

Kenwood Landscape Update for Friends of Kenwood AGM

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Overview

The weather over the last year has been challenging for the landscape: from the warm Easter in 2022, the prolonged drought and heatwave, and then wet autumn, meaning the ground went from rock hard to unworkably wet in a matter of weeks.

The dry weather in February 2023 was also a concern, however the recent wet weather has enabled returfing and seeding to be completed with good establishment to date.

The Garden Team have been a gardener down since Christmas, but have recently been able to appoint so should be back to full strength soon. We remain extremely grateful for the support provided by volunteers, directly with English Heritage and through Heath Hands, to manage the landscape: from plant recording, to repairs of fencing around the SSSI, and many work parties in between focused on vegetation management.

The Grounds Maintenance contract has been re-contracted, with a new contractor in post from 1st April 2023. The current contractor (Mears Group) declined to submit a tender.

To support the updating of the Landscape Conservation Management Plan members of the Landscape Forum, and London Parks & Gardens Trust attended a study day in October 2022 to consider the history and significance of the landscape and the works necessary to enhance and conserve it. A draft for public consultation is expected to be available soon.

Landscape Conservation Management Plan

The Management Plan has three principal objectives for the future management of the Kenwood estate, which remain:

- 1) To conserve and enhance the estate for the enjoyment of visitors.
- 2) To conserve and enhance the nature conservation interest of the estate.
- 3) To conserve and repair the historic designed landscape and to restore some important features.

With master planning discussions ongoing, the Study Day considered the following as to the vision for the landscape:

- Present and maintain Kenwood to a standard commensurate with its significance
- The bequest enshrines Lord Iveagh's wish that the "atmosphere of a gentleman's park" should be preserved at Kenwood
- From Hampstead Heath to Kenwood | From Countryside to the Country Estate

The Study Day also considered:

- Resources and the increasing backlog of cyclical maintenance
- Age structure of plantings
- Changes in landscape management over the years resulting in loss of meadow / increase in tree cover in the last 50-60 years
- Increased use of landscape
- Environmental changes, including impacts of climate change

Shrubberies

Over the last couple of years, the Garden Team have been making a concerted effort to address the backlog of cyclical maintenance in various significant plantings:

Inner circuit path, from the South Terrace to Millfield Gate and beyond, to restore the shrubbery screen which had become thin and overgrown to the point where it was no longer functioning as a screen. At the north end of the path the regeneration has been slower due to light levels and the over maturity of the planting, further towards Millfield Gate the work was completed before over maturity had been reached resulting in less drastic pruning and quicker regrowth response. Where needed additional planting has been started to fill gaps and increased the range of shrubs.

Rhododendrons in the Flower Garden and American Ground had over-matured and grown out of scale and proportion and were starting to block views from the House to the Dairy. There was also the increasing risk of collapse, which is not only a safety risk for visitors but also a point of no return in being able to maintain the plantings. Tentative pruning had been completed 3-4 years ago in the hope of lessening the impact of regenerative pruning, though this unfortunately only delayed the work further, and put the plants under greater stress resulting in an increase to the time taken for the plants to respond to the regenerative pruning. The plants are starting to respond, and those that failed have been replaced with new plantings.

The 'holly hedge' is an important historic field boundary which runs from the Dairy to Beech Mount. Work has previously been completed in the section outside of the SSSI, and work has recently started (with permission from Natural England) to continue the regeneration of the hedge within the SSSI. Due to the over maturity of the planting only holly has survived, having out competed other species, and now well out of scale and proportion. It responds well to regenerative pruning, which in turn also enables gaps to be replanted with a wider range of species that would have been common in such field boundaries. Due to the over maturity the difference is dramatic, though once regenerated regular annual cutting (which is how the section outside of the SSSI is maintained) will keep it managed.

Trees

With the cessation of grazing, and varying / inconsistent approaches to management, there has been a loss of meadows and grassland and an increase in tree cover (particularly birches which is a short lived, pioneer species, with a typical lifespan between 60 and 90 years). While the general approach is to leave the birches to decline, a significant number are starting to fail and others are having a significant impact on other trees including some veterans:

West Meadow boundary oaks have been slowly released from being surrounded by birches, this work continues and will push the meadow / grassland further up the slope towards the Spaniards Inn, supporting the veteran oaks and restoring the historic presentation.

North Copse, to the east of the boundary oaks on West Meadow, is now showing significant signs of decline in the birches. Some birches are starting to collapse, some of which are damaging the 'holly hedge' physically while others are shading it out. Work is continuing to thin the birches closest to the 'holly hedge' to better support the hedge, while in the future the aim is to restore the area back to meadow.

Within the SSSI permission has been given by Natural England to manage the understorey of holly, some of which is now dominant and impacting the upper canopy. This work will continue in phases, and should open up areas for planting / natural regeneration of trees.