Stonebridge Meadows— management plan

Adopted January 2018

Marlborough Town Council (MTC) and Action for the River Kennet (ARK) own and manage Stonebridge Meadow, a 15 acre water meadow to the east of Marlborough bound by the River Kennet to the north and Stonebridge Lane on the west. This management plan is a joint document which sets out agreed strategy, objectives and methods for managing the site.

The overall aims and objectives of this plan relate to the ten year period 2015—2025. Progress will be reviewed annually and actions added and altered accordingly. This plan was last reviewed in January 2018.

Background

In 2011 ARK and the Town Council purchased the Stonebridge Meadow. The overall terms of the joint purchase are set out in the 'Declaration of Trust' (Appendix 1). The joint purchase was accompanied by an agreement to ensure that the meadow was managed to benefit wildlife and create new public access. The agreed aims were:

- *To sustainably maintain and develop the stretch of river and the associated land to be an exemplar for the River Kennet as a whole.*
- *To recognise the conservation and environmental value of the site and maintain the land in accordance with best conservation and environmental principles.*
- *To preserve and enhance the rich biodiversity qualities of the meadow as an important natural breathing space*
- *To preserve and enhance the place where people have the opportunity to be inspired by the natural environment and recognise the need for people to have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment*

The initial objectives in 2011 included the following :

To explore the opportunity to provide additional sustainable allotment provision and t*o explore the opportunity to provide additional football pitch provision as an extension to the existing facilities at Elcot Lane recreation ground.*

The Town Council met their requirement to provide allotments by leasing land from St John's Foundation Trust so this objective has been removed. In 2014 Marlborough Town Football club explored the potential to create a football pitch on the site. They concluded that the construction of a pitch which did not flood was only possible with significant engineering and building works. In order to attract the level of investment required the pitch would need to be closed to public access. The results of the 2014 Stonebridge public consultation demonstrated some support for increased sports provision, but a clear majority (67%) opposing it (Appendix 2) . As a result the provision of formal sports pitches is not included in this management plan. The public review of the management plan in January 2018 reinforced this objection to loss of land to football pitches. MTC remain interested in exploring options for sports provision in the area, but conversion of land to football pitches is not an agreed action in this plan.

A management committee of three Marlborough Town Councillors and three ARK members oversee the management of the meadow and are responsible for drafting implementing this management plan. The management plan is ratified by the ARK and Amenities and Open Spaces Committees. Substantive issues are referred to the full Town Council and the ARK committee. Minutes of the SMC meetings are circulated to Town Councillors and the ARK committee.

A group of local residents are actively involved in looking after the site and a regular e-news is published by ARK with contributions from the Town Council.

Rare black poplar trees propagated and more planted

New fencing and gates installed, old fencing removed.

Bat & bird boxes installed

River bank repaired, mainly by volunteers

Grazing established

Stream water crowfoot planted by scouts and now established

New seats installed

Foot paths mown and maintained by Marlborough Town Council

Pasture pumps installed

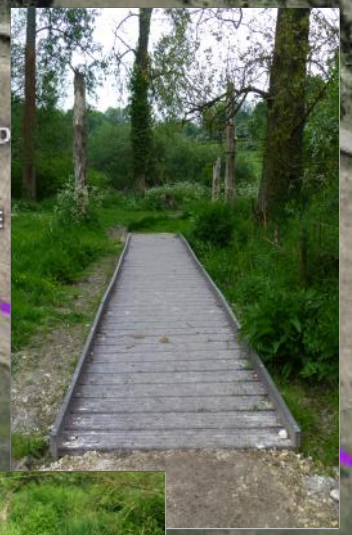
Hedge planted by volunteers

Stonebridge Meadow—illustrations of actions completed since 2012

At least 12 well attended events run every year.

Awarded 'Outstanding' 2015, 2016 and 2017 by Britain in Bloom. Winner of the Monk Trophy 2015 for best use of native plants.

Local involvement—even more community volunteers.



Firm partnerships with local schools, providing outdoor ecological education for all ages.

Improved access for informal play and exploration

New wetland and boardwalk improves access, biodiversity and educational opportunities, and is an exemplar of Sustainable Urban Drainage.

Footpaths mown and maintained by Marlborough Town Council.

Protected species recorded at the reserve, now a designated Wildlife Site.

Stonebridge Meadow—illustrations of progress completed 2015-17

Research and consultation

The initial management plan, agreed by both ARK and MTC in 2011, was based on advice from the Environment Agency, North Wessex Downs AONB, Flora Locale, David Davenport (river habitat restoration), The Wild Trout Trust , Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and Wiltshire Biological Recorders and feedback from the 2011 public consultation.

This 2015 update is informed by further advice from Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England and feedback from the July 2014 public consultation. A summary of the results is included in Appendix 2, and detailed comments in Appendix 3. The consultation showed > 80% support for the management interventions so far.

The masterplan for the meadow layout shown on page 4 with the key elements identified.

Strategy

Stonebridge Meadow sits within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and provides a valuable Natural Green Space and Green Corridor along the River Kennet valley leading out from within the urban fabric of Marlborough to the wider countryside and the adjoining Savernake Forest.

Following the processes of habitat, flora and fauna surveys, research and public consultation an Illustrative Masterplan has been drawn up to reflect strategic 'landuse' principles for Stonebridge Meadow and to guide its future management. The public consultation demonstrated that there is a widespread appreciation of the value of natural green space in relation to encouraging biodiversity through sympathetic management regimes and the need for a careful balance between developing recreation and conservation.

The strategy is a simple one that balances and protects the needs of the resident wildlife (determined by survey), whilst increasing public access and amenity. This leads to a gradation in the intensity of public use and access….higher where wildlife disturbance is less critical i.e. at Stonebridge Lane and bridging points…and restricted where protection of best quality habitat is needed i.e. the river corridor between the seating 'banjo' and Poulton Bridge and the extreme eastern end of the site, with scrub, fen and marsh habitats.

The strategy is reinforced through providing a hierarchy of permitted routes, maintaining existing public rights of way and allowing increased public access and amenity to parcels of the land where and as appropriate. These uses are described on the Illustrative Masterplan as Public Open Space and parcels A, B & C.

Public access is at its most intense at the western end, adjoining Stonebridge Lane itself and where the land and river abuts two urban edge areas. Here open access to the river, beach area, reed bed and wetland is encouraged and provided by boardwalks, dipping platform and open areas of wildflower meadow for picnics, seating etc.

Progressing east, the bulk of the land is under two parcels of grazing (marked B on the plan), which are managed and rotated to establish a wild flower rich water meadow in the longer term.

Further east, beyond the public right of way ('Marl 45'), lies an area set aside for scrub regeneration (marked A on the plan). This has been provided in order to allow a protected habitat for small mammals and ground and scrub nesting birds, including the Grasshopper Warbler. This area also provides a valuable food source for visiting barn owls and raptors. Beyond this and abutting the River Kennet is an area of scrub, reed beds and marsh, (marked C on the plan), providing a 'wild river corridor', difficult to traverse and providing a safe haven for wildlife.

Stonebridge Meadows— illustrative master plan June 2015 (rev. c)

Objectives and actions 2015-16

1. Objective: Create flower rich wet grassland (B)

Flower rich grassland is a declining habitat in the UK and most closely matches the traditional perception of meadow. Ninety seven percent 97% of flower-rich meadow has been lost since WWII (source: Buglife). It is a rare habitat in the Kennet Valley. Since 2012 the area has been managed by a combination of mowing and grazing. Half the area has been treated with herbicide and seeded to reintroduce meadow flowers. All the seeding was sown by local volunteers. The wild collected seed was harvested by volunteers. Snakeshead Fritillary bulbs were planted in 2014. See Appendix 7—Seeds and bulbs at Stonebridge. Herbicide may be used to spot spray nettle, dock or thistle where necessary, but will be a second option to removal by hand. Any person using herbicide will hold a suitable qualification and keep appropriate records which will be shared.

Action: ARK to provide cattle and/or sheep to graze the field. Infill seeding to be completed as necessary. Appendix 8—Schedule of grazing and mowing.

Action: MTC to mow a sinuous footpath across the field when livestock are not present. MTC to monitor success of Snakes head Fritillaries and replant if necessary.

2. Objective: To maintain the wetland

In 2015 an integrated constructed wetland, designed by Rob Innes was created to clean road runoff before it reaches the river and to provide an interesting wildlife rich feature.

Action: ARK to oversee construction of boardwalk during summer 2015. Completed August 2015. Marlborough Town Council to remove railings before February 2016.

3. Objective: To create and maintain an exemplar chalk stream habitat

From 2011 ARK volunteers have repaired eroded banks, created more flow diversity and cleared silt from riverbed gravels. They employed a variety of techniques including construction of brushwood mattresses, installing large woody flow deflectors and planting native marginal and instream plants.

Action: ARK to continue this approach following Wild Trout Trust recommendations. Appendix 10—Wild Trout Trust advice sheets. Guiding principles will be:

i. Banks will be kept vegetated to protect them from erosion (no mowing right to bank edge)
ii. Fallen woody debris will be left in-situ where it does not present a flood risk
iii. Full public access allowed along the west reach
iv. Restricted access around dogwood. This areas is valuable for brown trout spawning, water vole, kingfisher and otter.

4. Objective: Maintain scrub and tall herb vegetation (A)

This area is managed to gradually revert to scrub. It provides excellent habitat for birds, including the grasshopper warbler, reed bunting, sedge warbler and cuckoo. To protect nesting birds, dogs must be kept on a lead in this area during the bird nesting season (March to September). A sign will explain this to dog walkers. Natural England (Des Sussex) recommended that this area could be improved by the addition of hand-dug shallow scrapes to provide additional ephemeral wetland habitat.

Actions: MTC to maintain a sinuous footpath diagonally across the site, from gate to gate. During 2015 ARK to hand dig some low lying areas to create shallow scrapes.

Sedge Warbler in scrub area

5. Objective: To improve and increase public access

Footpaths around the meadow are very important to people walking with and without dogs (consultation Appendices 2,3). The paths are well used and require mowing in summer and some areas become very muddy in winter. The number and length of maintained paths has been extended from the original public footpath to include a number of permissive paths, including one alongside the river. Fencing alongside the river at the western end of the meadow has been removed. In 2014, at the request of the Mayor, the west most section of the meadow was close mown to remove meadowsweet and meadow cranesbill and create an open green space suitable for informal games and picnicking. When cattle are grazing in meadows (between May and October) they will be restricted to one section of the area marked 'B' with unrestricted access to the alternate half. When cattle are not present there is unrestricted access to the whole meadow.

Example of sinuous path

Access to the section of the river from the 'banjo' to Poulton Bridge is restricted by fencing. This is because it is a key site for water vole, kingfisher and spawning trout. It is also a potential otter site. Dogs in particular become a nuisance to wildlife when allowed unrestricted access to the water. The design of the meadow allows unrestricted access to the river at the western end and concentrated access around Poulton Bridge. The trade off for wildlife is to limit access to other sections. It is important that access points to the river are carefully designed to either keep a buffer strip of vegetation or create some revetment to protect banks. As a rule a strip of marginal vegetation between 2m and 4m deep should be maintained throughout the wild river reserve.

The public consultation in 2014 showed strong support for the balance between full access and limited access. **Actions:** MTC will keep all perimeter paths cut to a maximum of 1 metre wide. These will be kept free of obstructions and overhanging vegetation. MTC will undertake to complete a full cut of all grass areas with a 10 working day cycle. It is noted that ground conditions, especially soil moisture levels, may delay grass cutting to save damage to the paths and meadows. Grass cutting to take place from 16th April to 30th October ground conditions permitting. Reports of missed maintenance will be acted upon within 2 working days. The *public footpath* will be mown as a sinuous path leaving space for tall herby vegetation along the edge as illustrated (right). *Permissive paths linking the gates* in the two fields will be mown as required when cattle/sheep are not present. The western section of the meadow will be mown to the council specification for open space, with a clear boundary around the wetland agreed by ARK and MTC, mapped and included in the appendices.

Footpath near Poulton Bridge to be repaired

Actions: The footpath at Poulton Bridge requires repair where old sleepers have rotted and broken. Assess cost and secure funding for this during 2015. ARK will investigate and explore ways to fund new closing mechanisms for the kissing gates to allow people to enter the field at the same time a the livestock.

6. Objective: Create a native hedge to provide food, habitat and visual interest

In 2014 it was agreed to establish hedging in Stonebridge. It is comprised of saplings donated by the Woodland Trust and has been planted by volunteers. The hedge provides a source of food and shelter for wild birds and mammals, and some e.g. hazel, are particularly suitable for foraging by people. The hedge is creating a visually attractive boundary and in time could replace the barbed wire fence. Appendix 9—Benefits of Hedges and details of Woodland Trust Trees.

Actions: 2015/17 to continue planting as hedge saplings become available. Hedge to be planted approximately 1.5m out from the stock fencing. Supervised volunteers to trim hedging in winter during its early years, to promote dense, bushy growth. Volunteers to regularly control competing ground vegetation by hand or if necessary spot control herbicide (by qualified ARK Project Officer and volunteer).

From 2019: Hedge laying to begin, overseen by trained ARK staff and volunteers. Note: the final height of the hedge will be less than 1.5m, however to enable laying it will need to be taller than 'the finished article' to have enough material to work with and lay. The aim is to have a hedge that people can see over the top of so that it provides a boundary without interrupting the view.

Volunteers planting new hedge

7. Objective: To increase understanding of wildlife on the meadow.

Interpretive panels and notice boards have been installed. They contain detail about the wildlife in the meadow. The notice board is used to publicise events and Town Council notices.

Action: ARK to organise a run a variety of events at the Wild River Reserve (to include the meadow) to increase understanding and enjoyment of this local environment. The events will follows a similar format to 2014, but new ideas, suggestions and input from all parties are welcomed. Appendix 5—Discover Stonebridge Events 2014. The committee have an agreed protocol for advertising, with each party giving credit to the other and both parties acknowledging joint ownership and management in all communications. Appendix 6—Protocol for advertising events.

Interpretive panels provide information

Action: ARK to update content of large notice board to include the wetland and boardwalk once complete.

8. Objective: To reduce litter and dog fouling

Action: MTC to source appropriate replacement litter/dog mess bins by end of 2015. MTC to empty bins twice a week during May, June, July, August and once a week through the rest of the year. ARK/MTC to continue 'Bag it and Bin it' and 'Bin it don't Sling it' campaigns. ARK volunteers to litter pick during summer months and liaise with Grounds and Estates manager to arrange for removal of additional waste. (Appendix 4—Bag it and Bin it posters).

9. Objective: To increase seating

Actions: use logs on site to create more seating during 2015. ARK and MTC to arrange.

10. Objective: Maintain buffer strip and beetle bank

This area provides an important buffer between the football club and the wilder meadow. It provides habitat for invertebrates and small mammals, as such it is a popular hunting ground for barn owl. A 'bug palace' has been built and is maintained by volunteers. It provides a place for invertebrates to live, as well as providing a useful tool to engage the local community. Creating a space like a 'bug palace' for insects, bugs and other invertebrates as well as reptiles (such as slow worms) and amphibians (common frogs and common toads) to use for shelter and hibernation is an excellent way to engage young members of the community in a practical hands on way. With local groups including Beavers, Cubs and Scouts we have used recycled and natural materials to create a series of crevices and holes ideal for creatures to burrow in or the case of the solitary bee (an important pollinator) set up home. Beetles love dead wood as their larvae can burrow and grow safely. The structure can be added to at any time and investigated during the summer, so an educational resource as well as a home for wildlife. The palace is situated in the buffer strip of Stonebridge Meadow between the Scrub Habitat Area and the adjacent Football Club, an area rich in many species of wildlife.

Local cubs and scouts building a bug palace

11. Objective: to increase numbers of Black Poplars

Black poplars are a rare tree species and there are several male and female specimens in Stonebridge. As part of a wider black poplar recovery project we will continue to plant saplings. Saplings will be planted in succession i.e. not all trees of the same age planted in groups so that stands reach maturity at different times.

12. Objective: to ensure a safe public environment

MTC will undertake a monthly site safety assessment. The assessment will consist of a walk through visual inspection of the meadows, paths, trees and structures. A paper record will be kept within MTC formal inspection records and an electronic copy will be available for inspection. This will also be available at management committee meetings. MTC undertakes to completed the following responses:

- Trips, slips and fall hazards identified will be rectified within 2 working days. If this is not practical the hazard will be fenced off. Dangerous trees will be felled as soon as practically possible.
- Broken glass, needlesticks and drug paraphernalia will be removed immediately by MTC.
- The meadow has relic barbed wire through-out. Any found will be removed from the meadow immediately by MTC.

- Fly tip will be removed by MTC within two working days.
- It is important that ARK and MTC share information regarding any reports of hazards within the meadow.
- Removal of debris resulting from projects will be decided by the management committee.
- MTC will retain appropriate risk assessments for all maintenance activities, copies of which can be found in Appendix 14. ARK will carry out, and keep records of risk assessments related to project and volunteer work.

Both ARK and MTC carry appropriate public liability insurance. Appendix 13.

13. Objective: To provide a community space

Requests from third parties to use the meadows will be referred to the Stonebridge Management Committee, who will reach a decision by email where possible or refer the request to the Open Spaces and ARK committees if necessary.

14.Objective: to ensure transparency of financial gain

An annual budget will be prepared and monitored by ARK and MTC. If either party makes financial gain from e.g. sale of beef, or rent from public use of the meadow, the gain will be declared and invested in ongoing management and improvements.

15. Objective: to support and encourage a healthy population of bees (added 2017)

There are 250 species of bee in the UK. We will manage the meadow to encourage all species of bee by maximising the number and variety of native nectar rich flowering plants. We will actively support the bee road project. Our agreed bee strategy is in Appendix 18.

Progress towards objectives and actions 2015—2017 Presented and agreed January 2018.

1. Objective: Create flower rich wet grassland (B)

Progress: Grazing with sheep and cattle funded by ARK continues and a revised programme is included in Appendix 8 , wildflowers have increased in number. The first and second year of snake's head fritillaries were successful but care must be taken to avoid accidental mowing. A further 4,000 fritillaries were planted by volunteers September 2017.

2. Objective: To maintain the wetland

Progress: Boardwalk has been constructed, managed by ARK, funded by Big Lottery Fund. Railings removed by contractor (funded by ARK) February 2017. The newly accessible 'D' of grass, shown in bottom photo is mown twice a year by MTC and the cuttings are raked by volunteers then collected for off site composting by MTC. This 'cut and cart' management will promote wildflower growth.

3. Objective: To create and maintain an exemplar chalk stream habitat

Progress 2017: managed as agreed using supervised volunteers. Agreement to cut vegetated margin close to log seats down to knee height in summer to allow a view of the river.

4. Objective: Maintain scrub and tall herb vegetation (A)

Progress 2017: Tall herby vegetation has been left to grow, with neat short grass paths cut through it, by MTC. No low lying scrapes have been dug in the scrub area. The tall herb vegetation continues to provide the richest and most diverse habitat.

5. Objective: To improve and increase public access

Progress 2017: ARK secured funding in 2016 from the SITA Trust, replaced the sleepers at Poulton with recycled plastic boardwalk and installed two closers and one new gate to allow access to the whole meadow at the same time as livestock. ARK installed new wooden fence from Stonebridge Lane to replace a broken one. MTC continued to regularly mow footpaths to ensure easy access. During wet weather wood chip has been added to muddy areas by MTC.

6. Objective: Create a native hedge to provide food, habitat and visual interest

ARK continued to hold community hedge planting days and maintain the hedging throughout the year. The hedge planting has been completed with around 3,000 plants. It will be managed by 'laying' when the plants are tall enough.

7. Objective: To increase understanding of wildlife on the meadow.

Progress 2017: New notice boards are in place. ARK organises an average of 12 educational activities for the community each year, during 2017 seven-hundred (700) people took part in 25 organised events.

8. Objective: To reduce litter and dog fouling

Progress 2017: Marlborough Town Council has purchased and installed two new bins. Dog fouling has reduced. Drove Vets are sponsoring a new bin and Stonebridge will be part of a wider MTC organised campaign to reduce dog fouling. Litter is mainly problematic after hot weather. MTC continue to empty bins regularly and ARK volunteers clear litter and leave it in or next to bins for collection by MTC.

9. Objective: To increase seating

Progress 2017: logs have been arranged to provide informal seating by the river close to Stonebridge Lane.

10. Objective: Maintain buffer strip and beetle bank

Progress 2017: a green roof has ben put on the bug palace and children continue to fill it. The buffer strip between the football club and Stonebridge remains undisturbed.

11. Objective: to increase numbers of Black Poplars

Progress 2017: 10 saplings have been planted around the site.

12. Objective: to ensure a safe public environment

MTC has conducted monthly site assessments, and a full tree safety survey. A tree management plan has been devised by MTC to reduce risk of injury to people from falling timber.

13. Objective: To provide a community space

Progress 2017: there have been no requests from the community to hire the space for organised activities or events.

14.Objective: to ensure transparency of financial gain

Accounts are reported at each management committee meeting.

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