

Executive summary of Shorne Woods Country Park Management Plan 2009-2014



Produced by RSK Carter Ecological in consultation with Kent County Council, February 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Background Information

Shorne Woods Country Park is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and metropolitan green belt. There are a wide variety of natural habitats to enjoy throughout all seasons of the year and 116 hectares (288 acres) of park to enjoy, explore and exercise in.

The Park was historically part of the pleasure grounds of the Cobham Hall Estate. From the 1920s to the 1970s, clay extraction for the local cement industry occurred. The old clay pits created the flat, grassy areas that are now home to the picnic and play areas, Visitor Centre and car park. Prior to this, the whole of the Park would have been covered by ancient woodland.

The Park opened in 1987, having been purchased by KCC in 1982. In 2001, Randall and Brewers Woods two neighboring woodlands were also purchased. A Heritage Lottery funded project has supported access and nature conservation work enabling these areas to open up to the public in June 2008. A new award winning Visitor Centre championing sustainable technologies and construction was opened in 2006.

The park achieved Forest Stewardship certification (FSC) in 2005 and achieved a Green Flag award for Country parks in 2008 and 2009.



Photo 1. View overlooking Shorne Wood Country Park.

1.2 *Vision for the Site*

Shorne Woods Country Parks aims to provide a welcoming, safe environment for all ages and backgrounds whilst protecting and conserving the Site of Special Scientific Interest. The site aims to raise awareness of sustainable energies, healthy living and recycling through the visitor centre and café. The park is Kent County Councils flagship Country Park.

The overall vision for the country parks in Kent is for the county to be renowned for its great country parks, operating a service which meets the needs of the people of Kent and its visitors, and which is securely funded into the future.

1.3 *Conservation Management*

Shorne Wood is primarily occupied by mature broad-leaved high-forest with smaller areas, mainly in the south-east of the site, consisting of broad-leaved coppice. A large section in the south-east of the site is occupied by a disused quarry and is known as the claypit; in areas this has been allowed to naturally regenerate as woodland dominated by Silver Birch but it now has Oaks, Sweet Chestnut and Hornbeam growing through. This is an area where fungi flourish in the autumn and Orchids can be seen in the early spring. In other areas amenity grasslands have been created and some grass areas are rotationally cut to encourage moths and butterflies.

There are many ponds, mainly located in the disused quarry area, which support a range of aquatic and emergent plant communities. The ponds and wetland areas support a variety of animals and birds in particular a large population of Great Crested Newt, as well as rare water beetles and dragonflies and damselflies. Daubenton's bat use the pond for feeding, whilst Grass-snake use wetland and ponds. The fishing lakes are stocked with wide variety of freshwater fish. The fishing rights in lakes A and B are leased annually to the Thames Work Angling and Preservation Society.



Photo 2. Pond F.

Between 2003-2009, major clearance of the extremely invasive *Rhododendron* took place (funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund). This plant was originally introduced by the Victorians to line carriage rides which crossed the Park. Over the years the *Rhododendron* spread and by 2003 had completely suffocated over one fifth of the woodland. The clearance has opened up large areas previously hidden from view. These areas will be allowed to naturally return to woodland, bringing with it all of the associated species such as bluebells and wood anemones.

Randall Wood and Brewer's Wood mainly consist of Sweet Chestnut coppice, although there are some stands of high-forest, especially on the margins and adjacent to streams. These areas are managed by coppicing; where the trees are cut or coppiced every 15-25 years, and from the stumps multiple stems/trunks grow. The coppiced wood is then used to heat the Visitor Centre in the woodchip boiler, sold as firewood from the Visitor Centre, stacked as habitat piles or used to edge paths around the park, so none of the wood is left to waste on site. This regular cutting maintains the valuable coppice habitat in which small mammals, flowers and insects thrive.



Photo 3. Product of Sweet Chestnut coppicing used as woodchip for the boiler or sold as firewood from the Visitor Centre.

The areas of coppice are linked by woodland rides. These wide corridors through dense woodlands allow light to reach the forest floor all year round. These greatly increase the diversity of the woodlands as well as providing corridors through the woods that enable birds, butterflies and insects to flourish. Along the ride network there are regular open glades that help to capture heat and light within the woodland improving the woodland biodiversity. The ride clearance is initially very destructive and leaves muddy areas but these will within 1-2 years revert to grass and herbs and be great for encouraging a greater range of wildlife.

The grazed Knoll is an area of open grassland. This is the rarest habitat in the park and is known as wood pasture. This habitat is acid grassland with sporadic veteran trees. A small herd of Beef Cattle graze this area, they help encourage flowering-herbs and control the spread of Bracken in conjunction with mechanical clearance by site staff.



Photo 4. The Knoll.

Much of the woodland in the park is ancient semi-natural woodland. These are areas that have been wooded for over 400 years. The park has many veteran Hornbeam, Oak and Sweet Chestnut trees. In total there are 209 notable or veteran trees recorded in the sites veteran tree database stored on site. These areas of woodland are left unmanaged asides from health and safety tree work, veteran tree management or the removal of invasive species.

The woodlands are managed in an environmentally friendly way and have achieved Forest Stewardship Certification. The site was also designated as a SSSI in 1968 by English Nature (now Natural England).

All site work is carried out with permission from Natural England and the Forestry Commission and the HLF work is audited annually by HLF officers so all the works in the management plan have been well researched before implementation.

There is a full time Head Ranger , 1 full time Ranger and 1 part time Ranger responsible for delivering the conservation management objectives. There is a permanent volunteer team on site twice a week that ranges between 4-10 people per day from 9am -4pm. In 2008/2009 there were also two six month, four days a week, 'V for Volunteer' places and two Hadlow Countryside College placements.

1.4 *Heritage Management*

The site is known to have been used by people for many thousand of years. The earliest evidence of activity is pieces of flint found on Randall Heath, which have been shaped into tools. These tools date from the Mesolithic period (between 12,000 and 6,000 years ago). An

earth mound on the heath, known as a 'round barrow', may have been a burial for an important prehistoric person.

The Medieval site of Randall Manor, nestled in a valley, was the home of Sir Henry de Cobham, Sheriff of Kent in 1314. Only the foundations remain, which archaeologists have excavated over the last few years with the help of local volunteers. The banks of a very old road can still be seen nearby, known as a hollow-way, which may be even older than the Manor. It was described as "an ancient waie" in 1614!

The present Cobham Hall was begun in the 16th century, but earlier versions may have been built on the same spot by the de Cobham family. The Park was part of the Cobham Hall estate until the early 1980s.

An existing trackway leading to Cobham Hall planted some 200 years ago with newly introduced Rhododendron and Azaleas. It became known as the Rhododendron Avenue and visitors came from miles around to its length. This has recently been cleared for conservation purposes but will be replanted with sourced from the site.

During WWII, the site was home to a RAF billet in the woods close to the main road. Their air shelters still remain today.



was
stroll
Oaks
camp
raid

Photo 5. Showing walls associated with Randall Manor.

A part time HLF funded Community Archaeological Officer is based at the park and is responsible for leading on all Heritage objectives. There is a team of Archaeological volunteers in addition to the conservation volunteers.

1.5 **Visitor Management**

In 2006 a new, award winning, Visitor Centre was created which is the focal point for visitors to the park. The centre is open 7 days a week, and is open every day except Christmas Day.

The Country Park supports extensive recreational facilities including a woodland arboretum, Trim trail and fixed orienteering course, signed woodland walks (some of which are accessible using pushchairs and wheelchairs *i.e.* the Easy Access Trail, alternatively there are two Trumper mobility vehicles that are available free on loan), a picnic site, adventure play areas, (including a cutting-edge designed play area for older children, installed in May 2008 and new area opened in April 2009), fishing lakes, sensory garden, Geocache locations and a

combined horse and bicycle route. The site provides free access for the public. The visitor centre interpretation was updated in 2009 funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.



Photo 6a and 6b showing arboretum and fishing lakes.

The café uses local sourced products where possible and aims to promote healthy eating; the menu is reviewed regularly and includes seasonal specials.

There is a pay and display car park for 304 cars and a cycle rack adjacent to the visitor centre. Horse boxes can use part of the car park subject to prior bookings.

Two part time Visitor Services managers take responsibility for managing the visitor centre and associated services including events and conferences. In addition there is a full time catering manager, assistant catering supervisor and various other contracted staff who work in the café. There is a team of reception staff who work on the front desk, managing the gift shop and answering phone queries. There is a daily cleaner/caretaker for three hours a day, seven days a week specifically for the building.

On the wider site there are a team of Countryside Wardens who work seven days a week, with the main bulk of hours on weekends, paying daily visits to the site to litter pick, remove dog waste, enforce site rules and generally patrol the site and inform the Rangers of any damage or issues.

1.6 Education

Shorne Woods Country Park offers a broad range of environmental education designed to compliment and consolidate classroom activities. With qualified staff and excellent facilities,

it is the ideal place to bring schools and groups. Activities are available for all age groups covering subjects including habitats and sustainability. Shorne Woods Country Park is currently the only KCC site offering Forest School, a series of practical, hands-on activities that help to build confidence and self esteem through small achievable tasks. 2,274 pupils in 2007/2008 and, 2,308 pupils in 2008/2009 enjoyed education visits organized by the site education officer. KCC has a wide range of organized events for children and the whole family. These range from guided walks and holiday activities for children to music and Halloween events. Events are advertised in the Visitor Centre and in the events leaflet. An HLF-funded full-time Education Ranger is employed on site to deliver the education remit and assist the Visitor Service Manager, in addition to this there are 2 part time education rangers.

1.7 Site Maintenance

Site maintenance is undertaken by KCC site staff, if external contractors are used the relevant site staff manage the contract. This includes daily, weekly and annual site checks. All staff have allocated areas of responsibility for site maintenance. Specialist inspections are carried out by organisations on the Kent County Council approved contractors list. Annual inspections of buildings, trees, electric equipment across the whole portfolio of parks are managed centrally.

The Countryside wardens are responsible for visual inspections of site furniture, play equipment, checking cesspit levels and gas levels and they then report back to Countryside Officers with any issues. They are responsible for disposing of waste and removing graffiti found out on site and remove it on a daily basis where possible. The wardens work weekday evenings and weekends. The car park attendant also litter picks whilst patrolling the car park for 2 hours per day.

The Rangers take responsibility for implementing repairs and ensuring formal professional health and safety inspections are carried out each year subject to Kent County Council policies *i.e.* ROSPA- play areas, BAPTIE- Health and Safety Trees. They are constantly dealing with health and safety day to day issues on site.

The Visitor Services Manager ensures that all annual maintenance contracts for the Visitor Centre are up to date and that fire alarm, security alarms, and the CCTV systems are regularly tested. There are also procedures in place for managing unforeseen management issues such as blocked drains, broken windows etc.

General waste is removed weekly from the site. Recycled paper, plastic bottles, glass, clothes, CDs/books/videos are removed for free upon request. All compostable waste is

composted on site either in the nine bins at the visitor centre or the three large ones in the work compound.

1.8 Health and Safety

Kent County Council has an Environment Health and Safety Framework and manual which underpins the all work at the Country Park. These documents cover:

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974;
- Management of Health and Safety at Work 1992;
- Reporting of injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences regulations (RIDDOR, 1995); and
- Fire Safety Regulations, 2007.

In addition to this it summarises guidance on:

- Occupational health;
- Safety in environment work;
- Safe use of hand tools;
- Safe use of powered tools; and
- Vehicle policy.

A Kent County Council Safety Advisor take the lead on health and safety and ensure all staff are updated on changes in law and that all staff undertake the relevant training to their position. They are a link to the HSE and provide advice on all matters. A health and safety business plan was developed by the health and safety team for 2008/2009. The park is independently audited annually for health and safety in all areas. First Aid and incident forms are monitored by this team who investigate as and when necessary.

All staff undertake core training in health and safety when they begin in a new post.

Site contractors either complete a permit to work and submit a risk assessment for all works carried out on site that is authorised by the Officer who commissioned the work or for larger contracts an NEC3 Engineering and Construction short contract is completed. Any contracts over £50,000 go through a competitive tender process. All non specialist contractors must be from the KCC approved contractor list. KCC aims to use local contractors and materials in all contracts where possible.

The FSC certification ensures that all forestry work is carried out under strict health and safety guidelines.

Risk assessments are reviewed annually and updated when necessary (last update October 2009). Contracts paperwork is also reviewed and updated when necessary (last update December 2008).

Community Involvement

Community involvement at Shorne Woods Country Park is undertaken through two main areas – working with the Community Groups and by working with Educational Groups, this work is predominantly carried out by the Education Officer and Archaeological officer.

Regular access forums facilitated by the Countryside Agency 'By all means project' undertook workshops, some facilitated by the Sensory Trust, designed to ensure all the new footpaths, interpretation, car park layouts etc worked to the best variety of needs. These workshops directly led to the access strategy implemented as part of the heritage lottery project and to the design of new routes, waymarkers and position of notice boards.

A newsletter is produced every six months to inform visitors and strategic partners on current park issues such as conservation work, new events, new facilities. This contains contact numbers for the site staff and is available from the visitor centre.

There is a customer feedback policy in place and Kent County Council aims to acknowledge all queries within five days and respond in full within 20 days. Comments cards are available in the visitor centre and a visitor comments book is also available.

Visitor surveys (2004 and 2007) are carried out to ensure constant feedback is received about the park. The park is also 'mystery shopped' by non Country Parks staff and feedback reports are given to the sites. In addition Green Flag judges provide detailed feedback reports, which provide invaluable annual feedback on park management.

A visitor survey was undertaken in April 2004 this survey was then repeated in 2007. A visitor customer care standards survey was also undertaken in 2007. A summary of the findings from the visitor surveys is given below the first figure is 2004, the second is 2007.

- the main purpose for visiting the site was for walking, choosing this site because it was tranquil and clean.
- 20%/19.4% of respondents visited the site once a week or more.
- 86%/59% of respondents stayed for between 1 and 2 hours.
- 85%/82% of those questioned were local to the area.
- 17%/34% had first heard about the site through recommendation by someone that they know.
- Visitor satisfaction with the facilities at Shorne Wood Country Park was high *e.g.* over 90%/89% thought the site was clean and well maintained.
- Visitors left the site with a good lasting impression.

The total number of visitors in 2004 was in the region of 200,000 (based on traffic counter figures), since mid 2007 a new traffic counter has been installed in the park. The counter records car numbers and then calculates visitor numbers based on this data. The counter data suggests visitor numbers of 292,675 in 2008. The counter is read monthly and traffic figures per hour are recorded in a database to monitor peak visitor hours in addition to peak visitor days.

A touch screen feedback questionnaire within the visitor centre provided 659 respondents up to September 2006. This questionnaire provided valuable feedback on the 2nd phase of access improvements to Shorne Woods and the 2nd phase of interpretation for the centre and out on site. In response to this feedback the park increased the number of waymarkers on routes, changed signage, increased the number of benches and also increased the number of waymarked trails. Two 'Tramper' mobility vehicles are available, free of charge, to allow greater, offroad access to the Country Park for disabled visitors. All users are asked to fill in a questionnaire after their first outing. As of January 2009 there are 154 registered users and survey results indicate that most visitors would use the Trampers again as they provide better access and increase enjoyment of the countryside.

The park is also 'mystery shopped' (2008) by non Country Parks staff and feedback reports are given to the sites. In addition Green Flag judges provide detailed feedback reports (2008), which provide invaluable annual feedback on park management. Volunteers are welcome in all areas conservation, heritage and within the visitor centre.

1.10 *Financial Overview*

The park has seven main income streams:

- external grants from Forestry Commission, SEEDA, SEWF, HLF, ODPM;
- car park pay and display income;
- café income;
- shop income;
- corporate events and functions;
- education groups; and
- public events.

An annual revenue budget is provided by Kent County Council to fund the day to day operations of the park. Due to pressures in the wider organisation this is not enough to fund all site services so staff are expected to raise income to plug the gap.

Additional money is available through a modernisation of assets budget and an annual Capital works budget which is allocated by the head of country parks based on information submitted by site staff.

A three year programme of major Capital works has been secured for the next 3 years. This will fund items such as playground improvements, facility improvements and replacement of large equipment.

If you have any questions regarding the management of the park please call 01474 823800 and one of the staff will be happy to help you. We hope you enjoy your visit to the park.

We welcome all comments and comments cards are available from the visitor centre.

Executive Summary march 2009 edition.doc