

Theberton Woods – Update on Forestry England operations 2021 and beyond

Theberton Woods are situated approximately ¼ of a mile West of Theberton Village. The main access, with limited parking, is off Pretty Road.

As well as good populations of Purple Emperor, Silver-washed Fritillary and White Admiral, the woods are home to many other insects, birds (including nightingale, spotted flycatcher and marsh tit), bats, and a host of interesting plants (including bird's-nest, greater butterfly and early purple orchids) and fungi. Great-crested newts breed in the ponds.

The history of the woods is being researched by a key local enthusiast, who has found evidence of woodland on the site dating back to 1783 and possibly even earlier. The possibility of Theberton being assigned ancient woodland status is supported by the presence of several potential ancient woodland indicator (AWI) species, including guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and possible Midland hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*).

Forestry England had previously published a document entitled "Theberton Woods Thinning Operations 2022" however this was only ever accessible to the general public via the Theberton Eastbridge Parish Council website: <http://thebertonandeastbridge.onesuffolk.net/assets/Parish-Council/Forestry-England-Theberton-Woods-Thinning-Operations.pdf>

This document stated the intention to harvest between 12.5 and 20% of the trees during late Summer and Autumn 2022. It also outlined the removal of "intruding vegetation, including Salix species" from the entrance roadway and turning area, "widening of rides" and maintenance and resurfacing of the roadway / turning area. Unfortunately, no detail was provided on exactly how the above work was to be carried out.

Given the importance of the site, local residents were naturally concerned that management work should be carried out sensitively and in a manner which would not damage the flora and fauna.

Following negotiations with local enthusiasts, Forestry England made two important concessions, firstly that, for the initial work on the roadway / turning area at least, equipment would be used to gently lower cut branches to the ground and secondly that a small team of volunteers would then be allowed to search the cut material and rescue any Purple Emperor pupae.

When the initial work took place on 29th June 2021, neither of these things happened, leaving the volunteers feeling frustrated and let down. Forestry England used Covid restrictions as the reason for failing to allow volunteers onto the site, even though up to 30 people were allowed to meet outside at that time.

After these disappointing events, a loose group of local residents and enthusiasts worked in various ways to engage with Forestry England to influence the management work going forward.

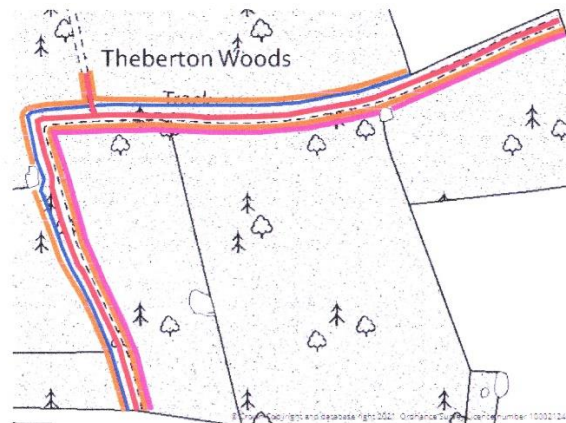
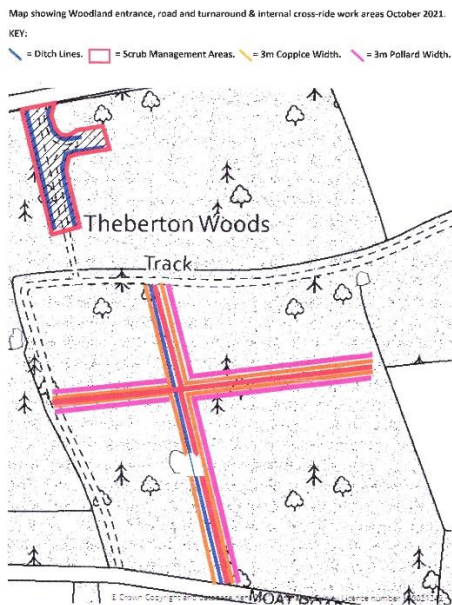
Sam Felton has been associated with Theberton Woods for many years. Sam is incredibly knowledgeable and always makes time to meet and greet visitors to the woods and assist them in finding butterflies, plants and animals. Following the events in July, Sam encouraged visitors to write to Forestry England, expressing their concerns.

Others engaged with Forestry England, through a formal complaint and freedom of information requests. Some also raised the issue with Theberton-Eastbridge Parish Council and attended a Parish Council meeting on 4th August 2021 to set out their concerns. The Committee Chairman and Parish

Clerk were very helpful and supportive. After the meeting, the Chairman wrote to Forestry England inviting them to a future Parish Council meeting, to discuss their ongoing thinning plans. Through the Parish Council we were also able to ensure that the issue was on the radar of the newly elected Leiston District Councillors.

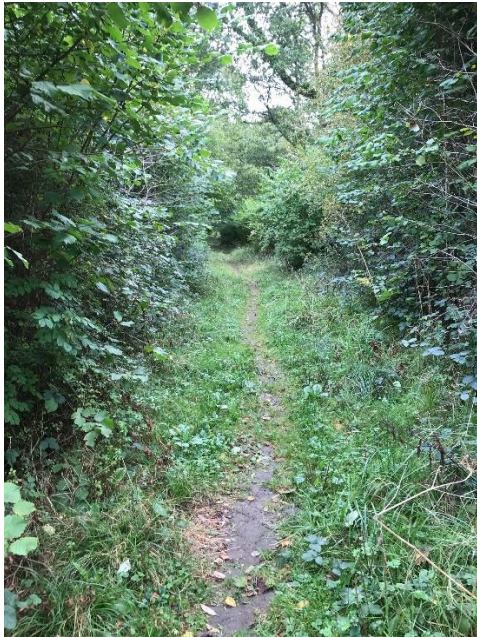
This multi-faceted approach appears to have been at least partially successful as, on 1st September 2021, Forestry England advised verbally that they were now looking at a smaller thinning operation, phased over “several years” and that the work on the rides would also be phased, albeit over only two years.

We subsequently received reasonably detailed information on the plans for the rides. Work on the entrance track and the “cross rides” was scheduled during October 2021 and involved cutting back encroaching vegetation to widen the rides, with some associated coppicing and pollarding to create a “stepped” effect. Please see below diagrams showing Forestry England’s phased plans for this work and “before and after” photographs showing the effect of the work so far:



Map Showing September / October 2022 - Outer ride work area.

KEY:
 = Ditch Lines.  = Scrub Management Areas.  = 3m Coppice Width.
 = 3m Pollard Width.



We asked for as much notice as possible of the commencement of the October ride works, however in the event, we were informed only 4 days before the work was due to start! Despite this short period of time, local enthusiasts and Butterfly Conservation members were able to conduct several organised “searches” for Purple Emperor larvae. As a result, a small number of larvae were taken into captivity and will be cared for by volunteers, before being released into the wood, during the 2022 flight season.



On the first day of the ride work, on 15 October 2021, representatives from Forestry England attended the site and met with local enthusiasts and a Butterfly Conservation representative. Forestry England shared their plans going forward, albeit only verbally.

On the positive side, several sallows had been identified to be either left alone, pollarded or high-pruned during the work on the rides. As a result of these last-minute on-site discussions, the number of such sallows to be “spared” was increased.

Of more concern was a brief mention of possible plans to create a number of deer stalking paths through the remaining tracts of forest. The need for this will be challenged, as local observations indicate that both fallow and red deer numbers are low and there is no real evidence of a deer browsing problem.

The second phase of the ride work, dealing with the “L” shaped outer ride, is expected to take place in September / October 2022 and will follow a broadly similar approach.

Forestry England have still not yet confirmed their phased thinning plans in writing, or in any detail. We await written confirmation of the quantity of timber to be extracted and exactly what is meant by “over several years”? We hope that local residents will be given an opportunity to discuss and comment on these plans at a future Theberton Eastbridge Parish Council meeting in 2022.

Relations and communications with Forestry England have improved since the debacle of July 2021. In fairness, Forestry England subsequently indicated that they had not expected their initial plans to prove so controversial. They also seemed surprised that so many people cared about the woods and were prepared to actively engage.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those local enthusiasts and Butterfly Conservation members who engaged with Forestry England and of course all the volunteers who painstakingly searched for larvae during October.

It would be unrealistic to expect the woods to remain untouched forever, without any management intervention. Indeed, if such intervention can be carried out sensitively, it is to be hoped that it can be beneficial to wildlife in general, and hopefully not too detrimental to Theberton’s important population of Purple Emperors.

Although the management work carried out so far, and that proposed for the future, is substantial, many areas of the wood could remain largely untouched, and it is to be hoped that these areas will continue to be used by the Purple Emperor and other butterflies.

Hopefully by engaging constructively with Forestry England on an ongoing basis, we can ensure that this very special place can continue to be enjoyed by nature enthusiasts for generations to come.

John Lepley
January 2022