

MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE OBSERVER FIELD

OCTOBER 2025

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1. Site Details

(i) Location & Size

The field is located to the south east of Holy Trinity Church, bordering the Cemetery and is approx. 1.2 acres in size. The centre of the field is located at Grid Ref TQ 305244, what three word ///enhances.drum.duplicate.

(ii) Topography

The field slopes gently away to the south.

(iii) Geology/ Soil

The underlying geology is a band of calcareous sandstone - the Cuckfield Stone Member- part of a series of sandstones and mudstones of the Hastings Beds.

(iv) Drainage

A stream runs to the east side of the field running into Newbury pond and eventually forming part of the Copyhold stream. It appears that the field can become waterlogged which does seem at odds with the underlying geology. There is an open drain on the southern perimeter of the bunker – unclear where this comes from and whether any significant volume of water flows onto the field but the presence of Soft Rush suggests there may be other field drains, some possibly broken.

2. Brief History

The Observer field was transferred to Cuckfield Parish Council for the sum of £1 in 1987. In 1995, it was decided to enclose the field due to security concerns for the Royal Observer Corp bunker with the entire field being fenced in 2006 and the gate padlocked. In 2016, fencing and a stock proof fencing were repaired and made more secure.

The bunker itself was operated by the Royal Observer Corps and was Post No. 50 of over 1500 originally built in the UK in the 1960s. The nearest other posts were in Brighton and Lewes with Cuckfield completing the local area triangulation. It was officially decommissioned in 1991.

There have been a few Parish Council management plans including a ten-year plan from 2007 by Sue Burgess. A grant from MSDC covered some maintenance work including strimming back the nettles, bramble and horsetails, but mainly focussed on improving the biodiversity by planting wildflower plugs with work carried out by volunteers. As part of the Woodland Trust's Jubilee Project, funding was obtained for an Oak with a plaque in February 2012. A native species hedge was planted along the western flank of the field and initially maintained by Danny Comber and laid professionally in 2020. There were generally two grass cuts per year with material baled by a contractor. Between 2013 to 2017 a couple of bee hives were introduced, but since 2020, it appears that there has been minimal management of the site.

Grazing has been periodic with sheep, mainly Hebridean from Bradley Woodward's farm, put on from autumn to February. While this was discontinued for a while in 2005/ 06 due to the theft of lambs, in recent years, sheep have not been brought on due to the presence of Barber Pole Worm (*Haemonchus contorta*). This is a highly pathogenic parasite which due to climate change is now able to overwinter in pasture. Cattle from Laines farm have also been used.

3. Current Status

(i) Tenure & Designation

The Parish Council is the legal owner of the field. The Observer field is classified as amenity land for public use and while there is no official designation, the Parish Council regards the site as a 'Pocket' nature reserve. A map is attached showing the current boundary. (am aware that this is still to be confirmed)

(ii) Current Management & Constraints

The current barbed wire fence around the perimeter is in some state of disrepair, particularly on the southern edge where wooden posts have rotted. The chain link fencing on both the left and right hand sides of the northern boundary appears relatively intact, but clearly the middle section needs some new chain link fencing although the concrete posts all appear secure.

The hedge on the western flank is fenced on both sides which makes access awkward. With enough volunteers it may be possible to remove the top growth and re-lay some of the material lower down. Alternatively, it may be easier and quicker to top with a flail although would incur additional cost of c£200. Any cut material can be used for the dead hedge at Newbury Pond.

Winter grazing can be problematic especially if the site is wet when the ground can become damaged. On such a small site, dung and urine can further create nutrient-rich patches encouraging the growth of coarser more rampant plants. Certainly with the presence of Barber Pole worm, it may be better all round if grazing does not continue. Either way a contract for any grazier should be in place if grazing is re-commenced.

Overall, it may be best to restart any management with just a grass cut every September and potentially a second cut in early Spring depending on the weather. The key thing is to remove the arisings – unfortunately the grass is not of good enough quality for livestock feed while baling becomes problematic with disposal. Removal could be a task for volunteers with rakes and bags although a cut and collect machine would clearly be quicker. The recent cut in September by Emmett Edwards cost £100 while cut and collect would likely be double.

An area of Horsetail exists on the eastern side and although native, can be invasive and difficult to remove due to its rhizome spread but should be manageable with an annual cut. The copse of oak trees in the NE corner are all close to each other and competing for light – as they are all of a similar age, it is hard to pick any candidates for thinning but this should be monitored as the canopy grows.

(iii) Biodiversity

The Observer field is a classic lowland neutral meadow with the apparent benefit of having been relatively undisturbed over the years. Orchids (Common Spotted) along with Greater Bird's Foot Trefoil, Tufted Vetch and Meadow Cranesbill have all been reported.

While there was some temporary success with encouraging more plant diversity, it seems after various grazing and cutting regimes over the years, any permanent floristic change has been minimal, except when Yellow Rattle was abundant in the central area, although this seems to have disappeared too now. It was further recognised that to produce a top quality wildflower meadow would require two applications of glyphosate to remove all existing vegetation, rabbit netting the perimeter, re-seeding and then annual maintenance. This was considered not affordable or desirable.

The field is surrounded mainly by Oak, Ash, Rowan and some clearly flourishing Hazel trees.

The field is important for wildlife connectivity, forming part of a wildlife corridor linking the Cemetery, Laines Farm, Newbury Pond and the gardens at the back of Courtmead Road. Continuing the limited access to the field will certainly benefit wildlife by reducing disturbance.

4. Management Objectives & Actions

(i) Tenure

To meet its obligations as a land owner, the Parish Council should be seen to be inspecting its borders at least twice a year, preferably by a member of staff with a Parish Councillor. Either side of the winter period would be best so March and September could be suitable.

(ii) Security

Parish Council to ensure all fences are in good order as part of bi-annual inspection and that entrance gate is padlocked accordingly. The ROC bunker is part of a Heritage Watch scheme.

(iii) Safety

As the trees around the site mature, it is recommended that they should be inspected annually to ensure they are safe. Fortunately, there appears to be only one significant Ash tree with some signs of dieback with the bulk of trees being Hazel and Oak.

For any volunteer work parties held at the site, a risk assessment should be carried out accordingly.

(iv) Maintenance

The Parish Council to repair perimeter fence as and when necessary.

The native species hedge on the western boundary to be cut every three years.

The field should be cut every September with all arisings removed to the dumping area at the eastern end where it can be composted. In a wet spring, it may be advisable to have a second cut.

(v) Access & Community Engagement

The Royal Observer Corps / Nuclear Bunker hosts open weekends each summer, so access paths are mown accordingly. It should be possible to mow a path within the field too so that people visiting the bunker on its Open days can also enjoy the benefits of the field. This could be further extended to other one-off events e.g. if the annual bioblitz were to be held there or if the local scout / girl guide group were invited to help rake up after a cut. Access may also be required for anyone who is granted permission by the Parish Council to manage bee hives there.

(vi) Biodiversity

Clearly a number of attempts have been made to improve plant biodiversity in the field with limited success. It would be good to start a baseline survey from Spring 2026 and begin monitoring on an annual basis. This could be ably carried out by volunteers from Greener Cuckfield with data being used to inform further decisions regarding grazing or any cutting regime. Arisings from any cuts can be left to compost and provide a potential home for Grass Snakes. There is no reason to suppose that the field would not have a population of Pippistrelle and Brown Long Eared bats so starting a bat survey in 2026 could also be informative.

A soil sample test to determine phosphate and nitrate levels in the field would be useful – cost £50

(vii) Time scale

Previously, time scales were set for instigated management plans, but the completion of any designated annual maintenance tasks should suffice for the ongoing management.

