



Ashcombe Wood

Management Plan

2020-2025

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THE WOODLAND TRUST

INTRODUCTION

The Trust's corporate aims and management approach guide the management of all the Trust's properties, and are described on Page 4. These determine basic management policies and methods, which apply to all sites unless specifically stated otherwise. Such policies include free public access; keeping local people informed of major proposed work; the retention of old trees and dead wood; and a desire for management to be as unobtrusive as possible. The Trust also has available Policy Statements covering a variety of woodland management issues.

The Trust's management plans are based on the identification of Key Features for the site and setting objectives for their management. A monitoring programme (not included in this plan) ensures that these objectives are met and any necessary management works are carried out.

Any legally confidential or sensitive species information about this site is not included in this version of the plan.

PLAN REVIEW AND UPDATING

The information presented in this Management plan is held in a database which is continuously being amended and updated on our website. Consequently this printed version may quickly become out of date, particularly in relation to the planned work programme and on-going monitoring observations.

Please either consult The Woodland Trust website www.woodlandtrust.org.uk or contact the Woodland Trust (wopsmail@woodlandtrust.org.uk) to confirm details of the current management programme.

There is a formal review of this plan every 5 years and a summary of monitoring results can be obtained on request.

WOODLAND MANAGEMENT APPROACH

The management of our woods is based on our charitable purposes, and is therefore focused on improving woodland biodiversity and increasing peoples' understanding and enjoyment of woodland.

Our strategic aims are to:

- Protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future
- Work with others to create more native woodlands and places rich in trees
- Inspire everyone to enjoy and value woods and trees

All our sites have a management plan which is freely accessible via our website www.woodlandtrust.org.uk.

Our woods are managed to the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) and are certified with the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) under licence FSC-C009406 and through independent audit.

In addition to the guidelines below we have specific guidance and policies on issues of woodland management which we review and update from time to time.

We recognise that all woods are different and that the management of our sites should also reflect their local landscape and where appropriate support local projects and initiatives. Guidelines like these provide a necessary overarching framework to guide the management of our sites but such management also requires decisions based on local circumstances and our Site Manager's intimate knowledge of each site.

The following guidelines help to direct our woodland management:

1. Our woods are managed to maintain their intrinsic key features of value and to reflect those of the surrounding landscape. We intervene when there is evidence that it is necessary to maintain or improve biodiversity and to further the development of more resilient woods and landscapes.
2. We establish new native woodland using both natural regeneration and tree planting, but largely the latter, particularly when there are opportunities for involving people.
3. We provide free public access to woods for quiet, informal recreation and our woods are managed to make them accessible, welcoming and safe.
4. The long term vision for our non-native plantations on ancient woodland sites is to restore them to predominantly native species composition and semi-natural structure, a vision that equally applies to our secondary woods.
5. Existing semi-natural open-ground and freshwater habitats are restored and maintained wherever their management can be sustained and new open ground habitats created where appropriate.
6. The heritage and cultural value of sites is taken into account in our management and, in particular, our ancient trees are retained for as long as possible.
7. Woods can offer the potential to generate income both from the sustainable harvesting of wood products and the delivery of other services. We will therefore consider the potential to generate income from our estate to help support our aims.
8. We work with neighbours, local people, organisations and other stakeholders in developing the management of our woods. We recognise the benefits of local community woodland ownership and management. Where appropriate we allow our woods to be used to support local woodland, conservation, education and access initiatives.
9. We use and offer the estate where appropriate, for the purpose of demonstration, evidence gathering and research associated with the conservation, recreational and sustainable management of woodlands. In particular we will develop and maintain a network of long-term monitoring sites across the estate.
10. Any activities we undertake will conform to sustainable forest management principles, be appropriate for the site and will be balanced with our primary objectives of enhancing the biodiversity and recreational value of our woods and the wider landscapes.

SUMMARY

This public management plan briefly describes the site, specifically mentions information on public access, sets out the long term policy and lists the Key Features which drive management actions. The Key Features are specific to this site – their significance is outlined together with their long (50 year+) and short (5 year) term objectives. The short term objectives are complemented by a detailed Work Programme for the period of this management plan. Detailed compartment descriptions are listed in the appendices which include any major management constraints and designations. A short glossary of technical terms is at the end. The Key Features and general woodland condition of this site are subject to a formal monitoring programme which is maintained in a central database. A summary of monitoring results is available on request.

1.0 SITE DETAILS

Site name:	Ashcombe Wood
Location:	Swainswick
Grid reference:	ST750699, OS 1:50,000 Sheet No. 172
Area:	15.60 hectares (38.55 acres)
Designations:	Ancient Semi Natural Woodland, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance

2.0 SITE DESCRIPTION

2.1 Summary Description

Ashcombe Wood is 15.6Ha ancient semi-natural woodland near Swainswick, and lies approximately 3 miles north of Bath. The wood is difficult to access and seldom visited, but occupies a prominent position on a steep, west facing slope overlooking the Woolley Valley. It is one of the largest discrete woodland blocks in the area. The site is part of The Bristol, Avon Valleys and Ridges National Character Area 118 (NCA), and lies at the southern edge of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The wood is mostly ancient woodland conforming to NVC type W8 [Fraxinus excelsior-Acer campestre-Mercurialis perennis woodland – (Ash, Field maple and Dog’s mercury)], with areas of more secondary wood dominated by ash with some areas of sycamore woodland. There are several natural springs within the wood, resulting in localised wet areas. Within the bottom of the site is a small grazed, unimproved grassland coombe.

The wood was acquired with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and a successful local fundraising campaign. Prior to acquisition there was no public access to the wood. Although a permissive, circular footpath was cleared from the A46 entrance, to the grassland at the bottom of the combe, it has had very limited use. Therefore public access will be stopped in this plan period for safety reasons, due to ash being the dominant canopy species, and to allow the woodland to succumb to the effects of ash dieback, without felling the ash dieback infected trees for safety reasons.

There is no official Woodland Trust parking at the site; however there is a lay-by on the fast moving A46 near the entrance. Management access is gained from the lay-by via a short detour over neighbouring land. Negotiations with the Highway Agency during the acquisition highlighted the roadside safety benefits of retaining a vegetation or tree barrier along the road, the visual effects of which can help to slow traffic on the bend and reduce accidents in an area known to be dangerous, and this will be retained where possible.

2.2 Extended Description

Ashcombe Wood is 15.6Ha ancient semi-natural woodland near Swainswick, and lies approximately 3 miles north of Bath. The wood is difficult to access and seldom visited, but occupies a prominent position on a steep, west facing slope overlooking the Woolley Valley. It is one of the largest discrete woodland blocks in the area. The site is part of The Bristol, Avon Valleys and Ridges National Character Area 118 (NCA), and lies at the southern edge of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

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3.0 PUBLIC ACCESS INFORMATION

3.1 Getting there

There is no public access to the wood during this management plan period due to ash dieback 2020-2025.

3.2 Access / Walks

There is no public access to the wood during this management plan period due to ash dieback 2020-2025.

4.0 LONG TERM POLICY

Ashcombe Wood will continue to develop a diverse, predominantly native broadleaved woodland canopy, constituting a varied age, size and species structure with populations of woody shrubs and woodland ground flora. Oak and hazel will continue to provide a canopy across the wood, broken occasionally by natural glades providing additional transitory habitat, and allow the levels of fallen and standing deadwood to increase via natural factors. A small proportion of ash with some resilience to Ash Dieback will remain as part of the canopy. Deer populations will be managed at levels enabling natural regeneration processes to occur unimpeded by browsing. Existing and future veteran trees will be retained providing an important habitat for protected species. The roadside edge will provide a scrub habitat and vegetation screen. The Trusts duty of care will be addressed through on-going tree safety, tree health, and site risk assessment regimes, which may require remedial works as required.

Re-opening the permissive, circular footpath in the wood to informal public access as a key feature will be reviewed before each management plan period. Tree disease issues, such as current ash dieback, will be reviewed in line with Woodland Trust Estate management principles where public access is concerned. Historical low levels of public access at Ashcombe Wood and the spread of ash dieback mean public access will be stopped in this plan period (2020-25) for safety reasons.

The grassland will be maintained for the range of flora and fauna typical of unimproved calcicolous grassland (NVC type CG3) and unimproved mesotrophic grassland (NVC type MG5). This will remain a healthy and viable habitat linked with surrounding areas of semi-natural habitat.

5.0 KEY FEATURES

The Key Features of the site are identified and described below. They encapsulate what is important about the site. The short and long-term objectives are stated and any management necessary to maintain and improve the Key Feature.

5.1 Ancient Semi Natural Woodland

Description

The steep, 15.6Ha broadleaf woodland is mostly ancient woodland conforming to NVC type W8 [Fraxinus excelsior-Acer campestre- Mercurialis perennis woodland], with a typical, rich ground flora including ransoms Allium ursinum, bluebells Hyacinthoides non-scripta, Cuckoo-pint Arum maculatum and rarities including Herb paris Paris quadrifolia and Spiked star of Bethlehem Ornithogalum pyrenaicum. There are also areas of secondary woodland, with even aged ash and sycamore with little understory, possibly due to previous grazing in the woodland.

The site contains a few ancient/veteran feature trees of ash, oak and hornbeam. General tree species include ash, oak, elm, field maple, hornbeam, sycamore, and hawthorn. With horse chestnut along the roadside suggesting some past planting, along with scattered remnant areas of neglected hazel coppice.

The woodland had little management for decades after substantial felling in the 1960's. The woodland was likely to have been predominantly oak standards with hazel coppice, and substantial ash. Areas of felling and gaps left by dead trees have been colonized with a mixture of dense regeneration which is mostly of ash, sycamore, hawthorn and bramble. A former field with mixed rough grassland and naturally regenerating wood edge and scrub exist in the NE of the site running up to the roadside boundary. The woodland was heavily grazed by cattle by its owners prior to WT ownership from

Discussions with the Highway's Agency at the acquisition stage highlighted the benefits to roadside safety of retaining a vegetation barrier along the road, the visual effects of which can help to slow traffic on the bend and reduce accidents in an area known to be dangerous. Tree safety works undertaken along the A46 boundary in the past have had the effect of reducing some of this tree cover, but shrub and scrub growth is cut on rotation to allow vegetation to grow without developing into trees and maintain the wood edge density.

Prior to acquisition there was no public access to the wood and much of the wood is difficult to access due to dense regeneration, steep slopes and boggy areas. A permissive footpath and a circular route were cleared from the A46 entrance to the grassland at the bottom of the combe, but this has mostly fallen into disuse and show very limited signs of access.

Ash makes up approx. 40% of the canopy in the woodland, and this is suffering significantly from ash dieback (2019). Therefore works to facilitate and promote access will be removed in the current plan period to allow the ash trees to dieback without requiring extensive health and safety tree work along the permissive path. Most ash trees along the Zone A, roadside boundary, have been removed or coppiced in previous years.

Significance

The Woodland Trust is committed to the protection and restoration of ancient woodland sites and believes that semi natural ancient woodlands are irreplaceable.

The woodland forms an important BAP habitat within the area providing not only a refuge for wildlife but also facilitating wider ecologically functioning and connectivity within the landscape. The wood has been identified as important regionally for wildlife, particularly for its rich flora and as such designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Value.

Opportunities & Constraints

Constraints:

Steep slopes with poor accessibility

Diffuse pollution from the road, especially salt in the winter spraying the road side verge, are a threat to the habitat.

No parking

Poor access

High ADB risk

Factors Causing Change

-Ash dieback is likely to have a major impact. Much will depend on the required pre-emptive interventions required for health and safety purposes, which with limited public access, is likely to create an opportunity for alternative species to regenerate and create structural diversity, as long as the local deer population can be kept low enough to ensure natural regeneration opportunities can develop unhindered. There will likely be a major impact on species obligate to ash although this process will occur over time.

-Deer browsing remains a threat to successful natural regeneration

- Sycamore possibly dominating overtime

Long term Objective (50 years+)

Ashcombe Wood will continue to develop a diverse, predominantly native broadleaved woodland canopy, constituting a varied age, size and species structure with populations of woody shrubs and woodland ground flora. Oak and hazel will continue to provide a canopy across the wood, broken occasionally by natural glades providing additional transitory habitat, and allow the levels of fallen and standing deadwood to increase with natural factors. A small proportion of ash with some resilience to Ash Dieback will remain as part of the canopy. Deer populations will be managed at levels enabling natural regeneration processes to occur unimpeded by browsing. Existing and future veteran trees will be retained providing an important habitat for protected species. The roadside edge will provide a scrub habitat and vegetation screen. The Trusts duty of care will be addressed through ongoing tree safety, tree health, and site risk assessment regimes, which may require remedial works as required.

Short term management Objectives for the plan period (5 years)

Ensure continued canopy cover with a diverse age structure, with a broad range of species to be maintained through largely natural processes.

The regenerating scrub along the roadside boundary will help to catch any pollutants before they can filter into the main block of woodland. This will be managed by re-cutting a 2metre width strip every five years, with coppice/hedge multi-stem regrowth and bramble.

Litter picks will be undertaken annually to remove the rubbish deposited from vehicles along the road side.

Ash dieback tree safety assessments and subsequent felling of dead or dangerous ash along Zone A and B areas as per WT ash dieback guidance on managing ash dieback on the estate. Annual inspections, and safety works with pro-active felling where necessary. Rationalisation of non-PROW permissive paths will close the circular path, with posters and a physical barrier at entrance.

5.2 Semi Natural Open Ground Habitat

Description

At the bottom of the woodland in the west of the site is a steep sided area of unimproved grassland (Cpt 2a), with areas of bracken and bramble within it. The field sits in the base of a secluded combe, and rises up to meet the woodland edge providing a good successional habitat. It forms part of a much larger area of grassland listed as Priority Habitat.

The grassland is a mosaic of calcicolous Upright Brome grassland (NVC type CG3) and unimproved mesotrophic Crested Dogtail- Black Knapweed grassland (NVC type MG5), in a mosaic of distribution. Some good grassland communities remain, with bird's foot trefoil and associated butterflies including brown Argus and common blue butterflies recorded. There are damp flushes and springs lower down the slope on the west boundary with the neighbouring farm. The grassland also contains large areas of bracken, bramble and regenerating scrub on the steeper slopes.

The grassland is grazed in the late summer by the neighbouring farm under an annual grazing agreement. The neighbouring farm has similar unimproved grassland habitat in adjacent fields and forms part of a much bigger area of Priority Habitat. An extensive period of non-grazing pre-2016 culminated in large areas of bramble and bracken to spread, and ranker grasses developing, but this has now reduced through the reintroduction of annual grazing since 2016 with cattle or sheep.

Significance

The field is part of a larger site that has been identified as important regionally for wildlife, for its unimproved grassland and ancient woodlands, and as such designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Value.

Opportunities & Constraints

Steep slopes - without grazing, the site has to be managed by cutting, but this is difficult and expensive due to the limited access.

Wet flushes and springs – makes vehicle access difficult and occasional poaching from cattle in wet periods.

Factors Causing Change

Rabbit Grazing,
Natural succession to scrub
Noxious weeds spreading including ragwort

Long term Objective (50 years+)

The grassland will be maintained for the range of flora and fauna typical of unimproved calcicolous grassland (NVC type CG3) and unimproved mesotrophic grassland (NVC type MG5). This will remain a healthy and viable habitat linked with surrounding areas of semi-natural habitat.

Short term management Objectives for the plan period (5 years)

The quality of the grassland habitat is to be maintained and the sward does not become dominated by coarse species with significant areas of noxious weeds. This will be achieved by:

Grazing with cattle in late summer, or cutting the grassland and removing arisings where accessible, annually from late July/August.

Check levels of ragwort each year and pull if found to prevent build-up of noxious weeds and prevent spread into neighbouring grassland.

6.0 WORK PROGRAMME

Year	Type of Work	Description	Due By
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APPENDIX I: COMPARTMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Cpt No.	Area (ha)	Main Species	Year	Management Regime	Major Management Constraints	Key Features Present	Designations
Ia	9.80	Ash	1960	High forest	Mostly wet ground/exposed site, No/poor vehicular access within the site, Very steep slope/cliff/quarry/mine shafts/sink holes etc		Ancient Semi Natural Woodland, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance
<p>Mostly ancient woodland conforming to NVC type W8 [Fraxinus excelsior-Acer campestre- Mercurialis perennis woodland], with a typical, rich ground flora including Hyacinthoides non-scripta, Arum maculatum and rarities including Paris quadrifolia and Ornithogalum pyrenaicum.</p> <p>Mostly even aged ash (circa 60 years), with scattered mature oak (c1920) standards, plus elm, field maple, hornbeam, sycamore, and hawthorn. A few occasional very large veteran/ancient ash, oak and hornbeam trees area also present. The understorey is neglected hazel coppice with patches of dense hawthorn scrub. There is a scattering of plated broadleaf mature trees of various species along a section of the boundary with the A46 inc sycamore, oak and horse chestnut. There is a small area of scrub with mature conifers including Scots Pine and Larch planted as a landscape feature at the edge of the grassland combe in the west of the compartment.</p> <p>Wet flushes and springs downhill running from east to west, as well as drainage outlets from the highway at the top (east) of the compartment next to the A46.</p>							
Ib	1.30	Ash	1900	High forest	No/poor vehicular access within the site, Very steep slope/cliff/quarry/mine shafts/sink holes etc		Ancient Semi Natural Woodland, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance
<p>Even aged ash and sycamore c100 years with very little understory due to previous grazing in the wood. There are a few older feature trees, mostly sycamore</p>							
Ic	0.90	Ash	1980	Wood establishment	No/poor vehicular access within the site		Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty,

							Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance
A former field with mixed rough grassland and naturally regenerating wood edge and scrub running up to the roadside boundary.							
2a	3.60	NULL		Non-wood habitat	Mostly wet ground/exposed site, No/poor vehicular access to the site		Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance
A steep sided area of grassland at the base of the combe. A mosaic, of high conservation value, unimproved calcicolous grassland (NVC type CG3) and unimproved mesotrophic grassland (NVC type MG5) with areas of bracken, bramble and scrub on the upper slope and damp flushes lower down. See WGS and botanical survey information in Reference File for further details.							

GLOSSARY

Ancient Woodland

Ancient woods are defined as those where there has been continuous woodland cover since at least 1600 AD. In Scotland ancient woods are defined strictly as sites shown as semi-natural woodland on the 'Roy' maps (a military survey carried out in 1750 AD, which is the best source of historical map evidence) and as woodland all subsequent maps. However, they have been combined with long-established woods of semi-natural origin (originating from between 1750 and 1860) into a single category of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland to take account of uncertainties in their identification. Ancient woods include Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland and plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (see below). May support many species that are only found in ancient woodland.

Ancient Semi - Natural Woodland

Stands in ancient woods defined as those consisting predominantly of native trees and shrubs that have not obviously been planted, which have arisen from natural regeneration or coppice regrowth.

Ancient Woodland Site

Stands in ancient woods that have been converted to plantations, of coniferous, broadleaved or mixed species, usually for timber production, including plantations of native species planted so closely together that any semi-natural elements of the understorey have been suppressed.

Beating Up

Replacing any newly planted trees that have died in the first few years after planting.

Broadleaf

A tree having broad leaves (such as oak) rather than needles found on conifers (such as Scots pine).

Canopy

The uppermost layer of vegetation in a woodland, or the upper foliage and branches of an individual tree.

Clearfell

Felling of all trees within a defined area.

Compartment

Permanent management division of a woodland, usually defined on site by permanent features such as roads. See Sub-compartments.

Conifer

A tree having needles, rather than broadleaves, and typically bearing cones.

Continuous Cover forestry

A term used for managing woods to ensure that there are groups or individual trees of different ages scattered over the whole wood and that some mature tree cover is always maintained. Management is by repeated thinning and no large areas are ever completely felled all at once.

Coppice

Trees which are cut back to ground levels at regular intervals (3-25 years).

Exotic (non-native) Species

Species originating from other countries (or other parts of the UK) that have been introduced by humans, deliberately or accidentally.

Field Layer

Layer of small, non-woody herbaceous plants such as bluebells.

Group Fell

The felling of a small group of trees, often to promote natural regeneration or allow planting.

Long Term Retention

Discrete groups of trees (or in some cases single trees) that are retained significantly past their economic felling age. Operations may still be carried out within them and thinning is often necessary to maintain stability.

Minimum Intervention

Areas where no operations (such as thinning) will take place other than to protect public safety or possibly to control invasive exotic species.

Mixed Woodland

Woodland made up of broadleaved and coniferous trees.

National vegetation classification (NVC)

A classification scheme that allows an area of vegetation to be assigned to the standardised type that best matches the combination of plant species that it contains. All woodlands in the UK can be described as being one of 18 main woodland types (W1 - W18), which principally reflect soil and climatic conditions. For example, Upland Oakwoods are type W11, and normally occur on well drained infertile soils in the cooler and wetter north and west of Britain. Each main type can be subdivided into numerous subtypes. Most real woods contain more than one type or sub-type and inevitably some woods are intermediate in character and can't be properly described by any sub type.

Native Species

Species that arrived in Britain without human assistance.

Natural Regeneration

Naturally grown trees from seeds falling from mature trees. Also regeneration from coppicing and suckering.

Origin & Provenance

The provenance of a tree or seed is the place where seed was collected to grow the tree or plant. The origin is the geographical location within the natural range of a species from where seeds/tree originally derives. Thus an acorn collected from a Turkey oak in Edinburgh would have an Edinburgh provenance and a southern European origin.

Re-Stocking

Re-planting an area of woodland, after it has been felled.

Shrub Layer

Formed by woody plants 1-10m tall.

Silviculture

The growing and care of trees in woodlands.

Stand

Trees of one type or species, grouped together within a woodland.

Sub-Compartment

Temporary management division of a compartment, which may change between management plan periods.

Thinning

The felling of a proportion of individual trees within a given area. The remaining trees grow to fill in the space created.

Tubex or Grow or Tuley Tubes

Tubes placed over newly planted trees or natural regeneration that promote growth and provide protection from animals such as rabbits and deer.

Weeding

The control of vegetation immediately around newly planted trees or natural regeneration to promote tree growth until they become established. Either by hand cutting or with carefully selected weed killers such as glyphosate.

Windblow/Windthrow

Trees or groups of trees blown over (usually uprooted) by strong winds and gales.

The Woodland Trust, Kempton Way, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 6LL.

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