

BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST 10 YEAR CELEBRATION

On Saturday 2 August Bearsted Woodland Trust celebrated its 10th Anniversary with a family-based afternoon held across our 26 acre site. It was an event first suggested by Peter Willson, our much-missed Life President, who died last year.

On a fine warm day, about 1000 people of all ages came along to enjoy a picnic with family and friends, visit the Country Craft Stalls, watch the display by birds of prey, listen to "Mick's Hot Licks"



rock band, and follow the nature trail across the site. We had mugs, twig pens, bird box kits and notelets all on sale, and there were refreshments for all tastes at

the Holy Cross Tea Tent. The Ice Cream Van was understandably very popular on a warm summer's afternoon, despite the earlier forebodings about rain.



There was Face-Painting for the younger visitors, and across the bridge on the eastern side of the site both young and old enjoyed Tractor Rides through Moore Meadow, and Have-a-Go Archery in the field nearby.



BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST 10 YEAR CELEBRATION

The winners were:

- Nature Trail – First Prize went to The Townsley Family. They won a Family VIP Tour of the Wildlife Heritage Foundation’s Big Cat Sanctuary.



- Two tractors (including Pauline Moore’s famous “Thomas”) were on static display near the Manning Maze, and these generated much interest. Everyone seemed to be having fun, as the photographs testify.



- 2nd place in Nature Trail – A girl from Birling Avenue won a guitar donated by Tony Bathurst from the Hot Licks band who played for us at the event, and for many brought back pop memories of their teenage years!
- Archery - Zane Spence - age 6.

Special thanks go to Barbara Dunford of Kent Community Events, and Peter Schmoeger and Chris Street of BWT, who all planned the event so carefully, and to BWT’s volunteers who prepared the site, managed events on the day, and carried out the leaflet drop. We must also mention BPC who provided portaloos!



TURKEY OAK FELLED BY HURRICANE GONZALO

It is always sad to lose a tree, but during the high winds on the afternoon of 21 October, a mature Turkey Oak (believed to be hundreds of years old) on the south side of Moore Meadow split its main trunk and fell south towards the Ashford Road boundary. Fortunately no-one was hurt and the damage to the fence and hedge has been repaired.

The canopy was solid and well developed, and still in full leaf; this probably explains

why the tree came down during the very strong gusts which came with the aftermath of Hurricane Gonzalo. Unusually, the main trunk split about 3 metres above ground level, and was found to be partly hollow; in contrast the root system was well anchored.

The photo shows the tree after it fell. Volunteers soon cleared the lighter debris and more surgery has taken place to make the area safe. We are thinking of

leaving the trunk in-situ, not only as a feature and new habitat, but as a reminder of the tree's past glory. The four side branches resting on the ground and the curved split of the main trunk give, to some, the appearance of an elephant. There is also a "bear's head" on the east side of the trunk.



FOR SALE:

We still have some items for sale from Committee members:

- Mugs £5; Bags £4; Twig pens £2; Notelets £2 (pack of 8).
- Wren bird box kits are £5 (now is a good time to put up bird boxes, well in advance of the 2015 nesting season).

If you would like to buy any of these items please contact Chris Street, our Membership Secretary (01622 739713), or have a word with volunteers on site.



AGM 2014:

This year's AGM for the year 2013/2014 was held on the afternoon of 28 September, and was attended by 56 members of BWT. Main headlines were: another hugely successful year in terms of site management and projects, membership, and financial management.

In his Financial Summary, Bernard Head reported that income from various sources including subscriptions, tree/bench sponsorship and donations exceeded expenditure by more than £11,000. Reserves continued to be in a healthy state.

Detailed minutes of the meeting are now available on BWT's website (paper copies on request).

GREEN FLAG AWARD 2014/15

On 4 June the annual inspection for the Green Flag Award was carried out by Dr Ian Boulton, an experienced landscape professional. He was both amazed and delighted at what he saw during his walk around BWT; on 18 July we learned that we had been given the highest award banding (80+). In his comments, Dr Boulton referred to:

"Very good levels of maintenance throughout the site. Volunteers clearly making an enviable effort to keep the site maintained and targeting their time and the Trust's resources with considerable success."

"Strong efforts being made to protect and promote heritage and landscape features where this is appropriate... Trust especially lucky to have access to knowledge

from skilled ecological consultant, and management of ecological features shows that this advice is being fully acted upon. Diversity of habitats and species, including trees, is just right for a site of its size and location, and their management is both timely and appropriate."

"The site provides just what the local community need – it doesn't try to copy what is provided elsewhere but complements them"... "An excellent case study in how the community can manage, and take sensible, realistic decisions on how management benefits both a site and the people who use and value it. The recent acquisition of an area of old horse field and riding land (Pauline's Field/Riders Wood) offers a great opportunity for the future..."

MOORE MEADOW:

BWT is very pleased to announce a grant of £400 from Paul Carter, Local County Member for our area, under KCC's Member Community Grant scheme. This grant will help to fund the purchase of trees for the remaining areas at the south side of Moore Meadow.

“ACCESS FOR ALL”

AT BEARSTED WOODLAND TRUST:

DOGS ON LEADS POLICY

SPECIAL REPORT

Introduction and Background

After detailed investigation and much careful thought, Bearsted Woodland Trust has decided to introduce a policy which requests visitors to keep dogs on leads on 40% of the site and permits dogs off leads in the remaining 60%. The 'off leads' area will comprise Moore Meadow, Barn (Gore) Meadow and the Lilk Valley. The boundary line will be the existing fence at the top of the valley, along the eastern edge of Church Meadow.

This report gives the reasons for the introduction of the policy, and responds to the feedback received since it was announced that an on-leads policy was under consideration. It is a lengthy report but the Management Committee hopes that everyone will read it very carefully, because some of the comments received show that there is a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding around this issue. There is also a fuller version of this report on BWT's website.

Survey of Members 2014

Over several years there have been complaints about issues with dogs at the Trust, but until recently the Management Committee has parked the issue in the 'too difficult' box. However, the number of complaints has continued to grow and earlier this year we decided to conduct a survey to assess the size of the problem. We received more than 350 responses (about one-third of our membership) and were astonished at the findings... and 50% of respondents reported negative experiences with dogs at the Trust. 60% favoured the introduction of a 'dogs on leads' area (including 30% of dog walkers), 23% were against and 17% undecided. These results revealed both the scale of the problem and a very strong mandate for a 'dogs on leads' area in which visitors could be confident they would not have bad experiences with dogs.

Proposal no. 1 - Moore Meadow

Therefore, at the AGM, we announced our intention to request everyone to keep dogs on leads in all areas other than Moore Meadow. This resulted in a lively debate and a great deal of criticism of the specific proposal, after which the Management Committee agreed to consider the points made and review its decision.

Proposal no. 2 - a time window

Following the AGM, several members contacted the Trust to suggest that a time window for dogs on leads would be a better solution. This idea of dogs on leads between 10am and 6pm was publicised on the site noticeboards and website with feedback invited. Some liked the idea, and some suggested alternative time windows. However, there was also considerable opposition and it was clear that this was not the widely accepted solution hoped for.

A Difficult Choice for BWT Volunteers

The past few months have been very painful for us. There has been much measured criticism of the Management Committee, and some constructive suggestions, but there have also been some wounding comments questioning our sanity, our fairness and our ability to analyse the situation.

We have not created this issue. We are neither pro-dog nor anti-dog. We are responding to complaints from our members and trying to find a fair solution to a significant problem.

BWT's team has put in thousands of volunteer hours over more than 10 years to create the wonderful community project that BWT has been to date. We ask everyone to respect what we have done and are continuing to do. This issue alone has created many, many hours of work for a few key volunteers, and has not been taken lightly. We have fully considered the points made at the AGM and in subsequent feedback, which are given in full on the BWT website. We have re-reviewed the responses to the survey, and have discussed several options in the light of these.

Can the survey be trusted?

A number of people, who did not accept the results, have questioned the validity of the survey. Our survey document was delivered to all BWT members by our volunteer delivery team and the replies were analysed professionally. The 350 responses represent about one third of our membership, an unusually high response rate for any survey,

making it statistically extremely significant. We can be very confident that our survey is a true reflection of members' views.

Some of the feedback received since the AGM has referred to people doing their own 'surveys' on site which reveal different results. This is probably because they are asking the views of the 23% of members opposed to any 'on leads' policy, plus a large number of non-members who visit the site daily.

Bad experiences at BWT

Comments made by respondents to the survey show clearly why so many members favour an 'on leads' policy. Many now choose not to come or bring their young families because of bad experiences, apprehension about dogs jumping up, and in some cases, genuine fear. One-third of dog walkers who responded have also mentioned bad experiences and concerns about how some loose dogs will interact with theirs. Some have said they no longer visit trees dedicated to family members because of other dogs' behaviours.

Other dog owners voted for an 'on leads' policy because of consideration for others:

'We are dog lovers, but feel for non-dog owners who want to use this beautiful space too.'

Why does BWT have a particularly big problem and is it unique?

It would appear that, since BWT continues to be a particularly safe place to exercise dogs off the lead, it has become increasingly dominated by loose dogs. As our reputation has grown, more and more people have come to walk their dogs at BWT. All visitors are complimentary to volunteers around the site, and we know anecdotally that some people drive a considerable distance from the surrounding area, specifically because it is the best place to let dogs run free. It is rare to walk the site without having close contact with a dog.

If BWT has a particular problem it is not alone in tackling the issue. We are aware of a number of other locations within local authority ownership where management has introduced policies to prevent areas being overrun by loose dogs. There are notices on many public rights of way in Kent which state clearly "Dogs must be kept on leads."

Does the prevalence of dogs running free matter? If so, why?

We feel it does, for several reasons. Firstly, the Trust Deed of BWT makes it clear that our land is to remain undeveloped green space for everyone to enjoy. The land does not exist to serve the interests of one particular group, but is for everyone. It is therefore important that the activities of one group do not prevent others from enjoying using the land. It is clear from our survey that the enjoyment of people who wish to visit has been severely compromised by the behaviour of some dogs, and many people visit the Trust on fewer occasions or not at all as a result.

Secondly, we aim to operate the Trust on democratic principles, and it is clear that a majority of members who responded want us to take action to address the problem: the Trust is not currently providing adequately for members who wish to walk undisturbed by dogs.

Third is the issue of fairness. Dog walkers get enormous value from BWT, many using it twice daily. It is only fair that others should also have access to the land... without being disturbed by dogs if that is their wish.

Is there an alternative to some form of ‘dogs on leads’ policy?

We have considered at length the alternative suggestions received and these are listed below with our responses:

- Leave it to discretion of owner: this has been the code for 10 years; it is clearly signed at entrances, but has not worked.
- Ask irresponsible dog owners to behave better: this has been tried for ten years... and has clearly failed; there is no mechanism to separate out irresponsible dog owners other than by peer pressure.
- Identify the problem owners and punish them: There is no practical way of doing this.
- Approach those who cannot control their dogs: BWT volunteers are not dog wardens.
- Put signs up to request better behaviour: there are signs at all entrances (and regular extra notices). These have not been respected.
- Use the law to protect people from unruly dogs: BWT does not have powers; nor does it have (or is likely to have) a regular police presence on site. Importantly, it is not the way we would wish to go.

We have consulted with other organisations and are not aware of any practical alternative.

Objection to a dogs-on-leads policy - practical reasons

We have considered the following practical difficulties and do not consider these to be insurmountable. Our responses are shown below:

Too difficult to enforce

- We hope that most people will accept the rule and conform.
- This will set a good example and encourage/embarrass others into conforming.
- We intend to give explanatory leaflets to visitors who do not conform.
- Irresponsible dog owners will feel uncomfortable and stay away.

Boundary management would be difficult

We have chosen a well-defined boundary which will have gates and clear signs.

Inconsiderate people will disregard the rules

With support from considerate people, we can all hope to make it work together.

Possible confrontations with non-dog owners if dogs stray

There is a fence along the boundary and gates will be installed.

The rule is not applied on the Elizabeth Harvie Field

Bearsted Parish Council has clarified the rule on dogs in EHF and the sign has been re-erected.

Objection - dog walkers' enjoyment would be reduced

Reasons given for opposition to the principle of 'dogs on leads' included '*dog walkers should not be restricted*', '*makes dog walkers feel unwelcome*' and '*interferes with dog walkers enjoyment*'.

The current arrangements interfere with the enjoyment of others and we believe that there is a need for some restrictions in the interests of others. The survey result was 3 to 1 in favour of a restriction and even 30% of dog walkers specifically said that they would support a 'dogs on leads area', as borne out by recent conversations on site. Many people without dogs now feel very unwelcome and, with the new policy, dog walkers remain welcome on the whole site, but with dogs on leads on part of it. The site is for everyone... whether or not they are walking a dog.

Objection - dog walkers have special rights over the land

Some take the view that because '*the land has been used for dog walking for 40 years*', dog walkers have a greater right to use the land than anyone else. Whatever happened previously, the ownership of the land changed in 2003 and the new owners donated it

“ACCESS FOR ALL” AT BWT:

to the whole community. The Board of Trustees and Management Committee have the duty to ensure the original objectives are adhered to. The site can still be used for dog walking, but not exclusively. Walkers without dogs have an equal right to use the land.

It is also argued that special rights apply because *‘Dog walkers saved the land from development’*. Dog walkers were prominent campaigners against development, the action which actually saved it was the purchase from the developers by our founders who donated it to the whole community.

Some people have stated that *‘people who don’t like dogs should go elsewhere’* and *‘those who don’t walk dogs should go to a park, not a woodland’*. We were amazed and saddened to hear this view supported at the AGM. The Trust exists for everyone.

Objection - dog walkers are the main users of the site

Several respondents stated that they *‘rarely see anyone without a dog’*, and suggested that therefore the wishes of dog walkers should over-ride those of everyone else. Dog walkers are indeed the main users of BWT; they get fantastic value from BWT and many use it twice a day, some even more. This is all the more reason why they should be prepared to acknowledge the right of others to use the site, and modify the way in which they use it, in the interests of others. We are not asking a lot... just for others to be considered too.

Although dog walkers are the main beneficiaries of the site, they are a minority of members. Those who want to walk dogs off leads over the whole site are only 23% of our membership who responded. We do not believe that a minority should determine how the whole site is used. Many people do walk the Trust without dogs, although some have stopped visiting because of issues with dogs. Although the remainder of members visit less frequently, they are equally entitled to enjoy the site in peace.

Objection - the site will be neglected if dog walkers go elsewhere

There is no requirement on how intensively the site should be used as a successful green space. BWT is a public open space and is protected from development; it is available for people to visit whenever they wish to do so. We have no fears of the site becoming derelict if some choose to visit less because of our new policy. We are confident that our volunteers will continue to maintain the site to the current high standard, as recognised by Green Flag and by many out-of-area visitors we have met who walk the site.

Objection - penalises the owners of well-behaved dogs

We welcome and fully recognise that many of our members manage their dogs very well, that they do not allow their dogs to approach others, and that they will feel restricted if a policy is introduced. It would be perfect if there were a way of restricting only the dogs that cause a nuisance, but there is no mechanism for this. We see no alternative other than to ask responsible dog owners to use leads in some areas for the enjoyment and comfort of others. We regret this, but think conscientious owners may be able, politely, to use peer pressure on others.

It is precisely because of representations made by responsible dog owners that we have decided to designate such a large proportion of the site for off leads. Owners who ensure that their dogs are well-behaved will still have access to a total of 26 acres of green space – the whole site, part on leads and part off.

Objection - Miss Moore would not approve

It is perhaps impertinent of any of us to claim we know what Pauline would have thought. We know that she was pleased that the Trust provided a solution that protected her land from development at no cost to her (unlike other charities which require an endowment to take on land). She worked very closely with our Management Committee for several years and was greatly respected by us for her fine judgement which was never based on self-interest, but on what was best for the whole community. She was a fair person, not a selfish person. She shared her views with us in detail and was very keen on access for all. It is true that she enjoyed walking her dog off the lead, but we think that, if she had seen these survey results, she would have been shocked and would have said we have a duty to act. We believe she would be pleased that her land can be part of the solution.

Summary regarding objections to the principle of a 'dogs on leads' policy

Much of the above relates to objections to the principle of an 'on leads' policy. We do not believe that any of these objections in principle should over-ride the very clear vote in the survey. Three times more members who responded want an 'on leads' policy compared with those who object. Many of these views were expressed prior to the publication of the survey results, and we hope that many of the 23% who stated a preference against will recognise that they are in the minority and accept the democratic mandate to introduce some form of 'on leads' policy.

Does BWT have an obligation to provide for dogs off leads?

Some people have said *‘The Trust will alienate the very people who use the land for what it was intended... Letting dogs off the lead is the point of being there’.*

BWT was founded to protect an important area of green space for Bearsted and to make it accessible to all. The Trust was never intended to be specifically for people to walk dogs off leads and has no obligation to provide an area for dogs to be exercised off the lead. However, we recognise that dog walkers are major users of the site, and that people value the opportunity to walk dogs off leads. We can offer this facility, provided it does not prevent everyone else from enjoying the site.

Members v Non members

It has become clear from representations received during this process that a considerable number of regular dog-walkers choose not to make a membership donation to BWT. They are entitled to do this, but is it right for our volunteers to accept advice or instructions on how to run the Trust by people who use it but choose not to support it? It is the opinion of BWT’s members which will guide our policy. We are of course very disappointed that regular site users choose not to show support for the development and maintenance of the site or for the work of those who, on their behalf, are volunteers. We appeal to them to join us.

Membership and financial considerations

It has been suggested that if we adopt an ‘on leads’ policy, BWT income will drop because dog owners will cease to be members. In fact, the majority of BWT income does not come from dog walkers, since only about one third of BWT members are dog owners. Income has already dropped as a result of resignations from some people who have had bad experiences with dogs. We hope that most supporters will accept the survey results and the need for action, but if not, we believe it better to do the right thing even if it has a cost. In addition, under the Trust Deed it is our legal obligation to provide access for all and if members leave because we fulfil this obligation, we must accept it.

If dog owners who have made donations to the Trust no longer wish to visit as a result of the new policy, we are prepared to discuss refunds.

Alternative 'dogs on leads' options

We have considered several options:

- **Dogs on leads at certain times of day**

After very serious consideration, this idea was rejected. The "10am to 6pm" idea was popular with early morning dog walkers, but there was also widespread opposition to it, and it soon became clear that some dog walkers were only happy to support times which suited them individually. These times included 11am-3pm; after noon; weekends only; and before 10am/after 6pm (the opposite of our proposal). It is clear that we could never achieve a consensus around time.

- **Dogs on leads everywhere at all times**

This would be the only way to give the majority of members full access to the Trust land, but we have not considered this idea because it would clearly be unacceptable to many dog walkers.

- **Dogs on leads everywhere except Moore Meadow**

This was proposed after the survey results were analysed and discussed at the AGM. Reasons put forward against this included the absence of nearby parking and the insecure fencing. There is considerable support for this proposal, but we have decided not to proceed with Moore Meadow alone because it is clear that it would not have the support of the majority of responsible dog owners.

- **Dogs on leads west of the Lilk bridge**

Perhaps the fairest solution because it would split the site 50/50 between 'on leads' and 'off leads' areas. However this has not been chosen in order to shorten the walk from the car park to the 'off leads' area for the less able.

- **Dogs on leads in Children's Play Area only**

This is not a sufficiently large area to make a significant contribution to the majority desire, does not provide a circular walk for non-dog walkers, and has no clear boundaries.

A fair but workable policy?

Dog owners are a minority of members of the Trust but a majority of users. It is perhaps inevitable that a workable policy will perhaps be slanted towards the interest of those who use the site most, because a ‘fair’ policy which is not workable would not be of use. It is important that our policy is accepted, even if reluctantly, by the majority of dog walkers so that they conform to the rule and encourage others to do the same.

We really do hope that our members understand the degree of discussion of all options, bearing in mind we know that there is absolutely no consensus amongst dog walkers about what would be acceptable.

The policy chosen

The Management Committee has finally decided to split the site into two areas, with 60% as an ‘off leads’ area and 40% ‘on leads’.

- **The ‘off leads’ area will comprise Moore Meadow, Barn (Gore) Meadow and the Lilk Valley.**
- **The boundary line will be the existing fence at the top of the valley, along the eastern edge of Church Meadow. Signs with colour-coded maps will be fixed.**
- **New gates (suitable for disabled use) will be installed at either end of this fence line one at the top of the slope into the valley at the corner of Elizabeth Harvie Field, and one at the top of the steps which lead up to the Old Avenue.**

This option will provide a circular walk for the majority of members who wish to visit without dogs around the original Trust land, in which most of the sponsored trees are located. Owners wishing to exercise dogs off leads will have a 200m ‘on leads’ walk from the Church car park past the Church and Elizabeth Harvie Field to arrive at the ‘off leads’ zone. They will then have a very large area to exercise dogs off the lead including a secure path circuit around the valley and Barn (Gore) Meadow in addition to Moore Meadow.

We believe that this policy takes account of many of the criticisms of previous suggestions and is the best compromise we can achieve.

Policy in the 'off leads' areas

Signs in these areas will remind people that normal rules of courteous behaviour should apply. Dogs should only be allowed off the lead if they can be controlled and return to the owner when called. They should not be allowed to jump up at other people or approach other dogs unless their owners approve. There remains an obligation to clear up after dogs in all areas. Since it is not possible to adhere to this basic conduct of behaviour with several dogs with one owner, we propose that dog walkers should be requested not to let more than one dog off the lead at a time.

Implementation of the policy

The policy will be introduced on an experimental basis as soon as we can organise practical issues such as appropriate gates and signs. In addition to signs requesting compliance, we will provide leaflets explaining the logic of the policy. We hope that all who use the site will help us to arrive at a position where the policy is generally respected.

Review of the policy

We intend to review the policy in summer 2015, and will of course be seeking the views of BWT members at that time, as well as talking to people on site.

In the meantime, we feel it is important to keep in touch with dog walkers, and again ask if they would like to form a liaison group to work with the BWT's Management Committee to develop dog-friendly policies.

And finally:

- It has been suggested that BWT should provide more dog waste bins within the Trust grounds. The bins are emptied by a Maidstone BC funded service which will only collect from bins near a public road.
- Does anybody know why some people hang full dog waste bags from trees? Please could we all discourage anyone seen doing this.

THANKS TO:

- Mike and Sue Ellis and their grandchildren who have delivered newsletters and other correspondence for us for about 10 years. Mike and Sue are emigrating to New Zealand - a beautiful country – we thank them for all their help, and wish them well.
- Dermot Bealey and Judy Buckley who have volunteered to join the delivery team.

BEARSTED CAVES

Following Newsletter 25 there has been a flurry of email correspondence about “Bearsted Caves” in Moore Meadow. The caves were constructed in the Folkestone Beds (sand) formation of the Cretaceous period, and this sand has been worked for centuries. It is virtually pure silica which has made it suitable for building and foundry use.

Several local readers have commented on what they saw in their youth; David Ditcher sent us this account:

“Looking at the photo showing the view across Moore Meadow toward Bearsted turning there is a small scar in the landscape between two clumps of trees to the left of centre. I wonder how many people realise that there is a cave there carved out of sandstone rock. As a boy from the village I remember with other boys we used to crawl on our bellies into the cave where we used to talk in the light of candles that we took with us. The entrance was very obscure and has now long disappeared.”



TERRY STEVENS AN APPRECIATION

Sadly we have to report the passing in June 2014 of Terry Stevens, a loyal and hard-working volunteer who had been with BWT since its early days, enjoying the site as it matured. Terry worked for Chris Street’s Delivery Team and had also been involved in several planting events and work parties. It is due to the work of many people like Terry that BWT has flourished.

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