**What’s Happening at Shortfield Common? – Autumn 2022**

Shortfield Common is a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) and the Parish Council consider its protection and management one of our key priorities. We asked the Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) to visit this area to identify any rare or protected flowers or grasses. In summary, Surrey Wildlife Trust stated that:

“*Acid Grassland, woodland and other habitats together create the beautiful landscape in Shortfield Common, steeped in history and provides a place of beauty and tranquillity for the community to enjoy*.”

Over recent years it has been obvious that the grasses have not been as rich or as dense as in the past. A point that was made clear to us by a number of photo’s taken over the last 20 years. This can be attributed to a number of reasons; the weather, the month in which the grasses are cut and the height of the cut. Additionally, we need to take into account the rare flora identified by Surrey Wildlife and the lifecycle of Butterflies that grow in abundance in the common. This creates a dichotomy as the grasses may react better to an earlier and shorter cut whilst the rare flowers require a higher and later cut to set seed and allow the butterfly caterpillars to complete their life cycle.

Two years ago, the Open Spaces Working Party, comprised of Council Members and members of the public, decided to undertake an experiment to understand the most appropriate timing and height for the grasses to be cut. Shortfield Common was split into two areas to allow differing maintenance schedules for Grass Cutting taking into account the suggestions made from Surrey Wildlife and the experience and history of Shortfield Common from local residents. This experiment has been impacted by the long, dry periods through both summers and the periods of drought that have been experienced, however, we will continue this experiment for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, the Working Party have decided to run another exercise to try and give the common every chance to thrive as it once did ensuring that the acid grassland and wildflowers are as abundant as they once were. Therefore, small areas of the common will be maintained to remove some of the invasive weeds and plants that are impacting the wildflowers and native grasses.

We recognise that some of these species may be beneficial to the overall health of the common, but we are focussed on creating an opportunity for these protected wildflowers and native grasses to thrive on this acidic soil.

**Ribwort Plantain (Plantago Lanceolata)**

Ribwort Plantain forms dense swards that crowd out native vegetation and prevent the establishment of native species. It has been described as an agricultural, pastoral, and environmental weed competing with other plants for light, water and nutrients and replacing preferred vegetation. It produces a large number of small mucilaginous (like a paste) seeds which can be dispersed by the wind, animal fur or by man.

**Moss**

There are over one thousand common types of Moss in the UK, mostly found in wet and boggy areas. They help to soak up rainfall, maintain moisture in the soil below and keep conditions around them humid. This enables other plants around them thrive, such as in habitats like marshes and woodland. Mosses also play a vital role in the development of new ecosystems. However, in such dry areas as at Shortfield common they are forming a cover of barrier restricting the opportunity for native grasses and wildflowers to thrive.

**Thatch**

The major causes of thick thatch accumulation are management practices that reduce the population of organisms that decompose thatch and/or that cause plant material to build up more quickly than the microorganisms present can break it down. Research has shown that earthworm and microorganism activity play a vital role in preventing excess thatch accumulation. Thatch problems are sometimes common in acidic and compacted soils since a healthy microorganism population does not flourish under these conditions.

**Unwanted Tree Saplings**

There are a number of tree saplings, mainly Oak, which are beginning to grow in the common. These are not naturally conducive to our objective to allow the native grasses and wildflowers to thrive and will therefore be removed.

**When?**

Work will commence in November to remove these species from parts of Shortfield Common in the area of grassland that has an earlier cut in July. The work cannot be mechanised and will be undertaken, manually, by a group of volunteers. We recognise that this will not be a quick exercise and the results will need to be monitored over the coming years.

Hopefully, both exercises for identifying the optimum time for the acid grassland to be cut alongside the impact of removing some of these species will allow us to plan future activities to bring back our wonderful Shortfield Common to its flourishing self!