



Rewilding Strategy

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Purpose

A long-term rewilding strategy for several of the Trust sites is proposed as one action to be taken by the Trust to help to tackle the current climate emergency and biodiversity crisis. The urgency of the climate emergency was recognised by the Trust declaration in November 2019.

Context

Actions being taken to reduce CO₂ emissions from the Trust activities and operations are in hand and will be recorded, together with the output from a carbon calculator, in the annual report starting with 2020/21. The Trust emissions of around 6 tonnes CO₂ each year will be absorbed and sequestered by the extensive woodland landholdings (227 ha) which can annually absorb between 930 and 2,040 tonnes CO₂ (depending on the rate of CO₂ absorption per hectare used in the estimate).

Nature-based solutions to the climate crisis are an effective way forward which also contribute to tackling the biodiversity crisis and generating ecosystem services. The 25-year Environment Plan has a target of increasing woodland cover. The increasing demands for nature-based solutions to the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis are likely to be rewarded by Government grants and subsidies over the next 20 years. The broad outlines of this can be seen in the Defra plans for the transition from EU funding to a new payments regime that rewards sustainable farming practices, creates habitats for nature recovery and reduces carbon emissions.

Rewilding is a process of allowing natural colonisation and ecological succession to occur such that the existing vegetation changes from bare ground or arable soils to grassland, to scrub and then on to woodland. The concept of rewilding means different things to different people depending on the overall vision and whether the particular rewilding scheme involves grazing animals, pigs and wild boars, beavers as wetland engineers, and even predators like polecat and lynx.

Current position and rewilding proposal at Haywood

The Trust has been converting small areas of grassland to woodland since the 1990s and more formally since 2011. Grass cutting and/or sheep grazing was intermittent on Paradise Meadow (Figure 1) from the 1990s onwards and was formally ended in 2011, ceased on Bower Yard Meadow in 2018, ceased on Maws Meadow in 2020 and ceased on Bower Yard Riverside in 2022. All because of the operational difficulties associated with access and small working areas for grass cutting and lack of secure fencing for sheep grazing. This has resulted in Paradise Meadow (0.49 ha), Bower Yard Meadow (0.39 ha), Bower Yard Riverside (0.13 ha) and Maws Meadow (0.28 ha) being allowed to turn into rough grassland and brambles with scrub and progress to woodland.

The westernmost field at Haywood (HW4, 1.53 ha) (Figure 2) has developed from the late 2010s into a mixture of bramble scrub and areas of grassland which are intermittently grazed. The fences are in poor condition and the grazier can only use cattle. The Head of Countryside spoke to the grazier in 2021, agreed that HW4 should not be grazed any more and the field was removed from the existing grazing licence to allow it to develop into scrub and woodland. The bramble scrub is increasing in area and is being colonised by tree and woody shrub species as it develops into woodland. Release from grazing will accelerate this process and woodland could be expected across the whole area within 20 years. There are patches of species-rich grassland, records of notable plant species (yellow oatgrass, quaking grass, bird's-foot trefoil) and some anthills: these are all present elsewhere in the Gorge and the anthills are dependent on sheep grazing which is no longer an option. HW4 is not entered into any countryside grant scheme. The Public Footpath across the western end of this area is covered by the current contract for ride cutting in June and this would be maintained.

The future

The financial incentives and other pressures to convert grassland into scrub and woodland in the next ten to twenty years in order to help tackle the climate emergency may provide opportunities for rewilding by conversion to woodland to be extended to the next pasture at Haywood (HW3) and potentially to HW2 (see Figure 2). Rewilding could range from wood pasture with patches of scrub and scattered trees to a transition to scrub and then woodland as a result of natural succession. Currently, these fields are not entered into any countryside grant regime.

Haywood fields are reputed to be where Abraham Darby grazed his horses when he lived up at the Great Hay, now the golf club, so they may have some heritage value. There are no overlooking properties and no significant views from the other side of the Gorge over these fields. There is public footpath across HW2. The easternmost field at Haywood (HW1) is close to houses and the residents may prefer open grassland to woodland.

The Trust needs to take in account and achieve many competing objectives including landscape character, climate change, support local farming, biodiversity improvements and heritage considerations. The Gorge is a heavily wooded valley and the fields at Haywood break up the woodland cover providing a different habitat for varied species and views for people. The Trust aims to have a working landscape and Haywood provides opportunities for farming in the predominantly wooded landscape of the Gorge. Any changes proposed for the management of the pastures at Haywood (west to east, these are HW3, HW2 and HW1) would subject to full consultation with the local stakeholders and the local community.

If the Trust does consider rewilding more sites, community consultation will be key to the process. A mapping exercise of the sites and habitats will be undertaken so that any changes can be assessed and monitored.

Original version approved by Committee of Management: 2021

Revised for Maws Meadow and approved by Committee of Management: June 2022

Revised to include Bower Yard Riverside and text updated: April 2024

