

Shelterwood Management of Ash/Oak in Lowland England at Wakefield Lodge Estate, Northamptonshire

Report on the CCFG England Site Visit, 6 July 2010.

by Simon Jeffreys

Standing around in bright sunshine drinking freshly brewed coffee with homemade shortbread is a good start to any visit in my book, so thanks to Julian Richmond-Watson for hosting our visit and contributing a useful historical oversight to our discussions.

The day centred upon a tour of selected points around an unusually well wooded estate of some 300ha of ASNW (of which most are SSSI) over a land holding of 970ha. The SSSI designation seemed to have been applied on the grounds of the woods representing a large chunk of nice native woodland remaining from the Royal Forest of Whittlewood. Ash is the dominant species with minor species comprising oak, field maple, lime and hazel. The site is on heavy Midland Clay.

A striking first impression was the width of the thoughtfully managed grass rides around each of the woodland blocks. Bearing in mind the ancient nature of the woodlands one could suppose this was ancient grassland – until the owner volunteered memories of many years work establishing the rides from overgrown woodland with the farm staff and tractors in deep mud and stumps. It is all too easy to assume that well established features are older than they actually are and this may in turn make for timid management decisions subsequently.

Moving into the woods we were told that historical records were slight, but that the woods were heavily felled in the 1920s. It was apparent that there had been a fierce late thinning of the ash in the 1980s whilst in another ownership. The principle applied was that the thinning should initiate a move to a uniform shelterwood system, as well as yield an income with the selective removal of timber value. The trees had not adopted the principle well, with the woodland giving the appearance of being in a continuing recovery phase.

The current management regime is moving to progress the uniform shelterwood idea and blend in an element of single tree selection, plus the felling of small coupes of 0.1 to 0.25ha. The revelation that only around 10 to 15ha are being thinned annually caused a raised eyebrow or two. However it became apparent that this modest thinning target is the result of a very restrictive work window imposed by an enforced no work period in the bird nesting season (April to August) plus shooting interests (September to January). So, together these restrictions lead to 2 working months in February and March – on heavy Midlands Clay. It was the universally expressed view of the meeting that it was ridiculous for the condition of the woodland habitat to be compromised for the sake of a mobile bird population, which is largely reliant on the favourable condition of the habitat.

Consideration of management interventions followed with discussion on the value of high pruning some of the better regeneration post respacing - doubtful; the importance of retaining as much oak as remains - do not fell trees more valuable than the regeneration; and that too much disturbance and light equates to a permanent invasion of sedge which is highly limiting to regeneration.

In a pleasing parallel to the summer CCFG Study Tour some of us were able to relate knowledge acquired from Prof Hanns Hofle with regard to the establishment of permanent extraction tracks and the avoidance of initiating the sedge invasion. There was a vivid demonstration of vegetation change along old extraction tracks, where *Carex* and *Juncus* were well established. A small experiment had been mounted with the

erection of two exclosures and treatment of *Carex* by herbicide, mowing and mulching. Whilst it was, and will continue to be, interesting to note variations in the following vegetation development the key point is to avoid creating conditions in which there is compaction.

Further discussions covered a pleasingly wide range of topics: the pros and cons of frame trees, with the majority preferring flexibility and change to the adoption of frame trees; the benefit of use of bought in planting stock of known quality as against collecting and growing on collected seed with variable to poor results; the effect of insufficient light in situations of low light possibly causing death of tubed regeneration and how best to locate enrichment planting within small coupes – close spaced in the middle of the coupe but perhaps with a North South orientation set back from the Southern edge. A fine veteran oak served to remind us that we really were in an ancient woodland before a lunch picnic.

A couple of stops in Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) extended discussions after lunch with the benefit of a Norway spruce nurse crop giving a clean start to natural regeneration after the removal of the conifer being readily apparent. It was noted that such an opportunity would seldom occur again with only a broadleaf component growing, and this pointed to the future value of a vigorous understorey of elm, hazel and thorn in keeping a potentially rank and weedy site in check. Subtle variations in soil type were suspected as showing up in the slight variations of undergrowth, perhaps we should have had a spade to hand to investigate further.

Drawing to an end there were some conclusions to be made not least that flexible timing of operations is crucial to avoid permanent damage to the habitat and productive potential. And finally, thin to what is present and celebrate irregularity.

Simon Jeffreys is a self employed consultant based in the East Midlands. At present his work is divided between the running and auditing of a large forest management certification scheme across the UK on behalf of UPM Tilhill and carrying out Chain of Custody audits for SmartWood which is one of the FSC accredited Certification Bodies operating in the UK. Prior to this occupation Simon has worked as a forester on private estates and as a forest Manager for UPM Tilhill.

Images and their script by Ralph Harmer, Forest Research, Alice Holt



Above: Dense stands of *Carex Pendula* that was typical of recently disturbed extraction racks



Above and below: Glyphosate applied in March controlled *Carex pendula* very effectively. Although flailing and raking reduced the height and cover of *Carex pendula* (within fence on right of picture) its effects were less obvious



Above: Natural regeneration of ash and other broadleaved species following removal of Norway spruce from a line mixture.