

# **MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE OBSERVER FIELD**

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**2025**

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## **1. Site Details**

### **(i) Location & Size**

The centre of the field is located at Located at Grid Ref TQ 305244, what three word  
///enhances.drum/duplicate and is c 1.2 acres in size.

### **(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 part of 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.

2007 A ten-year plan was agreed by CPC. A biodiversity report and a report from Helen Burgess informed the management plan of the Observer field. A grant from MSDC was obtained for hedging, tree planting, clearance and strimming back of thistles, brambles, nettles, horsetail (overwhelming the east side of the field) and the planting of wildflower plugs. Volunteers helped with the clearing and planting. WSCC advised on planting

2010 to 2012 The plan continued with the biannual cut up to the boundaries of the field and trees were thinned. Sheep from Oathall returned until 2011 when yellow wrattle was in the field. From reports the cutting regime continued and gates were being repaired. Funding from the woodland trust was obtained for a Jubilee wood! In February 2012 arrangements were put in place for the planting of a Jubilee Oak and a plaque. Five years into the plan there was a nice balance of grassland and wild flowers. The new hedge was growing well. The area from the entrance up to ROCP towards the north boundary fence had an additional cut before the open days.

During the last few years of the Ten-year plan CPC continued to manage the nettles and brambles. Two cuts and baled, a year completed by a contractor. In 2016, fencing and a stock proof fencing were repaired and made more secure. Hedge was cut and was scheduled to be relaid when mature enough and the return of the sheep and the continued security of ROC bunker.

Grazing has been periodic with sheep, recent years 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 have also been used at some point.

A native species hedge was planted along the western flank of the field and initially maintained by Danny Comber. This hedge was laid professionally in 2020. Between 2013 to 2017 a couple of bee hives were introduced.

### **2013 Desk top Biodiversity Report, Land at Observer field**

Grass snakes and Adders sitings in 1999 in London Lane and The Knowle and recorded in 2000 at Worsley Memorial Park.

Bats; Such as the Brown Long eared bat recorded from droppings, Marshalls, and Newbury in Courtmead Road. Common Pipistrelle (45HZ) Birch house Courtmead Road.

Sussex Birds: Eurasian Sparrow Hawk (2008), common Buzzard (2004) common Kestrel (2008), Merlin (2002), Herring Gull (2007) along with Rock Pigeon, stock Pigeon, and common wood pigeon. Common Cuckoo reported in 2009. The green woodpecker has been recorded since 1999, 2007, to present day, along with great spotted woodpecker (2008). The common swift reported in 2005, since then not many sitings and the reintroduction of swift boxes north of Cuckfield has started to see them return to the area.

Sky larks (1999, 2006), Goldcrest (2008) long tailed tit (2007, 2008) Blue tit (2007, 2009). Great Tit (2007, 2008). Marsh tit (2008). Wood Nuthatch (2008). Eurasian treecreeper (2008). Common Bullfinch (2006, 2008). European Gold finch (2002, 2007)

Since 2007 sitings there has been an increase in Magpies, jackdaws, Rooks and Carrion Crows.

## **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.

### **(ii) Current Management & Constraints**

Since the hedge was laid in 2020, it appears that there has been minimal management of the site.

The current barbed wire fence around the perimeter is in some state of disrepair where wooden posts have rotted, particularly on the southern edge. 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 very 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 just be easier and quicker to top with a flail although would incur additional cost of ~~£x00~~. 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 in 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~~.

### **(iii) Biodiversity**

The Observer field is a classic lowland neutral meadow with the apparent benefit of having been relatively undisturbed over the years. It is important for 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.

However, after various grazing and cutting regimes over the years, it seems there has been little floristic change, except in the height of summer when Yellow Rattle was abundant in the central area. This seems now, to have disappeared too. 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.

There is a copse of Oak trees in the NE corner, while the field is surrounded mainly by Oak, Ash, Rowan and some flourishing Hazel trees. An area of Horsetail exists on the eastern side and although native can be difficult to remove due to its rhizome spread but should be manageable with an annual cut. Orchids (Common Spotted 2009) have also been reported, along with red and white clover (2010), greater Bird's foot trefoil (2002, 2010), lesser trefoil (2009), Tufted vetch (2006, 2010), hard rush (2010) and around 83 other flowering species recorded in 2009 and 2010

## **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 by a member of staff with a Parish Councillor. Either side of the winter period would be preferable, so March and September may 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 security of the Royal observer Corps is maintained by .....

### **(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 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.

To cut and collect £100 To flail hedge £500

### **(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 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 biodiversity in the field with limited success. The last Biodiversity report in 2013 was a desktop study with data only going upto 2010 and no survey of this area has been carried out since then. 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 but could then be used to inform further decisions about regarding grazing or any cutting regime.

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

The arisings left as a compost heap could provide a home for Grass Snakes.

The copse of oak trees in the NE corner are all close to each other and starting to compete 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 develops.

### **(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.

## MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE 2026

### 3, CURRENT STATUS UPDATE

#### (ii) **Current Management Constraints**

Repair of the chain link fencing in the middle of the northern boundary still needs to be replaced and Council need to speak to the person whose garden is on the otherside before any work is carried out. At the moment, anyone can enter the field from the garden .

Early in the year volunteers along with Cllr, Podmore cut and relaid the tree hedge

Cuckfield Parish Council have decided not to go ahead with winter grazing, so all stock fencing is to be removed.

The whole field was cut in September and the grass from the entrance to the bunker was cut before the open days. The arisings from the cut were placed around the eastern perimeter. Early July, Emmett Edwards is to be asked to cut up to the northern perimeter fence from the entrance and a wider path around the Royal Observer corps Post for the public to walk. Another Path to be mowed from the Royal observer field in front of the Copse along the north eastern boundary. A mowed path along the southern boundary to the entrance. This allows safe access for the public and for perimeter fence inspection/work. This path can be mowed by late June to early July.

A budget needs to be set up for the annual cut and extra cuts ie in July.

### 4. **Management objectives and Actions**

#### (ii) security

A hedge has been laid on the eastern perimeter to fill the gap in the fencing. However, access to the field from Courtmead gardens is still present and the site is not secure. The middle section of this boundary requires a new close linked chain fence

A budget for this needs to be set.

#### (iv) Maintenance

The hedge on the western boundary was cut and laid earlier on in the year. The northern perimeter fence still needs attention

#### (v) Access and Community engagement

The field has been left uncut and no mowed paths, this has stopped small groups from accessing the site. A mowed path had been agreed for public to walk on instead of trampling over the meadow. It is with hope that this will happen next year, so that small groups can access the field by permission of the Parish Council.

#### (vi) Biodiversity

Greener Cuckfield have started a baseline survey of the field.