

Parish Land on Hilltop, Cley

Conservation Management Plan

Reviewed January 2023

**Review taken place by Cley Parish Council in consultation with Hilltop Residents.
The review was based on the January 2020 document written by
Dr. Leo Batten CEnv, MCIEEM, January 2020.**

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Some areas of Parish land on Hilltop have developed dense vegetation, dominated in places by brambles and Sycamore. The Parish Council would like to see some of this become accessible amenity land. As a first step, they agreed that a management plan is needed which would look for opportunities to enhance not only the appearance of these areas, but also the variety of wildlife by additional planting of herbs and shrubs attractive to wildlife. The management plan was produced by Leo Batten in consultation with the residents and property owners in Hilltop.

General information

This area of parish land covered by the Management Plan is situated on the north and east side of the loke which runs along the east side of the house called 'Umtata' and connects Hilltop to the Coast Road. It consists of a strip of well vegetated land from 6 metres to 18 metres wide which extends north of the loke below Box House to Lamberts Cottage, a distance of 102 metres. The narrowest point is at the west end of North Landing and a fence has been erected four meters from the wall of North Landing. This effectively reduces the parish land to four metres wide at this point. It is covered by ordnance survey 1:50,000 sheet number 251 and 1:25,000 sheet number 133. The site has no statutory protection for its wildlife interest.

It was however suggested that a Tree Preservation Order is placed on the mature Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra*) at the west end of the site. This scarce species was the only mature tree on this parcel of Parish Land except for a number of Sycamores. It provided nesting sites for birds and was suitable to attach a few bird nesting boxes and bat boxes.

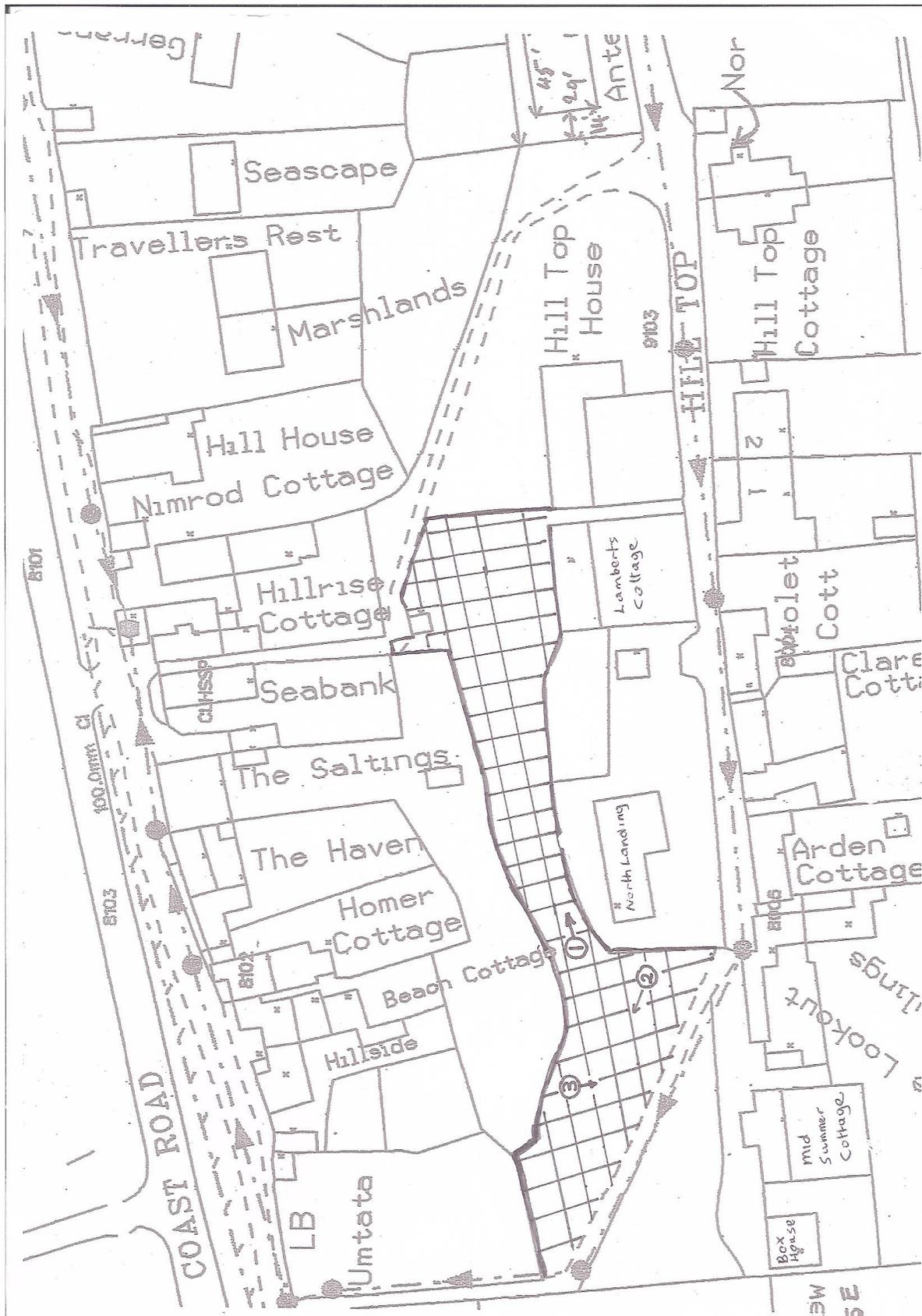
Since the original management plan was drawn up the Wych Elm has been removed because of Dutch Elm disease. This was confirmed by the NNDC tree officer. Several Sycamores have also died.

Site description

The site can be best accessed from its western end from the bend of the loke running along the east side of 'Umtata'. The density of the vegetation, which is mainly scrub and tall plants, makes it difficult to get on to the site especially in the summer months.

Photographs 1-3 show various parts of the site as it was in July 2013. Three photographs of the site in 2019 have been added.

Figure 1 is a map of part of hilltop showing the location of the parish land and the positions where five of the photographs were taken.



**Fig. 1 Parish land on Hilltop shown as hatched area with positions where photographs taken
Habitats and existing management**

The site is mainly bramble and with privet scrub at its western end together with a variety of flowering plants. There is a lot of rubbish and glass which has been dumped here with some concrete as well as rubbish from a bonfire. The rest of the site has less scrub but is covered by tall dense plants such as docks and umbellifers.

The site did not appear to be regularly managed prior to this plan being produced, although a number of young Sycamores were pollarded from time to time.

Ecological assessment

Visits to the site were made in March and July 2013. The main interest of this site lies in its variety of common wild plants and nesting sites for birds. It also provides a good insect food source, particularly for breeding and migrant birds, as well as food plants for butterflies and moths.

Landscape assessment

In 2013 the site was difficult to access and consisted mainly of dense areas of Bramble, Wild Privet, some trees, mainly pollarded Sycamores, and areas of tall plants.

Policy Statement

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 contained a new duty for local authorities. The Act states: Every public authority in exercising its functions have regard so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. NERC Act 2006 S.40.

General Objectives

In order to fulfil its statutory responsibilities and policy goals, relating to conserving biodiversity, Cley Parish Council is aiming to maximise the value of its parish land for nature conservation, landscape and amenity through the objectives summarised below, as far as these are compatible with present and future operational requirements:

1. Protect and enhance existing features of ecological value
2. Enhance ecological value of sites through creation of appropriate habitats
3. Enhance the visual landscape impact to increase its attractiveness for residents and visitors.

Management Objectives

The following specific actions for this site have been identified to make a contribution to the above aims:

1. Create more edge by removing sections of the existing dense growths of vegetation such as Wild Privet, bramble and a variety of tall plant species.
2. In areas where the site is dominated by tall plant species, clear and remove roots of about 50% of these and create a heathland landscape by planting Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and (*Ulex galii*)
3. Create some hedges
4. Manage the existing trees
5. Establish bird feeding areas
6. Manage the vegetation along the lokes



Photograph 1. View to the east, level with the west end of North Landing showing the dense rank vegetation which could be replaced by gorse. The trees at the back are not in the parish land



Photograph 2. View in 2013 to the west from the west end of North Landing showing the area which needs to be thinned out to create more edge and where the access route G is planned. The line of Sycamores is just outside the left hand side of the picture. The dying Sycamore is to the right of the telegraph pole. Photograph 3 below shows the same view in 2019 after the access route was completed.





Photograph 4 Looking South to Hilltop in 2013 at area of vegetation which is mainly wild privet and which needs to be thinned out to create more edge. Photograph 5 below shows view in 2019 with some planted gorse and the access route to Hilltop.





Photograph 6 Looking East in 2019 from the Western edge of the management area showing the area thinned, which also serves as an access route through part of the area

Management Constraints

1. Operational

The management objectives described above will need to be a compromise between conservation enhancements, accessibility on to the land and maintenance of residents and visitors' views.

2. Financial

It is envisaged that the management objective covers work to be carried out over the next five years. The best time of the year to carry out management from the conservation point of view is October to February. After some initial costs this plan should not result in significant extra maintenance costs. Maintenance costs will be met by the Parish Council, all works need to be agreed in a Full Parish Council Meeting and recorded in the minutes.

3. Recreational

Apart from limited access, the site is not suited to recreational activities taking place.

4. Health and Safety issues

In allowing limited access for residents and visitors there are risks of tripping over rubbish which may be illegally dumped, stones and vegetation such as bramble runners. There are also some very steep banks particularly along the eastern part of the site which are dangerous to access.

Management Options

1. Vegetation thinning

Create more edge by removing sections of the existing dense growths of vegetation such as Wild Privet, bramble and a variety of tall plant species.

A 1.5 to 2 metre wide swath of the above vegetation has since been cut and maintained. See Photograph 3 taken from the same place in 2019 as photograph 2 taken in 2013.

2. Gorse planting

In order to create a heathland landscape at the bottom of Hilltop it has been agreed to plant a limited amount of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), as found along the sides of hills between Cley and Salthouse. To extend the flowering period from April to June through to October, also plant 50% Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*). Gorse planting will be limited to low growing species, the Parish Council have raised concerns about gorse spreading so easily, they have stated they would like to see gorse planting limited only to the bottom of Hilltop, as an alternative to the bramble currently present. This hybridises with (*Ulex europaeus*) and the hybrid can flower from October through to March giving some flowering throughout the year.

Between the clumps of gorse an attempt could be made to establish flower rich grassland areas typical of some adjacent areas such as Scrib Hill near Salthouse.

So far the planting of 45 gorse bushes has been confined to the area west of North Landing. Most are on the slope just west of North Landing with a few additional plants close to the west end of the area. These are due to be trimmed lower this winter 2022-23 to prevent them becoming straggly. **Hedge creation**

Hedges need to be species rich to maximise their value for wildlife and to enhance their attractiveness. Ideal species would include:

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Hawthorns (*Crataegus monogyna & laevigata*) Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and Elder (*Sambucus nigra*).

The hedges could be bordered by a variety of plants attractive to people and wildlife. Examples include:

Bird's Foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scriptus*), Cat Mint (*Nepeta cataria*), Cowslip (*Primula veris*), Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Devil's Bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Dog Violet (*Viola riviniana*), Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), Great Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), Knapweed (*Centaurea spp*),

Honesty (*Lunaria annua*), Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*), Meadow Grasses (*Poa spp*), Musk Mallow (*Malva moschata*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Red Valerian (*Valeriana ruber*), Rosebay Willow Herb (*Chamerion angustifolium*), and White Campion (*Silene latifolia*).

Over the last five years over 80 hedgerow trees of the species mentioned above have been planted. There has been a good survival rate nearing 90%. All the ones which died have been replaced, however the growth rates have been variable depending on the quality of the substrate which is very stony in places. The hedging in the west needs cutting back in the next year.

No wildflower species have been planted yet. There is already a variety of wild flower species including some invasive species such as Alexanders which need to be regularly controlled.

Detailed advice for planting hedges to benefit wildlife is contained in **Appendix 1**, taken from information made available by the RSPB.

Ideally hedges should be maintained long term in this area at about two to three metres high and two to three or more metres wide. If the hedges start to become leggy and lose their cover at ground level they may need to be trimmed or even laid to get back the dense screening desired. Always retain any dead wood such as the dead stumps of trees or shrubs as these support a whole spectrum of invertebrates, unless they become dangerous. Any trimming should be carried out in the winter period, late November to February. This is after the birds have had a chance to eat the berries and before birds start to select their nesting sites in the spring. Trimming should be carried out on a rotational basis with preferably 10% and not more than 30% of the hedges being treated per winter.

3. Tree management

It has already been mentioned that the mature trees, mainly Sycamores which were confined to the western end of the parish land have died and fallen down. Most of the stumps have been covered with Ivy. It is suggested that about half of these Sycamores stumps are gradually removed, leaving some of the trunks on site to rot and replaced by a variety of attractive tree species important for wildlife because of their berries, seeds or for the insects they support. They should also be species which either tend not to grow too large or else can be pollarded or trimmed. Examples of suitable trees would be Hazel (*corylus avellana*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Hawthorns (*Crataegus monogyna & laevigata*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) Spindle Tree (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Elder (*Sambucus nigra*). Some of these have already been plants as hedgerow species.

4. Establishment of areas with vegetation suitable as bird feeding areas

Birds can be enticed onto the site by planting shrubs containing seeds and berries. These will also create suitable conditions for insects which will also provide food for some birds. The following shrubs produce berries which birds will feed on in addition to providing some cover for breeding and sheltering: Elder (*Sambucus nigra*), Hawthorn

(*Crataegus monogyna*), Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), Cotoneaster sp, Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Barberry (*Berberis darwinii*), Firethorn (*Pyracantha coccinea*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Crab Apple (*Malus pumila*), Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos rivularis*), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera* sp.).

Suitable sites have yet to be finally decided.

5. Management of the lokes and associated vegetation

Plant species such as Alexanders (*Smyrium olusatrum*) tend to dominate and partly block the lokes during the late spring and summer. Periodic cutting back of this vegetation is necessary as well as removing any bramble runners and other straggling branches from the adjacent hedges. The body of the hedges themselves should not be touched at this time of the year to avoid disturbing nesting birds or damaging nests. Any hedge cutting should be carried out after the breeding season for birds, preferably in October to February. These lokes also need to be filled in the centre which is like a gutter in places and levelled to prevent walkers twisting their ankle.

Bramble is one of the most important wildlife habitats. It provides food for pollinators with its blossom, they and other invertebrates also nest or reproduce on the leaves or in the stems. Others will eat the leaves and in the autumn the fruits are important for a variety of birds and mammals. The dense prickly foliage provides safe nesting and roosting sites for birds and some small mammals.

Brambles are best managed on a rotation of 5-6 years to provide a mosaic of brambles at different stages of growth. It is best to avoid cutting sections sequentially in order not to reduce the foliage to much. Cutting sections in a random way maximises the edge allowing more light to penetrate, which increases leaf blossom and fruit growth.

Management work for brambles is best carried out after the blackberries are mainly finished usually in late September to mid-October and before birds start nesting in mid-February in mild winters.

6. Establishment of access routes

Create an informal grass path to point D on the map, (this was originally the location of a proposed bench but this has been removed from the management plan after local consultation), and along back to Hilltop. Establish an access route at the east end of the parish land for management and **limited** access purposes. **Fig. 2** shows the location of these informal access routes. This access route is to help with the management of the site, the location of the access route on the plan is for indicative purposes only.

Monitoring

The land should be examined each year to determine what actions are required to carry out the various management options each October to March. A timetable, methodology and budget for implementing these actions would need to be agreed by the parish council. It is suggested that priority tasks this winter should include the trimming of the planted gorse west of North Landing.

Also this coming winter it would be desirable to make a start on removing some of the roots young Sycamores on the steep slope at the eastern end and replacing them with some Gorse patches which will also help to curtail the brambles. Before this can happen it will be necessary to create a safe access route for management purposes.

Review of plan

It is suggested the management plan is reviewed every three to five years.

Appendix 1 Advice on planting hedges beneficial to wildlife - information made available from the RSPB

Dig a trench a metre wide. Mix in compost and position plants in a double row, spacing the plants which can be at the whip stage around 30 cm apart, and spreading the roots carefully. Use a line to ensure the plants are in a straight line. Firm the soil and water.

Remove half of the height of the plants after planting. This reduces wind rock and allows the roots to establish quicker. It also encourages bushy growth from near the base of the plant more quickly.

Newly planted hedges are vulnerable to damage by wind, drought and severe weather for the first 2-3 years. Keep moist, and mulch to prevent weeds.

Refrain from planting climbers into a new hedge. Allow the hedge to establish first, otherwise the vigorous growth of the climbers can overcome the young shrubs. Once the hedge is old enough, climbing rose, dog rose, and honeysuckle can be planted.

Encourage a bushier and denser hedge by cutting at least 2 cm above the previous year's growth. This keeps the hedge full of vigour and growth. It is easy to prune a hedge too heavily and lose the fruit.

Most hedge plants, such as hawthorn, flower and fruit on the previous years growth. Cut them every other year, or a proportion of them each year to allow flowering and fruiting. Cutting should be carried out in late winter after any berries have been eaten by birds. Hard pruning of young plants encourages growth of lower branches, making the hedge dense from the base. Each winter remove at least half of the new seasons growth.

Standard trees growing from a hedge can enhance its wildlife value. The number grown is dependent on the length of hedge and personal taste. Trees can be planted as part of a new hedge, or allow a strong shoot to develop unchecked from the top of the hedge, and remove side shoots until the stem reaches the desired height. Then allow it to form a head by cutting the leading shoot. This will cause the tree to bush and form a crown. Such a tree will produce more berries and fruit than several yards of hedge of the same species.

The sides of the hedge should taper slightly towards the top to allow light and rainwater to reach lower foliage and the ground at the base. An ideal cross section is a flat topped 'A'.

Keep the hedge free from rank grass and weeds for the first few years. A mulch of grass clipping or bark chippings along the bottom can suppress weeds and reduce water loss in dry weather. This greatly enhances the survival of the plants.