

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OLD SCHOOL WOOD IN THE VILLAGE OF GREAT WALDINGFIELD

In 2001, a group of residents got together to form 'Branchlines', a charitable unincorporated body with the aim of establishing and managing a community woodland in Great Waldingfield. There was widespread support for this idea and funds built up as we looked for a suitable site. From the outset, we tried to involve the whole community, including the village primary school. There were consultations and educational talks. A symbolic tree was planted by the school gates and a tree nursery stocked partly with seedlings grown by the pupils. We were supported by the Green Light Trust, which also offered training days in woodland skills.

Eventually, a 3.3 acre arable field became available near the old school. Grants and donations totalling over £20,000 were received from a number of public bodies and individuals. The name, 'Old School Wood' (OSW), was chosen by the primary school pupils and there was a well attended consultation day on the design of the wood. In Feb 2008, there was an inaugural public planting day. 140 people of all ages attended to help plant the first trees. In two years, 1100 trees were planted by volunteers over three open days and monthly working parties were set up to carry out ongoing routine management.

Features have been added for the benefit of wildlife and residents. There are ponds, seating, a mound, a wild flower meadow, a yew circle.

We have learned hedge laying, coppicing, willow weaving, mowing with scythes. We have improved our skills at identifying wildlife species.

OSW is now established and is well used by the local community. It is used by walkers, joggers and dog walkers. It is used by the school for education, with a forest school planned for this summer term. Open days have given the chance for enjoying and

learning about the abundant wildlife. We have had guided walks for the W.I. and U3A, hosted the Wildlife Watch group and the Beavers, a queen's jubilee picnic and an Easter sunrise service. Many people love to just sit on the log seat on the mound in the top corner to enjoy the view, especially at sunset.

David Taylor, Chair of Branchlines, Mar 2017

2023 SUPPLEMENT

In July 2018, 10 years after the original land purchase, we were able to acquire a further 2.7 acres of adjoining land, bringing the total holding to 6 acres. The new land was in two parcels.

The first parcel of 0.7 acres was part of an arable field that links OSW with the churchyard. There is a new community orchard of 14 fruit trees, including some heritage varieties of local origin. The rest of this area is now flower rich grassland cut for hay each summer. There is a new pond, some seating and good views. New hedges were planted along the boundaries. We are considering a chalk bank for butterflies.

The second parcel of 2 acres consisted of a farm woodland planted about 40 years ago and unmanaged since then. We decided to call this 'The Glades'. It now hosts the forest school, much loved by local children. There is an owl sculpture carved into a tree near the entrance. We have reinstated traditional woodland management. Coppicing will increase the number of glades, letting in light and generating woodland products such as firewood and poles.

The whole site continues to be managed by a dedicated team of volunteers, gradually building up skills and experience. Surveys have shown good biodiversity including unusual and protected species.

David Taylor, Chair of Branchlines, Mar 2023