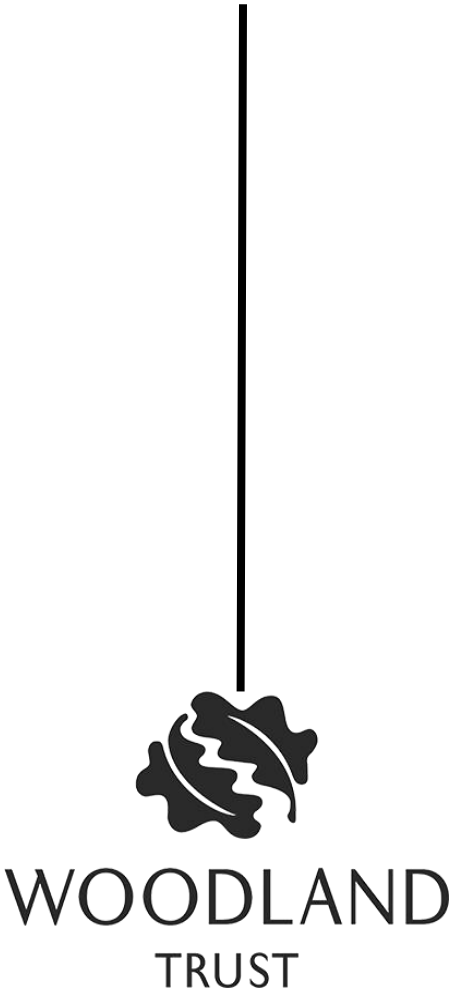
Ashenbank Wood

(Plan period – 2020 to 2025)



Management Plan Content Page

Introduction to the Woodland Trust Estate

The Woodland Trust owns and cares for well over 1,250 sites covering almost 30,000 hectares (ha) across the UK. This includes more than 4,000ha of ancient semi-natural woodland and almost 4,000ha of non-native plantations on ancient woodland sites and we have created over 5,000ha of new native woodland. We also manage other valuable habitats such as flower-rich grasslands, heaths, ponds/lakes and moorland.

Our Vision is:

"A UK rich in native woods and trees for people and wildlife."

To realise all the environmental, social and economic benefits woods and trees bring to society, we:

- **Create Woodland** – championing the need to hugely increase the UK's native woodland and trees.
- **Protect Woodland** – fighting to defend native woodland, especially irreplaceable ancient woodland and veteran trees; there should be no loss of ancient woodland
- **Restore Woodland** – ensuring the sensitive restoration of all damaged ancient woodland and the re-creation of native wooded landscapes.

Management of the Woodland Trust Estate

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.

The following principles provide an overarching framework to guide the management of all our sites but we recognise that all woods are different and that their management also needs to reflect their local landscape, history and where appropriate support local projects and initiatives.

1. Our woods are managed to maintain their intrinsic key features of value and to reflect those of the surrounding landscape. We intervene in our woods when there is evidence that it is necessary to maintain or improve biodiversity, safety and to further the development of more resilient woods and landscapes.

2. We establish new native woodland for all the positive reasons set out in our Conservation Principles, preferably using natural regeneration but often by planting trees, 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. Where possible, we pro-actively engage with people to help them appreciate the value of woods and trees.

4. The long term vision for all our 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 natural and cultural heritage value of sites is taken into account in our management and in particular, our ancient trees are retained for as long as possible.

7. Land and woods can generate income both from the sustainable harvesting of wood products and the delivery of other services. We therefore consider the appropriateness of opportunities 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 encourage our woods to be used for 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. We maintain a network of sites for long-term monitoring and trials leading to reductions in plastics and pesticides.

10. Any activities we undertake are in line with our wider Conservation Principles, conform to sustainable forest management practices, are appropriate for the site and balanced with our primary objectives of enhancing the biodiversity and recreational value of our woods and the wider landscapes.

The Public Management Plan

This public management plan describes the site and sets out the long term aims for our management and lists the Key Features which drive our management actions. The Key Features are specific to this site – their significance is outlined together with our long, 50 years and beyond, and our short, the next 5 years, term objectives for the management and enhancement of these features. The short term objectives are complemented by an outline Work Programme for the period of this management plan aimed at delivering our management aims.

Detailed compartment descriptions are listed in the appendices which include any major management constraints and designations. Any legally confidential or sensitive species information about this site is not included in this version of the plan.

There is a formal review of this plan every 5 years and we continually monitor our sites to assess the success of our management, therefore this printed version may quickly become out of date, particularly in relation to the planned work programme.

Please either consult The Woodland Trust website

www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

or contact the Woodland Trust

operations@woodlandtrust.org.uk

to confirm details of the current management programme.

A short glossary of technical terms can be found at the end of the plan.

Location and Access

Location maps and directions for how to find and access our woods, including this site, can be found by using the following link to the Woodland Trust web-site which contains information on accessible woodlands across the UK

https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/find-woods/

In Scotland access to our sites is in accordance with the Land Reform Act (of Scotland) 2003 and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

In England, Wales and NI, with the exception of designated Public Rights of Ways, all routes across our sites are permissive in nature and where we have specific access provision for horse riders and/or cyclists this will be noted in the management plan.

The Management Plan

1. SITE DETAILS

Ashenbank Wood

Location:	Cobham Grid reference: TQ675692 OS 1:50,000 Sheet No. 177
Area:	29.95 hectares (74.01 acres)
External Designations:	Ancient Semi Natural Woodland, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Tree Preservation Order
Internal Designations:	Welcoming Sites Programme

2. SITE DESCRIPTION

Ashenbank Wood is a 29.95 ha (74 acre) site located close to the village of Cobham, which lies west of the city of Rochester, Kent. The land was acquired by the Woodland Trust in 1984, aside from a small section at the southern end of the site which remains in private ownership. Around 2ha (4.9 acres) was compulsorily purchased along the northern boundary in 1999/ 2000 to construct the Channel Tunnel rail link, however in 2006 2.79ha (6.9 acres) was acquired back from Union Railways and this now forms the north west corner of this wood.

Ashenbank is set within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is comprised of ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) and a significant area of former wood pasture, or old parkland. It forms part of a complex of ancient woodland, wood pasture and parkland sites within the greater Cobham landscape, all once part of the former Cobham Hall Estate. Shorne Woods Country Park (managed by Kent County Council) is a significant woodland, wetland and meadow site located to the North of Ashenbank. Cobham Park (owned by Cobham Hall Independent School), Cobham Wood and Mausoleum (managed by The National Trust) and Ranscombe Farm Reserve (managed by Plantlife) all lie to the east. Jeskyns Community Woodland (managed by the Forestry Commission) borders the south west of the site. These sites offer public access and are linked by the Darnley Trail, a 10km (6.2mile) multi-user circular route named after the Earls of Darnley who previously owned Cobham Hall Estate.

The ancient semi natural woodland component at Ashenbank covers around 40% of the site (sub-compartment 1b), and contains predominantly oak, ash, hornbeam and sweet chestnut, historically managed by coppicing. There are also a significant number of open grown oak, hornbeam and sweet chestnut veteran trees. In the former wood pasture/ old parkland areas which cover around 60% of the site (sub-compartment 1a), birch, oak and sycamore feature alongside majestic veteran sweet chestnut trees, which were established in the late 18th century as part of Humphrey Repton's landscape design for Cobham Hall Estate. Approximately 7ha of the historic parkland is still maintained as a series of open glades, managed through cattle grazing and manual cutting programme.

The underlying geology at Ashenbank Wood is chalk bedrock overlain by Thanet Formation (sand, silt and clay). As a result the soils are principally gravely and free draining with a flat terrain in the north which extends into some undulating shallow dry valleys at the southern end. The site has a diverse array of flora, fauna and fungi; bluebells, snowdrops and wood anemones form a carpet across the woodland floor in the spring and at least 17 ancient woodland indicator species have been found on the site. Bird records include all three species of woodpecker, the mistle thrush and marsh tit. Over 300 fungi species have been recorded at Ashenbank, including some unusual examples, such as Pluteus leoninus (lion shield) fungi, and Suillellus queletii (deceiving bolete), along with a number of specialist saproxylic beetles, which also depend on the decaying wood habitat.

Due to its rich and irreplaceable mixture of ecosystems and habitats including a significant deadwood assemblage and associated specialist invertebrates, veteran trees and open ground areas, Ashenbank was designated as part of the Shorne and Ashenbank Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1968. The whole wood is also subject to a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) - Order no.1, 1960.

Ashenbank also has an interesting and varied social history, with evidence of human activity dating as far back as the prehistoric. Both a Bronze Age round barrow (a Scheduled Ancient Monument) and a shallow medieval (or potentially older) wood bank are located on the site. More recently, Ashenbank was used as an accommodation

base camp during the Second World War for RAF personnel stationed at Gravesend airfield. Although many of the camp structures were removed during the 1950's, the remains of four bunkers can still be found at Ashenbank, alongside some further examples that are still intact in the surrounding area.

3. LONG TERM POLICY

In fifty years' time, Ashenbank Wood will contain a diverse woodland structure providing a range of important habitats, typical of native ancient semi natural broadleaved woodland with areas of managed wood pasture, alongside preservation of its important archaeological interest.

The mosaic of open glades in the north and east of the site (glades totaling approximately 7ha) will be principally managed by a bespoke grazing programme and sensitive mechanical intervention when required. Coppiced edges around the glades will also be managed on short rotation. These processes will help to preserve the open character of this woodland, aiding its structural development by allowing a successional scrub habitat to evolve. These open areas will continue to provide an important habitat for diverse pollinators, birds, flora and other wildlife, especially those that rely on temporary open space.

Areas of high forest formed from stands of mature coppice are concentrated to the south and west of the site, and will be encouraged to convert to a semi natural woodland structure through minimal intervention. As the trees here continue to age and deteriorate, there will be an increasing prevalence of coppice stools splitting and falling apart, generating important deadwood microhabitats whilst also allowing the regeneration of an understory through increasing light levels.

The significant number of open grown veteran and future veteran trees will be allowed to develop and decline with age without competing tree growth affecting their crowns. This will be managed by a combination of halo thinning and livestock browsing and trampling of young saplings. These trees will support an important saproxylic (wood decay) invertebrate assemblage, alongside many bird and fungi species that rely on both dead and decaying wood. Due to their ecological and cultural importance, any veteran trees posing a high risk to visitors will be fenced off from visitors or surrounding areas could be left to scrub up, in order to prevent unnecessary intervention whilst maintaining public safety.

Ash dieback (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus) will have an impact in some areas of this woodland where ash forms a higher percentage of the tree composition, chiefly in the north west and south east areas of the wood. The most affected ride-side and boundary trees have been removed as part of the Woodland Trust's routine tree safety regime, however many of those that remain do show early to mid-stage symptoms, as of summer 2019. With the loss of a high proportion of the ash comes an increased decaying wood habitat, which will further help to encourage invertebrate and fungal communities, and potential to increase tree diversity in these areas. It is likely that field maple, birch, sycamore, hornbeam and oak will repopulate the canopy.

The presence of invasive, non-native trees and shrubs will continue to be monitored. Deer do not currently present a problem at the site, however their presence will be monitored and controlled if they are preventing adequate levels of regeneration.

Ashenbank Wood will continue to act as an important heritage, conservation and recreational space in the local landscape. Stunning floral and fungi displays, ease of access from nearby towns and good connectivity with neighbouring conservation sites all help to contribute to Ashenbank's popularity. The provision of safe and informal public access will remain across this site and it is expected that a mixture of local residents, wildlife enthusiasts and ramblers will continue to make up the main visitor demographic. Management will entail regular path and access

point works, safety inspections of site infrastructure and higher risk tree zones along the path network and site boundaries.

The Woodland Trust will continue to work in partnership with surrounding landowners, to develop a landscape scale approach to the protection, restoration and enhancement of a high value ancient treescape and its associated special wildlife. All Woodland Trust sites are focused on improving woodland biodiversity and increasing people's understanding and enjoyment of woodland, to help create a UK rich in native woods and trees, for people and wildlife.

4. KEY FEATURES

4.1 f1 Historic Landscape

Description
The 'historic landscape' key feature covers the whole site given that it is broadly similar in composition and structure throughout, and is subject to the same management prescriptions. Habitats: Ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) The ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) habitat at Ashenbank Wood covers approximately 40% of the site (sub compartment 1b). There are distinct areas supporting National Vegetation Classification (NVC) W8a ash (approximately 20% of canopy), field maple, dog's mercury woodland, and others which support NVC W10a oak, bracken, bramble woodland. Old open grown hornbeam standards and coppice stools are scattered through the ASNW area, some of which were windblown during the storm of 1987 and have been left to develop naturally, along with a number of significant sweet chestnut trees that date from the late 18th century and lined the edge of the path network. Parts of the ASNW have been historically managed as coppice and can be found in the southern and western parts of Ashenbank Wood, although much of this is now out of rotation and managed through minimum intervention to support the development of a more natural woodland habitat. Open glades and scrub Around 60% of Ashenbank is historic wood pasture or former parkland (sub compartment 1a), and this habitat is largely concentrated in the north east and eastern half of the wood. Since 2003, the Woodland Trust has managed key areas of the former parkland as open glades (totalling around 7ha) between stands of adjacent woodland, and these incorporate both grassland and a successional scrub element. There are a small number of maintained open glades or part glades within the denser ancient semi natural woodland compartment, areas kept open around specimen veteran trees and archaeological features. In these areas especially, the woodland and old parkland blend together as a mixed habitat with subtle changes in the species present. Grazing at the site is thought to have ceased in the early 20th century before resuming through a renewed programme put in place by the Woodland Trust in 2011, which continued through until 2019. Livestock help to maintain and restore the open ground areas, by grazing and trampling some of the young trees and scrub which encourages species-rich grassland to establish. Previously, cattle have rotated between two compartments (20.65ha and 8.20ha), split by an internal fence to encourage dog walkers to utilise the non-grazed compartment at any given time. In the absence of grazing, mechanical cutting methods have and will continue to be used. Veteran trees

Significant, open-grown veteran trees are scattered throughout both the woodland areas and the glades. As a direct result of being allowed to grow in more open conditions, many exhibit rich and varied characteristics, with wide and open limbs including those further down the main stem, alongside developed fuller crowns. These features create important microhabitats often including both dead and dying wood. They help to provide ecological continuity for a number of species, and are essential for saproxylic invertebrates, and many lichens, fungi, bats and hole-nesting birds.

A survey in 2004 confirmed that there are 135 trees which are classified as veteran alongside other notable trees. Species include sweet chestnut, oak, hornbeam, ash, hawthorn, sycamore and wild cherry. A concentration of impressive veteran sweet chestnut trees can be found in both the north and south/ south west of the site, predominantly lining the path network. These are at least 200 years old, dating from Humphry Repton's landscape design for Cobham Hall estate, which he was involved with for over 25 years until 1820. There is at least one ancient tree on site, a characterful hornbeam of at least 225 years which has been fenced off from the main path network in order to both ensure public safety, and avoid any unnecessary intervention to this important, ageing specimen.

Research carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1995 concluded that prior to the early nineteenth century most of the northern part of Ashenbank Wood comprised a mosaic of open fields, rough grazing, heath and wood pasture with local areas of trees and scrub. This would explain the existence of veteran trees of great size and girth suggesting they grew in an open landscape, but also the existence of ancient woodland plant indicators which survived within the more wooded parts.

SSSI designation and key species:

Ashenbank Wood was designated as part of the Shorne and Ashenbank Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1968 as a good example of stand-types associated with Tertiary gravels, clays and sands. The site supports an important and diverse invertebrate fauna, especially its Coleoptera (beetles), Hemiptera (true bugs) and Odonata (dragonflies). The main SSSI interest is in the wide range of invertebrates including species associated with decaying and dead wood and aquatic species linked to the ponds on site. In addition, Ashenbank Wood is a site of national significance based on the recognised protocol for assessment of old growth/ wood pasture sites which support an obligate saproxylic beetle assemblage, with at least one species recorded as Red Data Book category 2 (vulnerable) and 17 as notable (nationally scarce).

Of the saproxylic beetle communities found at the site, more than 50% of the species recorded for Ashenbank are found in the wood pasture and perhaps 25% are wood pasture or open crowned tree specialists. A large number of fungi species can also be found at Ashenbank. In 1999 a survey recorded 382 species of which 21 were rare and 134 were occasional or uncommon.

Dog's mercury is the dominant ground flora species at the site, and can be found in both the denser woodland and the wooded edges of the open ground areas. At least 17 ancient woodland indicator species have been recorded, including wood sorrel, wood anemone, moschatel, wood sedge, wood speedwell and early dog violet. Other notable flora species such as black horehound, white dead nettle, both common and mouse ear chickweed and creeping cinquefoil tends to occur in patches and is mainly confined to ride edges. The grass composition in the glades comprises a mixture of spreading meadow grass, rough stalked meadow grass, creeping soft grass, Yorkshire fog and perennial ryegrass.

A number of wildflower displays can be seen throughout the year including bluebells, cowslips and native primroses in

the spring, and self-heal, bush vetch and rosebay willowherb throughout the summer. Areas of rhododendron and laurel were present on site until initially cleared in the mid 2000's.

A series of ephemeral ponds are located around the site, predominantly within the more open areas, alongside one pond which was dug as part of the mitigation work for the channel tunnel rail link in 2000. These areas also see a number of associated flora, including varieties of rush and sedge, and are important habitats for many species of dragonfly which also help to secure Ashenbank's SSSI notification.

Archaeology:

Set within the woodland at Ashenbank are a number of ancient and recent archaeological interests. A Bronze Age barrow believed to date from 2400 – 1500 BC is found on high ground in the centre of the wood. A shallow wood bank of medieval age or older also passes through the middle of the wood. During the Second World War, personnel from the Gravesend air field were out stationed in 5 purpose built camps in and around Ashenbank. All of the structures were removed in the early 1950's apart from four air raid shelters which remain as a feature of interest, alongside numerous building foundations and remnants of ablutions units. These have recently been the focus of on-site excavation works by archaeological group Cobham Landscape Detectives, with permissions granted from Natural England.

Significance

Ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) is a dwindling habitat and as such all remnants of ancient woodland must be protected from further loss.

Wood pasture is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitat and ancient wood pasture and parkland in particular is significant, featuring open grown ancient and veteran trees and decaying wood with important old growth characteristics, alongside grassland and associated flora. This provides a range of key microhabitats for a number of widespread and scarce species.

Ashenbank was designated as part of the Shorne and Ashenbank Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1968. The sites that once formed the great Cobham Hall Estate encompass an exceptional veteran tree and decaying wood habitat resource with associated notable and rare species which will benefit from the maintenance of the mosaic of ancient woodland and wood pasture structure. The concentration of ancient and veteran trees within the Cobham landscape makes the whole area one of very high conservation and cultural value within a wider UK context.

Ashenbank Wood is a small part, at the western end, of a Grade II historic landscape that is recognised as nationally important on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 (List Entry Number: 1000182, first listed in 1986)

Opportunities & Constraints

Opportunities:

As an important part of the Cobham landscape, Ashenbank offers the opportunity to work closely with other local

conservation organisations that also care for veteran and ancient trees. This includes the potential to establish wider cohorts of open grown trees at a landscape level, to become the ancients of the future.

Landscape scale management also offers the opportunity to work with other partners when carrying out important lichen, fungi and saproxylic invertebrate studies associated with the veteran trees and their decaying wood. These will help to identify population changes to key species already recorded, and the existence of new species.

There is the opportunity to actively manage one or two of the ponds on site for biodiversity, with support from a local pond restoration trust or Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group. The bunkers also offer major potential as bat hibernacula and could be further developed with the inclusion of bat boxes for key species.

To use the site to demonstrate the Trust's approach to woodland management and to influence neighbouring landowners and other key stakeholders.

Constraints:

Some parts of the site have difficult access and ground conditions.

Protected species present on the site impose strict conditions on working practices and timing of operations.

Grazing on site has been problematic due to management of livestock welfare at a busy site with numerous dog walkers, who despite having the option to walk in a cattle free compartment will still choose to walk in close proximity to the cattle. This could determine whether cattle continue to graze at Ashenbank Wood in the long term, or whether other livestock or cutting methods could be used.

Factors Causing Change

• The effects of ash dieback (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus) will result in the loss of the majority of ash on site, currently concentrated in the north west and south east areas where ash makes up around 20% of the canopy. However, the dying ash will contribute to the decaying wood habitat and regeneration of an understorey prompted by increasing light levels in the ash stands.

• Following ash decline and planned thinning works, quick colonising species such as sycamore may drastically increase its abundance throughout the site in the W8a woodland areas, which could prove detrimental to more biodiverse, native tree species. Sycamore is also more vulnerable to squirrel damage than many native species. Alexander (2016) references the negative impacts of young sycamore growth increasing shade levels and suppressing opportunities for saproxylic activity.

• Rhododendron ponticum has previously invaded areas of the site, and could continue to spread out from the adjacent housing boundary.

• Supplementary mechanical methods of cutting will not have the same desired effect on the sward and surrounding vegetation compared to selective grazing, it is also important to ensure that these methods do not impact the integrity of the open ground habitat, nor the archaeological features.

• Without intervention by grazing or mechanical methods there would be a natural succession of open areas to secondary woodland.

Long term Objective (50 years+)

The ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) habitat will extend around 70% of the site, and will predominantly be managed as minimum intervention high forest to support the ongoing development of processes characteristic of a natural woodland habitat. The woodland should be in a secure or recovering condition, with an increasing age of trees within the stands, associated decaying and deadwood habitat from collapsing and splitting coppice stools, and evidence of a range of important ground flora species indicative of ancient woodland.

Although any disease tolerant ash trees will be retained where possible, ash will become a minor species within the next 50 years due to the impacts of ash dieback. Natural regeneration of other native broadleaves such as sycamore, oak, hornbeam, cherry and birch will establish in the areas where ash has died, and eventually close up any gaps in the canopy and increase woodland resiliency. The accumulation of deadwood will also provide an important habitat for invertebrates and fungi, which will in turn support the development of a healthy woodland ecosystem.

As per Natural England and Forestry Commission joint guidance on managing sycamore in SSSI's (2019), given that sycamore is already present at this site and is likely to fill in the gaps created by the loss of ash, its ongoing establishment will be monitored. The overall canopy coverage of sycamore should not exceed 15% to minimise impacts of extensive shading of ground flora. Veteran sycamore trees can provide ecological continuity for a number of species associated with ash. Deer and squirrel populations will continue to be at a level that does not pose a threat to the woodland regeneration.

The remaining 30% of the site will consist of a mosaic of grassy glades (20%) and scrub habitat (10%). The grassland will include a diverse species mix, with scattered veteran trees and coppice stools, and a successional scrub element. The veteran trees with their old growth characteristics will support a diverse range of flora, fauna and fungi, including a number of common and rare species that are reliant on temporary open space. These areas will be sustainably managed, with short-rotation coppicing occuring around the network of wide rides and glades, alongside a sympathetic cutting regime in lieu of cattle grazing.

Successive generations of veteran trees, including species such as oak, hornbeam, field maple and cherry have been established across the site through natural regeneration. Through active management of competing trees, the continuity and improvement of future generations of veteran trees and their microhabitats can be secured, with successive interventions of halo thinning and coppicing to continue over a long cycle, maintaining identified trees in open grown conditions. At least one cohort (around 100 trees) should be identified over 50-100 years, with a similar species mix and distribution to existing veterans. This will also ensure that Ashenbank Wood maintains its importance for its obligate dead and decaying wood habitat.

A healthy and diverse ground flora associated with both the open glades and ancient woodland will be maintained throughout, and this in turn will be hugely beneficial to native woodland invertebrates, mammals and birds. Invasive, non-native species will be appropriately monitored and managed. Rhododendron ponticum and cherry laurel will be eradicated if there are risks of recolonisation.

Both the Scheduled Ancient Monument and other important archaeological and historical features, such as the World

War Two camp structures will be actively managed to keep them free of trees

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

Maintain/ enhance the ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) areas:

The out of rotation coppice within the ancient semi natural woodland will be managed through minimum intervention to support its development into a more natural woodland habitat, with implemented works to address hazardous trees where necessary along the path network.

Maintain/ enhance the veteran trees:

- Surveys

The ongoing plotting and mapping of all veteran trees and suitable successor or new recruits as future veteran trees is taking place on site- the survey began in 2017 and should be completed by 2020. This data will support the future halo thinning programme, in addition to the areas selected for halo thinning during this plan period.

To undertake surveys in 2021 of key species associated with veteran trees and decaying wood (saprotrophic fungi and saproxylic beetle assemblage) to determine both ongoing and new population presence and effectiveness of the current management prescription. Alexander (2016) makes recommendations that flight interception trapping should be repeated on a six year cycle, in line with standard condition assessment for SSSIs.

- Halo thinning

Felling competing trees around veteran trees will enable their open grown habit to be retained. During this plan period approximately 50 veteran trees and successor trees will be identified for working around with thinning/coppicing of trees occurring up to 5 metres out from their crown edge. This work will be concentrated in both the south east roadside stand, and the stand south-west of the covered reservoir and works will be undertaken during 2021 and 2023. Identified veteran trees within the woodland edge habitat will also be promoted through regular coppicing cycles, as highlighted in the open glade management section.

Maintain/ enhance the open glades and scrub habitat:

At the end of the plan period it is expected that the open glades and scrub areas within the historic parkland habitat and ASNW will start to exhibit a more diverse structure and mosaic through a combination of grazing by livestock and mechanical cutting where necessary. The active management of the woodland edges will also contribute to further structural diversity of the habitat matrix.

- Scrub management

Maintaining and creating woodland edge habitat up to 15 metres deep will continue around 4 of the major open glades (A, B, C, D) in the central and northern parts of Ashenbank Wood. This will be achieved through coppicing approximately 1.2ha of edge habitat with the work split evenly through the plan period. The edge habitat will be split into 2 zones and maintained on short rotations with zone 1 cut on a rotation of 3-5 years, and zone 2 cut on a rotation of 10-15 years, and all cut in a piecemeal fashion. This will accentuate the woodland edge habitat providing valuable temporary open space coppice habitat.

Within all areas to be coppiced, identified standards will be retained and young maiden trees recruited where possible as successor veteran trees, so that these should number no more than approximately 50-60 per ha.

- Grazing

Grazing is to be carried out by docile, shorthorn cattle or a hardy breed of horse between 5 and 12 animals. For stock management and for public access considerations, the site was split into 2 grazing compartments, covering the whole site. From 2020 the two grazing compartments will be reduced to 20ha in total, ensuring more focused grazing to benefit the glades and Bronze Age barrow in particular. The livestock will only graze one compartment at a time, spending approximately equal amounts of time within each compartment with the availability of suitable fodder dictating how long the livestock spend in each compartment. A new local grazier needs to be identified as a priority and grazing to start each year in early June and finish in October/November, extending to January/ February if only low numbers of stock are available.

Annual observations and fixed point photography monitoring will assess the effects of grazing on scrub and coarse vegetation management. This will help to ensure suitable stocking densities, timescales and whether supplementary mechanical cutting is necessary, along with measuring impact on public use of the site.

- Mechanical cutting

If required mechanical mowing is to occur once a year during August or September to cut back and collect rank growth of bramble and bracken within the open areas which have not been adequately grazed by the livestock. This will help to encourage a more diverse ground flora.

Whole site:

- Ash dieback monitoring and impacts

Annual monitoring will measure the impact of ash dieback (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus) across the site, where ash currently makes up around 20% of the canopy. Signs of impact and resilience will be observed, alongside any variation between individual trees and stands, and the abundance and type of tree regeneration in place of lost ash. Annual zone A (housing and roadside boundaries) and biennial zone B (path network) surveys will highlight hazardous ash trees for removal, all others will be retained to promote the potential for a resilient seed bank of future ash trees. Dead wood will be left in situ to contribute to the decaying wood habitat as an important resource for a number of fauna and fungi species.

- Invasive species control

Any recolonising rhododendron ponticum and cherry laurel to be eradicated through targeted hand pulling of young seedlings, or herbicide application to stump regrowth in the north west area of the site. Ongoing annual monitoring to determine impact of regrowth and encroachment from neighbouring garden to around 0.1ha of site. Eradication of these invasive species and their regeneration will occur on an annual basis (if necessary) through the management plan's period with aim of no regeneration after 5 years in the target areas. An environment assessment to be competed to confirm method of eradication.

- Pond restoration

Restoration works to include installing fencing around one or two key ponds on site, in order to deter dogs from disturbing aquatic wildlife and sediment, alongside appropriate management of surrounding vegetation in line with European Protected Species guidelines.

- Archaeological features
The Bronze Age barrow and the area containing World War Two camp structures will remain free from trees through livestock grazing between June and November (extended where monitoring dictates). Sympathetic supplementary mechanical cutting may be necessary to prevent degradation of the structures, whilst allowing the public to view these relics.

4.2 f2 Connecting People with woods & trees

Description

Ashenbank Wood is part of the Welcoming Sites Programme (WSP), a Woodland Trust initiative which aims to improve recreation and access provision at our key sites. The WSP will lead to a series of lasting upgrades that will improve the visitor experience and will likely increase the number and range of visitors to this site. An attractive and serviceable network of tracks and paths will further encourage the appreciation of the woodland, both on the site and in the locality. The site will be managed to meet the required high standards of WSP and will provide a clear welcome: well maintained entrances, furniture, signs and other infrastructure as well as sustainable path and track surfaces across the variable ground conditions where appropriate. Improved access will better facilitate use by a wider range of visitors. An engagement plan will set out a plan for engagement activities, further enhancing public visits to the site. Ashenbank Wood is classified by the Woodland Trust as a category A site, where we expect a high level of public access (15-20 visitors using one entrance every day).

Ashenbank Wood is a 29.95 ha (74 acre) site located close to the village of Cobham (pop.1,469 in 2011 census), located west of the city of Rochester, Kent (pop.62,982 in 2011 census) and a short drive from Gravesend (pop.74,000 as 2016 est). The site benefits from good transport links, easily accessible via car, local bus services and a train station located around 2 miles away. The public can enter the wood via six access points, with the main entrance and small car park (with dual kissing gates leading to each half of the wood) located at the eastern edge of the wood off Halfpence Lane. There is an established network of both surfaced and unsurfaced pathways in place (totalling 3.5km), and in places incorporate a number of fallen trees from the great storm of 1987. A red waymarked trail starts at the car park and leads visitors through the key features of Ashenbank Wood, taking approximately 40-50 minutes, and there is also a direct path link to Jeskyns Community Woodland from the south west of the site.

The wood is very well used, often by local residents, dog walkers, nature enthusiasts and ramblers. It is also a popular site for forest school activity. The 10km (6.2mile) Darnley Trail links together the surrounding ancient and veteran tree landscape and passes through part of Ashenbank Wood. This multi-user path runs through the northern part of Ashenbank Wood linking up access between Halfpence Lane and the byway called Scotland Lane at the western boundary. A public right of way also runs through the site, which extends from Shorne Wood Country Park, through to the historic villages of Cobham and Luddesdown (NS178).

Ashenbank is home to a great number of rare and interesting species from the declining hazel dormouse to the elusive brown long-eared bat, along with a number of red and amber listed birds. The site has a rich flora, with at least 17 ancient woodland indicator species including impressive displays of bluebells and wood anemones in the spring. There is also an array of characterful veteran trees on site with their decaying and deadwood habitats which support a host of fungi species and specialist saproxylic (wood decay) invertebrates.

In addition to its special wildlife, Ashenbank has a rich social history with evidence of human activity dating as far back as the prehistoric. A Bronze Age round barrow (a Scheduled Ancient Monument) and a shallow medieval (or potentially older) wood bank are located on the site, along with the remains for four bunkers dating from the Second World War, when Ashenbank was used as a base camp for RAF personel. Cobham Landscape Detectives have been very active across local sites, surveying archaeological remains and recording ancient and veteran trees. This provides a fantastic opportunity for partnership led small events at the site, focusing on aspects of social history and links to the wider Cobham landscape. Established volunteers at Ashenbank are able to act as ambassadors for the Woodland Trust and could potentially support this future engagement. The scale of events would be restricted by the small car park at the site, however local attendees would be encouraged.

Members of the public can access a range of on-site interpretation and information, including a site leaflet dispensed from the 'Welcome to Ashenbank' noticeboard located in the car park- there is a similar welcome panel at the entrance point leading in from Jeskyns. There are further interpretation boards placed around the site along the permissive path network. These give details on the World War 2 RAF camps, deadwood habitats, the Bronze Age barrow (Scheduled Ancient Monument) and pasture and pollards. The site leaflet is also available from the nearby visitor centre at Shorne Woods Country Park.

Due to its close proximity to London, the Medway towns and the motorway network, Ashenbank is vulnerable to the impacts of ongoing infrastructure development. With 2ha of the site already lost to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, further pressures from the Lower Thames Crossing development pose huge threats to this special site. As a SSSI and part of the complex of ancient woodland and former parkland of the historic Cobham Hall Estate, Ashenbank Wood forms an important open, recreational and ecological space within the local area.

Other local outdoor recreational sites well worth a visit in the local area include Shorne Woods Country Park, Cobham Wood and Mausoleum, Ranscombe Farm Reserve (owned and managed by Plantlife) and Jeskyns Community Woodland (owned and managed by Forestry Commission/ England). Ashenbank Wood is also a short distance from a number of nearby Woodland Trust sites including Saxten's and Cage's (10 miles) in Fawkham Green and slightly further afield Joyden's Wood in Bexley (12.5 miles).

Significance

Ashenbank Wood is an important space for informal recreation within the wider Cobham landscape, especially given its close proximity to the busy A2 road, which connects the nearby city of Rochester to Gravesend and London. Unlike neighbouring conservation sites with public access, Ashenbank offers visitors free parking provision.

The site falls within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and was designated as part of the Shorne and Ashenbank Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1968, for its veteran trees, deadwood and associated specialist invertebrate assemblage. Access to this mosaic habitat of ancient semi natural woodland (ASNW) and former wood pasture and gives an opportunity for the Woodland Trust to promote the importance of preserving and protecting ancient woodland and veteran trees, alongside appropriate management of significant archaeological heritage.

A number of national and regional walks and trails run through Cobham. The 10km (6.2mile) Darnley Trail links together the surrounding ancient and veteran tree landscape and passes through part of Ashenbank Wood, as does a public right of way which extends from Shorne Wood Country Park, through to the historic villages of Cobham and Luddesdown

(NS178) .

Public access to Ashenbank Wood helps fulfil one of the Woodland Trust's key objectives; to inspire everyone to enjoy and value woods and trees.

Opportunities & Constraints

Opportunities:

The consistent level of regular visitors to this wood offers opportunity for positive community engagement. There is a fantastic display of spring flowers, colourful and interesting fungi in the autumn and a significant number of veteran trees which provide interesting focal points within the site and help to demonstrate conservation management by the Woodland Trust

The unique and mosaic habitats within the woodland are a key resource for education, and local forest schools have provision to hold regular events for both primary and secondary age children, targeted at the history of the wood, veteran trees and wood pasture habitat.

There is an ongoing opportunity to work with other conservation partners to promote the whole Cobham and Shorne landscape of special trees and decaying wood habitat.

Members of the public are reassured by the presence of a uniformed warden opening and closing the car park at beginning and end of the day. This has helped to deter many elements of antisocial behaviour.

Constraints:

A number of unsurfaced paths make some areas of this site challenging for visitors with prams and wheelchairs.

The high visitor numbers and fairly compact size of this wood means that it often feels congested, and can become quickly impacted by issues such as dog waste.

Factors Causing Change

• Antisocial behaviour- The site has previously been a hotspot for antisocial activities. The car park is opened and closed daily by wardens which has helped to deter some of these issues.

• Flytipping- this is a significant problem in the local area, and the site has suffered from repeated dumps of household and contractor waste at both the north west access track and along the roadside boundary with Halfpence Lane.

• Road and rail infrastructure development- around 2ha of the site was previously lost to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link development, and the threat of the pending Lower Thames Crossing could signify further impacts for Ashenbank and

other conservation sites within the local landscape.

Long term Objective (50 years+)

There will be a well maintained and safe network of paths for informal public access in Ashenbank Wood where responsible visitors can appreciate and enjoy the site, utilising it for local walks, archaeological and wildlife interests and peaceful recreation.

The visitor numbers at Ashenbank will continue to be in line with its category A status as part of the Welcoming Site Programme. The provision of a site car park, a way marked route and information boards will continue to be made available on site. Both partnership and educational opportunities will be ongoing in line with conservation objectives, and the site will continue to be valued by the local community, particularly for its ease of use and recognised importance as a SSSI and as part of the wider historic Cobham landscape.

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

During this plan period, the short term objective is to continue to provide public access at Ashenbank Wood which is both safe and enjoyable.

This will be achieved by:

-Three annual path cuts to the network of paths on site totalling approximately 3.5km (2.1 miles), including strimming of any overhanging or encroaching vegetation along the paths.
Horse access along the Darnley Trail will be maintained by mowing and cutting back tree growth interfering with the route as necessary.

-Entrance maintenance works including:
Ensuring safe access from the car park onto Halfpence Lane by cutting roadside vegetation periodically through the summer months to maintain site lines along the public road.
Strimming a 1m radius around all info boards, benches, way marker posts, and pedestrian/vehicle gates.
Upgrading the car park surface following wear and tear, as and when necessary

-Upgrading car park fencing and kissing gate structures, due 2020, and renewing a further section of perimeter fencing, due 2022

- Replacement of roadside welcome signage, and small entrance and exit signage as per new branding spec, due 2020

-Annual inspections of site access points, signage, furniture and general infrastructure to ensure that all are in good condition and adequate for visitor numbers and all user groups

-Annual Zone A tree safety inspections carried out in the summer and fungal surveys carried out every other autumn. Zone B tree safety inspections are to be carried out every 2 years and to coincide with Zone A summer surveys, and should include inspection along the route of the telephone line. Arboricultural work carried out when necessary.

-The continued provision of a site leaflet available from Ashenbank Wood car park and from Shorne Woods Country

Park visitor centre. To continue to provide welcome boards placed in the car park and at the access point next to Jeskyns, and information boards on the World War 2 RAF camps, pasture and pollards, Bronze Age barrow and deadwood communities and to replace if they become damaged or illegible.

- Monitoring of antisocial behaviour:
To continue to monitor the antisocial use of the wood and liaise with Gravesham Borough Council and Kent Police to help stop anti-social behaviour occurring and removal of fly tipped material as and when is required.

5. WORK PROGRAMME

Year	Type Of Work	Description	Due Date

APPENDIX 1 : COMPARTMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Cpt No.	Area (ha)	Main Species	Year	Management Regime	Major Management Constraints	Designations
1a	19.51	Mixed broadleaves	1700	Wood pasture	Archaeological features	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Tree Preservation Order

Old parkland or wood pasture in north and east of the site with significant open glade areas, veteran trees of mostly sweet chestnut, scattered oak with some ash. The site was affected by 1987 storm with evidence of windblown trees and coppice stools still present, with many still alive and continuing to grow. There is significant decaying wood habitat in the veteran trees and also as windblown and dead trees. During 1999 along the northern boundary, the trunks of 30 trees were felled as part of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link works on the northern section of the forest were relocated into the wood. 12 of these trees were re-erected up against existing trees to provide vertical deadwood habitats which contrast with the more typical horizontal deadwood of fallen or windblown trees.

Part of the north west area of Ashenbank is in private ownership, featuring both a covered Southern Water reservoir and the property boundary of 'The Mount'. The Darnley Trail also runs through the northern part of the site. Remains of the former WWII encampment are located within the compartment, including ablutions and four bunkers to the east and south of the boundary with The Mount. Trees and scrub bushes were cleared from around these bunkers in 2001, and continue to be maintained in order to form an open glade area so that the bunkers could be seen better and to prevent any structural damage occurring to them from windblown trees. Metal grid doors have been placed across both to prevent unauthorised access, and they are likely utilised by a small number of bat species.

In the north east area of the compartment, there are two ponds. The smaller pond is long standing and was previously maintained by local volunteers for some years. The large pond was constructed in 1998/99 as part of mitigation works by the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) for damage to the historic 'Becketts Pond' that is on the edge of the wood. This new pond has a bentonite liner. Water and plants from Becketts pond were transferred to it. Beckets Pond was known to contain Smooth and Palmate Newts as well as frogs. It is reported that it was a receptor site for great crested newts translocated from a Development sites in the Ebbsfleet valley.

Dog's mercury is the most dominant ground flora species in the central and northern areas. A considerable extent of the open ground habitat south of the ponds is mainly domniated by bracken and bramble, with more diverse flora during the spring months. Other species are rare and mainly confined to ride edges but include a number of Ancient Woodland Indicator plant species, such as wood speedwell (Veronica montana), wood sorrel (Oxalis acetosella) and wood fescue (Festuca gigantea) and the native bluebell (Hyacinthoides non-scripta).

Cpt No.	Area (ha)	Main Species	Year	Management Regime	Major Management Constraints	Designations
1b	10.44	Sweet chestnut	1700	High forest	Archaeological features	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Tree Preservation Order

ASNW in the south and west of the site with hornbeam and sweet chestnut coppice with oak and large sweet chestnut standards many of veteran age, and a small number of wild cherry. Towards the northwest the compartment takes on more of a high forest character and there are some particularly large ash and holly with much seedling ash regeneration. The south western part contains open glade areas with veteran trees exhibiting open grown characteristics. Areas of this woodland were affected by 1987 storm with evidence of windblown trees and coppice stools still present, with many still alive and continuing to grow. A number of windblown and uprooted veteran trees have been made into main features of the path network. The southern boundary is formed by a path adjacent to a Sweet chestnut coppice cant once belonging to Lord Darnley.

This western boundary of this sub-compartment is formed by a Byway named Scotland Lane. A Public Right of Way runs through from the northern boundary to Jeskyns Community Woodland on the south west of the site. Part of the northern boundary also meets the covered reservoir for Southern Water and the adjacent Scheduled Ancient Monument- a Bronze Age barrow, thought to be dating from 2400 – 1500 BC, found on high ground in the centre of the wood. A shallow wood bank of medieval age or older also passes through the middle of the wood. Topography is very steep to almost precipitous in places with the Public Right of Way running along the bottom of a small valley with steep sides either side.

Towards the south and east the ground flora is dominated by bracken with bluebell while towards the north the ground flora reflect the more moist conditions which prevails and includes notable species such as Moschatel (Adoxa moschatellina). The central area of this compartment is dominated by a large open bracken covered glade whilst within the remaining wooded parts are found bluebell and bramble with occasional ferns, meadow grasses and speedwell (Veronica) species. At the southern end of the compartment, the ground flora is richer and contains a number of Ancient Woodland Indicators such as wood anemone (Anemone nemorosa), native bluebells (Hyacinthoides non-scripta) and wood sage (Teucrium scorodonia).

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.

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