

Abbey Road Conservation Volunteers.

Progress Report for Oct 2022- March 2023

General

We continue to gently manage the site with the intent of maintaining and improving the various habitats, guided by our Management Plan and our Advisory Group. Richard Black of Wilder Horsham also visited last Autumn and gave us useful advice.

Pond.

The pond has been 80-100% full since last November, having been completely dry from June to October. At the end of March, it is still 90%full. The site performed its function as a flood plain in November and again this February when the pond and surrounding areas were completely flooded with the back paths under several feet of water. The majority of this water drains back into the Tanyard stream in a few days, but leaves the pond 100% full.

As you will recall, last summer was exceptionally hot and dry. Even the normally wet meadow suffered in the drought. But other areas nearer to the pond managed to thrive, with Purple Loosestrife putting on a spectacular display.

One notable success already has been the increase in the number of frogs and frogspawn recorded. In our first year on site, we saw 3 clumps of frogspawn, but the water dried up before the tadpoles were able to complete their growth. This year we have seen 40+ clumps of frogspawn, and on the 15th Feb a night camera filmed at least 16 frogs in the pond. So, there must be a very healthy population of 80+ frogs in the area.

Our Advisory Group had suggested levelling out the banks of clay removed in Sept 2021, to allow the pond to spread further when full, and to take out another 6" depth in the middle of the pond.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to schedule that last year, so this is a priority for this September.

Trees

The 6 Silver Birch and 5 Alder trees planted last Autumn, all survived the summer drought thanks to regular watering. They are all growing well. 6 Black Poplar saplings provided by Wakehurst/Arun and Rother Rivers Trust were planted out this month. (Black Poplars are a wet woodland/riverside tree, and are still rare in Sussex). Their propagation has been a long-term project between the Sussex Wildlife Trust and Wakehurst. We applied for trees and were pleased to be allocated a dozen. The other 6 are being grown on in pots as they are still quite small.(see pic)

Meadow

After consulting with the Advisory Group, it was decided to only 'cut and remove' the meadow grass once a year in early Spring, rather than twice a year with a second cut in the Autumn. This first cut of the year should happen soon.

The original idea of creating a flowering meadow by cutting twice a year and sowing wildflower seeds mix failed to suppress the vigorous grass growth that swamped our attempts to introduce wildflowers. A few Yellow Rattle plants (semi-parasitic on grass

roots, reducing their growth) did flower last year, but not in the numbers we were hoping for.

So, we will now concentrate on introducing plants that can cope with competition from grasses. Purple Loosestrife, Meadowsweet, Water Mint, Yellow Iris and Water Mint already grow on this and other parts of site, so we will try to introduce more of these and other plants to the grass meadow.

Richard Black suggested these as possible additions:-

Marsh Marigold, Common (Black) Knapweed, Hemp Agrimony, Marsh Marigold, Marsh Woundwort, Sneezewort, Square-stalked St. John's Wort, Water Avens and Wild Angelica,

We will also look to introduce some low growing shrubs to the edges of the meadow such as Hawthorn, Alder Buckthorn, Crab Apple, Holly and Dog Rose. These would provide good habitat for nesting birds, food plants for butterflies and nectar sources for other insects.

Orchard

Steyning Community Orchard planted 3 more fruit trees in February, attended by the tree donors and their families. This new orchard now has 6 fruit trees located on the southern part of the site, adjacent to Gatewick House grounds. The day coincided with an Abbey Rd volunteers work day and so our volunteers were able to join in also join in the celebrations (and refreshments!)

Over this winter, the volunteers have been clearing back the encroaching brambles and nettles on the boundary with Gatewick. In some places this had grown out 10metres from the original fence line. This work uncovered large clumps of daffodils that have been flowering profusely in recent weeks. (see pic)

There is potential for planting a new wildlife hedge along this boundary. We will survey where this might go once the mature trees come into leaf so we can see where the new hedge plants will have enough light to thrive. We would then hope to plant this next winter.

Working Parties/Volunteers

We held 6 working parties in this period, who contributed 84 voluntary work hours between them. We currently have 21 people on our volunteers list with a further 3 helping with botany and bird surveys. The average number attending each work party was 8. Those who have attended less frequently in the last year were canvassed to see if they wished to be dropped from the list. Only one did so, with the 7 other wishing to stay in the group.

Some of our recently recruited volunteers live very close to the site. One of these is a recently retired Professional Arboriculturist. We now have volunteers living in Abbey Rd, Church Mead, Cannons Way and Mimmack Close.

So, we have a very thriving and engaged group of volunteers, which is very encouraging.

Work carried this last Autumn/Winter included:-

- cleared more fallen Goat Willow in the glade area.
- cut/trimmed excess growth in the glade area.
- trimmed back vegetation around the paths.

- trimmed around the 6 Silver Birch, and 5 Alder trees, keeping them clear of vegetation.
- continued to cut back Willows growing in pond area.
- cut a 'bench seat' from a large willow cut down a few years ago (see pic).
- kept access open to the Tanyard stream 'in-stream baffles' installed last year.
- planted 6 Black Poplar trees.
- as mentioned, cleared boundary with Gatewick House boundary.

Finance/budget

It was decided at a previous Communities Cttee meeting that a separate budget for Abbey Rd would not be allocated, but that individual requests for funding would be considered.

So far, the only request we have made was for £70, for the 6 Silver Birch trees that we planted in Nov 2021.

Since then, we have sourced (for free) and planted 5 Alder and 6 Black Poplar. Two volunteers have generously donated £25 each to buy some of the wildlife-friendly shrubs mentioned above.

As also mentioned, we hope to do more work on the pond this September.

Previously this was done for free by a local contractor, but we were unable to secure his services again last September when the work needed doing. As it is important we do this, we would like to request a grant from SPC for the work to be done this September. Maximum cost of hire of a mini digger would be c£250 (incl delivery and fuel) . We can provide an experienced driver.

Other grant requests might be for the wildflower plants or seeds for us to grow on, and for the hedging plants later in the year.

Pic1. Willow bench

Pic2. Volunteers with Black Poplar trees

Pic3. Cleared orchard area with daffodils.

Roger Brown. Mar 29th 2023.



