in parts of the compartment could therefore be expected to help develop a more diverse woodland structure for the benefit of all.

7. There are other things that could be done:

- A seat could be placed in the compartment for people to enjoy. It could perhaps be dedicated to a local person.
- Tidying and managing the area would prevent the dumping of rubbish.
- Tree saplings could be sponsored by local schools, both in terms of their acquisition and monitoring.
- Careful planting could help hide the gas monitor and make the car park edge look more attractive, thereby encouraging people into the compartment.
- Bird and bat boxes could be erected, and perhaps sponsored by individuals and companies.
- There is probably also at least one place where a special tree such as a whitebeam could be planted to celebrate a special local or national event.

8. To start all this, a tree survey is required which would catalogue all the existing trees, determine what and how many of them there were, and also help to formulate the preliminary approach to a long – term management plan such as costings, what needed to be done where and when, and other matters essential for a good plan. This is when the hard work would begin, but it would result in a much nicer place than the compartment is today. The work at the site would complement the work of the volunteers on the open Freedown. It would ensure that the site was restored to its former glory, as a place for birds to sing and nest, flowers to bloom, and people to relax amidst the greenwood in the sunlight out of the wind.

Martin Newcombe,

December 2014.