

Worthies Conservation Volunteers Task 17th October 2004

The group met at the end of the lane to Woodhams Farm on Springvale Road at 2-30 pm on Sunday 17th October to walk the old track of the disused Didcot, Newbury and Southampton railway line in the direction of Worthy Down Camp. The intention was to identify features of the track which might become the focus of improvements to enhance the general environment.

Some 14 people, two dogs and a bicycle, turned up for the walk which was led by Michael Edwards. Many of the participants were already familiar with the track and used it on a fairly regular basis for strolling, dog walking and other similar activities. As requested many brought bags and gloves to collect some of the rubbish known already to be on and about the track. The weather had been bright but cool in the morning but threatened rain for the afternoon. Fortunately it never materialised.

An initial conversation with Alison indicated that the County Council were very happy for the Conservation volunteers to undertake any work on the track which might improve the area for walkers, dog-owners and all those who already use the facility and for those who might come to use it and enjoy it in the future. I believe that Alison will be maintaining contact with the Council to ascertain just what freedoms we might have.

The leader was not aware of the current status of the first section of the track, although from it's intersection with the bridleway/ track running from Hookpit Farm Lane (behind Tesco) right to the Ox Drove above Worthy Down it is a recognised Bridleway and Footpath.

It would be worthwhile tracing the path on an Ordnance Survey map, such as Explorer Sheet 132, as I will refer to features by their relevant OS co-ordinates.

Several keen litter pickers started work as we walked up the Woodhams track by the beech avenue to the beginning of the main walk at SU4831 3330. Connie found an intact tea-cup!

The old approach to the railway had until recently been across a wire strand fence and down a steep slope into the cutting. This has now been improved considerably so that the track slopes down directly to the north towards and under the old bridge, doubtless to make access for riders from the large new equestrian centre at Woodhams Farm. Hardcore has been spread and compacted to make a very easy and mud free entry. The bridge across the track at this point makes a very imposing, almost inviting, entrance to the walk.

For the first 400 metres the railway cutting is deep and dark, bordered on both sides by trees, largely sycamore, running up the steep slopes and fringing the top. There is not a great deal of scrub but over the years trees have died to leave much fallen timber and wood. There is some sign of regeneration of sycamore along the track, and these as yet small seedlings, should perhaps be pulled before they start to encroach too far. There are many Male fern and Hartstongue fern at various points along the slopes, which increase the somewhat mysterious feeling along this part of the walk. There is still remaining rubbish about but not large amounts and it could easily be dealt with on subsequent visits.

At SU4810 3370 the surrounding land has fallen away and the track is now on a somewhat raised embankment. The scrub has also closed in from both sides. There is a slightly open aspect at this point towards the sloping fields enclosed on the eastern side by the old spur line linking south-eastwards to the line of the London to Southampton Railway. ***This seems an ideal point to open up the scrub, especially to the east to give a sudden burst of light and green after the confinement and gloominess of the deep cutting.*** A large disused brick and concrete railway building is set to the west at this point, and has the appearance of a signal box controlling the various junctions which converge just to the north. The condition of the building is somewhat parlous with much missing brickwork and a dangerous looking overhanging concrete roof. ***There may be some possibility of opening up vistas to the west near to the rail junction with views over to the square sycamore wood and adjoining fields. The best view would be roughly at SU4807 3398.***

The entire area over the bridges spanning the bridleway below and covering the old junction is used as an "adventure play-ground" with ropes from the trees and other signs of intense activities by older children. There are protective fences and so on around the dangerous holes, especially a gap between the line of the old tracks down to the bridleway below. ***As we exit from the junction area there is a fairly clear patch in the scrub which would benefit from further opening up to encourage flora. This might necessitate removing one or two minor trees.***

There is a footpath access near this point going down to the lower bridleway.

At little further along at SU4806 3415 there is a war-time pillbox to the right (east) of the track. ***It would pay to keep an eye on it, perhaps clearing some of the surrounding scrub and of course removing rubbish etc. from both inside and outside.***

The track continues along at a elevated level for a further 500 meters or so eventually crossing a bridge over the bridleway beneath. Many of the shrubs along here have been cut at some time and could be re-coppiced to introduce light to the area, a view over to the west where there can be seen further pillboxes across the field, and to being back a flush of flowering plants. ***In particular it would be advantageous to clear much of the scrub on and near the bridge at SU4803 3465 to encourage flowers and enhance the view, especially to the east over the bridleway towards the fields.*** A simple seat could be erected here to enhance the experience. Coppicing to the west at this point would be an attractive proposition.

Shortly after the bridge we discovered Earth-star fungi. It is also known that there are Helleborines in the scrub around this area.

The scrub is extensive to both sides of the track and might be "pushed back" here and there to clear the path and encourage woodland edge flowers.

Beyond the bridge the land rises once again, dropping the track into a partial cutting. The stretch for the next 300 to 400 meters is not especially inviting principally because of the large amount of rubbish which has been dropped into the cutting from the Army camp to the west above. Most of the rubbish is old but there is obviously some newer material. ***A letter to the commandant pointing out the mess would not go amiss!!*** It would probably be sufficient here for us to keep an eye on rubbish and general tidiness with perhaps a little scrub clearance to the east if it is possible to open up some sort of vista.

The back entrance track (emergency) to the camp enters the compound after passing a bridge over the railway at SU4803 3478. There are a number of ferns on and around the bridge which acts as a natural entrance and visual "frame" to the station area. Opening up around the bridge and clearing some of the scrub would enhance the general appearance. A number of magnificent coppiced sycamores lie to the north just beyond the bridge. ***Opening up around these splendid sycamore trees to show them off would make the area more attractive, giving a sudden change of atmosphere after the slightly dismal feel before the bridge .***

A tangle of mixed scrub leads the way to the station. There are many different flowering species around here, with a large number of older birch trees. In the spring there are violets and other flowering plants in profusion around and in the scrub. Clearance of some of the scrub especially towards the east might be considered so as to encourage woodland "coppice flowers".

To the west the army camp fence lies immediately beyond the old siding area which, still being covered in hard core, has many plants of dry sandy terrain. There is a great deal of very attractive dwarfed Basil thyme with purple flowers and much Common stork's-bill as well as a host of other interesting flowers. ***The openness of the site to the west of the platform at this point would make any conservation or other work difficult but it is important to monitor this area and prevent any degradation, especially caused by motor-bikes and the like.***

Some minor clipping back of willows along the edge of the platform would probably encourage helleborines known to be on deposits of turf-covered gravel under the lea of the platform. There are numerous fungi of a wide range of species around the edge of the platform both to its west and to the eastern side. This is a valuable habitat from the point of view of fungi, especially at this time of year. Connie spent many happy minutes nose-down in the fungi with her books, having been so active with rubbish-collecting that she had to give up her sack being full to the brim!

The station platform is covered with heavy scrub and round about there are many Goat willow and Silver birch trees. Suitable conservation activities may need some careful consideration.

To the east of the platform a second path goes along. It might be possible to open up one or two vistas to the east over the adjoining farm-land. If this were done due consideration needs giving to the rich fungi habitat. Especially interesting might be a view from the platform centred on the old building (waiting room?) half-way down the platform and opening out to the east. Seating in the shelter and some means of access would be great assets.

By this point it was about 4-30 pm and we decided to terminate the walk. The group broke-up with various parties going home by different routes, all complete with full rubbish sacks!

During the walk a number of points were discussed. Overall it was felt that the "Railway Walk" had considerable potential for development. Some of the points are made above. In essence it was felt by most participants that judicious opening up of vistas, removal and clearance of scrub, the creation of mini flower-meadows, enhancement of the area around special interest points, and of course the removal of rubbish on a regular basis would all be useful.

Additional thoughts centred around making a sign-posted and pamphleted nature-walk, the provision of simple seating around and overlooking interesting views, fungal forays, floral walks, the provision of bat and bird boxes and many other topics.

It was also felt that an interesting historical and archaeological walk might be conjured up, perhaps with the help of the Historical Society, especially considering the war-time importance of the Worthy Down Camp, its surrounding emplacements and the critically important railway and other similar features.

It was the opinion of many of the participants that this walk had all the ingredients that would excite them to continue to be actively involved in the Group's conservation interests, and would provide an excellent next step after, and alongside, the work proposed at Broadview and the associated Kim Bishop's Walk.

Michael Edwards 18th October 2004.