

22 October, 2003

Dan Quarry

We have visited Dan Quarry four times over the summer, starting in April. This is an assessment of the condition of the habitat, with some suggestions about its preservation and use.

Dan Quarry has, since it was closed, developed a naturally colonised woodland which is approaching the natural condition for a deciduous wood in this area. The predominant tree is the sycamore (which is not a native species and normally does not produce anything of great wildlife interest), but there is a good mixture of native species, such as birch, oak, holly, yew and hawthorn. As a result the herb layer has been colonised by the native plants normally found on the floors of deciduous woods, particularly bluebell, dog's mercury, wood sorrel, wild garlic, celandine, herb Robert and foxglove, with red campion, forget me not, and cleavers becoming prominent later in the year. There is some bracken, and one other species of fern. There is also an area of acid grassland typical of other local woods on the millstone grit. [These are notable species, not a complete list.]

The floor of the wood in the early spring is attractive, with the native woodland species flowering, and with some growth of escaped garden flowers, notably a fine display of snowdrops and some daffodils. The connecting lane linking the wood to Shadwell Lane also had a moderately interesting flora, with some of the Queen Anne's lace that is so prominent in the hedgerows of the road spreading up the lane to the wood. This area has now been rotavated: it will be interesting to see how the flora recovers!

Later in the year, as happens in all deciduous woods, the growth of the leaves on the trees cuts out the light, and the ground flora starts to die back, leaving the wood looking less pretty. At this time the bracken, the brambles and the nettles start to grow, and fill up much of the ground within the wood.

The wood therefore has a good ground layer, some shrubs, particularly bracken, gorse, blanketing ivy, and the younger smaller trees. The woodland canopy is well developed, mostly of sycamore but with a good mix of other species.

The wood is growing "naturally", with some fallen rotting timber (which is an important habitat for all sorts of creeping wildlife) and a substantial growth of tree seedlings, probably mostly sycamore and rowan.

We did not see much in the way of flying insects, and did not attempt to look for the crawling kind. We noted great tit, blue tit, blackbird, robin, tree creeper, woodpigeon, jay, willow warbler and garden warbler, and swallows, house martins and swifts cruise the edges of the woods, the former two probably feeding on sycamore aphids that will be produced in plenty from the trees. Once there was a fine Reeve's pheasant walking around (tame, and presumably someone's pet!)

Rabbits and moles are present.

The unusual thing about the wood is that it has remained largely undisturbed for perhaps a century or more, and is approaching a natural growth for a deciduous Yorkshire woodland. Such "natural" habitats are now extremely rare, and although the wood is small, it clearly has conservation value from this alone. It has an interesting mix of plants, most of them not to be seen in other woodlands in the area, which are either managed plantations or are extremely disturbed and eroded by human activity.

The wood is providing cover, some food, and probably nesting space to a good spread of bird species. Further, the wood forms an important terminus to a woodland corridor that runs continuously from Shadwell southward into Roundhay Park, connecting us to the extensive woods in the gorge and on the eastern side of the lake there. This means that it is part of a conduit that introduces birds into Shadwell from those large woods, and of course allows Shadwell birds to travel back. The quarry and the corridor are probably in part responsible for the good mix of birds that we find in our gardens.

Conclusions

1. Because it has been left undisturbed for so long, Dan Quarry has developed to a state which is rare for a wood so close to an inhabited area: a semi-natural woodland with the ground flora typical of woods on millstone grit in this part of Yorkshire. Most of the woods as close as this to Leeds are either degraded and trampled by excessive human activity (Roundhay Park) or are managed as commercial plantations. Although it is unlikely to contain anything "rare" it is therefore unusual and has conservation value both for its plants and its use by local birds.

2. The wood is indeed probably unusual in having grown more or less naturally for such a long time.

3. A century of natural development can be destroyed in a matter of hours by a cultivation machine, and in a matter of weeks by human feet. It would be wise not to make alterations until we know what we are altering. Once a crucial part of the flora has been removed it will take years before it reappears.

4. Because of its small size it will be a matter of skill to preserve the wildlife value of the wood at the same time as making it available as a village amenity. The natural woodland floor will be very vulnerable to trampling, dog

deposits and youth on two wheels (whether motorised or push). The usual fate of small woods adjacent to villages in this area is to become seriously degraded, with most of the woodland flora destroyed or replaced by brambles. As an example, the sycamore wood at Blind Lane is a long way down this route, although its bluebells have so far survived.

5. While the nettles, bracken and brambles that fill the wood in high summer lack human appeal, this is part of their usefulness: they act to some extent to deter the trampling, biking and the build up of dog poo that is the death of small woods.

6. It would be good to obtain professional advice on the management of the wood. There is a professional consultancy based in Keighley Museum which has considerable experience of conservation in Yorkshire.

7. A simple positive step would be to discourage the dumping of garden waste from neighbouring properties.

8. Shadwell, or at any rate the larger area around us, has plentiful gardens, parks, playgrounds, dog walks and places to bike. A more or less natural wood is worth keeping for its own value.

Suggestions

- the wood should be left with as little disturbance as possible and no serious attempt at alteration
- the old machinery should be removed in winter, when it can be clearly seen and the plants have died back
- neighbouring land-holders should be discouraged from using it as a dump
- the woodland corridor extending to the south should be surveyed for plants and birds (who owns the corridor?)
- the Council should consider hiring a conservation consultancy to draw up a plan for the conservation and use of the wood
- a strategy is needed that would allow residents of Shadwell to enjoy the wood without degrading it