

It has long been a dream to recreate part of the Nuneham Courtenay historic parkland at the Arboretum. Initially we felt that it was indeed just that: a dream but dreams have a habit of becoming reality at the Garden and Arboretum and as I stand and survey what was originally a meadow I see the signs of a historic parkland emerging.

Recreating a Parkland

by Piers Newth

Ten years ago the Arboretum's wild flower meadow was approximately 12 acres in size, it then grew to 30 acres when we took on the land between the Arboretum and the village of Nuneham Courtenay. This new piece of land was unimproved and species rich so needed little work. We simply removed all the old broken fences and chain harrowed it once a year just after cutting the hay with the aim of dragging seed from our old bit into the new bit. Since the 1970s our approach to management of the meadow has been to cut it for hay once a year after the wild flowers have set seed. This task was carried out by a local farmer who took the hay as payment. This suited both parties well. Before the farmer cut the hay we hand weeded the meadow. This time-consuming task is essential taking one person around nine days to pull up the ragwort, thistles, docks, cow parsley and nettles. We make a point of trying to leave a few of these plants as they are often covered in insects. Any brambles are managed by cutting them with a flail mower. We try to limit the amount of flailing to one clump per year then we allow them to grow for 5 years before repeating the process. This ensures that there is always some cover for wild life.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the original meadow was planted up with exotic tree species. Whilst small, these posed no problem to the meadow, only a minor problem to the farmer whilst cutting the hay. However with the passage of time these small trees are now semi mature and this has begun to pose a question. Do we allow the meadow to become woodland or do we try and retain it as meadow? Britain has lost 95% of its semi natural grassland since the Second



World War, a frightening statistic that really underlines the need for in-situ conservation of this endangered habitat whilst giving us the perfect opportunity to do our bit here in our own back yard. We took the decision to remove the exotic species from the meadow but not all in one go, every year after the hay has been cut we remove a couple of these young trees so in five years time the over planting will have been reversed.

This change in management coincided with the decision to commission Kim Wilkie Associates to create a development plan for the Arboretum. It was at this point that the dream of recreating the parkland began to look like it could become reality. When looking at the history of the Estate we realised that by reinstating the historic parkland we would be creating the wonderfully evocative look of the large 19th century estate, that our meadow was once a part of. The key difference between meadow and parkland was the introduction of livestock to graze for a period of three months after the hay has been cut. The addition of livestock is important as they disturb the soil allowing seed to germinate adding to the diversity and clean up the meadow eating all the dead grass preventing a build up of thatch. So not only were we

creating that wonderfully evocative feel of a 19th century estate we were also improving the biodiversity of the site.

Key to turning the meadow into a historic parkland was the inclusion of the land in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. The Scheme provided part funding along with generous support from the Friends to enable the restoration of the parkland to go ahead. Without this funding the installation of the parkland railings would have certainly remained a dream. The railings enabled us to graze the parkland for the first time since it's been in the Garden's ownership with 24 Aberdeen Angus cows from the Rycote Park Estate. The cows arrived in August and stayed with us for three months. Staff training was provided and our daily routine included topping up the water troughs and checking that the cattle were fine. It was a sad day when they left us at the end of November.

The old historic clumps of trees have had parkland railing roundels installed around them enabling us to plant more young trees. This has predominantly consisted of oak but we have also planted some female black poplars. These will take over in time from the mature trees as and when they die. Planting within the roundels also prevents any trees encroaching in to the grassland.

With the completion of the sale of Palmers Leys the size of the historic parkland rises to 65 acres. Although at the moment the phrase historic parkland is a rather grand description of what in essence is an area of set aside and will need quite a lot of work before we can call it anything other than a field! But we like a challenge and there is certainly lots to do in this new area. We look forward to sharing our plans with you in the months and years to come.

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