

Email exchange re biodiversity project at Halfpenny Field (oldest emails first)

Dear Mr Parmee,

I refer to our email exchange of 4th May 2023 regarding the parcel of land/open space on the corner of Firebronds Road and Ha'penny Field, Holbrook, and overseen by nearby residents. In your response to my earlier email, you mentioned a number of things as to why that parcel of land was being left unmown and the way forward later that year. Among those was to (i) increase the number of wildflowers; (ii) the development for the stag beetle reserve; (iii) the intention to cut the whole area late summer and for it to be cleared away and (iv) to make a decision on how best to manage the area thereafter.

As regards (iii) above, that did not happen and I certainly question any success regarding (i) and (ii). I have enclosed a photo of the parcel of land in its current state. As you will see, despite the optimistic sign, there are very few wildflowers in existence. That's because they have been completely overwhelmed by brambles, nettles and angelica. I acknowledge the latter two specimens are considered wildflowers but they are doing nothing to encourage the growth of other, smaller varieties. As regards the stag beetles, I monitor the number we see each year, having lived here since the bungalows were built in Ha'penny Drive/Reade Road in 2000. Based on that, I saw no more in 2023 than we have in previous recent years, so doubt whether leaving the parcel of land in its unkempt state has been of any great advantage to that endangered species.

One of your staff planted an ornamental pear tree last summer. From a conversation with the person concerned, my understanding was that part of that was to replace the remnants of the dying nearby ash tree and that Babergh District Council staff would regularly attend to ensure the new tree was not overwhelmed by brambles and nettles. None of that happened. Had it not been for me regularly watering the new tree with 'grey' water during the very dry summer we once again experienced, it would have died within a matter of weeks. Owing to the amount of brambles and nettles that grew up around it I was eventually unable to access the tree to continue to water it. Thanks to the very wet autumn and winter it has survived, as can just about be seen from the bloom in the photograph.

In making my observations, I acknowledge I have no expertise in land management but from what I have read and seen on television my understanding is grass should be suppressed if wildflowers are to be established and continue to thrive. That cannot happen whilst the parcel of land is left in its existing state. The remnants of the ash tree is also in need of attention as it now contains more dead than healthy branches, unless that too is part of the plan to 'rewild' the area.

Finally, referring back to your email response last year, it mentioned a decision on how best to manage the area would be taken late summer 2023. Did that happen? If so, I would be interested to know the outcome of that please as there is currently little evidence that it is being managed.

Thank you and kind regards,

And Richard Parmee's reply:

Dear xxxxxx,

Thank you for your email.

I visited this area several times last year, both to check on the tree and the flowers that appeared. Many thanks for taking time out to water the tree and I'm pleased it has survived.

When I visited, I saw a wide range of flowers. Some were native, some looked more like garden escapes – either they had seeded themselves or someone had planted them to enhance the area. Though we would prefer native flowers, non-native flowers can still benefit biodiversity. Even long grass is better for wildlife than short grass. Continued management for wildflowers should help them to spread. We will monitor the condition of the site and, if needed, look at introducing yellow rattle to help control the grass vigour. However, when I visited, I did not see that the flowers were overwhelmed by grass.

If the area wasn't cut at all at the end of the season, I shall find out why. I am due to meet the mowing teams in the next few weeks as we start to leave areas for wildflowers, so I can raise this then.

This area is somewhat different from other wildflower areas due to the stag beetle reserve status. That means the conditions we want to encourage on this area are not the same as those on other wildflower areas.

I met a national expert on stag beetles on the site before the tree was planted, concerned that in planting it we may do harm to the very species we are trying to encourage. He allayed my fears on that and provided much useful advice on the conditions that would best favour stag beetles. In his opinion, the bramble is a positive feature, providing shade and protection for the decaying wood beneath, though we appreciate it does not please everyone's eye. This bramble was cleared the year before and periodically, we will need to clear it to prevent it taking over the entire area. However, we do not want to remove it completely at this stage. Perhaps, once the pear has grown large enough to shade the area, then we can look at doing so.

He also mentioned the long lifecycle of the stag beetle. The larvae spend several years below ground before emerging as the flying beetle the species is famous for. This means that we would not expect any increase in numbers to be noticed for several years. Even then, changes in the weather from year to year mean that it could be five, six or more years before we would have any indication that the change in management may be making a difference. We cannot make a decision based upon the findings of the first year since we changed management.

The ash tree is being monitored and we will remove dead wood before it poses a high risk to anyone. This can be stacked in amongst the bramble to help support invertebrates. The bramble may act as a deterrent to anyone hoping to have the wood for their log burner.

Finally, yes a decision was made late summer to continue with management of this area in the same way. We had very few objections raised to the management, mostly concerned about the long grass alongside the pavements and road sign, which we addressed. How we manage this and other sites may change over time as we and the mowing staff learn more about the sites and their needs. There were some failings last year and if this was never cut at all at the end of the year, that may have been one of them. This will be addressed.

Kind regards,

Richard Parmee

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Follow up email from the resident

Dear Mr Parmee,

Thank you for once again for providing a lengthy explanation as to why Babergh District Council continues its policy of 'rewilding' the open space in question. I suspect the reason why there have been few complaints/objections raised is because few people live close to the site and therefore are unaffected by its unsightly appearance. Please be assured I am very much in favour of protecting our natural fauna and flora but I believe that can be done in a balanced way. When you next intend to visit the site for one of your inspections I would be pleased to meet you to discuss how I believe that may be achieved. If you are prepared to do that would you kindly contact me on 07391 251700 in advance please so I can pencil the date and time in my diary.

Thanks again and kind regards,

Reply from R. Parmee to above

Dear xxxxxxxxxx

I would be happy to meet with you and discuss this. I'm not sure when I am out that way next but will contact you ahead of that visit. I have met with residents of Ha'penny drive, who live on the doorstep of this area and, aside from concerns about the path edges, had no objection to the appearance of the area.

Please note, this is not a case of rewilding, but a change in management away from short mown grass to benefit both our pollinating insects and the stag beetle. Rewilding is about the restoration of natural processes, whereas we want to manage the area in a fashion more aligned with meadow management, rather than just leaving it to do its own thing.

Kind regards,

Richard (Parmee)