

Wild About The Coombes

I had something else I was going to cover in this issue, but something far more important has arisen. Instead, therefore, I am going to outline how the Coombes was affected when about one fifth of it changed ownership five years ago and the current risk of a similar thing happening across the remainder of the woodland.

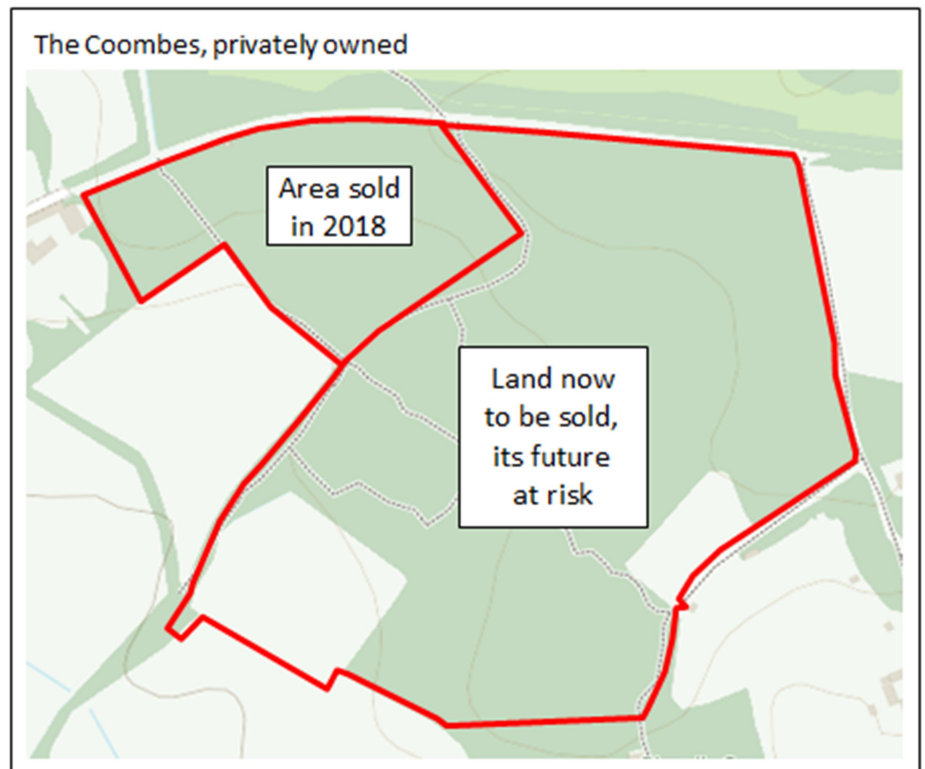
In 2018, 16 acres of woodland in the north west of the Coombes was sold. Previously, people had felt free to walk through the area, most of them probably being unaware that it was anything other than a public amenity.

Very soon, signs were liberally nailed to trees in that area saying 'PRIVATE LAND NO PUBLIC RIGHT OF WAY'. Fences started to be erected, a practice that was swiftly curtailed by the Council. The character of the land has been changed and the feeling of freedom lost.

Last December, it emerged that the owners of the rest of the Coombes wished to sell up. They are not the people who sold the other area, I hasten to add, and they have been good enough to allow the local community access to their land for well over 40 years. However, this freedom to roam, enjoyed by so many, is now in danger of being lost altogether.

The Coombes straddles the parishes of Barkham and Arborfield. The two Parish Councils and Wokingham Borough Council were made aware of the impending sale 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 agents to allow the Councils time to investigate how the land could be taken into public ownership, or that of a suitable charity such as the Wildlife Trust. They were given until mid-February to come up with a proposal.



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

With the support of the Borough Council, 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 is 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.

Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust has already visited twice and given advice on how best to manage what is designated Ancient Woodland. The WBC Ecologist has also surveyed it and made recommendations.

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.

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

I am so grateful for the efforts being made to secure the Coombes for the benefit of the local community and, to my mind even more importantly, the diverse range of wildlife that it supports. I see no better way of achieving this, at this point, than for it to move into public ownership.

With the deadline for Newsletter articles upon me, the proposal is still being worked on. By the time you read this, it will probably be in the hands of the vendors for consideration.

Let's hope that The Coombes, which I am so wild about, survives this crisis unscathed.

Joe Wild