

DRAFT

DOWNE COMMUNITY ORCHARD

2019 CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

This is the draft 2019 Chair report for the Friends of Downe Orchard. It reviews what has happened the May 2018 to April 2019 period, takes stock of where we are and proposes steps to develop the management of the orchard in the next twelve months.

Achievements during the 2018/2019 year

Fruit Trees

Despite a considerable drought, the 5 pear trees planted last year are now well established.

Unfortunately, one of the two donated greengages died.

After 4 years work, with a handful of exceptions, the restorative [major] pruning of the apple trees has now been completed and we are now shifting the balance to putting a preferred, open, shape back into the trees in order to increase the fruit crop.

We have also lifted the crowns of many of the trees to enable more effective mowing and suppression of competing growth – including what used to be substantial bramble coverage.

Finally, we rescued one apple tree that had been knocked over by staking and propping it.

The Meadow

We have significantly increased the meadow area both at the Rookery Road and North End Lane ends of the Orchard. Meadow grasses and plants are now taking over from the brambles and invasive blackthorn that covered both areas. The spaces around the fruit tree trunks were cut short this year and this should feed through into a bigger and healthier crop with less unrecovered windfall. This work has also led to us seeing some different plants at the margin of the meadow – including lesser celandine, dog violet, lords and ladies' arum and significant bluebell coverage [English/Spanish hybrids unfortunately]. A full survey of the plants in the Orchard was carried out two years ago and is available on the website. A bench funded and installed by the local residents has been installed at the Rookery Road end of the Orchard.

Boundaries

On the Northern boundary - where we now have our greatest remaining concentration of bramble and suckering blackthorn – two scallops have been created. These are bays where the plants on their back borders are of staggered heights and the cleared space in front has lots more light. That will create a more diverse range of habitats and will encourage more insects/pollinators in particular. One of these scallops is being considered as a potential site to place some beehives. At North End

Lane we created a coppard [trees cut down to shoulder height] of blackthorn which is already thickening up and creates a better nesting habitat for birds.

Hedges

The work on boundaries and the meadow we conducted this year in turn has enabled us to work on the North End Lane and Rookery Road hedges. North End Lane has received its annual 'hair cut on one side' and a number of hazels have been planted and small ash laid into the hedge to thicken it up. At the Rookery Road end, we have uncovered the line of alternating oak and hazel trees a metre or so in front of the hedge that appear to have been planted 30-40 years ago [finally removing the tree guards still around their trunks]. We have also coppiced, laid into the hedge or extracted as appropriate hazel, ash and blackthorn at that end of the Orchard. In addition, the gates at North End Lane have been maintained and one pedestrian gate replaced.

The Crop and crop produce

After a very good [700kg+] crop in 2017/2018 – we fell back a little this year to just under 700kg. This does not include the fruit Downe villagers pick for their own use. We finally received the 2017 cider from the Orchard Project – 399 x 500ml bottles. We arranged for the 2018 crop to be turned into fruit juice and have received 274 x 0.75 litre bottles which is being sold [after clearance and advice from London Borough of Bromley] in a number of Downe, Biggin Hill, Chelsea and Battersea outlets, as well as to individuals.

Wildlife

A mammal survey was completed this year – we have had a number of voles and we have seen the odd field mouse and – once – a toad. There appears to be a badger track from the neighbouring woodland crossing the orchard. There are recorded sightings re moths and butterflies. The one thing that we are missing is any record on birdlife.

Assets and Money

Covered in more detail in the treasurer's report but the headline here is that we now have the full range and numbers of pruning and access tools that we require and a comprehensive and accessible first aid kit. Safety glasses and helmets?

Zoe, Paul and Paul Gubby have recovered and refurbished the hydraulic apple press from Christmas tree farm which significantly raises our capability to potentially process our own apple crop.

Over the year – we have spent £133.96 on tools and third-party services (£328.80) and have generated £608.93 income and have £749.18 at 10.4.19 in the bank. Mike Bingold has stepped down as treasurer and we thank him for his contribution.

Community Involvement

The website is still going strong and contains the management plan, supporting documents and a photo gallery. There is also a Downe orchard email address. orchard@downe-kent.org.uk and Facebook page: Downe Village Orchard

A Wassail and Apple Day were organised and held this year and about 50 people took part, with the green man appearing, cake baking competition, apple pressing etc taking place again. The number of committee people has expanded but other commitments mean a few people remain silent – although very welcome - partners. Overall however, more people have been more involved more often for longer and worked harder. Thank you to all of you/them.

Finally, we have launched a photographic competition this year to encourage more people to enter and appreciate the Orchard and as a potential further source of fundraising material.

Other relationships

The Orchard Project

During the course of the year it became clear that the Orchard Project was under significant financial pressure [they launched a crowdfunding appeal to keep their apple press going] and this translated into a far worse offer both to convert apples into juice/cider and regarding delivery dates/containers. In light of this research was carried out into alternative suppliers and it became clear we could secure a far better deal for pressing and bottling from a commercial enterprise. We have made this deal for the pressing, pasteurising and bottling of our crop for apple juice, and have had 205.50 litres (in 75 cl bottles) produced at a nominal value of £685 – if all are sold. Cost to us from Owlets is £328.80.

Bethlem Hospital

We contributed dessert apples to Bethlem Hospital again this year to blend with their cooking apple crop. We spent a morning with the staff and patients at the hospital watching them prepare and produce their apple juice as part of their occupational therapy.

Down House

We helped out Down house with some apples who had a poor crop from their own orchard this year, in return they will carry our apple juice as part of their shop stock. (Waiting to be registered as an English Heritage supplier)

Friends of High Elms, Bromley Conservation volunteers and Id Verde

Over the last few years members of these groups did a high proportion of the heavy lifting to recover the Orchard which had been neglected for a long time. That heavy lifting has now been completed.

They still, however, make a major contribution to our non-pruning workdays and bring a special set of skills regarding power tools, hedge laying, tree felling etc. Id Verde also manage the mowing contractor on behalf of London Borough of Bromley. In return we contribute with advice on fruit tree selection for their orchards, pruning and fruit identification.

Overall state and next steps

I think we have already achieved a lot; and this is reflected on our gaining valued local green space status.

[Downe Orchard received Local Green Space status and is included in Bromley's Local Plan as such (published in February 2019). Downe Residents' Association made the successful application. Local Green Space status gives an additional layer of protection under planning law. It is the only Local Green Space in the south of the Borough (in Darwin/Biggin Hill wards). The entry in Bromley's Local Plan (page 331 in Appendices) includes a Statement and a map - see below]

For 2019/2020 I would propose the major tasks we have left to complete are:

Fruit trees

Finish off restorative pruning, take stock of existing trees and consider replacement of poor croppers. Complete fruit identification and label up trees [40% currently positively identified]. Explore and commit/decline beehive placement.

The meadow

If possible, move bench nearer to Rookery Road boundary to enable path re-routing, use wildflower meadow cuttings from other sites to enrich seedbank.

Boundaries and Hedges

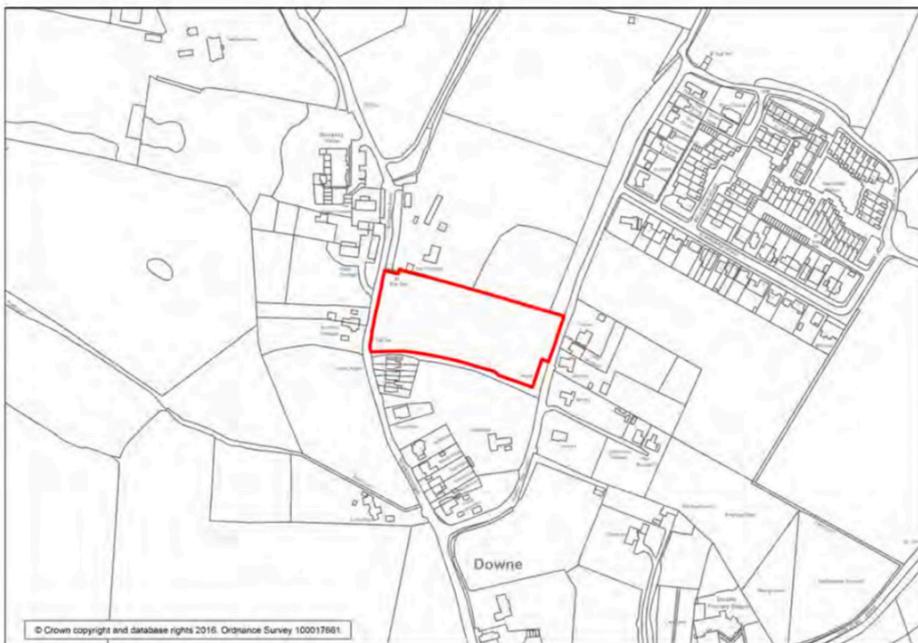
Complete clearance/thinning of Rookery Road thicket – complete laying of Rookery Road hedge and replenish North End Lane dead hedge.

Crop and Crop produce

Experiment with blossom thinning, consider investment in mechanical scrapper before pressing if we decide to commit to craft cider experiment. Review commercial options with suppliers.

John Fisher

6 April 2019

Site 51**Downe Orchard****Downe Orchard****Downe Orchard- Statement of Significance**

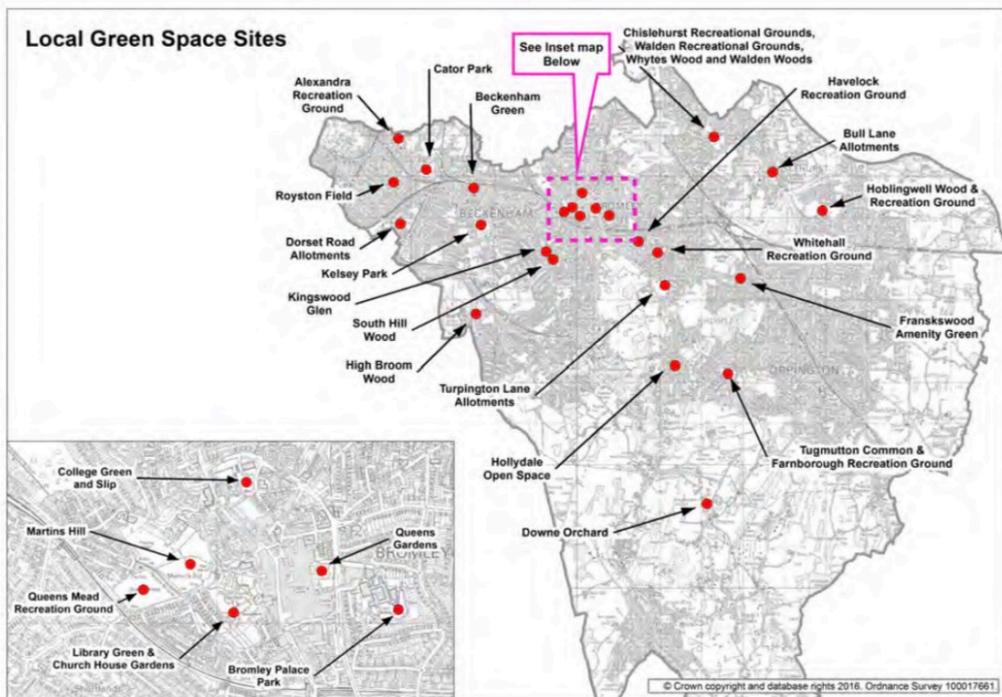
The publicly accessible orchard was planted in March 1992 by local residents on disused allotments land and features a wide variety of Kentish apples including Bascombe's Mystery, Cobham, Colonel Vaughn, Gooseberry Apple, Mabbotts Pearmain, Kentish Fillbasket and Tydeman's Orange. The site's biodiversity value is recognised by its proposed designation as a Borough Grade II Site of Importance for Nature Conservation. Key features are described in the 2011 citation. Local residents have enhanced the site's biodiversity by seeding the land with wildflower mix and planting mistletoe in the trees. 'Apple Day' is celebrated and there are pruning and mulching days. The site is also used for walks and for picking apples.

10 Appendices

10.8 Local Green Space

Local Green Space Site Boundaries and Statements of Significance

This Appendix shows the boundaries and Statements of Significance of the 25 sites proposed for designation as Local Green Space in the Local Plan, in alphabetical order. These sites are displayed on the map below.



Local Green Space Sites