

Emailed Report from J Sacha on Potential Nature reserve on old railway embankment.

11/05/2019

Hi Diane

Thank you for meeting me on Friday morning to discuss the possible nature reserve project on the old railway embankment at Lucy Plackett Recreation Ground. I said I would follow this up with a summary of my understanding of what might be involved. As I understand the position, the Parish Council owns the section of the railway embankment along the southern edge of L.P together with the concrete track that runs parallel with the embankment along its southern side. Over the many years since the closure of the rail line the embankment has been colonised by a thicket of native trees and shrubs and several of the trees are now fully mature and the larger Ash are showing signs of decline. I believe Andy Barnes has prepared a tree survey that identifies most of the major trees. Along the south side of the embankment between the bank and the concrete track there is a flatter strip of ground below the line of telegraph poles and electricity cables. Here the trees and shrubs have been discouraged and a ground flora of nettles and other advantageous herbaceous species have become well established. Then alongside the concrete track there is timber close boarded fence in various stages of collapse and sections of overgrown hedgerow species including patches of *Pyracantha* that may have been planted, or are possibly garden escapes.

Over the years local dog walkers and children have formed a network of well-trodden earth paths along the top of the embankment, down both ends and in various places down and across the north facing slope. The tracks have also presented a challenge for BMX bikers and some of the steeper slopes have been eroded so that they are quite wide in places. Access up and down the steeper slopes and part of the track along the top presents a challenge for less able walkers and are impossible for unsupported wheelchair users.

On the day of our visit at the height of the bird nesting season the bird song was a delight and its very clear that the site is already of value to wildlife, presenting a variety of habitats with mature trees, shrub thicket and a more open swathe of ground flora. Wildlife accommodates itself well to unmanaged or undermanaged land and the tangled thickets, decayed and fallen timber may look untidy but can be of immense value. One must therefore resist the temptation to intervene too much and 'tidy up'. With that said there is also scope to enhance and add to the variety and quality of habitat and we considered the impeded drainage at one end of L.P field and whether there would be an opportunity to create a pond scrape. You could also enhance the woodland ground flora and create islands of native wild flowers in the swathe of nettles below the electricity cables. By controlling the nettles the wild flowers can be encouraged to spread and naturalize to provide an excellent habitat for butterflies, bees and other insects. The dilapidated timber fencing will have to be removed and then you face the possible problem of travellers gaining access, and fly tipping. Replacing the close board fence with a timber post and rail fence and native shrub hedgerow would be one possible solution.

Access to and through the nature reserve will be an important consideration and you will gain more public support by using the path network that already exists. You may need to discourage the use of certain areas and decide what if any restrictions need to be applied to prioritise areas for wildlife. DDA must be considered and whether you can meet the challenge of providing wheel chair access so that the nature reserve can be enjoyed by all. Then interpretation of the wildlife to be seen and enjoyed and what management plans you have in place to attract certain species will be another important consideration and I.T can be very creative by allowing 24/7 engagement. Keeping people informed will be key to encouraging care and respect and a 'Friends Group' in the community will be a great asset to the Parish Council.

You must engage an Ecologist and when you have a good understanding of the value of what's there you can then prepare your project proposals and short term and long term management plans. Susan Marchand at CDC can advise you on how to go about declaring the site as a Local Nature Reserve and the variety of different grants that might be available. I understand you already have policies in your Neighbourhood Plan for enhancing sites for wildlife, so you should have a strong case for winning funding support through developer contributions / CIL.

I hope that's a useful summary Diane and please keep me informed and let me know how the Parish Council intend to proceed with the project.

Kind regards

Jeremy