

Management Plan for Westcombe Woodlands proposed by the Greenwich and Westcombe Societies

September 8th 2006

History

The Woodlands are in the ownership of the Blackheath Woodlands Company, a company set up and owned by the Blackheath Preservation Trust. They are 3.6 acres in size, and were acquired from the Regional Health Authority in the 1970s. The Health Authority owned the Nurses Home in Restell Close to the north of the site. This land has recently been acquired by the developers Laing O'Rourke who have planning permission to demolish the present buildings and develop flats on the site.

The woods were historically used for quarrying sand and gravel, although in the latter part of the 19th Century the flatter areas of the woods were laid out to gardens and allotments. Some of the finer trees in the woods are probably attributable to this period. The last house on the site, called The Woodlands, was demolished in the early part of the 20th century.

The Blackheath Preservation Trust (BPT) approached Tim Barnes the Chairman of the Greenwich Society and Dick Allard Chairman of the Westcombe Society in April 2006 with a view to disposing of the woodlands, and involving the 2 local amenity societies and other local interests in their acquisition.

The status of the woodlands

There is currently no public access to the woodlands. Indeed there is effectively no legal access at all to the woods. The BPT has consented to the blocking of access from Lasseter Close, and the northern boundary adjacent to Restell Close is securely fenced. Much of the perimeter of the woodlands is bounded by private gardens of residents of Maze Hill, Ulundi Road and Vanbrugh Hill/Lasseter Close.(see copy map attached)

In the recently completed Unitary Development Plan (UDP) for the London Borough of Greenwich the woodlands have the lowest designation of importance in conservation terms (site of local importance), being described as "small secondary woodland with dense shrub layer. Future strategy and management under review". In the previous UDP the designation included the phrase, "managed as a nature reserve." But there has been no management of the woods in the last 20 years or so and it has not been a nature reserve, except in the sense that nothing having been done, there is a degree of bio-diversity. There is no Tree Preservation Order in place to cover the woods.

The physical lay-out of the woods

The woods are located on a steep slope running from south to north. At the southern end, adjacent to the rear of the gardens in Ulundi Road the slope is extremely steep. At the northern end adjacent to Restell Close the woods have a much more gradual incline and in the centre, (towards the back of the Maze Hill Gardens), there is a level gladed area with some fine specimen trees. The whole site is densely overgrown with brambles, nettles and invasive shrubs and an infestation of ivy. Towards the south western end of the woods there is a shared boundary with the woods forming part of the land owned by Vanbrugh Castle. The freehold of the castle is also currently owned by the BPT, but the owners of various residences into which it has been divided have long leases.

To quote from a survey carried out in 2004, "The woodland is broadly linear in character occupying the steep slopes overlooking the Thames. It is predominantly self sown secondary woodland with mature sycamore and ash the main canopy trees. There are a few other mature tree species on the site, (including a fine oak). The tree cover is fairly dense (with tree stems between 3 and 10 metres apart) and relatively uniform in character across the site. There is a considerable amount of fallen timber within the woodland, a reflection of the steepness of the slope, sandy character and sparseness of the soil cover. There are also many trees leaning on others. Many of the trees are covered with dense ivy growth and a number show signs of die back.

There is some natural regeneration of trees within the wood, with sycamore and ash the main species but also including a few oak, whitebeam and horse chestnut. The shrub understorey is relatively sparse and consists of a mixture of native species, (hawthorn, elder, holly and a stand of hazel in the north-west part of the site) and garden escapes. The ground flora is dominated by a dense cover of ivy which extends to almost the full area of the site, with large stands of bramble. The density of the tree and ivy ground cover has restricted other ground flora to isolated stands of more shade tolerant species such as hogweed, enchanter's nightshade and bluebell."

The section 106 agreement.

As a condition of the grant of planning permission for the Restell Close site the developers have entered into a section 106 agreement with Greenwich Council, the relevant terms of which are as follows,

1. The Developer covenants with the Council and the BPT Woodlands Company that it shall;
2. Pay to the BPT Woodlands Company Ltd £57,800 such payments to be made in 6 annual instalments in accordance with clause 30.1.1 below as a financial contribution towards remediation and maintenance works to be carried out to the woodlands by the BPT Woodlands Company.
3. Pay to the BPT Woodlands Company the said sum of £57,800 in 6 annual instalments beginning 31st January each year in accordance with the following amounts; January 2006-£7,800; 2007-£12,000; 2008-£12,000; 2009-£10,000; 2010-£8,000 and 2011- £8,000.....
4. The Developer covenants with the Council that it shall within 6 months of the implementation date use best endeavours to enter in to a contract with the BPT Woodlands Company (or any successor in title to whom ownership of the Woodlands is transferred) in respect of the use of the Woodlands as a managed space for residents occupying the Development."

The BPT has received the initial sum of £7,800 which is in an interest earning account. In the event of their transferring the woodlands they would transfer that balance to the new owner who would then receive the further 5 annual payments.

The terms of the section 106 agreement may be somewhat opaque in 2 important respects. Firstly, the developer has to use best endeavour to enter into an agreement with the owner for the use of the woodlands as a managed space for residents of the development. What happens if the owners refuse to enter into such an agreement despite the best endeavours of Laing O'Rourke the developer? Could the developer refuse to continue the annual payments for the woods' remediation and maintenance? Secondly what is meant by a "managed amenity space for residents?" Does it import some access to the site by residents, and if such access is denied, is it again open to the developer to discontinue future payments?

Joint proposals of the Greenwich and Westcombe Societies.

These can be put under the following 10 points.

1. The priority is to retain the woodlands as 'wild woodlands' of which these are an unique example so close to the centre of London. With a degree of regeneration they should provide for a rich bio-diversity.
2. The 'upper part' of the site adjacent to the rear gardens of Ulundi Road properties, should be wholly 'off-limits' to any access at any time. It is steep and potentially dangerous, and apart from stabilising the slope with some planting of trees as recommended by a woodlands management company and some basic remedial/maintenance work – such as dealing with deleterious effects of ivy, it should be left as it is.
3. The lower and central parts of the woodlands should be maintained and improved in accordance with a long-term conservation management plan to be drawn up with appropriate professional advice. As presently envisaged this would involve clearing sections of the undergrowth and removing brambles, creating a footpath, (possibly a circular path) from the Restell Close end of the site to the gladed area mentioned previously.
4. There would be very limited access to the lower and central parts of the wood, and some of the works of improvement and clearance would have to take place before any access was allowed. The precise mechanism of this access still needs to be resolved. Our current thinking would be for a Friends of the Woodlands organisation to be set up whereby, in return for an annual subscription, members would have a right to visit the woods on specified but limited occasions. Members of the Greenwich and Westcombe Societies might also have more limited access than the Friends to reflect the involvement of the 2 Societies in the scheme. Members of the general public might be allowed in once a year, (perhaps on Open House week-end), but such visits would be supervised.
5. The only permitted access to the site would be via a locked gate, (to be installed), at the lower end of the woods adjacent to Restell Close, or Tom Smith Close. This would need to be with the agreement of the occupiers of Tom Smith Close or the developers of Restell Close, as the case may be. The access via Lasseter Close would be closed off, and used only for occasional maintenance and improvement works. The Restell Close gate would be closed and locked except during periods of access mentioned above. Secure fencing would be maintained on those borders of the woodlands where people might unlawfully access the woods.
6. The freehold of the woodlands would be vested in an organisation which guarantees the future of the woods as a bio-diversity resource and amenity in perpetuity. We are presently in negotiation with the Woodland Trust and the London Wildlife Trust with a view to one of these bodies acquiring the freehold, assuming our negotiations with the BPT are successful. The importance of a guarantee to the community that the woods will remain as such in perpetuity, through the ownership of the site being vested in an organisation such as one of these bodies, cannot be over-stated.
7. There should be the widest discussion with local residents and the wider community before the final decisions are taken as to how to manage the woodlands and what degree of public access to allow. At the same time there should be a dialogue with the Restell Close developers as to how best to maintain and improve the woodlands, for the benefit of the residents of the new flats to be built.
8. The actual day to day management of the woodlands as well as the initial work in bringing them back to their true potential should be entrusted to a professional woodland management company, although every effort would be made to involve volunteers in the work.

9. An appropriate not for profit organisation would be set up, possibly using the BPT Woodland Company as the vehicle (or at least as a template), which would take a lease from the freeholder and would enter into the agreement with the woodland management company. This organisation would be run by local people, and would be not for profit. We have in mind representatives of the Greenwich and Westcombe Societies, as well as local residents.

10. Special interest groups such as the RSPB would be asked for advice as to how the bird/wild life in the woods could be protected, diversified and improved.

Steps taken so far

We have made contact with the WoodlandTrust and the London Wildlife Trust with a view to their acquiring the freehold of the woodlands. We have also been in touch with the Forestry Commission whose London agent Simon Levy has visited the woods and discussed our plans with us. He has advised that some funding might well be available from the Forestry Commission through its Thames Gateway Section, administered by Groundwork; certainly for an improved Management Plan and probably also for some capital and maintenance costs. We are actively following this up. His latest e-mail states " I have spoken to Russell Miller as regards Westcombe's eligibility for the current London Woodland Grant Scheme and he feels that an application would certainly be countenanced." Simon says that some income could be generated from the sale of firewood, and that any clearance of trees could be done by using shire horses on the steeper parts of the site. He could recommend woodland management companies (including his own woodland management company) that we might approach with a view to obtaining estimates for both initial site clearance and improvement and for annual maintenance.

His 'guesstimate' is that the annual cost might well be in around £2000 -£2500 for maintaining the woodlands, (after the initial work has been done to put them in some form of order) allowing for the limited access which we have mentioned above, and the reduced insurance premiums which would result. But he also says that to some extent where woodland maintenance is concerned one can cut one's coat to the cloth (or cash) available.

Contact has been made with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the UK's leading practical conservation charity. They also arrange for public liability insurance for areas such as the woodlands. They have written, " To give you an estimate, the cost of insurance based on the size of the wood, restricted access and voluntary maintenance carried out by your members using hand tools only, would cost around £210 per annum.." They also say that their London office may be able to provide volunteers for the project although there will be a small charge for them to cover their costs. Their latest e-mail states, " We have various project officers based around the London area. The Project Officers can arrange for work to be done on sites by volunteers. The work is co-ordinated by the Project Officer and they usually carry out a site survey initially and from this make an estimate of how long the work required would take... Someone will be in contact shortly." It will be appreciated that until the BPT has indicated its decision as to the future of the woodlands we cannot enter into any commitments.

We have also been in correspondence with Lady Willcocks who has been responsible for organising the Adams Road Reserve in Cambridge for the last 12 years. This reserve is about the same size as the woodlands although it is an ex-gravel-pit. She has been very helpful in terms of advising us on how they manage their reserve. They try to establish as many different habitats as possible, opening up glades in the woodland and keeping the reeds cut to maintain open water. They restrict access to members of their Friends Group, in part because general public access would involve greater Health and Safety and Insurance costs as well as because of the size of the reserve. They work to a 5-year plan and are funded by membership fees of £10 per annum, from some 160 members. "£1500 -1600 covers the cost of the major items (insurance, tree surgery, bridge replacement) and the routine ones of paid labour for grass cutting, ditch clearing etc. We try to keep a balance of £2000 for storm

damage and unforeseen emergencies. The Treasurer, Secretary and Committee work voluntarily and costs of postage are kept to a minimum as most of our members are within walking distance. When we had a major expenditure to excavate the lake we had to raise the £4000 needed. Shell were very generous and have funds available where young people are involved in the work of maintenance.”

We organised a meeting with local residents to canvass their views, and have made contact with our GLA member (Len Duvall) and our MP (Nick Raynsford). The Executive Committees of both the Greenwich and Westcombe Societies have been fully apprised of the steps taken.

The way ahead

There is a limit to how much further we can progress our plans until we have confirmation from the BPT that they are prepared to dispose of the woodlands in line with the proposals referred to above. If that is the case then we can begin taking the steps to implement our aims, such as finalising the choice of freeholder, arranging for the company/group which will take a lease from the freeholder, entering into an agreement with a woodland management company, seeking funding from the Forestry Commission, finalising insurance, setting up a Friends Organisation, liaising with the developer and the other actions anticipated in this Plan. We would hope and expect, if given the green light by the BPT by mid-September to have brought those actions to completion by the end of the year.

We are confident that our proposals can work, that we can make the funding package cover the costs, and can provide the community with an unique and permanent amenity.