

# **COLLINGS PARK TRUST - SITE MEETING REPORT - 14<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2016**

## **Attendees**

Jon Stokes, Director, The Tree Council  
Andrew Young, Plymouth Tree Partnership  
Gloria Dixon, Plymouth Tree Partnership  
Tony Bray, Collings Park Trust  
Andrew Stewart, Collings Park Trust

## **Summary**

A meeting with Jon Stokes of The Tree Council was organised through Andrew Young (Plymouth Tree Partnership), the aim being to secure Tree Council funding to plant a fruiting hedge along the north boundary of the Trust's site. Advice received from Jon during the site visit has the potential to significantly influence the original plan for the development of the site. Jon proposed that the lower half of the site (the east side) is allowed to continue along the route of natural re-colonisation, which has been occurring for the past 15 to 20 years.

## **Report**

Jon Stokes visited the Trust's site to assess whether it would be appropriate for The Tree Council to provide funding to plant a fruiting hedge along the north edge of the site under the 'Wild Hedges for Urban Edges' initiative. However, on observing the site and a copy of the Trust's site layout plan for the proposed community garden (see Appendix 1), Jon offered an alternative view, giving reasons for his suggestions and noting potential benefits.

Jon asked about the Trust's purpose, which we stated as being (in simple terms) recreation, conservation and education. Jon advised that every part of the development should be focused on purpose and suggested that clearing the site as shown on the layout plan would not be maximising the conservation and education opportunities that exist.

Jon also recommended that we re-consider the community's capability to clear and develop the whole site in the style we have planned, then to maintain it in the long-term, noting that this would be a major undertaking. He suggested we would have a much better chance of success if we leave the lower half of the site largely as it is, which he described as in a state of 'natural re-colonisation'. He introduced the term 'Rewilding', this being the approach of allowing and helping nature to look after itself. Jon recommended we adopt this approach, clearing some meandering pathways through the site and undertaking some supplementary tree planting. The benefits of this approach were discussed and include:

- Reduced costs and workload to create the community garden
- Reduce maintenance costs and workload into the future
- Reduced environmental impact, working with nature rather than against it
- Provide a greater range of opportunities for ecological and conservation-focused education
- Maintain and enhance alignment with the Trust's charitable objectives.

Jon stressed the huge level of effort needed to 'fight' nature, rather than working with nature. He recommended a rewilding approach to the lower half of the site because the natural re-colonisation is more apparent, this due to the clearance works that have occurred in the upper level over the years. From a brief inspection within the area it was concluded that the upper level would be far more suitable for development in the way the Trust has planned.

Jon provided a number of recommendations to support a rewilding approach, including:

- Undertake an ecological survey, potentially involving local schools and/or Plymouth University
- Introduction of water to the site, in the form of a pond (or bog)
- Maintain and enhance height by planting trees (e.g. apple & pear trees) and hedging
- Establish dead wood stacks to encourage biodiversity
- Install 'bug hotels', potentially working with local schools on their construction, installation and on-going monitoring
- Contact local bee keepers and invite them to install bee hives
- Create meandering, bark-chipping covered paths through the lower level, following the natural features, creating small clearings for seating / observation areas
- Supplement existing ash tree saplings along the bank between the two levels with fruit trees (e.g. apple and pear trees) as ash die-back is highly likely to set in and cause decline within 10 years.

Jon advised that the Eco Land Management (ELM) co-operative, a group established by ex-employees of the Trust for Conservation Volunteers (TCV), may be able to help with support such as writing a management plan for a re-wilding approach. There is likely to be a charge for this type of support, possibly around £150 per day. ELM also offer support with physical works. The ELM contact is Dean Price.

Returning to the original subject of the site visit, Jon advised of concerns that fruiting hedging planted along the north boundary may not survive due to the close proximity of brambles on both sides. If the brambles are not kept at bay their rampant nature will overcome the young hedge planting. He suggested we utilise the strip of cleared undergrowth to form an access path, and then let the brambles to the north act as the boundary. Jon did not rule out the possibility of funding for fruiting hedging, but he stressed that we would need to demonstrate how it would be maintained in the long-term and how it would fit into our overall purpose/plan.

Jon further advised that The Tree Council may be more inclined to provide funding for planting of fruit trees / hedging along the bank between the two levels.

Jon observed the group of trees in the strip of land to the south of our site, which he suggested have probably developed from an ancient meadow boundary. He noted Ash trees, Scots Pine, Beech trees and one very old Sweet Chestnut tree, which he estimated to be over 300 years old. He stated that it was 'one of the best trees in Plymouth', even though it was probably in decline. He mentioned that Sweet Chestnut trees can take 300 years to grow, 'rest' for 300 years and then slowly decline for a further 300 years.

## **Observations & Recommendations**

Jon Stokes has provided an alternative, expert opinion about the future development of our site. He has provided justification for his suggestions and highlighted various potential benefits to the Trust, its members and the wider community. Suggestions made are aligned to the Trust's charitable objectives relating to conservation and education. Furthermore, the proposed modifications to the site layout would not contravene the restrictive covenants set out within the transfer of title documentation.

In October 2014 we were provided with a contact in Plymouth University's School of Biological Sciences, Dr Paul Ramsay, who could potentially help us with an ecological survey and schools engagement. Follow up contact would confirm whether this is still possible.

We have leeway within the restrictive covenants to create a bog garden, but would need City Council agreement to introduce a pond. There are obvious safety issues to consider, should we wish to pursue this option.

A brief search on the internet on potential hazards associated with beehives and bee keeping, in particular with relation to young children, indicates this is a manageable situation, simply requiring some segregation and common sense precautions.

It is strongly recommended that the Trustees and Management Committee adopt the alternative proposal to allow the lower half of the site to continue along the route of natural re-colonisation as described in the report section above. More specifically:

- The school children's planting area, the growing area with beds and the poly-tunnel indicated in the north-east quadrant of the original site layout plan should be moved to the north-west quadrant (previously shown as a non-specific 'growing area')
- The fruit growing area / orchard originally shown in the lower part of the site should be relocated to the length of bank between the two levels (planting with potential Tree Council funding)
- The features in the south-east quadrant should be concentrated at the south end of the site to leave a greater area for rewilding
- The bird hide / bird feeding area should be integrated within the lower part of the site
- The location and number of secure stores should be reconsidered, taking account of other changes made.

It is further recommended that the Trust maintains contact with local experts from the Plymouth Tree Partnership (Andrew Young, Gloria Dixon) and explores the possibility of procuring assistance from the ELM Cooperative.

Regarding the north site boundary, it is recommended that the recently cleared strip is maintained as a pathway with the existing brambles to the north side maintained as the physical boundary.

**Andrew Stewart**

Chair of Management Committee, Collings Park Trust

# Appendix 1: Original Site Layout Plan for Collings Park Community Garden

