

Outwoods Management Committee  
Rangers Report  
April - June 2022



# Volunteer Activities

## Green Gym

Volunteer activities in April through to June were carried out in the Outwoods. Due to the impact of February's storms, there was still some work to do to clear storm damage. Much of the more obvious damage, near footpaths, was cleared quickly by the Rangers after the storms, so we have enlisted volunteer assistance from the more popular 'desire line' routes.

The Green Gym has also continued to uproot sycamore saplings throughout the woodland paying particular attention to the area around the 'bus stop'. They have also been trying to keep up with the abundance of waste material produced by the Brooksby Melton students (see below). At every opportunity we are burning the waste but as the weather gradually gets warmer and drier, opportunities are becoming scarce as ideally the waste is burnt in damp conditions to reduce the risk of losing control of the fire.

Sadly, there has also been an increase in levels of litter so the volunteers have been out picking litter from path edges, in scrub areas and quite oddly, from in trees. For some time now, we have been collecting a large amount of Budweiser bottles that are found in certain areas of the wood. Visitors have noticed the bottles strewn around the woodland and have dubbed this litter-bug "Budweiser Man" (though we ourselves are cautious not to presume gender). These bottles appear frequently nestled in the crooks of branches and holes in tree trunks and rarely in the nearby bin. We are aware when this visitor has left their trail as we will find the empty 24 bottle box near the information board as we arrive for work in the morning. We can only hope that they're not driving.

It is quite surprising, as we talk to the public, of how many are aware of this issue. A few have also reported to us that they themselves have collected bottles and have offered to pick them up as they walk. Of course we have discouraged picking these up by hand and have offered a litter picker and bag if they're insistent, but we'd rather the location be highlighted to the team in order to collect ourselves to help us to track their route or establish a time pattern.

We are trying to remove all bottles from the wood, not only to keep the SSSI free of litter, but also to remove carelessly discarded bottles as these can present a fire hazard.

## Enstruct Training & Brooksby Melton College

The groups of students are still carrying out work to remove sycamore saplings and rhododendron. The rhododendron is piling up faster than the Rangers can burn on site so we have now asked for this particular task to be postponed. Rhododendron will re-root itself over the growing months if not destroyed, so the task may be fruitless until we get back to the colder months in autumn when it is more suitable for burning. Therefore, in April, the groups also carried out several litter picks.

## Heartwood (Coleorton and New Lount Volunteer Group) Community Woodfuel Group

In June we saw the charcoal kiln fired up for the first time in at least 7 years. The burn was carried out by The Woodsman, Pete, who was supported by volunteers of this group. The aim is that the group will develop familiarity with the Outwoods kiln, as it is much larger than those that they use on a regular basis on their own woodland site and gain the skills and knowledge to be able to carry out the burns themselves in the future.

## Improvements

Following the rerouting of the entrance to the Outwoods events space there have been many positive comments about the improvement to the pedestrian visitor entrance. We have received many compliments and overheard positive comments from those entering the area. These compliments may have been helped along by the appearance of daffodils in early April, followed by the bluebells and the freshly cut grass around the café. The aesthetics have also been improved by the fresh laying of bark and the new 'seating' that is the repurposed felled tree.

We have also been kept busy removing graffiti which appears regularly on the oak picnic tables in the Events Barn and keeping the area clear of litter, mostly made up of the discarded coffee cups and serviettes from the café. As the warmer weather comes, the café users numbers are increasing and with this, unfortunately, comes the litter issue.

As usual, the space around the café has been maintained to a high level. Each morning, litter is collected and the area blown of leaves and seeds; the playground is inspected, bark raked and the facilities are kept clean and restocked.

We have also been monitoring the playground/picnic area for early daffodil and bluebell growth. Any found have been uprooted and placed into the bedding area around the mature oak in the car park. We are trying to improve this area to become a 'memorial garden' to discourage the leaving of memorial trinkets within the SSSI. Following the snowdrops appearing in February and March, we have made improvements to the small bedding area around the oak tree in the events space. The low level retaining wall around the tree has been stripped out and rebuilt and once all early spring flowers went over, dog violets and forget-me-nots spotted around the picnic area, which would have otherwise be trampled, have been replanted in the beds.



In preparation for the charcoal burn in June, the Rangers have created a walkway and open glade area in which to create the 'kilnsmans hut'. The building of the hut was a community activity for the charcoal weekend event by Artscape. The frame was constructed with poles of ash and members of the public were invited to add the bracken 'cover' for weatherproofing. The outside of the fencing was cleared of vegetation to allow spectators to congregate around the edges of the kiln site and the grassed area in front was mowed to create a tidy lawned area.





Further improvements to the site, carried out by the Ranger team during May, included moving memorial plaques from the post in the car park. The original post was only 6" wide and was housing plaques of an average width of 9". As this was not appropriate, given the sentiment of the memorials, we have now installed a 10" wide post and situated this in the walled area of the great oak in the car park. This area will also act as memorial garden, in an effort to encourage visitors to use this spot to lay flowers for their lost loved ones rather than place plastics and garden variety plants and flowers within the SSSI.

A new plaque has already been placed on the new post and an informal service held to commemorate a regular season ticket holder visitor, who died suddenly earlier this year.

### **Bluebells**

Of course no report on the Outwoods covering April/May can be complete without mention of the bluebells. This year there was a particularly early show and many of the flowers were in full bloom by the 25th April.

The Bluebell Walk was brought forward by a week in order to ensure that the bluebells were at their finest for the Rangers tour of the best show. We had a record number of 51 attendees from the local community, even though the event was only given 2 days of promotion.

The area that has been cleared of bramble by TCV in collaboration with Enrych was particularly stunning this year. A photograph of the outcome of their hard work was passed onto them with a 'thank you' for their hard work.



On the 10th April, persons unknown lit 3 separate fires within close proximity of the Outwoods. These fires were at the edge of the farmers field next to Jubilee Wood and the Outwoods. The fire closest to the Outwoods was fuelled by brash in the field left over from the falling of the mature beech during storms in 2019.

The emergency services that attended had great difficulty in accessing these fires due to their location which allowed the fire to spread over the drystone wall and left damage to the outer edge of the woodland.



Fortunately, the damage to the Outwoods was minimal, but this has highlighted an issue with access by the emergency services. Last year, the emergency services were required to attend a fire in the Outwoods which was only just within reach of the fire hoses as the trucks access was limited. In order to protect the Outwoods, we will look at the options available to us in order to open up the primary footpath network to allow better access to emergency vehicles. This will also allow better access for machinery required to access the eroded footpath near the rock face.

Also to report from the Outwoods, the demand for Trampler use has significantly increased. As there is now only one Trampler, this has meant that we are having to be mindful of how often it can be used on a daily basis because of limited battery time. We are booking in users but limiting to only 2 users per day which also means that we're having to issue deadlines on return times to allow for the next user.

## **Charcoal Event-June 18th & 19th**

### **Background**

To see the return in functionality of the charcoal kiln has been a hope for a number of years for the Ranger team. However, this is very much a dying art and a competent kiln operator is a rarity. Contact was made in June 2020 with The Woodsman, Peter Nicholls, to enquire on whether he would be interested in running the kiln and to also ensure that the kiln was still operational as it had been stood unused for so many years.

Pete is a local traditional woodsman/forester who served his apprenticeship on the Earl of Fitzwilliam estate in South Yorkshire. Pete now trades locally in charcoal that he makes himself in a ring and retort kiln. His produce is sold by small local businesses around Leicestershire and Derbyshire.

During a site visit to the Outwoods, Pete was impressed with the size and condition of the kiln despite its lack of use for a number of years. However, it was noted that one of the chimneys was missing and the ground would need building up at the base of the kiln with soil and sand. There would also need to be a log store on site to season logs to at least 18% moisture content for creating good quality charcoal.

During a meeting in the Outwoods in 2021 with Dr. Jack Matthews, the kiln plans were mentioned and Jack was very keen to assist on this. Jack went on to speak to Susan Kilby, Heritage Education Officer with the National Forest Company, on whether she considered the firing of the kiln viable. It was Susan that presented the idea that this could be an opportunity for an educational event.

As has been reported previously, the preparations for this event have been all consuming in the building of the log store, the Green Gym providing 6m<sup>3</sup> of silver birch through thinning operations, which was then cut into 10" logs and stacked in the log store to season.

The National Forest Company's involvement in this project has been intrinsic. Susan Kilby project managed the event in great detail and developed further community engagement in order for the manufacturing of the charcoal to become a more of a community event than a straight charcoal burn.

One of the community groups that were invited to run this project was Heartwood Community Woodfuel Group. These are a team of volunteers that create charcoal on a regular basis on their woodland site of Nether Hall Wood, Hartshorne. The funds from the sale of their produce from this project go back into their project for sustainability. The Heartwood volunteers shadowed The Woodsman as he took charge of the burn. The volunteers had never used such a large kiln and although the principles are the same for any sized burner, the length of time of burning is much increased.

School groups were invited to attend the weekend of education which embedded functional skills in history, science, maths and art. Further fun art activities were provided by Charnwood Arts and Artscape. 9 schools took up the offer to attend.

## The Event

On the evening of Friday 17th June, the kiln was loaded by The Woodsman, Pete Nicholls, assisted by the Heartwood Woodfuel Group and National Forest Company staff, Julie Attard and Susan Kilby.

On the morning of the event, the kiln was lit, marking the opening of the event.....



Olivia's Café provided refreshments near to the kiln in a converted horse-box.

Educational information was hung from trees on the walkway from the car park to the kiln.



Unfortunately, we don't have exact figures of attendance for the event. It is also unfortunate that the Saturday was hampered with rain which affected visitor numbers. However, fortunately, the weather did not affect the kiln temperature and the weather made a marked improvement on the Sunday, which encouraged the visitors in.

The production of charcoal took less time than the approximated 24 hours burn time. By 5pm the clear smoke indicated that all moisture had been removed from the timber and it was at this point that the kiln was 'sealed' to cut off the oxygen. Although, there was a further 48 hours cooling time left before the lid could be removed, so there was still uncertainty on whether the process had been a success.

On Monday 19th, the Ranger team, members of Heartwood Woodfuel Group and The Woodsman, removed the lid of the kiln to reveal that we had succeeded in the production of charcoal. However, there was a portion that had not fully carbonised and a pocket that had 'overcooked'. The reason for this was that some areas inside the kiln had received more oxygen than others. This was put down to a change in wind direction during lighting.

The Woodsman, Peter Nicholls, inspecting the contents of the kiln post burn.



The Ranger team were then left to remove the contents. As this has never been tried before, we took advice from the Rangers at Bradgate Park who had kindly lent a chimney in order for the burn to take place. They advised on the design of the 'chute' to use for removal which allows the finer charcoal, which is not up to the grade for sale as BBQ charcoal, to fall through the gaps of 20mm chicken wire and into a tonne bag.



So far, 65 bags have been removed, with approximately another 30 bags remaining. Unfortunately, due to staff holiday, the remainder of the charcoal remains in the kiln but will be removed at the earliest opportunity.

With the Charcoal event running at the same time as the Sculpture Trail, there has been a raising of the profile of the Outwoods as a 'place of interest' to visit. Visitor feedback regarding the events this year has been very positive with many in awe of some of the sculptures this year. Olivia's Café's response to these events has also been very positive and the addition of the horsebox café down by the kiln was well met by visitors, with some visitors (perhaps jokingly) requesting it as a permanent feature. Bags of charcoal have been put up for sale from the café.

It is very much hoped that the charcoal production was not a one-off and that this can become an annual feature in the woodland. Pete Nicholls is keen to run another firing of the kiln again this year, using up the timber that was left over and bringing some of his own to top up. This of course will not be part of a wider event, but to simply produce more charcoal and entertain visitors.

