

Saltford Environment Group

Plan to re-establish grassland along a short stretch of the Bristol-Bath Railway (Cycle) Path (former LMS railway)

1. Aims

Main biodiversity aim: clear woody regrowth and tall coarse perennials from a representative stretch of one side of the railway bank to begin the process of re-establishing herb-rich rough grassland.

Subsidiary aims: (1) re-establish views over the surrounding landscape along a short stretch of the cycle path; (2) foster local community appreciation of wildlife and landscape by participation.

2. Background justification

Herb-rich rough grassland has suffered the greatest decline of any extensive habitat in and around Saltford in the last 50 years. Primarily reflecting economic forces in farming, most areas have either become overgrown with woody regrowth or suffered agricultural intensification. As late as the 1970s long lengths of the then recently-closed LMS railway line both S and, especially, N of Saltford were dominated by this habitat. The intervening decades have seen almost ubiquitous succession to woody growth. Coupled with trends on the adjacent farmland this has seen the massive decline and probably local extinction of many insects and plants formerly common here.

Scrub itself is an immensely valuable habitat and to some extent the succession of woody growth along the cycle path balances the loss of old-growth hedgerow in and around Saltford. The linear feature so formed is longer, wider and taller than typical hedgerows. In particular, its longitudinal connectivity (thanks to its location along a former railway-line) is of great wildlife significance.

In some parts of the SSE-NNW running line, it is possible to clear coarse growth to begin the process of grassland re-establishment without compromising the young woodland – tall hedge connectivity: by clearing only one side of the line and leaving the other untouched. This will be most effective where the line is embanked and there is a WSW-facing (and thus warmer) outer bank, to be cleared (where the line runs through a cutting the WSW facing bank is 'internal' and to the E of the line and so is shaded by the tall growth on the other bank).

3. Site selection

Along several possible stretches, one presents outstanding features: the location of the former Kelston-for-Saltford station. As well as being highly embanked, it (1) was almost entirely lacking in trees and bushes 50 years ago, so clearance disturbs very few woody features of long standing (there is only one tree that was already mature at that time, and a few others that were well established); and (2) this area is almost contiguous with one of very few patches of herb-rich rough grassland – albeit a tiny one – surviving in the area, which could act as a source for recolonists (it is on near-adjacent private farmland). This area is now largely woody scrub, with intervening parts dense bramble, nettle and other coarse tall plants.

4. Action programme

Mature trees and selected younger trees mostly of fruiting species will be retained, as will the former hedge between railway corridor and private farmland, now much overgrown (the intention is that this will be laid). Woody growth will be cleared with chain-saws. Coarse growth will be cleared with a mix of brush-cutters, secateurs and bush-knives. Cleared material will mostly be piled at the bottom of the embankment to provide itself wildlife habitat. Much of the wood suitable for firewood will be removed (payment in kind to the professional chain-saw operators – we do not have funds to pay them) but some of this will also be left as wildlife habitat. Some cut material will be burnt on site, so that most of the cleared slope is free of debris.

All trees to remain will be marked with removable plastic tape. Clearance will start with one manageable stretch to give clear vision for the community as to the process, and expand out as time allows. All episodes using chain-saws will be conducted with only the chain-saw operatives and one or more of SEG committee/advisors and/or parish council in attendance, with precautions to prevent danger to path users (see separate risk assessment document). Other sessions will involve SEG-organised community volunteers, both individual and as groups (e.g. youth organisations).

The cleared area will regenerate as dense coarse tall herbaceous growth and woody scramblers notable brambles. To reach the objective of species-rich grassland, a method to remove this is needed. The method to use is currently under research.

5. Timeline

Clearance will begin on 11 November 2013 for 3 days. This will be a chain-saw session long enough to allow a meaningful stretch to be cleared and an assessment of the number of days required to complete the identified stretch. Further areas will be cleared during the winter. All clearance of new area will cease by 15 March 2014 to prevent damage to nesting birds, reptiles emerging from hibernation and so on.

6. Additional note

The woody regrowth and mature woodland along this stretch of the line are notable for their almost completely native composition. There are a few areas where individual plants of invasive non-natives have established, e.g. White Poplar and *Buddleja*. These are outside the stretch for return to grassland, but will be removed during this work.