

Site Management Plan

(last updated 1st July 2023 as part of the Horspath Neighbourhood Development Plan)

Introduction - Horspath Parish Council purchased the site in 1982, and with the help of a large group of local volunteers, has developed it as a designated Local Wildlife Site by creating new wildlife habitats and safe public access during the period 2000-2008, and a brief introduction to this Millennium Project for Horspath is posted online at: <https://horspathparishcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Horspath-Parish-Council-2023-Wildlife-Conservation-Area.pdf> The current Management Plan focuses mainly on the regular annual maintenance of the habitats and on the public access to nature created during the first 10 years of this project, in order to sustain these new wildlife habitats and to maintain a safe public access route around the site by way of a gravelled path. The general underlying principle is to manage the site sustainably with minimum interference with the wildlife and its habitats, and without any use of insecticides or herbicides. The continued maintenance of a safe gravel path around this site is intended to reduce the need or the motivation for any visitors to leave it and create any disturbance to the birds and animals in the surrounding woodland.

Public Access Path – This path is maintained annually by cutting back any overgrowing vegetation to reveal a gravel path approximately 1 metre wide, so that walkers can easily pass one another. Volunteers use tools provided by the Parish Council, or their own gardening tools, and the cut vegetation is raked off the path beyond its down-slope margin to build up a continuous natural barrier of cuttings and growing scrub which helps to confine visitors and their dogs to the gravel path. Because the annual leaf fall occurs at various times in the autumn and early winter according to each year's different weather, and at different times for different species of trees, the layer of leaves falling onto the gravel paths needs to be cleared off down the slope by volunteers several times each year. Some gravel is barrowed by volunteers from the storage heap inside the entrance gate to wherever there has been significant erosion of the gravel path. When the storage heap runs low, more gravel is ordered by the Parish Council for delivery in 5 tonne loads by a local gravel supplier. A smaller gravel storage heap is maintained at the top of the circular path, for easier application to repair any defects found in the path further west.

The extension of the gravel path from near the wooden footbridge northwards to the low concrete platform acting as a large stepping-stone over the up-rising spring, just in front of the tunnel entrance, requires cutting back every autumn. Excess vegetation needs to be cut back conservatively to the west of this platform which provides year-round access via this stepping stone to a very narrow brick path set close to the water level on the west side of the pond, flanked by many tall iris pseudocoris, which leads to an in-filled concrete drain structure regularly used by children as a place to observe frogs and other pond life, and for safe pond-dipping.

As a result of the need for better infection control during the Covid pandemic, the pedestrian gate latch on the entrance kissing gate is now fixed open, to avoid the need for visitors to touch the gate with their hands.

Trees and woodland – The Parish Council has a legal responsibility to reduce the risk of any trees falling down on anyone walking around the site on the gravel path, and the risk of any trees rooted within the site's boundary falling down over the boundary onto any of the privately owned properties surrounding the site. In addition to any monitoring of these risks by volunteers, the Parish Council engages the services of a local tree surgeon to make safe any trees which he considers to be a potential risk to Health & Safety, which normally involves felling seriously weakened trees and cutting up the debris from any fallen trees and stacking it safely so that it can rot down to provide a good habitat for invertebrates, which in turn sustain some of the resident birds. There is a general policy to leave fallen trees to rot down wherever they fall if they are not a danger to people using the gravel paths, and to stack cut tree trunk sections down-slope of any path, and well away from the wetlands, where some have ended up in previous years. In wet weather the clay slopes, on which the trees are relatively shallow rooted, becomes plastic and mobile, and if gales then pressure the crowns of those trees, some are likely to fall over, so routine site inspections are needed following any gale, so that the tree surgeon can be called in by the Parish Council.

The clay grass meadow – This flat area of grass at the bottom of the railway cutting is regularly invaded by nettles and by Rosebay Willowherb, and is cut annually by a volunteer during dry weather in August or September using the Parish Council's own Smallholder 135 tractor and the Caroni rotary cutter. The cuttings are ideally raked off and barrowed by volunteers to the compost heap to promote the re-growth of a wider range of flowers in the meadow. A towed flail mower is sometimes used to leave a flatter surface to this meadow.

The frog-breeding pond – Some of the invasive pond weed which spreads over this pond is raked off every winter, sufficient to leave approximately 20% of the surface of this pond open. This removal of the excess weed is best achieved by starting to rake it off from near the entrance to the tunnel and barrowing it to a heap near to the wetland, to allow any micro-fauna trapped in it a better chance to return to the pond. This pond is shallow at its north end and the bottom is very firm on the original railway track bed of granite chippings through which the stream arises from inside the tunnel, so it is easy to enter the pond with a wheelbarrow using a ramp by the tunnel entrance for the collection of the pond weed as it is raked off. Any debris is removed which has accumulated to partially block the overflow pipes in the base of the wall across the tunnel entrance, and also from the flood overflow channel set in the clay dam.

The silt trap south of the wooden footbridge – Silt accumulates naturally into this wetland from the stream which drains into it from the cattle pastures on the sandy soil above the site. Any large tree debris is removed wherever it is possible to reach it from the bank as the mud is deep and cannot be walked on safely. The overflow channel in the clay dam requires clearing of any debris, to protect the dam when floods occur.

The temporary wetland south of the silt trap – This is cleared annually of any fallen boughs or other tree debris when it is dry enough to walk on the mud and to bring a wheelbarrow onto it to remove any cut material to the nearby compost heap. Woody tree species are removed from growing there.

The roadside verge and area immediately inside the entrance gate – The nettles which invade the grass verge near the entrance gate require cutting down at least once a year, and any tall vegetation growing high enough to obscure views into the site from the public road over bridge, and from around the entrance gate, is cut down annually, on the advice of the Police to, provide open up views into the site and thereby reduce the scope for any covert criminal activities .

The bat hibernaculum in the Horspath Littleworth disused railway tunnel – The security of the metal gates at both ends of the tunnel is the responsibility of the Parish Council, but as the owner of the tunnel, Oxfordshire County Council has considered that the tunnel is no longer a safe place for volunteers from Horspath and the volunteer Licensed Bat Handlers from the Oxfordshire Bat Group to work, so no further maintenance or regular monitoring of the bats hibernating in the tunnel in winter is carried out. The tunnel has sufficient accommodation already installed for thousands of bats to hibernate within it during any future cold winter, but it is estimated that it is currently used in cold winters by only a few hundred bats, and for them no further maintenance is required.

The maintenance of the wooden footbridge over the wetland by volunteers is limited to monitoring and reporting any structural deficiencies arising, and reporting these to Horspath Parish Council for appropriate professional repairs to be commissioned by the Council.

The maintenance of the steep flights of steps and ramps on the circular path on the west side of the site by volunteers is limited to clearing away any debris and obvious trip hazards, and reporting the need for any capital works or engineering repairs to Horspath Parish Council.
