# Brede High Woods – open space/heathland management

Brede High Woods covers a total of 262 hectares (ha) across the East Sussex parishes of Brede, Ewhurst and Sedlescombe. It lies within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the High Weald Natural Character Area. The area is dominated by nutrient-poor acid sandstone which creates a range of soils, from free-draining through to wetter areas of marsh and mire.

**History**

Historically, the site was a mixture of ancient semi-natural woodland, small farmed fields (both arable and rough pasture), orchards and areas of heath. The heathland developed in southern England through traditional grazing activities, but much has been lost. The woods were once influenced by traditional Wealden coppice industries such as charcoal burning for the historic iron industry and sweet chestnut for hop poles and fencing. The farmed elements were pre-Second World War, so have no history of intensive chemical or fertiliser use.

In the 1930s farming was abandoned as the Brede Valley was dammed to create the Powdermill Reservoir. Following this, much of the catchment area around the reservoir was given over to commercial forestry from the 1940s to 1960s.

**Present day**

Today Brede High Woods is a complex mosaic of habitats; ancient semi-natural woodland (mostly coppice), conifer plantations (both secondary woodland and plantations on ancient woodland sites), broadleaf plantations, and more open areas of heath, grass, mire, *Sphagnum* moss beds and scrub.

The Woodland Trust acquired the woods in December 2007. Surveys and assessments by Dr Patrick Roper and others identified a rich biodiversity in the open spaces and a need to manage these areas to retain important species. Two of the UK's heather species, common heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, and bell heather, *Erica cinerea*, were recorded on site. Along with the scarce heath dog-violet, *Viola canina*, and butterflies of conservation concern including dingy skipper, *Pyrgus* malvae, and pearl-bordered fritillary, *Boloria euphrosyne* (a UK BAP species).

Fixed point photography – View 28; top 2009, bottom 2010
Brede High Woods © Patrick Roper

The Trust has undertaken significant work to expand and improve open habitats. Trees have been removed from ride edges to widen them. But most importantly, two large open areas have been created, namely Sedlescombe Heath and Brede High Heath. Open space comprises up to 15 per cent of the wood's area, ideally the Trust would like to increase this to 20 per cent.

Sedlescombe Heath is a fenced 20 ha area, of which 75 per cent is open ground with 25 per cent tree cover. It was created by clearing a number of subcompartments (subcpts), which reflect historical boundaries such as old banks and hedgerows, and the past management of these distinct areas now appears to influence their individual floristic characters.

## Heathland creation

As the area to be cleared was over half a hectare it was necessary to complete an Environmental Impact Assessment. This and the cartographic evidence showed the proposed section was not ancient woodland; it was secondary woodland that had been actively planted or naturally regenerated. The cleared subcpts contained unthinned hybrid larch, *Larix x eurolepis*, Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris*, and Norway spruce, *Picea abies*, plantations (closely planted, dense and very dark) and a young closed canopy oak, *Quercus robur*, plantation. There is also an area of open-canopied, mature Scots pine plantation within the fenced area of Sedlescombe Heath.

Whole tree harvesting was the chosen clearance method as it is quick and clean. Trees are felled and chipped; the resulting wood chip is then removed from the site. Due to this the seed bank was able to flourish immediately, as the soil was not swamped by excess woody debris. The leftover stumps were mulched; this created small piles of woodchip which wild boar, *Sus scrofa*, constantly root through, turning it over and increasing the rate of decomposition.

Some groves of birch, sallow and other species were retained, along with individual Scot's pine and oak trees – to become veteran and ancient trees of the future. Sedlescombe Heath is now an intimate mosaic of open ground regenerating with heather and some standards, wet birch/purple moor grass woodland, and open-canopied mature Scots pine with a hazel, oak and bramble understorey.

Since clearance cross-leaved heath, *Erica tetralix*, previously unrecorded on the site, has appeared along with many other heathland plants. However greater broomrape, *Orobanche rapum-genistae*, last recorded in the early 2000s, has not reappeared. Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum,* parasitic on *Calluna vulgaris* heather and other plants have proliferated across the cleared areas of Sedlescombe Heath. Skylarks, *Alauda arvensis* (a UK BAP species), previously nesting in fields to the west of the site, were recorded in 2011 in the newly open areas. The area is a hotspot for adders, *Vipera berus*, a nationally declining reptile, and these too will benefit from the increased open space.

## Future

Future management objectives for Sedlescombe Heath are to maintain the current mix of habitats. To achieve this, light conservation grazing has been introduced using cattle at low stocking levels. Natural grazing and browsing by rabbits, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, and transient, controlled fallow deer, *Dama dama*, herds add to the development of the habitat.

Fixed point photography – View 29; top 2009, bottom 2010
Brede High Woods © Patrick Roper

In 2011, after consultation with Sussex Wildlife Trust, who have a number of woodland grazing projects, a local grazier was identified. A small herd of five Sussex cows, a Wealden breed descended from draught oxen, were kept on the heath over the summer and mild winter, until they began to lose condition during a period of cold weather. They will resume grazing in spring when the weather warms sufficiently and new grass start to grow. The number of cattle is likely to increase to ten for the summer period.

The cattle use all areas of Sedlescombe Heath, grazing the open grassy areas and taking shelter in the open pine plantation. Cattle movements poach the ground in wetter areas, increasing habitat diversity and plant species richness. Their trampling should also control bracken growth, which can overtake and shade out heather species. The development of the area is being monitored annually by an external consultant and the site manager and will be adjusted according to the response of ground flora and scrub.

Additional mechanical management of bracken and scrub may be required periodically to prevent them dominanting. In 2012 both areas of heath were entered into an HLS agreement with Natural England. This 10-year grant will pay an annual area sum plus additional capital payments for bracken and scrub control.