

## **'On Whinberry Hill: winning for whinberries on Clunbury's Black Hill'**

Project reference CF2223/6

### **Final report on activities supported by the AONB Trust's Conservation Fund, August 2022 to July 2023**

An interim report was submitted on 21 December 2022

#### **Background**

The principal outputs and evaluation criteria identified in the original application were:

- Complete clearance of all invasive Sitka spruce
- Control of 80% of the bracken
- Community engagement, with a minimum of six reports in the Parish's newsletter and at least one visit by Clunbury Primary School. Also, the making and installation of an information board.

The purpose of the first two outputs was to provide conditions for whinberries (bilberries) to prosper again and to provide a place where parishioners could pick them each year.

The project has been managed on behalf of Clunbury Parish Council by the Parish's Climate and Environment Group. Acknowledgement is made for the assistance of 'The Wooders' a group of National Trust volunteers who normally work elsewhere in the Parish, at Walcot Wood.

#### **Complete clearance of all invasive Sitka spruce**

Hundreds of small trees have been felled by volunteers and during the two days of work by professionals. As stated in the interim report, it became clear that the quantity of trees had been underestimated. Consequently, the evaluation criterion of 100% clearance has not been achieved. In the order of 10% remain, but apart from the larger trees, a volunteer task arranged for 5 November 2023 should clear the remainder. Provision for the felling of these has now been made through a combination of a successful application to Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) scheme and the involvement of a timber merchant. He will remove the biggest trees when he comes to fell and extract the fringe of Sitka spruce round the perimeter of the ground which are shown on the accompanying photos. The majority of these fringing trees are growing on the Parish Land, as was unexpectedly revealed during the course of the project by the mapping of ownership boundaries carried out by a Forestry England (FE) surveyor. Because we believed that these trees were on FE's land, they did not figure in the grant application, but are reported on here for the sake of completeness, in the following paragraph.

There have been protracted negotiations with the Forestry Commission (FC) over the felling licence for these semi-mature Sitkas round the fringe. The negotiations related principally to the replanting condition that FC insisted on imposing. We received sterling support on this issue from the AONB and also from the Open Spaces Society (OSS). We argued that for a whole range of reasons this 9-acre fragment of unplanted ground lying within 370 acres of

close-planted commercial forestry should be kept open, and that accordingly there should be no requirement to replant as compensation for what was to be felled. Although we were unable to get the FC to budge on this, the OSS pointed out that there was no requirement for a licence, let alone a replanting condition, on land designated as Village Green, which (odd though it may seem) was the case for about half of the area of the proposed clear-fell. This point was eventually conceded by the FC. With respect to the remainder, FC's local Woodland Officer (who had done his best to be helpful throughout), agreed that the re-planting density should be reduced from the standard rate of 1,000 per hectare to 400. As the licence now applies to only 0.18 ha, this means that only 72 woody shrubs or trees will need to be planted.

### **Control of 80% of the bracken**

Comparison of the drone photos taken in July 2022 and July 2023 (as attached) suggests that the target of 80% control may have been met. This was achieved through the application of Asulox from a spraying unit mounted on a remote-controlled Robocut machine. It is important to acknowledge however that without rigorous follow up, this level of control will be short-lived. There is provision through the FiPL grant for further chemical control in 2024, but it is recognised that bracken will continue to be an issue thereafter.

It was encouraging to find that even where, prior to control, bracken cover appeared to be complete, a scatter of bilberry plants had survived, although they were heavily suppressed. It is anticipated that the bracken control which has already been achieved will give these plants the opportunity to flourish. Provision has been made in the FiPL work programme for the raking and scraping of the bracken litter. This is aimed at re-establishing a healthy dwarf-shrub heathland community and if achieved, this may perhaps help in suppressing bracken in the future.

### **Community engagement, including minima of six reports in the Parish Newsletter and one school visit; also, an information board**

The 255 volunteer hours contributed has far exceeded the estimate of 90 and is a strong indicator of community engagement. This level of activity is partly explained by the number of visits that proved necessary in order to plan and supervise the work of contractors, to liaise with Forestry England and to recce, plan and participate in the very successful visit by 50 pupils from Clunbury and Bucknell Schools on 17 October 2022. The other explanation is the strong turn-outs for the two main volunteer task days, with 18 participants on 20 November 2022 and 28 on 5 February 2023. These levels of activity led to a sharp increase in the mileage recorded (for which no grant had been sought).

In nine of the twelve months from August 2022 to July 2023, reports about the project were published in the 'Parish Post', the free newsletter for Clunbury Parish. These reports explained what was planned, what had been achieved and encouraged participation. In February 2023 an article was published in the 'Clun Chronicle'.

The grant application included funding for the design and erection of an information board on the site. Costs were however underestimated and it has

only been possible to fund the artwork, map and overall design for the sign, as reproduced herewith. The cost of the manufacture of the sign, and of a lectern and stand on which it will be displayed, will be met through the FiPL grant.

On 23 July we held a whinberry pick-nic on the Parish Land, attended by 20. This inaugurated what we hope will become an annual event, connecting parishioners with the annual whinberry harvest, an activity which historically had considerable importance in the lives and incomes of the poorer members of our community.

### **Costings**

- As has been noted above, volunteer hours and mileage have both significantly exceeded what was anticipated in the application.
- The cost of producing and printing the artwork, map and design for the sign was put at £472; this was an underestimate. The actual cost, without printing, amounted to £585, against which a claim has yet to be made.
- An estimated cost of £170 was included for materials for the stand for the sign, but given that the sign has yet to be produced this allocation has not been drawn on.
- The anticipated combined figure of £60 from a previous event and an anticipated donation has been exceeded, totalling £155, and this has been expended on the unanticipated costs of drone photography and extracting and cleaning hinberry seed for use by the schools.
- When making the application, the Parish Council committed to contributing £220. The final invoice for work on the sign is, as noted above, £585. When the Parish Council contribution of £220 is deducted, that leaves £365 as the amount for the final claim.
- When that sum is added to the £1,628 already claimed and paid, the total amount claimed for the project amounts to £1,993.

### **Conclusion**

We are indebted to the AONB Trust, through its Conservation Fund, for providing us with the wherewithal to get work underway to restore our Common Land on the Black Hill to an open area of whinberry and heather, with occasional rowans and characterful Scots pine, but without Sitka spruce and with considerably less bracken. We over-estimated what could be achieved in the first year of this project, but thanks to the Conservation Fund we have achieved much and have laid the foundations for a successful application for a FiPL grant. We are now in a position to make good any shortfalls and carry forward the next phase of what will be an ongoing project with the continuing involvement of parishioners, neighbours and friends.



Looking south, July 2022



Looking south July 2023



Looking north July 2022



Looking north July 2023

Clunburg CE  
Primary  
School  
Clunburg  
Shropshire  
SY70HE  
21st October  
2022

Dear Tom and Grizelle,  
Thank you for the lovely time we had  
at Black Hill we all had a amazing time learning  
about how trees are grown and about all  
the things we were looking for.  
We had so much fun in our field when  
we were looking at the diggers and the  
same of the natural environment and also  
when we were making bees sticks.  
Hope you are all doing well.  
Many Thanks

Yours sincerely  
Class 3.

We all had an amazing trip at  
Black hill. Year 5 and 6 loved it and experienced  
loads of things. Thank you for giving up your  
time for us, we really enjoyed it.

From year 5 and 6

To Tom and Grizelle, Evie, Isla, Mia, Shaye,  
Brooke, Jayce, Poppy, Summer, Jake, Laine, Grace, Lola,  
Leena, Tatum, Daniella, Katie, Mia C X X  
Electra, Yusuf, Arielia, Erin, Esmeralda



Thank you!  
Mrs Hood

'Thank yous' following  
schools visit October 2022



Work party, November 2022



Whinberry pick-nickers, July 2023



Whinberry pickers July 2023



# Whinberry Hill

Whinberry Hill is the name now given to this 9-acre fragment of the 370-acre Black Hill Grouse Moor; it includes a turbarry, where peat was cut for fuel, and a village green! The Forestry Commission bought the rest of the hill in 1952, mostly from the owner of Cwm Hall, and planted it with conifers.

The Black Hill had great importance for the poor of the parish. Whinberries (Bilberries) grew here and they picked great quantities of these little purple fruits which were sent to Manchester for use as a dye.

Whinberry Hill is owned by Clunbury Parish Council. Local people are striving to preserve it from invasive Bracken and Sitka Spruce and hope to pick Whinberries here once more.

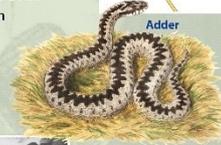
Adders could be present and ticks too. There will be Woodcock in autumn and winter, and in spring and summer ground-nesting birds, possibly including Nightjar. So, please keep your dog on a lead. Thank you.

Local Whinberry pickers in about 1900

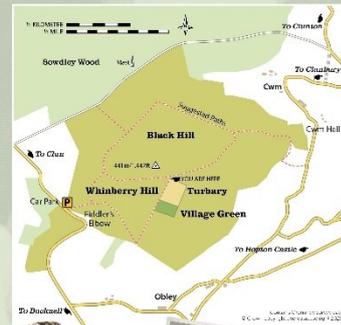


Whinberry

Nightjar



Adder



The Whinberry Hill project is supported by Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Trust, through the AONB Conservation Fund.

For further information go to [www.theparishpost.org](http://www.theparishpost.org)



Completed design, artwork and map for the information board