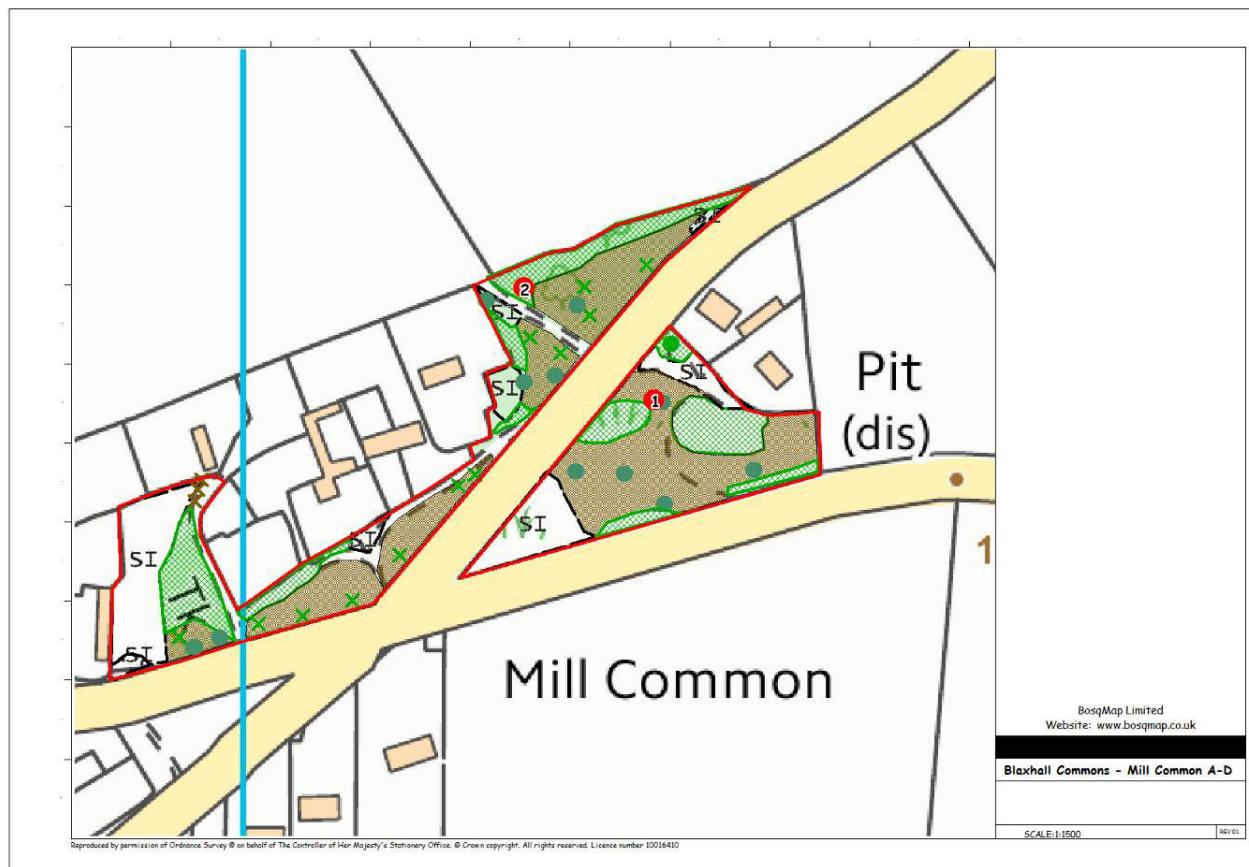


Site name: Mill Common

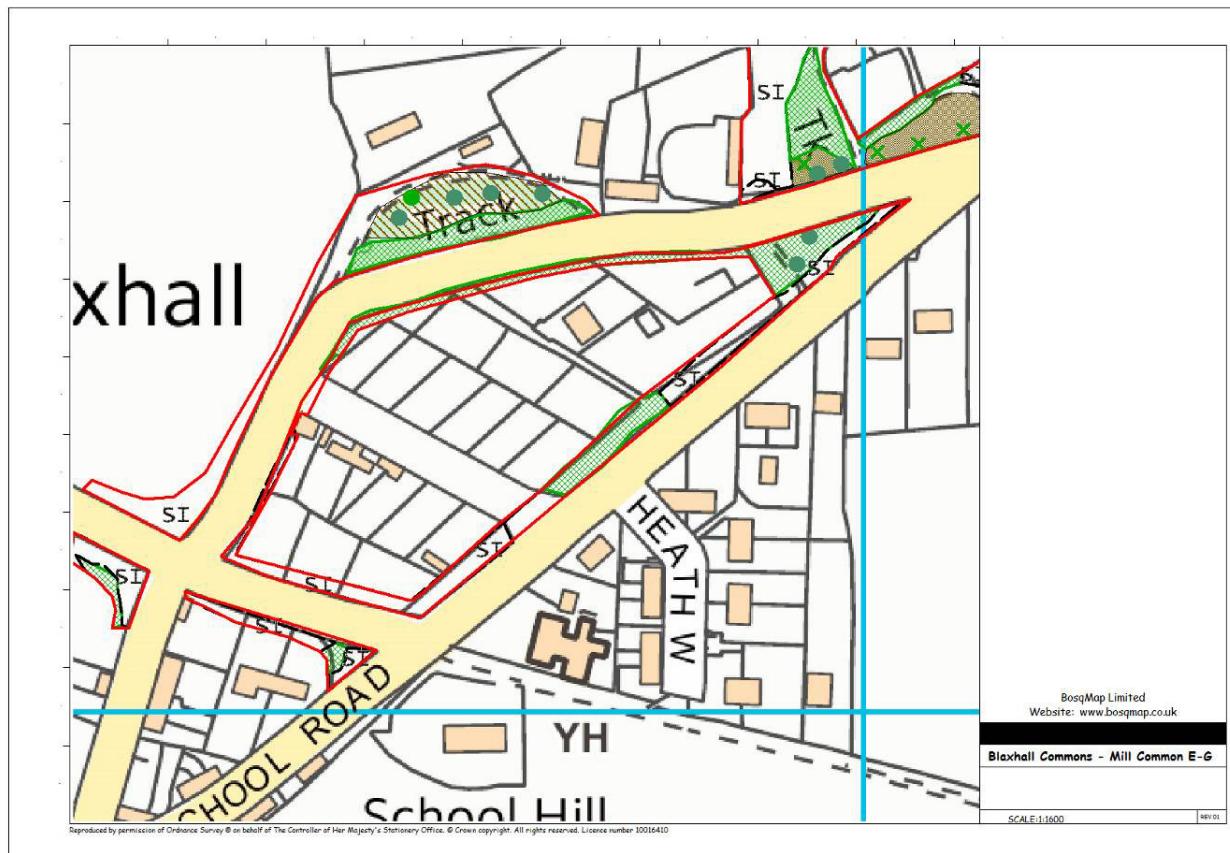
Site status: Registered common land
Grid ref: TM 36850 57122
Area: 1.99 ha
Date: 13th March 2017
Recorder: S. Bullion & J. Crighton
Weather conditions: Wispy cloud cover, sunny, 11°C
Biodiversity value: Medium-High

Map:

Sections A-D



Sections E-G



Photos:



A – Packgate: View north across bracken and scrub



B - View east along scrub boundary



B – The Nook: Leggy scrub to be coppiced



C – Cottages: View west along bracken with scattered scrub



D – Mill House: View north on scrub side of site



E – The Sheilings: View west showing tall ruderal with mature trees and dense scrub boundary



F – Home Guard Hut and Allotments: Triangular section in east of site



F – Home Guard Hut and Allotments: Gorse scrub to be coppiced to ground level



G – School Hill: View west of car parking area and scrub patch

Habitat type(s):

Dense continuous scrub, scattered scrub, bracken, poor semi-improved grassland, species poor hedge, tall ruderal

Subsidiary habitats:

Mature trees, bare ground

Site description:

Mill Common consists of a series of interconnected parcels of land around the settlement. These areas are likely to be relics of former lowland heathland habitat, but are now overgrown and in some places dominated by bracken.

Section A, Packgate, is a triangular shaped pocket of land which lies between the fork of two roads, both leading east towards Langham Road. The western most corner represents poor semi-improved grassland which occasionally mown, to ensure visibility for traffic. The main part of the site is dominated by bracken, which has developed a thatch of bracken mulch over the years. There are small thickets of 'leggy' gorse and blackthorn within the bracken, and a sunny central glade with spring bulbs. Also within this area are three young scrubby oak trees, along with some more mature oaks, a silver birch and a planted sweet chestnut tree. There is a patch of bluebells in the shade of a large oak towards the east (TN 1). A short-mown area of poor semi-improved grassland lies in the far east of the site, adjacent to the residential gardens. A local resident explained this was created as a buffer area to prevent bracken and scrub encroachment into their gardens.

Section B, The Nook, lies across the road, north of Packgate. It is also a roughly triangular shaped piece of land, which backs onto an arable field. There is a scrub boundary on the northern boundary, which gets progressively 'leggy' towards the east. The majority of the site consists of bracken, with some blackthorn scrub encroachment on the north-western side. There are also some large elms in this area, some of which are exhibiting die-back from Dutch elm disease (TN 2). A path bisects the site, north to south and on the western side of the path is another area of bracken with a large silver birch, and short-mown grassland with gravel driveways leading to the adjacent houses.

Section C, Cottages, continues westward from The Nook, separating a line of cottages from the road. It is largely bracken dominated with some scattered scrub. This section widens out to Section D.

Section D, Mill House, contains leggy scrub and bracken along the eastern half of the site, and mown semi-improved grassland in the western half. At the northern end of the eastern side, a leylandii hedge has recently had further plants added in what may be a former gateway to enclose a rough grassland area within the boundary of this part of the Common. There is also some bare ground by the roadside where vehicles park in front of the Mill House property.

Section E, The Sheilings, lies west of Mill House and comprises of a line of scrub on the roadside edge, and a large semi-circle of tall ruderal vegetation and mature trees on a downward slope north of the scrub. A rough track provides access to the domestic properties lining this site.

Section F, Home Guard Hut and Allotments, surrounds the allotments in the center of the village. The northern edge is mainly blackthorn and hawthorn hedge with a thin strip of roadside verge, this widens on the western edge and around to the south, where there is a wide belt of poor semi-improved grassland. This is intersected by patches of thick leggy gorse. At the eastern end of the site, there is a wider triangular area within which is the remains of the old Home Guard Hut. Here, there is dense scrub and some mature sycamore trees.

Section G, School Hill, is a small section of mown grass beyond which is a patch of dense gorse scrub. It appears to be currently used for car parking and turning, although this has not had an obvious impact on the grassland.

Protected species seen or known:

Pipistrelle bat (old record-1996)

Protected species potential:

Common lizard, adder, slow worm, grass snake

Priority habitats present:

Priority species seen or known:

West European hedgehog (2014) directly east of the site.

House sparrow, dunnock and starling (2009) east and south of the site.

Priority species potential:

White letter hairstreak butterfly, stag beetle

Connectivity:

Although Mill Common is spread out across a number of different areas, it has relatively poor connectivity with the wider environment. This area is surrounded by arable fields and only a small number have hedgerow boundaries.

Structural diversity:

Mill common covers a number of habitat blocks which collectively have good structural diversity. They include a range of short mown grassland, tall ruderal vegetation, bracken, dense continuous scrub and mature trees, providing a wide range of habitats for a number of taxonomic groups.

Flora:

The main area of Section A is mostly bracken dominated with scattered trees and scrub including oak, sweet chestnut, silver birch, hawthorn, gorse, blackthorn, holly and Scot's pine, some of which have been planted by neighbouring properties. The verges bordering the road are thick with bramble, with some alexanders and daffodils. There are early stages of bluebell leaves appearing beneath the shade of a large oak, although it was not possible at this early stage of growth to know whether they are the native form or the hybrid with Spanish bluebell. The small mown area is mainly cock's foot grass with cow parsley, nettle, dandelion, chickweed and common field speedwell.

Section B is mainly bracken with a scrub edge, including elm, blackthorn, elder, ivy-covered hawthorn, scrubby oaks and elms. There is honeysuckle growing amongst much of the scrub. Interspersed with the bracken are alexanders, lords-and-ladies (arum), cow parsley and nettle. On the west side of this area, there is more bracken with bramble and gorse, and some mature trees such as silver birch, maple and oak.

Section C is similar as it is mostly bracken with some scattered leggy elder, hawthorn and gorse. There is a line of blackthorn scrub edging the gardens on the north side of the site, nearest Section D.

Section D has a large amount of bracken and scrub with similar species to previous sites, with the addition of broom, dog rose and buddleia.

Section E has thick bramble and gorse scrub on the roadside with tall ruderal vegetation north of this, which includes cow parsley, ground ivy, cleavers, Yorkshire fog, cock's foot, lords-and-ladies, spear thistle, curled dock, alexanders, green alkanet and knapweed. There are areas with a shorter sward that contain daffodils and snowdrops. There are some mature trees in this area including ash, sweet chestnut and scot's pine.

Section F has a triangle of dense scrub at the eastern end which contains the remains of the Home Guard Hut. The ruins are covered in honeysuckle. The scrub is mainly blackthorn with some lilac and there are a few mature sycamore trees. The southern road verge has sections of leggy gorse and grassland, which includes ribwort plantain, vetch, yarrow and common cat's ear. The northern road verge has a hedgerow of hawthorn, blackthorn and lilac, much of which is ivy clad.

Section G is a mown area of roadside verge, which widens into a triangular section at the School Road intersection. It is comprised of perennial rye grass, buckshorn plantain, ribwort plantain, creeping buttercup, common cat's ear, cow parsley and some ragwort. Many of these low growing species are typical of dry grassland on free-draining soils.

Avifauna:

The large areas of gorse scrub within Mill Common provide excellent nesting opportunities for a variety of garden birds. Long tailed tits were observed nesting in the scrub, while chaffinch, great tit, robin and wren noted singing on site during the survey. This site also has potential for nightingale, linnet and dunnock in thick scrub sections.

Invertebrates:

This site provides good sunny glades for butterflies, it is possible that white letter hairstreak butterfly could be present due to the high volume of elm trees in Section B. The bracken provides habitat for spiders and other invertebrates, and many were noted on site. Stag beetle may be present where there is subterranean deadwood.

Herpetofauna:

There is the potential for various reptile species (common lizard, grass snake, slow worm and adder) in section A in particular, but also section B.

Mammals:

There were abundant mole hills throughout the different sections of the site, and many mammal trails were visible throughout the bracken. A local resident reported that fallow deer often shelter within the scrubby areas of section B. Other common species of mammal will be present, such as fox, rabbit and grey squirrel, as well as various small mammals.

Comments and recommendations:

Mill Common covers a relatively large area so when considering management, areas should be chosen which can be repeatedly tackled annually. Consequently, we only recommend management of areas if their management can be sustained in future. This means that working in small areas is likely to be the most successful. In addition, a mixture of management tasks across the year will be more effective in spreading the load when undertaking work with volunteers and by hand.

Due to the notable bird activity, we recommend that local residents might like to record bird species. In particular, on a warm summer evening in mid-late May, a group of residents might like to listen for singing nightingales within all the scrubby sections of the various areas of the Common.

Timing of the various works suggested below:

Bracken – summer

Tree/scrub trimming/coppicing of gorse and blackthorn – autumn/winter

Grassland mowing – spring/summer/autumn

A – Packgate:

Coppice leggy gorse, flail bramble edges or cut by hand outside of bird nesting season (March-August is bird nesting season).

As an option, a small area of bracken could be cut and raked off and the thatch and mulch removed. Reduction in bracken could be tackled by either cutting or by pulling the young bracken fronds by hand, wearing thick gloves. This treatment is most effective when the bracken is at or near full frond and will need to be carried out over several years to weaken the plant, which works only by sustained depletion of the underground rhizomes. A small area should be chosen which can be tackled in successive years. Place dead bracken and mulch in a discreet habitat pile and continue to use this same pile in future years. Be aware of the potential presence of reptiles when undertaking the work (all reptiles are protected from intentional killing and injury).

Retain existing trees, but prevent new growth of saplings by pulling up or cutting.

B – The Nook:

Cut back sections of blackthorn where it is encroaching, but on rotation (ie not all at once) and outside bird nesting season. Decide where to pile up the sharp spiny branches away from footpaths or roads and continue to add to this pile in successive years.

Coppice leggy scrub in the eastern-most 20m of the site, but again on rotation and outside of bird nesting season.

For treatment of bracken, see A)

Monitor dying elms around the path to the arable field (NB assessing tree safety is outside the scope of this report).

C – Cottages:

Manage habitats on rotation, as above. Do not clear all at the same time.

D – Mill House:

Some of the scrub on the southern side is becoming leggy. Some small-scale coppicing work could be carried out on rotation outside of bird nesting season.

E – The Sheilings:

Retain scrub edge on southern boundary. During spring-autumn mow small areas of tall ruderal habitat and remove cuttings to help deplete nutrient levels and promote a better sward.

F – Home Guard Hut and Allotments:

Retain Home Guard hut ruins with honeysuckle covering. We would not recommend re-instating a path through the eastern triangle of site as suggested, due to established scrub and bird nesting value. Coppice leggy gorse down to ground level on rotation in winter.

G – School Hill:

Trim back leggy gorse, keep up with mowing regime of roadside verges.

Select an area of grassland on the slope where cars are avoiding, and mow three to four times a year and remove cuttings and a more interesting/diverse flora may appear, including more heathy species such as harebell.

