

## Forest Management Day

SUSAN LIMBREY



Natural England's Forest Management Day, 10 February 2018

Rosemary Winnall

On a cold, wet February morning we gathered at Lodge Hill Farm, where Alice James (Natural England's Senior Reserves Manager) and Nick Woodward (NE's SSSI Responsible Officer) were waiting to explain management policy and show us some areas where work was going on. Alice explained how the Memorandum of Understanding between Natural England (NE) and the Forestry Commission (FC) brings all the publically-owned land in the forest under one management, and she said she would welcome our knowledge of species and habitats to help inform her policy decisions.

Alice and her exuberant dog Ned led us at a brisk pace eastwards along the railway line, where we saw how, with support from Butterfly Conservation, scallops have been cleared to increase light and warmth at ground level, so that food plants for Wood Whites, Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and Grizzled Skippers can flourish and the insects and their larvae bask in the sunshine. The scallops will be maintained on rotation. As elsewhere, the heavy snow load in December had brought down trees and bushes, making cutting back essential, and further work needs timing for when the power wires can be turned off. We then walked up through the bracken bank in Town Coppice, where Alice welcomed discussion of removal of trees and

other measures to improve and maintain this habitat. This area is to be closed to the public to minimise disturbance from February to May, and we talked about how the problems of closure and access might be addressed.

Further up in Town Coppice, FC are felling and thinning mature oak and birch for NE. The policy is to keep 5 standards per half hectare or reduce canopy by 30%. The trees spared are not necessarily those foresters would select, but those offering good wildlife potential. Dead trees are left standing, and some trees are ring-barked to provide further standing dead wood. Halo thinning is used to give some protection to remaining trees while they adjust to exposure. Alice talked about the value of different grades of timber, how it is marketed, and how the income flow from timber is made available, showing impressive competence in the financial aspects of her responsibilities. We then returned to the welcome warmth of the NE office for lunch, which was supplemented by Alice's delicious flapjacks.

Out into the now drier and warming afternoon, we went down into Dowles valley, walking westwards to where Longdon Stream comes down into the floodplain. Nick



explained the proposal, supported by the Environment Agency's Natural Flood Management Scheme, to use the stream as a study site, modelled on work in Gloucestershire at Stroud, to create a number of dams in the upper reaches, using branches from stream-side trees and scrub, to control water-flow and trap sediment. Going on towards Coopers' Mill, we saw where beside the track above the east meadow, hedge laying by a volunteer group was under way, with clearing back of the bank above. At the top of the meadow, once the hedge work is finished, a massive thicket of Blackthorn, laid low by the snow, will be brashed and piled in heaps to prevent grazing of regrowth, with fingers and pockets created for warmth on this south-facing slope, there and among the gorse and birch, some of which will be cut. We looked at Dowles Brook below the meadow to see where the snow had downed large alders, making some promising natural dams.

Stopping to look at the orchard planted some years ago on the cleared slope above Coopers' Mill, we saw how a tremendous growth of broom has taken over, and Alice said she had had fun trying out a robot mower to cut it back. Going a short way up the path north from the Coopers' Mill bridge, we saw where dense coppice regrowth right to the tops of the banks is being cleared back under an arrangement with Paul Jackson

of Coppice Creations. He supplies oak bark to the only remaining tannery in England that uses it, and he uses even quite small and irregular stems of oak, hazel and birch in the rustic structures he makes, so he is happy to clear the banks and a strip at the top, creating an open sunny habitat, to then work the coppice areas.

After crossing the bridge and a strenuous climb from Dowles up to the railway line then into Town Coppice, our last stop was west of Lodge Hill orchard. Alice's pet project here is the re-creation of the orchards shown on old maps, using historic fruit varieties, with wood pasture on the slope down to the railway, an area where there are apple trees surviving or seeded in. Selective felling is in progress, leaving some mature oaks, and rides need to be widened. At the far end of this patch is 'Tatty Piece', where potatoes had once been grown by the Lodge Hill farmers, and here a meadow will be re-created.

Alice and Nick had given up their Saturday, and had walked us faster than the Study Group has ever progressed before to cover a good range of management topics. We greatly appreciated their enthusiasm, their explanations, and our discussions with them.



Watching Hawfinches in Arley Churchyard, 13 January 2018

Rosemary Winnall