March 2007

Weather Report

A very wet and windy first week followed by light south - westerly breezes, spring sunshine and a daytime maximum temperature of 18 C on the 12th. These mild days but cool, occasionally frosty nights continued until the 18th when bitterly cold, strong northerly winds brought sleet and snow showers for three days. After this the weather settled again. It was calm, mainly sunny and dry – only 12mm of rain falling between the 19th and the end of the month. Another exceptionally warm maximum daytime temperature of 18 C was recorded on the 27th.

26thMarch – An orange ladybird, *Halzia 16 guttata*, has emerged from hibernation

18th March. A Comma butterfly, *Polygonia c-album,* basks in the sunshine on a pile of logs.

Towards the end of 2006, after much discussion, and consideration of recommendations from the farming and wildlife advisory group (FWAG) together with advice found in Chris Starr's book 'Woodland Management', we drew up our own management plan for Long Wood to give us a framework of objectives to aim for in 2007.

Management Plan: ***Long Wood***

Name of Wood: *Long Wood.*
Type of Woodland: *Mixed broadleaf and coniferous, ancient semi-natural.*
Size: *5.2 hectares.*
Purchased: *January 2006.*

1. Woodland assessment

The woodland is predominately broadleaf coppice to the eastern area with a large stand of mature conifers to the west. The woodland site is basically rectangular running due east to west on the longer axis, and situated on a gently sloping south facing aspect. The southern boundary follows a small stream bed while the other boundaries are all fenced from grazing and arable farmland.

Access to the wood is by right of way across a track alongside an adjoining field to the woodland gate. The track is on level ground and has had some amount of rubble compacted into the surface in the past. No height restrictions hamper free access, accept for some overgrown side growth from trees. There are no footpaths or public rights of way through or around the wood.

The wood has had numerous trees (oak,hornbeam,ash,wild cherry) planted in the past subject to a 15 year Forestry grant which has now expired.
The wood appears to have been neglected for some considerable time since the planting of the new trees. There are stacks of treeguards scattered around the wood, and a large number still on the trees, mostly full of leaves/moss/damp, with subsequent damage to the enclosed bark.
The wood is generally very overcrowded with large numbers of tall spindly trees.
There are large established areas of wood anemones, bluebells, ransom and Dog's Mercury throughout the wood.

Objectives of Management.

To make safe any dangerous trees.

To maintain continuous cover throughout the wood.

To clear access track of overhanging trees.

To retain habitat suitable for diverse wildlife.

To remove excessive dead/dying trees.

To generally thin out overcrowded areas.

To form small clearings through the wood.

To establish a clear metre wide boundary track.

Arrange to deliver container for safe storage.

Construct site hut for all weather shelter

Build and fit dormouse/bat/bird boxes

Extracts from Rodney's Diary

8th March

Small amount of work on clearing felled Hemlocks but most of time spent on levelling devastation caused by three horses being ridden up and down main tracks. Horses had pushed around end of fence by the gate between large poplar and the stream and been ridden all the way to the field fence in the north- eastern corner then back again, ruining the track with many gouges 4 to 6 inches deep. Delicate layer of previously undisturbed mosses and liverworts decimated. Fence extended into stream and new posts fitted alongside originals supporting wires. Ruts and lumps trampled flat as best as possible by foot tamping.

Planting blackthorn

9th March

Collected 25 Blackthorn and 25 Hawthorn trees (bare rooted 60/80cm whips) spirals and canes and took them to the wood. Started planting around northern edge of picnic clearing. 17 planted so far with plans to return tomorrow to plant remainder.

10th March

Remainder of 50 trees planted around edge of picnic site, with some Blackthorn along field fence directly north of picnic site to in-fill gaps, and last five Hawthorns planted around small clearing near entrance gate. Fence to west of gate – posts renewed. Extension constructed along side of streambed to first tree, to deter horses from entering wood

Driving in a fence post

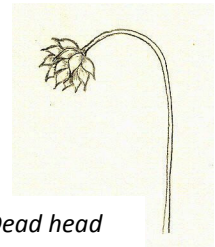
Wood Anemones

I knew the waiting must be almost over. I walked slowly, stopping frequently to scan the ground around my feet. On the south- facing slope to the west of the pond I found what I had been searching for – dark green folded, feathery leaves emerging claw- like through the winter debris that covered the woodland floor. Were there any in a more advanced state? Towards the eastern boundary at the side of the path down to the stream, little white stars and demurely drooping buds danced in the breeze, the first flowers of spring! Long Wood would soon be transformed.

Ironically the petals, which can number from four to nine, are actually a series of floral leaves. They are sepals that have assumed the characteristics of petals, white on the upper surface, tinged rose or purple underneath. The flower opens with the sun but closes and droops as soon as it becomes cloudy or evening approaches in order to protect the ring of stamens surrounding the head of pistils, from any damage that might be caused by rain or dew.The flower has no discernable scent.

Anemone nemorosa

The Wood Anemone is perennial having a long, tough, creeping root- stock just below the surface from which unbranched stems rise directly, with three deeply divided leaflets half way up and a single flower head above the whorl. As the flower unfolds the stalk lengthens and then one or two ordinary leaves grow directly from the underground stems.



Dead head

The fruits consist of small nut- like achemes containing a single seed.

Various surveys carried out have resulted in the compilation of lists of plants that are more likely to be found growing in ancient woodland than anywhere else and the inclusion of the Wood Anemone in these lists means that it can be described as an **indicator species.** They are shade-evading plants, needing to flower and manufacture food while the trees are still dormant and at least one third of available daylight reaches the woodland floor. Thriving in a loamy soil, extensive carpets of flowers can be seen during the months of March, April and May.

The plants are poisonous, containing the acrid, irritant substances anemonine and protoanemonine. In spite of this herbalists in earlier times recommended the application of various parts of the plant to cure headaches, agues and rheumatic gout. Nicholas Culpeper, the seventeenth century apothecary and herbalist even advised chewing the roots because 'it purgeth the head mightily'.

Scientific classification
Kingdom: Plantae
Phylum: Magnoliophyta
Class: Magnolopsida
Order: Ranunculales
Family: Ranunculaceae
Genus: Anemone L.
Species: Anemone nemorosa

Greek legends relate that Anemos, the wind, sends his namesakes the Anemones to herald his coming in the early days of spring. This might account for the fact that the most popular common name for the wood anemone is Windflower, and is certainly more flattering than the other two country names of Crowfoot and Smell Fox.

Carpet of wood anemones

Dog's Mercury

A little further down the slopes from where the anemones are growing travelling towards the stream, the ground is always damper and the shade deeper even in winter under the much older and significantly taller ash, poplar and sweet chestnut trees. Here another plant with a strong affinity for ancient woodland is just beginning to flower, but it is conspicuous on account of its upright stems and relatively large brilliant green leaves providing such a contrast to its sombre surroundings rather than the attractiveness of its blooms.

Mercurialis perennis

Dog's Mercury favours deep shade, sending up numerous undivided stems about thirty centimetres high from its creeping rhizomes. Each hairy stem bears several pairs of large roughish leaves and before they are fully out, small yellowish- green flowers grow from the axils of the upper pairs. They can be described as dioecious because male and female flowers are produced on different plants, which are rarely found intermixed but grow in separate patches. The female plants tend to be less common than the males with their shorter stalks and more pointed, less serrated leaves.

Flowering occurs between March and mid May. The seeds ripen in the summer and are wind pollinated. Flies can also play their part, but Dog's Mercury usually achieves far better success increasing by its spreading, creeping rootstock and stems than by relying on seed. The rhizomes have contractile properties enabling them to drag rootstock back into the soil when new growth sometimes emerges above ground, so protecting the root from drying out.

The plants contain saponin, ethereal oils, an alkaloid and trimethylamine in the leaves that results in an odour similar to rotting fish when they are bruised. In its fresh state Dog's Mercury is poisonous and can cause damage to the liver, kidneys and stomach. The juice is emetic and purgative. A medical herbalist working in our village, told me that medieval people who often suffered with worms as a consequence of living in such close proximity to their animals, would be tempted to eat some of the first fresh green leaves of spring and in doing so would help to purge themselves of their parasites! In previous centuries a lotion made from the plants was used externally to treat eye and ear problems, warts and sores and as an antiseptic dressing.

A greyish- yellow coloured dye can be obtained from the plant tops when alum is used as a mordant (fixative) and a fine blue dye from the stems and leaves, turned red by acids, destroyed by alkalis, but otherwise permanent.

The name Dog's Mercury probably derives from the legend that the god Mercury revealed the plants medicinal virtues - Greeks called it Mercury's Grass. The prefix 'dog' is also often given to wild flowers that are lacking in the properties of allied species, and in this instance possibly because of its inedibility compared to the less harmful annual species Mercurialis annus. The only other common name I have been able to find for the plant is Dog's Cole.

Scientific classification

Kingdom: Plantae
Phylum: Magnoliophyta
Class: Magnoliopsida
Order: Malpighiales
Family: Euphorbiaceae
Genus: Mercurialis
Species:
Mercurialis perennis

Primrose

Although the Primrose is a well known symbol of spring and Easter, the name coming from the Latin 'prima rosa' meaning first rose, I chose not to feature it as my first flower of the year on account of its distribution in Long Wood. In the spring of 2006 I only managed to find primroses in four different locations, in patches of no more than three plants. In 2007 however, walking the same route, the total had quadrupled and in several instances a main plant had much smaller, newer plants growing in close proximity. It will be interesting to see in the future if the creation of clearings to let more light and warmth into the wood continues to encourage this species to multiply.

Primroses are hardy perennials with a thick, fleshy rootstock underground from which grow rosettes of spoon shaped leaves approximately ten centimetres long, soft and wrinkled on the upper surface, deeply veined and hairy on the underside. The leaves are irregularly toothed. The flowers, made up of five notched, pale yellow petals, grow singly on long, pinkish, downy stalks that actually spring from a common, central, stout flower stem, so short it is hidden amongst the leaf bases. There are two types of flower, the pin-eyed with the style visible above the stamens, and the thrum-eyed with the style below the stamens, only one kind growing on each plant. For successful pollination by long tongued insects such as bees and moths, pollen from a pin-eyed plant must reach the style of a thrum-eyed plant and vice versa. Moths attracted by the bright petal colours pollinate primroses at night. Ants are attracted by the sticky seed and aid dispersal.

The primrose has a very long history of medicinal use and in the early days was particularly used to treat conditions involving paralysis, spasms, cramps and gout.

Scientific classification
Kingdom: Plantae
Phylum: Magnoliophyta
Class: Magnoliopsida
Order: Primulales
Family: Primulaceae
Genus: Primula
Species: Primula vulgaris

Primrose plants contain a fragrant oil, Primulin, Saponin and salicyclates (the main ingredient of aspirin), and preparations made from the flowers, leaves and dried roots have pain-relieving, anti-inflammatory, expectorant, emetic and sedative effects.

The flowers and leaves are edible raw or cooked and the flowers can also be made into wine and jam.

There are several references to the primrose in British folklore. The five petals are supposed to represent birth, initiation, consummation, repose and death. It was believed to be a protection against witches and if bunches of primroses were hung in cowsheds then fairies would refrain from stealing the milk. It was also alleged that if children ate the flowers then they would see fairies. Another superstition stated that it was lucky to bring thirteen primroses into the house but unlucky to bring in only one.

Barren Strawberry

The Barren Strawberry is an early-flowering native perennial commonly found growing in ancient woodland in southern England. There are two quite extensive patches of this tiny plant in Long Wood, both on the main ride, one just west of the picnic site and the other close to the wettest section of the track.

Scientific classification
Kingdom: Plantae
Phylum: Magnoliophyta
Class: Magnoliopsida
Order: Rosales
Family: Rosaceae
Genus: Potentilla
Species: Potentilla sterilis

The Barren Strawberry has a branching rootstock with a tuft of silky leaves on hairy stalks rising directly from it. The leaves consist of three regularly toothed leaflets and the flowers have five small, white, notched pals, which characteristically do not touch.
In spite of the image conjured up by the word 'strawberry', the fruits are not red and juicy but fleshless, a mere cluster of dry achenes.

Barren strawberry