

Old Park Woods

History of Old Park Woods

Old Park Woods spans from the base of the Harestone Valley up to Viewpoint and the North Down's Way. The area includes ancient woodland in addition to large areas which were until recent times grass downland and have only become wooded since the 1950/60s.



In recent decades Old Park Woods was subject to several planning applications for development including planning applications for development of a golf course on the site and housing. Across many decades Old Park Woods had been left unmanaged resulting in trees and pathways left uncared for and unsafe. The lack of management across an extended period has also resulted in Old Park Woods becoming dominated by individual tree species, namely ash trees, with little biodiversity. In addition the woodland has suffered from the encroachment of invasive species such as laurel and bramble.

Securing Old Park Woods

A large proportion of Old Park Woods was secured by Caterham School in 2015, removing the threat of commercial development of the land which had hung over the woodland for decades.

The School's purpose in securing Old Park Woods has been to maintain the area as a healthy and viable woodland for the long term, for the benefit of the local environment. The School's priority remains to regenerate the woodland so that it has a long term future as a thriving biodiverse environment. The purchase also enabled the school to increase outdoor learning opportunities and provision for young people at Caterham School, at partner primary schools, attending local clubs and local children attending holiday clubs held at the school.

When the School acquired Old Park Woods in 2015, the sale was dependent on purchasing a greater area of woodland than the School required or desired. This greater area including a parcel of land to the south of War Coppice Road. Immediately following the purchase in 2015, this relatively small parcel of land was sold. No other areas of land have been sold by the school in the interim seven years. Other parts of Old Park Woods under separate ownership may have been sold, but these are not and have never been owned by the school.

Regeneration

Upon securing Old Park Woods, the School engaged a specialist woodland consultant to establish the state of the woodland and to draft a regeneration plan with the sole purpose of the long term health of the previously unmanaged woodland. This initial plan recommended the implementation of a ride (a linear open space) to improve the biodiversity of the woodland across both flora and fauna. This change was implemented soon after the school took over the woodland and has already brought significant success and improvements to the woodland. The benefits of introducing a ride are illustrated on page 4 and are already to be seen in evidence in the Old Park Wood ride today.

The initial regeneration plan also recommended a fairly rapid removal of diseased and unstable trees across the woodland. Following consultation with the local community, and concerns regarding the removal routes for the resulting timber, the School reviewed and amended the initial plan. As a result a slower paced regeneration with timber removal via fewer and existing woodland exits was adopted.

As part of the review of the initial regeneration plan, Caterham School recruited a professional woodsman to the grounds team at school in 2017. This recruitment was to ensure expertise and consistency within our staff body in addition to external consultants.

Benefits of Regeneration

In addition to the slowing of timber clearance, the addition of a woodsman on the team allowed other regeneration work to begin including coppicing work. Coppicing is a traditional method of managing woodland which exploits deciduous trees that produce new shoots from their stump when cut. In a coppiced wood, typically called a copse, young trees are repeatedly cut down to new ground level, resulting in a stool. From here, new shoots are produced and, in time, grow into mature trees. The process is then repeated, providing a very sustainable source of timber and fuel.

Coppicing provides a continued supply of timber, which is sustainable. It is also beneficial to wildflowers, flora and fauna. By opening up the woodland through coppicing, new light can penetrate the floor, stimulating dormant wildflowers and grasses to grow and providing rich habitats for butterflies, small mammals and invertebrates.

Ash Dieback in Old Park Woods

Reports into the health of Old Park Woods identified a significant and rapidly growing natural threat to the future of the woods in the shape of Ash Dieback. Due to decades of neglect and resulting lack of biodiversity, almost 80 per cent of the trees in Old Park Woods were ash trees.

In early 2020 Old Park Woods was assessed with an onsite visit from the Forestry Commission who have been assessing the impact and prevalence from this disease across the South East of England and beyond. This visit identified the serious nature and advanced progression of Ash Dieback within Old Park Woods. As a result of this visit by the Forestry Commission, an urgent action plan and prioritised plan of works was established.

What is Ash Dieback?

Ash is a native UK species but one that has been fighting, and losing, a UK-wide battle against a fatal disease. Ash Dieback is affecting woodlands across the country and it is estimated that the fungus will kill almost all ash trees in the UK (The Woodland Trust). The introduction of Ash dieback (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus) to Europe occurred about 30 years ago has devastated the European ash (Fraxinus excelsior). UK native ash trees, such as the majority of trees in Old Park Woods, did not evolve with the fungus and therefore have no natural defence against it.

Ash dieback causes leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions in affected trees. It also weakens the trees, making it more susceptible to other pests and pathogens such as Armillaria, or honey fungus. Affected trees

become unstable once affected and therefore highly likely to fall. Ash dieback spreads through windblown spores, and through the movement of infected ash trees.

Managing Ash Dieback in Old Park Woods

Work to clear the affected ash started in 2020 but was delayed by Covid-19 restrictions. The priority felling works have concentrated on two areas, those areas of the woodland accessed by children and a 15m band where the woodland backs on to neighbouring properties. By their nature, these areas are the most visible and noticeable parts of Old Park Woods. The remainder of the required felling will continue through to late 2023 with diseased ash trees being felled but leaving and monitoring those which appear healthy.

All felling work has been undertaken under the terms of a licence granted by the Forestry Commission.

The felling work has been planned and undertaken outside of nesting season – so that birds and their nests are not disturbed during this crucial season. Other 'residents' of the woodland have also been considered including the three established badger sets within Old Park Woods. The areas around these sets have been avoided by felling machinery and any works which might disturb the resident badgers.

The felling work has brought a significant amount of timber – some of which has been seasoned onsite and sold on to the local community as logs or as charcoal. Further timber has been chipped and sent to the Kent Renewable Power Energy Biomass Plant to generate electricity.

Replanting

With the felling work almost complete in the first two areas, new life can now be breathed into the woodland and the foundations of Old Park Wood's regeneration can, quite literally, take root. The felled areas will be replanted with UK native trees such as oak, birch, hazel, beech and cherry. Whilst it is unfortunate that so many of our ash trees need to be removed, the necessary felling works have been incorporated into the overall plans to regenerate the woodland. Introducing a diversity of native trees in place of the diseased ash will help the long-term sustainability of the woodland. Introducing a wider breadth of tree species means that if, in the future, a disease threatens a certain species the overall impact on the woodland will be less severe than it has been for Ash Dieback.

The replanting will begin in the autumn of 2022 which gives the new trees the best start in their new environment. A mix of saplings/whips and more mature trees will be bedded in. Caterham School's Parents' Association have already supported the purchase of more mature trees with many parents also signing up to be part of the Old Park Woods Replanting Party. The Parish Council have also supported the replanting with a number of whips provided by Surrey County Council.

Community Involvement

Old Park Woods will be home to 1,000s of new saplings and young trees which will all need digging in across the autumn and winter of 2022/2023. If you would like to get into the great outdoors and contribute to Old Park Woods' future you can sign up to the Caterham Replanting Party online. You can lend as much or as little time as you would like –every tree planted helps regenerate Old Park Woods and secure it for the future. To join in sign up here: <u>https://www.caterhamschool.co.uk/events/help-us-replant-old-park-woods/</u>

Old Park Woods and the Community

The school's aim has been to secure Old Park Woods for the local environment and community. Against a backdrop of cancelled school trips, summer 2021 saw Sixth Form pupils and staff volunteers welcome children from Tandridge local primary schools as they enjoyed a day in the woods exploring the school's obstacle and high ropes course amid much laughter and smiles. For many their rite of passage Year 6 outdoor adventure trips had been cancelled due to Covid-19 so fun in Old Park Woods was a welcome escapade!

Old Park Woods is now used extensively by Caterham School pupils from the youngest children in the prep school who enjoy regular sessions in the forest school, to the older pupils who have been learning the basics of woodland management as part of the skills element of their Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

Throughout school holidays local children are able to learn more about the environment at Forest School camps. We also welcome local primary school pupils to the woods throughout the year as part of our broad East Surrey Learning Partnerships programme.

Old Park Woods has also facilitated learning for those from outside of the school and local community too. Prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns the school worked with a Lantra/NPTC (one of the leading awarding bodies for land-based industries in the UK) instructor who has been able to train members of the general public and representatives from various government agencies, including Network Rail and the Environment Agency, to complete chainsaw training courses.



Woodland ride & benefits to biodiversity









Aerial photo of site c.1940 showing chalk down land and ancient woodland comprising Old Park Woods today