# Watts Wood, Comberton

## Assessment and management plan

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## Background

Watts Wood is an area of about 2 ha on the site of the old sewage works south east of the village. It comprises planted woodland (mainly ash, oak, field maple and cherry) bisected by Tit Brook which flows diagonally south west to north east. Old hedges occur on the west and north, though the boundary is open to the south and east. A network of paths provides public access around the perimeter with small tracks into the centre.

As a Parish Council asset the wood plays a significant role in the wider plans for the Nature Recovery Network within the parish. In addition, it provides an important public access resource for the village and is used by a number of groups. A small notice board provides details of the some wildlife in the area.

## Site Description

Five zones can be identified. These are woodland, open glade, stream banks, pathways and boundary. Parts of the planted woodland are rather too dense and the glades and stream bank show vigorous growth of both perennial and herbaceous species, which threaten the stability of this habitat.

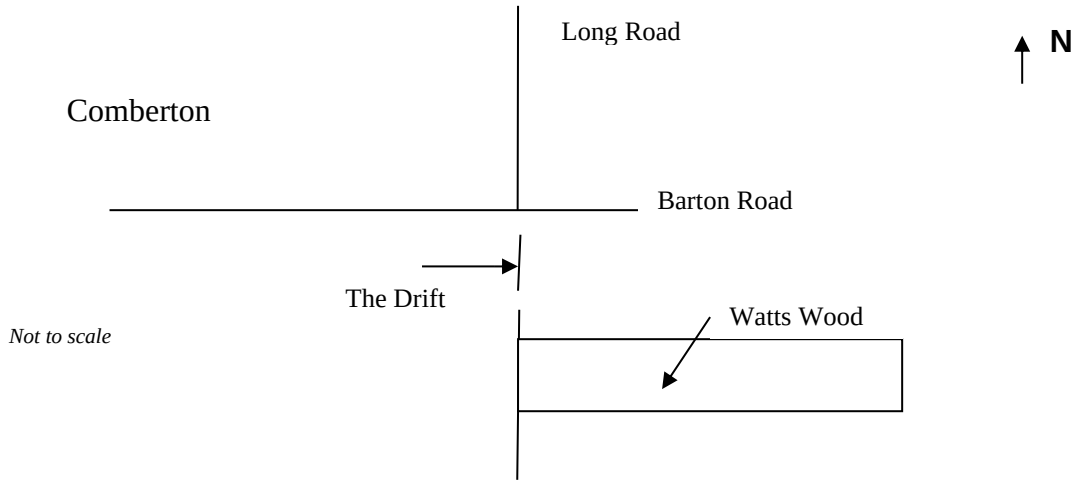
Ownership of the wood was transferred to the village Parish Council who aimed to manage the wood as a nature reserve with public access. Accordingly, a management action plan was been devised to provide a diverse range of habitats and encourage biodiversity.

- An area of woodland thinned to encourage light to pebetrate to the floor. Cut timber will stacked to create habitat for insects, small mammals and amphibians.
- Tit Brook banks should be cut in September or October each year and open glades established on their shoulders and at woodland edges by cutting every two or three years on alternate sides to allow light penetration and control bramble. Similarly, areas of the streambed will need to be cleared on a two or three year cycle to control reed growth.
- Close mowing of the grass around the seat will be continued. Other areas of open glade will be established on top of the mound and between the wood edge and stream east of the bridge. These will be cut back on a three year cycle to maintain tussocky grassland and prevent tree growth.
- The south east boundary grassland will be similarly managed to separate the wood from the Herringland Trust field to the north. The other boundaries are marked by old hawthorn hedges, the canopies of which should be raised in over footpaths to facilitate access.
- The paths should continue to close mown and the covering canopy raised in places to encourage grass growth

## Location and size

The area is about 2.0ha, located the South East of village on the site of the old sewage works; entrance at TL389569. Access is by a gate from the green by-way (The Herringsland Drift) running south from Long Road towards Lord's Bridge. The location is shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. *Approximate location of Watts Wood (not to scale)*




## Age and general description

The wood was established during the early 1980s, after the sewage works was abandoned. It comprises planted woodland intersected by a number of paths with a drainage stream (Tit Brook) flowing south west to north east. An old hawthorn hedge provides the northern boundary and a mixed hedge and fence provides the boundary with the Drift on the west. The eastern boundary is an open ditch separating the wood from farmland. The southern boundary is open and marked by a discontinuous fence line with intermittent hawthorn growth. An old hawthorn hedge runs for about 100 m on the southern and eastern boundaries about 3 m inside the boundary and separated from it by with a grass pathway.

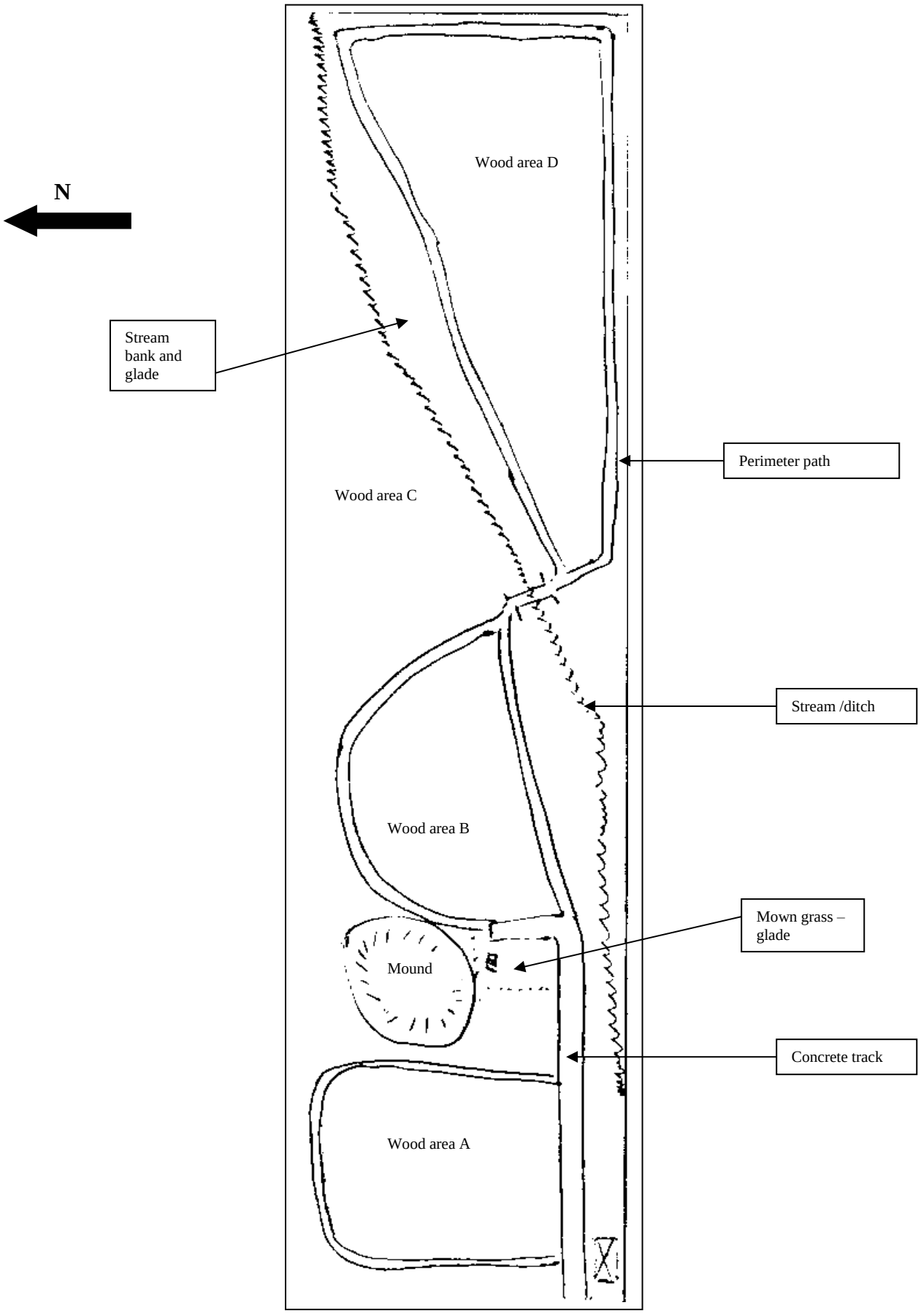
## Geology and soil

The site is Gault clay and the soil probably belongs to the Evesham 3 association. There is a small layer of leaf mould and plant debris, modified at random by building debris and stone.

## Vegetation and ecology

The primary tree cover is planted field maple, oak and ash within established hawthorn hedges. A small stream runs roughly south west to north east, diagonally through the wood and water often lays immediately north of the entrance over winter. Herbaceous species on the woodland floor are poorly represented in the main area of woodland at the eastern end. There seem to be into the five primary ecological zones as identified in Fig. 2.

Figure 2. *Plan of Watts Wood to show the main vegetation zones.*



### *Woodland*

This has been planted and currently comprises oak and ash with cherry, field maple and some sycamore (an introduced but fully naturalized species). There are three horse chestnuts; this is native to the Balkans and of relatively little wildlife value in Britain. Most trees are in lines, as planted (Figure 3), and density of the canopy reduces the penetration of light to the woodland floor. There are several well established spindle trees. There are four main areas of woodland trees (see Figure 2), separated by paths or hawthorn hedging. The largest area (D on the map) is at the eastern end of the wood.

3a

3b

Figure 3. *Woodland floor in January 2003. a) area D and b) meandering path.*

An extensive proportion of this area shows very sparse floor cover (primarily cow parsley) and a number of trees seem to be in poor health, lacking vigour and showing branch dieback (Figure 4). Some trees (mainly ash and oak) in this zone are stressed and dying. There is some regrowth of seedling hawthorn, field maple and some herbaceous species on the wood floor. There is a large amount of surface and subsurface pea gravel throughout this area, which is understood to have been dumped from road sweepings during the 1970s. It would, therefore, be helpful to know the history of this part of the wood in more detail.

Figure 4. *Area of stressed trees and dead undergrowth, July 2003.*

The eastern and western sides of Watts Wood vary slightly in composition. The western part (A on the map in Figure 2) is slightly wetter than the east and alder and willow are present immediately inside the entrance.

### *Open glade*

There are three areas of open glade which provide shelter amongst natural grass growth. The first is a mown area around the wooden seat (Figure 5). The second is on the south bank of the stream in the northeast corner of the wood. The latter area comprises grassland with occasional young cherry and field maple. The third area is atop the mound.



a b

Figure 5. *Open glade around seating area, a) January 2003 and b) July 2003.*

### *Boundaries*

The southern and eastern sides are unfenced with well established grass growth. The northern and western edges are primarily old hawthorn hedges with a dense canopy which often reduces light penetration to the ground below. The southern boundary against the Herringsland Drift has remains of a wire mesh fence and significant bramble growth. Figure 6 shows the hedge on the eastern end of the southern boumndary.

Figure 6. *Boundary path at eastern end of the southern boundary, January 2003. Note the partially overgrown hedge canopy and unmarked grassy boundary on right.*

### *Paths*

A well maintained grass path runs in a figure eight pattern around the woodland from the end of the concrete entrance way. A short unmaintained track provides access to the top of the mound. A third track runs around the northwestern periphery. Several paths run through and around the wood (e.g. Figure 3b, 7) and the boundary track on the southeast edge is shown in Figure 6.

### *Stream banks*

The stream banks are grassy with bramble scrub (Figure 7). Small amounts of reed mace are establishing west of the bridge. This is part of the Tit Brook drainage system and as such should be maintained.

a

b

Figure 7. *Stream bank and path, a) looking west from the bridge towards concrete entrance way, January 2003 and b) looking towards the bridge, July 2003.*

### Current management
The pathways and an area of mown grass maintained as a seating area was previously cut regularly on a voluntary basis.

### Wildlife value
Deer footprints have been seen in the streambed and water voles are reported to be present. Climax vegetation would presumably be broad leaved woodland dominated by oak and ash. These have been planted and most are establishing well.

## Opportunities
The history of the site and primary vegetation indicates the potential for continued improvement of the natural flora and woodland structure to enhance biodiversity. The area is well used by the community, so that there is opportunity for continued leisure use. The woodland is to be a key part of the parish Nature recovery Networkm, connectimg to the churchyard to the south east by a permissive path across arable fields and potentially through hedges to Barton Road the Woodland Burial site.

## Constraints
The wood is relatively small and close to the village, which might limit its value to wildlife owing to disturbance. Proximity to the village also creates the risk of vandalism and use of the site for disposal of refuse.

## Aims
1. To maximise the biological value of the wood, enhance the biodiversity of the area and provide a retreat for local people to enjoy the natural environment.
2. To provide key habitat in the village Nature Recovery Network

## Objectives

1. To manage the wood to maximise value for conservation and biodiversity.
2. To provide a quiet oasis close to the village for the community to enjoy.
3. To achieve Nature Reserve status for the wood.

## Action plan
The aim should be to enhance each zone of the wood to provide the widest possible range of habitats consistent with the restored woodland nature of the site. Several non-indigenous plants have been introduced to the site. It is proposed that some of these should remain as they provide structural diversity and some local colour when in flower. Removal of others such as Horse Chestnut should be considered.

A small management committee should be established to oversee implementation, monitor changes and modify this initial plan as necessary. It should include representatives from the community, those involved in management and potential users with professional biologists in an advisory capacity.

### Woodland
The intention is to create a greater diversity in the canopy and woodland floor. Felling up to 5% of the trees in a random pattern will allow greater light penetration to the floor.

Additionally a small number could be either pollarded or coppiced to represent traditional woodland management practice and encourage diversity on the woodland floor.

The overall aim is to recreate typical native deciduous woodland. However, although there are three horse chestnut trees in the area, it is suggested these should be left at present, as it is a popular tree. There are also a small number of young sycamore trees, which should be removed. Both species are introduced and are of relatively little value to wildlife. Neither would occur in native woodland.

The current flora beneath the trees is sparse in part of area D. This could be augmented by sowing a woodland mix of grasses and flowering herbs at a later date if colonisation is slow. This area needs to be monitored.

Small areas of the cut timber will be stacked in various parts of the wood to encourage small mammals, amphibians and other invertebrates.

The wood is arguably over populated by trees at present and of relatively little value to local wildlife. There should be no further planting, or very restricted specific planting at the site in future. Some of the existing trees are dying owing to overshadowing, and in two cases ring barking by human action. It is important for woodland to retain a number of dead or dying trees to provide habitat variety.

## Open glade

This is an important part of woodland ecology and the areas within the wood should be managed differently.

### *Seating area*

This should be mown on a regular basis to provide a seating area.

### *Stream bank in NE corner*

The banks near the bridge offer the potential to create a linear glade on both sides of the stream. The area should be cut on alternate sides at two to three year intervals, during late September or early October, and the debris removed. The regime should start this autumn with a cut of the south side and the north should be cut next year to introduce the triennial cut regime. Any young tree or shrub growth should be cut down, as it would prevent establishment of the open glade environment.

### *Mound top*

The trees and shrubs of the main wood area and bank provide a sheltered ridge. The area would make an excellent sheltered glade.

The grass and bramble scrub should be cut in September, on a triennial cycle to maintain tussocky grass.

### *Eastern face of mound*

This area is currently part of the main woodland, and has been colonised by primroses. An area of the tree growth should be cut back and tree canopy reduced to increase light penetration to the slope. This would encourage the primroses and other spring flowering plants.

### Edges

The eastern part of the southern boundary and the eastern boundary are currently in rough, overgrown grass scrub. As both boundaries are well defined, to the adjacent field and ditch respectively, no further boundary delineation should be necessary. These areas could be maintained as tussocky grassland, cut at 150-200mm high in September on an annual or biennial cycle. If cut biennially, it is suggested that alternating 15 to 20 metre lengths could be cut each year.

The northern boundary is mature hawthorn. This should be trimmed in areas to raise the crown and allow light access to the ground.

### Stream banks

The banks are currently colonised by vigorous grass and bramble scrub. Contact should be re-established with the contractor who used to cut the stream banks so that regular trimming can be reinstated. Alternate tops of the banks can be cut at 150 to 200 mm high in September on a triennial cycle to prevent overshadowing of the stream bed and colonisation of scrub. We need to recognize the stream is part of the Tit Brook drainage system. Accordingly, the streambed should be kept clear of debris and cleared of reed mace stolons which will eventually form a dense mat and block the flow.

East of the bridge the banks merge with the open glade area described above so that a more extensive open area could be developed.

### Paths

The main mown figure eight grass paths should be maintained to facilitate public access. It also provides a different type of grassland and would abut the longer tussocky grass of the glades. It is suggested that this main path should be no more than 1 m wide and that the network of tracks through the trees should not be maintained in future. The hawthorn hedges alongside paths on the south and east boundaries are well established and mature. Parts should be trimmed to raise the crowns in areas where light penetration is poor.

## Other considerations

### Habitat augmentation

Consideration should be given to placing bird boxes and bat roosts in suitable positions.

### Public access and safety

General public access carries a risk of concomitant vandalism, litter and fly tipping. Access is from the Herringsland Drift, which is subject to a separate management regime, although this does allow access to wheeled vehicles. This should be discouraged, except for essential farm and maintenance traffic. People entering the wood should also be encouraged to reduce their impact on the wood and take all their litter home including dog waste (“leave only footprints and take only memories”).

A public safety assessment should be made at intervals as all entry is on ‘an own risk basis’. There will be a need to monitor all dead trees left standing as habitat regularly, to reduce the risk to people from falling branches or trees. Similarly, stacks of timber or brushwood will need to be monitored to reduce fire risk.

## Costs and labour

There will be a need for contractors to be involved in grass cutting and some of the work on paths and trees. From time to time there may be an additional need for work by contractors. The Annex provides a calendar based schedule.

## Species recording

Members of the public regularly visit the wood. Their involvement in looking after the wood and noting variations the ecology should be encouraged. In addition, local naturalists and specialists, together with the village schools should be encouraged to visit and survey frequency and incidence of plants, animals and fungi to provide a full species list.

Although a list of species specifically recorded in the wood is not maintained, a record of species in the Parish is kept by the Parish Council Nature Recovery programme.

*Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to the Parish Council Tree Group, who contributed to this plan with enthusiastic support. Rob Mungovan, Ecology Officer SCDC, has given advice and kindly provided some of the photographs.

*Note*

*Updated by October 2024.*

This schedule aims to maintain the area for public access and create habitat to improve the wildlife opportunities. Grass paths should be cut regularly during the growing season and other areas of grass on the shoulders and top of Tit Brook mown cyclically to maintain different habitats.

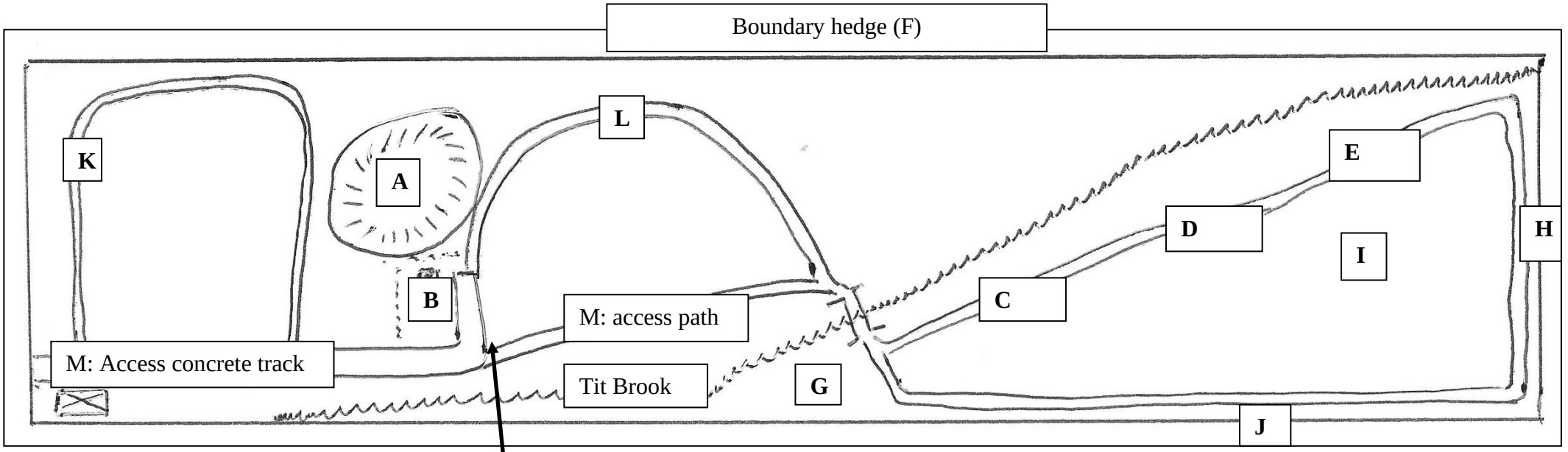
| Date | Task |
|---|---|
| January or February | Maintain canopy of hawthorn hedges around and within the wood at *ca* 2.5 m, to reduce obstruction to walkers; in sections, where appropriate, allow light penetration by trimming larger branches growing over the paths. |
| April | Grass cut area B to *ca* 110mm<br>Cut grass paths; *ca* 1.5 m walkway |
| May | Grass cut area B<br>Cut grass paths; *ca* 1.5 m walkway |
| June | Grass cut area B<br>Cut grass paths as above |
| July | Grass cut area B<br>Cut grass paths as above<br>Remove branches and bramble stems obstructing pathways |
| August | Grass cut area B<br>Cut grass on mound A to 150 mm at end of month; remove cut grass to prevent nutrient return.<br>Cut grass paths as above |
| September | Grass cut area B<br>Cut stream banks to keep base of ditch clear and reduce flooding risk (local authority responsibility).<br>Cut grass paths as above |
| October | Clear bramble and other scrambling species on mound A and trim edges where appropriate, to maintain open clearing atop the mound.<br>Cut open glade areas on brook shoulder both sides of the pathway to *ca* 150 mm in approximately equal lengths of *ca* 40 m on triennial cycle (see A, B & C on attached sketch). Cutting section E in 2017, D in 2016 and C in 2018 and thereafter by triennial rotation. Remove cut vegetation from the trimmed areas to prevent nutrient return.<br>Cut grass paths as above, as neede |
| October or November | Identify overcrowded trees to thin the plantation. Felled trees to be left *in situ* and some wood stacked on site and allowed to rot as habitat. |

**Note**: Some of the cut grass and wood could be removed but would be best stacked as habitat

**Specific management suggestions**

1. Remove scrub growing along north side of stream south of Access Path M to open northern shoulder of Tit Brook. The aim is to create a more open vista, an area of open grass and facilitate management of the Tit Brook banks;
2. Raise canopy of the pathways to 2.5m.
3. Trim back growth around the display board;
4. Cut back growth encroaching on the pathways to simplify access;
5. Clear back margin of northern side of the main woodland area 'I' to restore open glade effect either side of the pathway so that grass south of the path can be mown regularly;
6. Coppice hazel bushes growing on the north side of the access path 'M' between the display board and the bridge
7. Cut back vegetation along ditch on eastern margin 'H'

*Watts Wood sketch map*.




Key

A: Mound with open grass on top
B: Grass, maintained to ca 150mm
C: Shoulder of Tit Brook
D: Shoulder of Tit Brook
E: Shoulder of Tit Brook
F: Northern Boundary hedge
G: Shaded grass area
H: Eastern boundary ditch and shoulder
I: Main area of woodland (used by Forest School)
J: South boundary
K: Loop path 1
L: Loop path 2
M: Access path and track