

A Critique of Croydon Council Policies in Selsdon Wood

Preliminary oversight

This is a particularly apposite subject at a time when Prince William is launching the Earthshot Campaign to bring nature back to its rightful place, when Climate Change is becoming an ever more apparent very real threat to the continuing existence of the biological world, and when the World's Climate Change Conference is being held in Great Britain. Such projects talk the talk, but they will only succeed if we all of us play our part in every aspect of our lives with our full co-operation.

Croydon Council in respect of the Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve management is between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand the wood is a National Trust official nature reserve, deserving of respectful and sympathetic treatment as such, primarily for the benefit of nature. On the other hand is an often unthinking public who want to use it as a park, mainly for dog walking, and who are sometimes intolerant of natural conditions so are only too ready to complain of any discomfort or inconvenience those natural conditions cause them. As if these conflicting interests aren't enough, the Council is also supposed to show the wood and its running costs are a benefit to the population, sometimes leading to holding functions within the wood which conflict with it being a nature reserve.

The contention of this critique is that our Council have got the balance for these changed times wrong, despite their best of intentions, mainly by following policies which are now outdated. As the opening paragraph shows, the world has recently changed and will continue to substantially change of necessity, so policies and practices now need to change commensurate with that. The Council's priority in management of the nature reserve should be the interests of the natural world if that is to return to its rightful place, ultimately in the interests of us all. It follows that when necessary they need to stand their ground against a public sometimes wishing to put their human interests first at a cost to nature. That is after all hardly an inconvenience to those who want smooth paths, trimmed verges and manicured grass, when Croydon has so many parks, some like Addington Palace Park and Lloyd Park not far away from the Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve. Since those places already hold functions which are primarily for people, that is where they are best held, not in a nature reserve, especially when they do demonstrable harm to the natural world.

The criticisms largely fall into two main subjects, the maintenance of the five meadows and the maintenance of the woodland rides and adjacent woodland areas, though these functions do considerably overlap.

The last page includes some additional specifics that also need attention if Croydon Council are to get with the program for change to benefit the natural world and improve the future for us all.

The Meadows

These have two cutting regimes, the cutting of the walking routes across the grass at intervals from the early spring to the end of summer carried out by the council, and an annual cut around the end of August or start of September carried out by a team of local farmers, in part reimbursed by the hay produced.

The problem with the field paths is the way they've been progressively widened over the years from around six feet wide to up to 12 feet wide since the middle of the last decade. This huge and unnecessary width destroys many areas of important flowers, some like Marjoram being very scarce in the reserve while being especially important to many of the smaller butterflies like the Brown Argus, Small Copper and Common Blue, and solitary bees like all of the many Halictus species. The origin of this wide path grass cutting was a policy of Jon Wren, a former council manager, that two dog walkers should be able to pass with their dogs on leads without them interacting. This was always a very silly and pointless policy since as anyone with any knowledge of how dog walkers use the reserve knows that very few of the dogs are ever on leads when walked in there.

Another disadvantage of this wide cutting is the way the councils operatives, who routinely work in parks, go far beyond their brief in routinely going off route well way from paths, cutting any plants they perhaps perceive as weeds. This leads to large losses of such as Hogweed as they are about to flower and be essential in supporting all the many Hoverfly species, Flower Beetles and many other insects, plus the spiders which hunt on umbellifers. It also leads to the harmful cutting of stinging Nettles distant from paths at a time when they are of vital importance in feeding the developing caterpillars and larvae of several dozens of insect species including our most popular and colourful butterflies.

Together with some associated inappropriate cutting and clearing in the woodland, this has led to a large reduction of those insects in addition to their widespread general decline, and in some cases their total elimination from where they were once commonplace in the reserve. Most notably among them are the two Red Cardinal Beetle species and the Rhagium mordax Flower Beetle, once common, all three now completely absent, an absence caused solely by mismanagement since they still exist in nearby less managed areas of the countryside.

Taking greater care will actually save money since much of the past field path cutting has been unnecessarily repetitive, being recut frequently when there's been hardly any growth to cut. It's on these occasions when the previous lines have not been exactly followed that we've ended up with excessively wide paths, on one occasion a wide path duplicated with space between the two simulating a motorway across the top of field 3! The most obvious example of unnecessary cutting was in the year when a tractor turned up on a Friday to recut all the paths, but the fields had their annual total cut after the weekend.

The Council's financial difficulties and Covid have proved the old maxim that every cloud has a silver lining, since it temporarily halted some of the above problems allowing some much need recovery.

Lastly on meadows maintenance, where cutting certainly should be done, it isn't, namely the considerable loss of fields areas to extending perimeter monocultures of Bramble, Bracken, Blackthorn and the like, losing valuable flowering plants and field area. In this respect the annual cutting is unhelpful in two ways. The farmers doing this are only interested in cutting for baled hay and the huge 4 x 4 tractors they use cannot get under the trees at the field margins anyway to cut those areas. This also applies to much of the cutting equipment the council use, unable to do these jobs that are so obviously important but never get done.

The Woods and their Rides

The most dominant issue is the policy of opening up the rides to more light by selective tree felling, the stated objective being ecological diversity, That's a very good objective if carried through properly, but unfortunately it isn't, resulting in quite the opposite, a loss of diversity. The problem is that letting in the light immediately benefits the bramble that dominates the understorey of the wood, leading to the opened area rapidly becoming a bramble monoculture, eliminating the wide variety of verge flowers and fungi that previously flourished.

That can be clearly seen in West Gorse North on the north-eastern side which had tree removal in 2015 and later, leading to only bramble where before we had a number of fungi and small flower species in and on the edge of the woodland. The earlier stages of this process are seen in Pool Grove which was cleared wide very recently but is already showing the onset of bramble cover. Being close to David's Crook south with extensive bracken, that is also likely to invade. As a sunny spot for much of the day, it can be confidently predicted that the grove will become yet another large bank of bramble and possibly bracken with little else, unless action is taken to prevent that.

Clearly the opening up of the rides if done needs to be coupled with an annual bramble management program in those areas which need not be expensive. All that is necessary to stop progressive growth is to flail down that excess bramble in those opened up spots each April. This is before most of the more valuable varieties of flowering plants grow, giving them a chance to establish to the benefit of all insects and not just the limited range that feed on the short lived bramble flowers.

Another major issue with the tree felling program in recent years is that virtually all the cut wood is removed to the timber store for sale, even the branches, presumably sold for firewood. All very well for income to offset the felling costs, but it means the end for the small and medium size beetles whose larvae live, feed and grow in the soft brown bark underlay, being unable to dig into the hardwood of a trunk which only some of the larger beetles can do. This is the other cause of the reduction and sometimes total loss of the flower beetles mentioned earlier, first denied the flowers to feed on as adults, then denied the felled horizontal timber they need for reproduction. Stumps are never used since the underlay of the vertical bark soon waterlogs with rain which would drown them.

The soft underbark of stumps is mainly the territory of feeding and breeding woodlice which have gills on their legs so they can breath as easily in both air and underwater.

Any walk around the mature areas of Selsdon Wood enables one to see many very old fallen or felled hardwood logs with bark long gone and the heartwood either hardened or with the oldest logs, crumbling having rotted. This shows the practice was once to leave cut or fallen trees in place for the benefit of all the wild life that depends on their presence, from beetle larvae feeding and growing in the underbark and heartwood to the many different fungi that grow on timber at every stage of its decay.

With the eight year felling program only part way through, the wood seriously needs some of the cut hardwood to be left in situ if there isn't to be further total loss of important species, completely contrary to what we should be aiming to achieve at the present time in the interests of the natural world.

Some specifics

Insects

The emphasis on insects in the foregoing is due to them being by far the most important element in the entire food chain, simply because they work in both directions. In the usual upwards direction they feed other insects, birds and mammals including bats. By flower pollination they work down the food chain to provide the plant reproduction that all higher life depends on. But insects go much further down the food chain, often invisibly.

Flies don't stop at midges and the tiny so called vinegar flies we can just see in our homes, there are large numbers of tiny woodland species often well below half a millimetre in length and they work two ways as well. They pollinate the tiniest flowers such as those of Cow Parsley, Garlic Mustard and Cleavers, but they also lay their eggs on the soil surface, from where their tiny larvae burrow into the soil and feed on its nutrients. They are part way through the plant recycling chain that starts with worms and fungi, then continues after the microfly larvae with Springtails, followed by Mites and finally bacteria, completing the process of returning all that plants have taken from it back into the soil.

Alien Species

There's been traditional opposition to so-called alien species being in our countryside, but all too often that has become blinkered and harmful. One such case is that of Buddleia which the council quite wrongly try to eliminate in Selsdon Wood. First introduced in 1890, the 130 years since have seen it become naturalised to Britain, Famously known as the Butterfly Bush, it's equally supportive of moths, hoverflies, some bumblebee species and certain spiders like the Misumena vatia Crab Spiders that hunt on the flowers. All these are threatened and in decline due in part to the loss and reductions of so many of our native flower species in modern times, so to destroy an ideal substitute that can help halt the decline is sheer madness.

Some of the opposition is on the grounds that buddleia proliferates, but that's as nothing compare to the proliferation of our native bramble and bracken. Buddleia in contrast is quite fussy in wanting south facing locations exposed to sunshine and even then it often refuses to multiply as the single one in The Wend between Langfords Way and Noakes Way has shown for several years.

This year has produced an excellent illustration of the conservation value of Buddleia in Selsdon Wood. In July the Friends of Selsdon Wood held their annual Butterfly Walk, but as their report on their website walks page shows, only five species were seen, some of them singly. This was despite their walk covering all five meadows and the more open rides and being led by one of their butterfly experts.

Yet in September when the Wend's single buddleia, delayed by being so savagely cut back the previous year, finally flowered, it enabled eight different butterfly species to be photographed on or near at this unseasonal time, along with two species of bumblebees. These extensions of their flying seasons increase the span of the opportunities for reproduction, emphasizing the value of this so-called alien plant species.

Silver Birch

There appears to be a war on birch in Selsdon Wood, which is a pity since it is one of our oldest native species and an early pioneer, suited to the acid soil of the Gorses area. A short lived softwood, its felled or fallen wood quickly rots providing support at all stages of decay for many species of fungi. Following the felling of the larch plantation between East and Middle Gorse there was selective felling of birch alone at the southern end of that area. Then after one of the more recent hardwood felling programs, a second team with a pickup were sent into West Gorse expressly to fell most of the birch there. Middle Gorse has also suffered that felling of healthy standing birch trees. Being of no commercial value one can only imagine this is done to open more space for hardwoods of eventual monetary value, hardly supportive of species diversity since birch has now become scarce in Selsdon Wood.