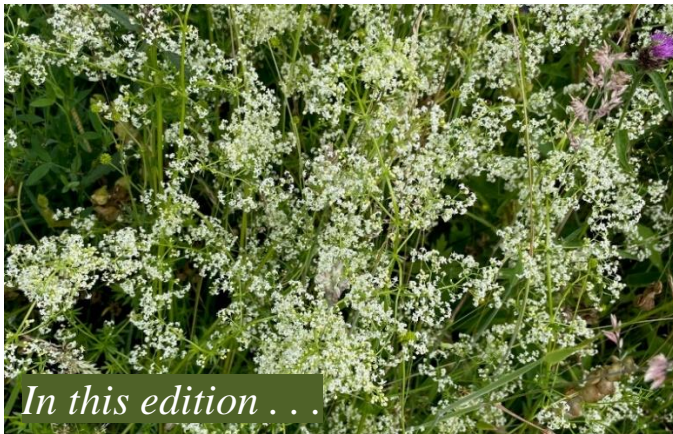


Friends of Gedling House Woods

Annual Report 2024



In this edition . . .

The wettest year so far – how the woods and meadows responded . . .

The next 20 years – a new contract from Gedling Borough Council . . .

New laws on hedge cutting – only in the autumn and winter . . .

Dealing with muddy paths – more woodland paths now usable in wet weather . . .



Volunteering for FGHW

Firstly, we would like to thank the many visitors to the woods and meadows who regularly pick up cans, bottles and other litter, and also those who remove dog poo bags hung on fences and trees by inconsiderate dog walkers. FGHW values this ongoing and usually unnoticed contribution that keeps the woods and meadows relatively free from rubbish. Thanks go to all who contribute in this way.

Occasional and very valuable help

We have two main periods when we seek help from FGHW members through appeals by email, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). In both cases, these have often been family affairs, with older children joining in and helping us with the task.



In the spring, we have asked for help in moving and spreading the trailer loads of chippings on to woodland pathways to make them more manageable in muddy weather. This is likely to become a regular event. In late summer, we ask for volunteers to rake up the hay from anthills and under trees so it can be included in the bales of hay we need to remove from the meadows after mowing.

We thank all those families who have contributed so far; the next opportunity will be in late August, again after mowing, and we will send out a request for help nearer the time.

Two specific roles needed

Site work - regular volunteer – much of the work needed in maintaining the woods and meadows is done by members of the FGHW committee, who manage the site and work according to a detailed management plan. The speed of growth of the vegetation this year has meant we are finding it difficult to keep up with our regular maintenance with our small group of regular volunteers. If there are any fit and active members of any gender who would be prepared to join us regularly – often but not always Saturday mornings – then we would love to hear from you. We would like to find one or more people we could train up to use our machinery (this does preclude bringing children along) to give us more flexibility in our maintenance team.

Meetings secretary – for some years now we have had no one to organise the agendas for our committee meetings and AGM. We really need someone who could organise our committee and annual meetings, and take minutes at them. Meetings are roughly four times a year in the evening, plus an AGM in June/July. If anyone has this sort of expertise in a work situation now, or has done this sort of thing in the past, please get in touch.

If you could help us, please contact us by email on: members@fghw.org.uk or speak with a committee member.

The past year in the woods and meadows

Progress with woodland and meadow management plans

Each year, we revise the management plans for the woods and the meadows to reflect new decisions, changes in how we tackle tasks and eliminate activities that are no longer needed. We work to a very detailed set of plans so that our core team of volunteers know what needs doing and when, and who to contact where others outside the group are involved. You can find a summary of both of these plans on the FGHW website:

<http://www.fghw.org.uk/about-gedling-house-woods-and-meadows/managing-the-woods/>
<http://www.fghw.org.uk/about-gedling-house-woods-and-meadows/managing-the-meadows/>

The wettest year since FGHW began managing the woods and meadows

Climate change has started to have a noticeable impact on the woods and meadows. They have been at their wettest since FGHW began to manage them in 2003. The meadow was so wet from late September that we were not able to get contractors' vehicles on the meadow to replace some failing fence posts. The meadows have grown considerably during the warm, wet spring and there is much more grass than we have been accustomed to. For example, in 2023, we mowed the meadow paths twice between April and August, with little growth after a dry spring. In 2024, by the end of June the paths had been mown three times, with a likely need for two more sessions before our contractor moves in to mow all the meadows in August. The meadows survived the winter well, though, as this photo from the top of meadow 3 shows. Meadow growth has been very strong this year.



The woods have probably suffered most from the continual rain over the winter. A spring at the top of the woods close to the entrance opposite Yew Tree Lane continued to keep that area wet throughout the winter and spring, even when other paths had dried out. We highlighted this issue in an update to members, reprinted in a modified form here.

Access versus conservation

We have a layer of unusual topsoil throughout the site, noted also by Balfour Beatty when working on the Gedling Access Road. The fine topsoil turns to liquid mud very quickly when it rains heavily, and this means pathways have become very slippery. More rain means the mud remains for much longer periods than usual. Apart from the obvious risks of walking on

muddy paths, the woodland pathways are widening as visitors walk along the less muddy edges. Widening pathways means that footfall is beginning to erode the undergrowth that should be flourishing – wood celandine, dog’s mercury, snowdrops, bluebells and wild garlic are particularly vulnerable. As paths become difficult to navigate, visitors are also forging new paths through areas of woodland not previously used, creating a new generation of muddy paths, again reducing the area of woodland in which plants can grow.

Thus the open access that is so valued is contributing to the deterioration of the site, and our attempts to conserve an oasis of woodland and meadows in an urban environment are being compromised. Inevitably we have had to ask ourselves “What should we do?”

To install hard paving anywhere in the woods would radically change the woodland environment as well as being prohibitively expensive. Our alternative and more natural solution is to create paths with wood chippings to try to keep visitors on the pathways, rather than tread down new growth as they avoid the mud. We are very grateful to Andy Musson, one of our regular contractors, for providing two trailer loads of wood chippings in March 2024.



In the winter of 2022/23, we installed a set of steps to support visitors using the steep path down to the meadows from the Yew Tree Lane entrance. This was successful and we improved that route in March 2024 by topping up the chippings. We also had sufficient chippings this year to resurface the path along bottom edge of the woodland, which we created with the help of volunteers from the NHS Supply Chain in 2023.

The remaining chippings were used to create less muddy pathways at the top of the woods near the spring. In some particularly boggy areas, where water appears to stay for some time, we may also need to consider land drains in the future. The pictures in this section were, unbelievably, taken in July 2024. The pathway has survived over three months of steady use, and this gives us confidence that application of wood chippings is an effective method of maintaining paths.



These are precisely the same sorts of issues faced by, for example, the National Trust in Derbyshire, where heavy footfall is eroding paths. We operate on a much smaller scale, of course, and we hope that the work we are doing in laying chippings on path surfaces is supporting visitor access to the woods in the winter and helping to prevent damage to plant life.

Woodland planting

Planting this year has focused on replacing plants along the Colliery Way hedge that have died. These were planted under a different contract from the main GAR landscaping, and the plants used by that contractor do not seem to have been as strong as they are in other parts of the GAR. Responsibility for the hedge reverted back to FGHW a year after planting and so we undertook a major replant in January 2024. In all, we planted about 175 new hedge plants – 100 hawthorn, 50 hazel and 25 yew. Most of these went along the Colliery Way hedge, but we also replaced some hazel at the top of Wood Lane from the 2021-22 planting.

The trees planted at the top of meadow 3 continue to do well, as do the two beeches and the wild cherry planted through a donation from Nottingham City Transport.

Planting woodland flowers



The bluebells we planted in 2021 are gradually spreading, but they take their time thickly to cover an area. We thank Pete Wood again for his help on splitting and moving cyclamen into various paths and corners of the woods. Cyclamen spread more quickly than bluebells, and several areas had very good ground cover during flowering.

Annual tree check

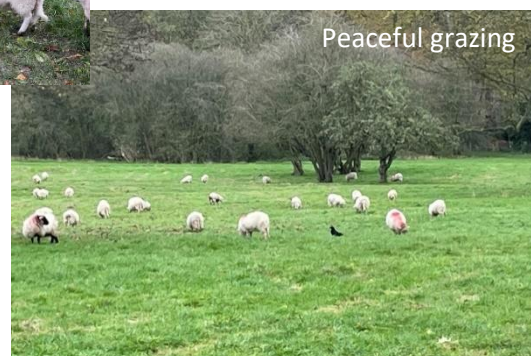
The usual annual tree check took place in the winter, with the removal of dead branches and felling of unsafe trees – the so-called three Ds – those that are dead, dying or diseased. This year we removed a considerable number of branches overhanging one of our neighbour's property which were at risk of causing damage if they fell. This is not a job we undertake ourselves – tree climbers and specialist machinery are needed, as the picture shows.



Sheep

We hosted a small flock of sheep for a little longer than usual – 11 weeks, from mid-November to the end of January. We had 80 Welsh Mountain sheep this time. These are significantly smaller than any of the recent breeds we have had. We discovered they love bramble, and had to rescue a few from the coppice at the end of meadow 2!

We are often asked whether sheep are distressed if they lie down, as a lot do. If asked, the response should be “Yes, sheep do lie down to rest and sleep – it’s perfectly normal.”



We combine meadows 2 and 3 for a longer stay and then move them for a shorter stay in the smaller meadow 1. At the end of the process, we aim for the grass to be very much shorter than shown here, allowing maximum space for wildflower growth.

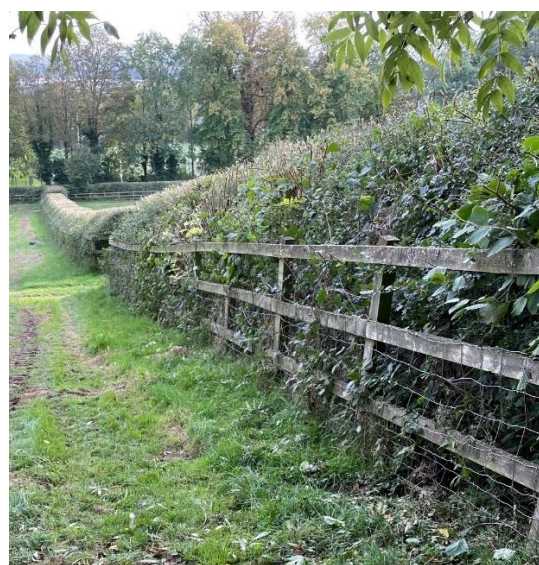
Regular maintenance of the meadows

Every month or so during the growing season, one of the key tasks we undertake is brushcutting and strimming the meadow borders so that the hedges do not spread over into the meadows. This is almost a monthly task at the moment with lush growth of grass.

The hedges in the double-fenced areas are filling the gaps between fence and hedge well. The hedges are slightly higher this year, increasing the amount of space for wildlife. We originally cut the hedges inside the fencing, mainly to stop growth of unwanted plants in the gap. The pictures below show how one hedge has changed from over a period of eight years – we don't hold photographs of the same side of the hedge, but they were very similar in both years.



2016



2024

New legislation on hedge cutting and buffer strips

New government regulations on hedgerow management have come into force. The new rules aim to protect hedgerows on agricultural land. Hedgerows provide habitat, act as wildlife corridors, slow soil erosion and reduce water run-off. They also support crop pollinators help store carbon and enrich the landscape.

The hedges around meadows 1 and 2 are listed on the plans held by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) as part of our annual grant. As hedges surrounding meadowland, they are covered by the new rules.

From 23 May 2024, it is now illegal to cut these hedges between 1 March and 31 August. (*FGHW already respects these dates for cutting.*)

From 1 July 2024, landowners are now required to maintain green cover on land within two metres of the centre of meadow hedges, and it will be illegal to use any pesticides, including herbicides, within two metres of the centre of the hedge. This covers both sides of the hedge and so includes the meadow and the verge along Military Road. (*We have already have an informal agreement with Carlton le Willows Academy that they do not use herbicides on the verge, which is now reinforced by the new rules, and we keep the green growth under control for them. This is distinct from our spot spraying of herbicides to deal with specific unwanted species in the meadows, which is still required.*)

[Hedgerow management rules: cutting and trimming - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Hedgerow management rules: buffer strips - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Goosegrass, or is it?

You know the plant we are talking about! We come home from the woods and meadows and find those annoying burrs attached to our clothing (and our dogs, for those walking dogs). One of its names is Goosegrass. Unfortunately, there are many other plants from different families and species called Goosegrass, so called because they were typically eaten by geese in the days when country dwellers often kept geese.



A more definitive term for the plant is **Cleavers** – it certainly avoids mixing it up with other types of Goosegrass. Cleavers is an annual wildflower and is native to the UK. It has sticky hairy stems and seeds that attach themselves to clothing, and animals, using Velcro-like hairs. This clever system transports the seeds over long distances and they find their way into gardens, where they can be a real nuisance. Also known as Sticky Willie, the botanical name of cleavers is **Galium aparine**. We have plenty of Cleavers in the meadows and woodland, so watch out!



We also have a related plant called **Hedge bedstraw**, also native to the UK. This is a perennial with similar growing habits to cleavers. It typically grows randomly to 1 metre but does not have the hairy stems or hairy seeds. We have a lot growing in the hedges surrounding meadow 1 – there is a bigger picture on the front of this report. Its botanical name is **Galium mollugo**.

The leaves of both Cleavers and Hedge bedstraw are edible, and various wild food sources suggest eating the young tips in salad or using them to make tea or soup. The taste is apparently quite mild but the leaves and stems get bitter as they grow older.

Hedge Bedstraw and Cleavers are members of the **Rubiaceae** family which they share with Coffee. The fruits/seeds of both Hedge Bedstraw and Cleavers can be roasted and used as a coffee substitute which, according to wild food sources, contains less caffeine than coffee.

The group's finances

The group's income and expenditure for the financial year 2023-24 are summarised here. Full accounts will be available at the AGM on 31 July 2024. They show that FGHW is financially secure. Expenditure was high last year as we built depreciation costs for our machinery and equipment into the accounts for the first time – this had not been included previously. This year we have also purchased some up-to-date equipment to improve efficiency with grass cutting, particularly during the haymaking season, when we need to cut the grass under the trees and among the anthills that the contractor cannot reach with his tractor-mounted mower. The cost of the new machinery was £4805 and this appears, less depreciation, in the balance sheet. Other income and expenditure are shown in the table.

We are working on better understanding how income and expenditure fluctuate from year to year to aid long-term planning. This planning allows us to budget for high impact expenses like capital equipment purchases. This is an ongoing process focusing on how the site can be responsibly managed for the future.

Income - £8395

Grants - £7304
Membership - £250
Donations - £270
Calendar/honey sales £205
Bank interest - £366

Expenditure - £7511

Managing the site - £1933
Insurance - £238
Printing etc - £196
Administration - £208
Depreciation - £947

Decarbonisation – Why it matters to FGHW

Climate change is already affecting our woods and meadows. The warmer and wetter weather has, for example, meant that for much of the winter, a walk through Gedling House Woods is a walk in the mud. The amount of water falling on the woods has kept the soil very wet since September 2023. Additionally, the water table has risen and small springs are bringing water to the surface at higher levels - some that have not been seen since FGHW took over the management of the site. One response could be to install stone paths in the woods to provide a paved way through. Not only would the cost be prohibitive for a small organisation such as FGHW but it would radically change the characteristics of the nature reserve. Instead, we have used natural resources – wood chippings from tree felling – to start to provide natural non-intrusive pathways across the wettest parts of the woods.

So how should we respond to climate change? Although we are only four miles from a major city centre, we probably have more in common with rural communities when it comes to our actions. Rural areas must play their full part if the UK is to rapidly reduce its carbon footprint and achieve its net zero target. An approach focused on urban areas alone would fail. It is clearly not easy to reduce a carbon footprint in a rural area. In the ten years between 2008 and 2018, industry in England reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 30% while agriculture reduced them by 3%*.

FGHW would wish to do what it can to reduce its carbon footprint. We use a considerable number of hand tools but, as you will be aware, also have some machinery powered by petrol engines. We have begun our decarbonisation process by replacing our noisy two-stroke hedgecutters with battery powered machines used commercially. They are lighter, easier to use and just as efficient for the work we do. The old machines have been retired and are now providing spare parts for the similar models used by Gedling Borough Council, whose workshop provides an annual service for our machines. Similarly, we have disposed of a small petrol driven mower and replaced it with a battery mower. Next in line will be our well-used trimmers.

Our aim is to move all our smaller two-stroke petrol machines to battery power in the next two years. At that point we will retain four petrol machines – three grass cutting machines of various types and a chipper. At the moment, there are no cost-effective alternatives to petrol power for these. We will keep looking.

*<https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/revitalising-rural/decarbonising-rural-communities.pdf>

New Benches

Earlier this year the bench posts in meadow 1 collapsed and the seat needed replacing with a new one. We used the existing seat with some new posts to replace the bench at the bottom of meadow 3. We were delighted that Holo Holo provided a donation to help fund the replacements.

On behalf of all members and visitors, we thank those at Holo Holo for your generous donation and also for the dedication plaque it now has on it. The new benches will allow many people to take a moment and enjoy the meadows for years to come.





Seen in 2023-24

Clockwise spiral from the top left corner: shaggy inkcap; tortoiseshell butterfly; bee on buttercup; damselfly; robin; nuthatch, speckled wood butterfly on bramble; blue tit; and buzzard

Social media

You can keep up with news about the woods and meadows on our website, on Facebook on Twitter, as well as through our regular members' newsletter.

 www.fghw.org.uk
 [groups/fghw](https://www.facebook.com/groups/fghw)
 [@fofghw](https://twitter.com/fofghw)

Recent comments from visitors to the woods and meadows

"We were impressed at the level of conservation and restoration achieved for this site when we visited recently. Many thanks to all the volunteers and workers who help to maintain this site over the years." – *local resident*

"I've just joined as I love walking round the meadows and woods" – *new member*

Good news: another 20 years managing the woods and meadows

Friends of Gedling House Woods have managed the woods and meadows since 23 April 2003. During that time the group has made huge investments in fencing and redevelopment of the area, supported by funds from Gedling Borough Council, Nottinghamshire County Council and Natural England, whose responsibility moved to the Rural Payment Agency (RPA – part of Defra) part-way through that period.

FGHW has had its contract the RPA extended for a further five years, to end in September 2029. This means that we can claim government funding to maintain the meadows, specifically in relation to mowing the hay annually, baling it and removing it to keep nutrition levels low.

We have also nearly reached final agreement on the terms of a new 20-year contract to manage the woods and meadows on behalf of Gedling Borough Council. The terms are similar to those we have now, updated to reflect current legislation. Our new contract will last until 2045.

Membership update

We continue to receive amazing support from our members. We saw an 84% renewal rate for the 2024/25 membership year, which surpasses last year's 77% renewal rate. When we put out a call to action for assistance, we value the very good turnout. We continue to provide informative updates of the work we do, as well as other items of interest to members. The membership charge was held at the same rate for another year. We value all contributions in these difficult financial times. We use membership charges to buy saplings, planted in the autumn to fill gaps and replace those plants that do not take. We thank all members for their continued support.

The aims of Friends of Gedling House Woods

A reminder of what we are here for . . .

To protect, maintain and develop the local natural environment of Gedling House Woods and Meadows Local Nature Reserves and their immediate surroundings, including wildlife, woodland, meadowland, hedgerows, trees and verges.

Photograph acknowledgements

All photographs by Andy Newton (AN), Frank Knowles (FK) or Dan Straw (DS)

Front page: (clockwise spiral from top left): hedge bedstraw in meadow 1 in June 2023 (FK); delivery of chippings in March 2024 (FK); evening winter moon over meadow 1 in February 2024 (FK); view from the top of meadow 3 in December 2023 (AN); and one of our many squirrels in winter 2023/24 (AN)

Page 2: volunteers helping to add chippings to the existing steps and move chippings to the far end of meadow 3 for the bottom path in March 2024 (DS)

Page 3: view from the meadow 3 in August 2023 (AN)

Page 4: delivery of chippings in March 2024 (FK) two views of the newly laid path in the wettest area of the woods in July 2024 (FK)

Page 5: cyclamen in the woods in October 2023 (FK); access platform used for branch removal in January 2024 (FK); arrival of sheep in November 2023 (FK) and sheep grazing in November 2023 (FK)

Page 6: looking down the central hedge between meadows 1 and 2 in 2016 from meadow 1 and 2024 from meadow 2 (both FK)

Page 7: goosegrass young shoots in April 2024 (FK); goosegrass long stems in May 2024 (FK); goosegrass burr (stock photo); hedge bedstraw in meadow 1 in June 2023 (FK)

Page 8: New bench in October 2023 (DS)

Page 9: Clockwise spiral from the top left corner in the main block: shaggy inkcap (FK); tortoiseshell butterfly (AN); bee on buttercup (AN); damselfly (AN); robin (AN); nuthatch (AN), speckled wood butterfly on bramble (AN); blue tit (AN) and buzzard (AN)