



ARBORFIELD
& NEWLAND
PARISH COUNCIL



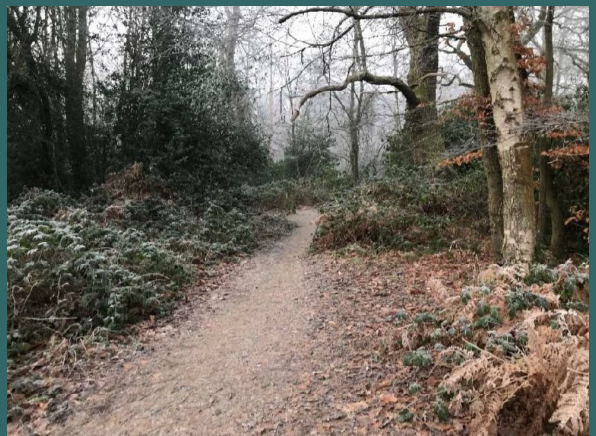
BARKHAM
PARISH COUNCIL

Conserving The Coombes



We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring The Coombes into public ownership.

We aim to preserve and protect the land for future generations, help to reduce air pollution, support local wildlife and mitigate climate change.

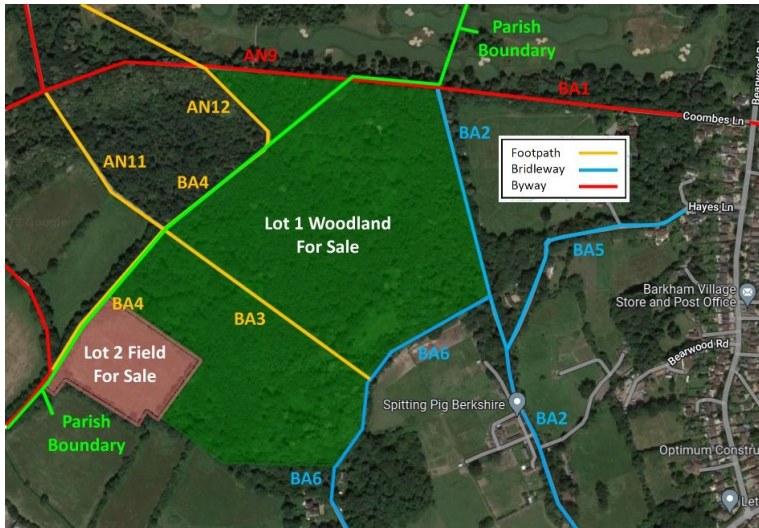


SITUATION

A unique opportunity has arisen to protect the future of The Coombes. Until now, the woodland has been privately owned and the owners of the majority now wish to sell.

The owners of the woodland known as The Coombes, have been good enough to allow the local community access to their land for well over 40 years. This would not necessarily be the case if it were to be taken over by one or more other private owners.

To retain The Coombes as a public amenity, and also to ensure that it is well looked after, Arborfield & Newland and Barkham Parish Councils are working together to try and purchase the land (see map below).



BACKGROUND

The two Parish Councils and Wokingham Borough Council were made aware of the impending sale last December, before the land was due to go onto the open market. They found the prospect of the woodland becoming closed to the public, combined with damage that new owners might inflict on the mature woodland, its natural wildlife habitat, rich biodiversity and carbon capturing potential, deeply unpalatable.

A period of time was negotiated with the land agent to allow the Councils time to investigate how the woodland could be taken into public ownership, or that of a suitable charity, such as the Wildlife Trust.

Both sets of Parish Councillors devoted long hours to the task, intent on securing the Coombes as natural woodland to be enjoyed by the local community, along with the wildlife that inhabits it, for ever.

They have been researching market prices for such land, options for jointly owning it with each other or suitable charities, best practices for managing it, the ongoing cost of ownership, possible grants, funding, and so much more. For them it has been a steep learning curve.

Public bodies with woodlands have a statutory duty to conserve and enhance their biodiversity, and they need to be able to demonstrate their compliance. For this, Wokingham Borough Council has tree and ecology specialists on its staff and working relationships with organisations such as the Woodland Trust, Natural England and TVERC, an organisation that carries out ecological surveys.

To help the Parish Councils generate a proposal, Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) visited twice and gave advice on how best to manage what is designated as Ancient Woodland. Wokingham Borough Council Countryside Services who manage areas such as Ditton Pastures and California Country Park have also made proposals.

MANAGING THE WOODLAND

Wishing to retain public access, the local authority would start with a survey to identify trees that may be dangerous, plan how to deal with them and in what order. Paths may be rerouted to avoid felling otherwise healthy trees.

Meanwhile, a Woodland Management Plan would be developed for its ongoing monitoring and maintenance, informed by the findings of a Habitat Assessment. The plan is likely to include, for example, systematic thinning of the denser patches of rhododendrons. This would allow more light through to currently-stifled plants, thereby increasing biodiversity. Historical Ecology records may be a guide as to what may re-emerge this way, so that it can be helped to flourish once again. Opportunities for reintroducing additional traditional woodland management practices, appropriate to an ancient woodland environment, could also be explored.

The woodland is heavily protected against development. It is entirely covered by all species Tree Preservation Orders and designated as a Local Wildlife Site and a Local Geological Site, additionally, Natural England has registered most of it as Ancient Woodland.

Wokingham Borough Council has recently made an Article 4 directive on the area which means that likely changes that could be made under permitted development rules will now have to go through the full planning process.

WHY INVEST IN A WOODLAND?

Trees are an essential part of our natural environment, providing a multitude of benefits to both the planet and its inhabitants.



Trees play an important role in our mental and physical health. Studies have shown that being surrounded by trees and green spaces can reduce stress levels, improve concentration, and boost overall wellbeing.

The environmental benefits of trees are numerous and far-reaching, from reducing air pollution and mitigating climate change to preventing soil erosion, conserving water, supporting wildlife, and enhancing our health and wellbeing. The importance of trees to our planet cannot be overstated.



FUNDING

When development takes place within the borough, the developers have to make contributions to a fund for providing or improving local infrastructure. This is known as a Community Infrastructure Levy, or CIL. The purchase and ongoing maintenance of amenity woodland qualifies as an acceptable use of CIL funds and these would be used for the purchase and upkeep of The Coombes.

With the implications of ongoing management now clearer, it is believed that the Parish team will be able to offer a competitive price for woodland that is as heavily protected against development as The Coombes is.

COMMENTS

If you wish to comment on the proposed purchase of The Coombes land then please email your comments to: feedback@barkham-parishcouncil.org.uk, or write to: Conserve the Coombes, Barkham Parish Council, Arborfield Green Community Centre, Sheerlands Road, Arborfield, RG2 9ND.