

Wellington Community Woodland

Origins and development of the project

How it began

In response to an environmental initiative by the European Union, in 2008 an area of damp grassland known as Moor Field, between the Recreation Ground and Wellington Sports Centre, was identified as suitable for the creation of a Community Woodland. On its eastern boundary was a small watercourse with some mature trees, mostly willows (*Salix spp.*), which separated the area from the grounds of Wellington Rugby Football Club. (WRFC) At the start, the project involved Wellington in Bloom (WiB), Wellington Town Council (WTC), Somerset County Council (SCC) and Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC), the latter body having overall responsibility for the site. The planning process was co-ordinated by Ian Clark (at the time Landscape Lead Officer, TDBC), in consultation with Barbara Collier (also TDBC) and the then Tree Warden (Colette Hayter, a WiB committee member) among others. It was suggested that the woodland should be named "Moor Wood", but this may never have been officially ratified, nor is it known whether a Management Plan was drawn up.

Phase 1 of the planting, in the southern half of the field, took place during National Tree Week (29th November to 7th December 2008), with Wellington in Bloom inviting members of the community to take part, and, if they wished, make a donation for the planting of a memorial tree, for which a certificate would be given. (No record exists of the response to that offer.) Funding came from a number of sources including SCC and the Woodland Trust. Species selected for planting were all deciduous and native to the English countryside, including some relatively uncommon ones such as the wild service tree (*Sorbus torminalis*). Being "whips" (seedlings mostly less than 50cm in height), the trees were housed within a protective plastic tube attached to a small stake.

Further planting of Phases 2, 3, and 4 took place in the winter of 2009/10, Phase 4 being the largest in area, and Phases 2 and 3 relatively small and on the east and west margins of the site, respectively. Altogether the planted areas amounted to less than 0.5 hectare. Oversight of the project was left in the hands of the Tree Warden, with the understanding that mechanical mowing of the grass by TDBC staff would take place each autumn.

The project continues

In 2010, Colette Hayter left the area, and the position of Tree Warden became vacant. TDBC asked Wellington Town Council if someone suitable in the community might be identified and invited to volunteer for the role. A member of the Town Council approached Simon Ratsey, known to be a professional gardener and life-long tree enthusiast. He agreed to meet Ian Clark at the Community Woodland where, after some discussion, he said he would be happy to assume the role of Tree Warden for Wellington. Mr Clark then recommended Mr Ratsey to Wellington Town Council, which body then endorsed his appointment as Tree Warden, with the oversight of the Community Woodland project to be his chief role. Mr Clark moved on from his role with TDBC within a few years, after which it seems that no individual council officer had an interest in or involvement with the Community Woodland project. Wellington Town Council had no active engagement with the project, after its initiation. Mr Ratsey continued to oversee the wellbeing of the young trees, having drafted a Management Plan that was never formalised.

The most important maintenance work at Moor Wood involved dealing with the results of vandalism. Many of the wooden stakes securing the tree guards were broken off and taken away (for firewood, according to one local resident). The plastic tubes were then either blown away or left at an angle, distorting the growth of the young tree inside. Remedial work was necessary on an ongoing basis. On one occasion Mr Ratsey had to remonstrate with some youths who were systematically "karate kicking" a line of the baby trees in Phase 4 of the woodland (the more northerly clump).

It was also important to prevent herbaceous plants from swamping the young trees. For a time after the first planting, TDBC sprayed weed-killer around the trees on an annual basis. This practice, as well as the autumn mowing, ceased within the first five years. Then it became necessary to clear the undergrowth with hand tools, which was carried out according to need. Stinging nettles and hogweed were abundant, the latter reaching heights in excess of 2 metres.

Survival rates for the young trees were on the whole good, although there was some vandalism, and both dry summers and wet winters caused a number of casualties. In November 2011, as part of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations for HM Queen Elizabeth II, members of the community gathered to plant a further 100 seedling trees. These were mostly replacements for those that had died, and had been provided free by the Woodland Trust. Among the trees supplied was an oak (*Quercus robur*) grown from an acorn gathered from one of the royal estates. Being only a one year old seedling at the time, this was nurtured in Mr Ratsey's garden until large enough to be safely planted out. The "Jubilee Tree" can be found at the south-west corner of the northern block of trees (Phase 4).

Further tree casualties occurred in 2012, the wettest year on record, when some succumbed to root-rot following months of saturated ground. (This was not a surprise, in view of the site's original name.) Mr Ratsey was able to source a variety of deciduous tree seedlings through his business connections, and further replanting took place as needed. Among the additions were purging buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*), hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) and common lime (*Tilia x europaea*), which latter seemed to flourish especially well in the damp conditions.

Over the course of the following three years, most of the young trees became well established, with birches (*Betula spp.*) notable for exhibiting a very rapid rate of growth. Some of these had reached heights of between 3 and 4 metres by the autumn of 2013, while a significant shrub layer now occupied most of Phases 1, 2 and 4. This meant that mechanical mowing was no longer practicable. Many of the trees planted in Phase 3, along the western edge of the field, were adversely affected by the shade created by existing mature trees, mostly field maple (*Acer campestre*) in the boundary hedge. Growing towards the light, they became severely distorted, and some were coppiced in the hope that shrubby regrowth would create a better plant. A programme of removal of any remaining plastic tree-guards and stakes was more or less complete by the autumn of 2016, by which time some trees had developed a leaf canopy sufficient to begin shading out the ground flora. Limited amounts of winter pruning had also been carried out, chiefly to maintain the health of the young trees.

Being the corridor linking the Basins Nature Reserve with the Recreation Ground and Wellington Park, the Community Woodland rapidly became popular with walkers and also birdwatchers. Considering the large number of people visiting the area, instances of vandalism were fortunately relatively rare. The mature trees lining the stream channel provided a habitat for a variety of bird species, including the song thrush. It was hoped that as the new woodland areas matured, they would provide an enhanced habitat for a range of creatures.

A wood has been created

Very favourable conditions in recent years, often with an extended growing season, resulted in many trees putting on significant amounts of growth. By the summer of 2019 an almost complete canopy had developed in the two main clumps (Phases 1 and 4), while some birch trees had reached more than 10 metres in height. As a result, ground flora was much reduced, and more dieback of lowest branches was being noted. With two clearly recognisable areas of established trees adding to the local scene, the emphasis changed from "nurture" to "manage". However, with TDBC in the process of forming a new district authority with West Somerset, there were changes of personnel and in the roles of council staff that meant it was impossible to get help or advice from the council regarding the management of Moor Wood. Mr Ratsey continued to carry out jobs at his own discretion, sometimes with volunteer assistance.

Winter maintenance work was focussed on cutting back low branches that obstructed access among the trees, partly because the heavily-used perimeter paths became muddy and at times almost impassable, so that walkers would seek alternative routes. "Habitat piles" were created using the resulting brushwood. Ash Dieback Disease ("Chalara") was seen to be affecting some of the relatively small number of ash trees (*Fraxinus excelsior*) present. Where possible, these were felled, and the roots dug up to prevent coppice shoots from emerging. Some tree species began to spread by suckering, with quite dense clusters of shoots emerging from the root system. This is a common characteristic of dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) and guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), both of which species are fairly common at the site. There were signs of hazel (*Corylus avellana*) propagating by seed, but little indication that the seedlings were surviving.

It was noted that as the herbaceous layer diminished, clumps of wild daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) began to appear in spring. These had been planted in the early days of the project,

mostly in Phase 2, but, if flowering in previous years, had been hidden in the undergrowth. Other flowering plants that appeared on the margins of the woods included Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), self-seeded from plants by the pond near the Sports Centre. It was recognised that there would be a very limited range of flowering plant species present in what had been an area of low-grade pasture, and that the introduction of suitable woodland herbaceous species would be necessary if it was hoped to recreate a woodland ecosystem in a relatively short period of time.

Members of Transition Town Wellington's Sustainable Food Group became interested in the area as it offered possible space for the growing of fruit trees and bushes to provide for local foragers. Permission was granted by the district council, and a variety of species including apples and plums were duly planted on the eastern and western sides of Phase 4, adding another element to the amenity value of the site. The care of those trees and bushes remains the responsibility of TTW.

Planning for the future of Moor Wood needs to embrace its value both as a public amenity open space and also as a wildlife habitat, at a time when there is a greatly increased emphasis on the need to increase this country's tree cover. Restrictions on travel during the main period of Covid-19 lockdown early in 2020 resulted in unprecedented footfall at the site, with most paths being impassable to anyone not wearing rubber boots. There was a period of considerable public anxiety when it was noted that Wellington Rugby Football Club had cordoned off certain areas and appeared to be starting to clear the trees from Phase 2, and some of the mature willows by the boundary stream. This was the result of a misunderstanding with the council, WRFC gaining the impression that it might enlarge the area of one of its playing fields in that way. Fortunately, most of the work had involved coppicing or cutting back trees that would in time recover perfectly well.

The episode served to demonstrate the vulnerability of such green spaces to encroachment or development not in keeping with their set purpose. However, the announcement in 2021 of a Green Corridor to be created on the western side of Wellington, including the area containing Moor Wood, should provide a degree of security for the future.

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