

WCLC – The brash is not for burning?

Adam Cooke & Amanda Erlenbach, Trustees, 22 November 2021

The Charity's contractors, Paul Denny and Robert Mortley, have resumed their work on the Common, removing gorse and self-sown silver birch and sallow (goat willow) so as to restore the rare and wonderful lowland heathland habitat. Gorse is a particular problem as it is invasive, and its nitrogen-fixing ability means that it thrives in poorer soils where other plants find it hard to survive. Left unchecked, gorse soon out-competes other shrubs and plants.

In response to requests from the community (see the Q&A in the report mentioned below), we have been investigating two alternatives to the burning of cut gorse and silver birch etc on the Common. These are using the cut branches (brash) to prevent riverbank erosion; and chipping the brash.

Working with Natural England, birch and sallow brash is being bound together to make brushwood fascines. When tied with biodegradable cord and entrenched in a woven pattern between closely-placed poles on a riverbank, the bundles of brash create quite robust low barriers. These help sediment rapidly to accumulate which in turn enables plants to anchor and grow. The plants then help to prevent erosion of the riverbank. The fascines will be collected by Natural England and installed on the banks of the Blyth, upstream of the Bailey Bridge. In contrast to birch and sallow, Natural England are understandably reluctant to use gorse for fascines as it is hard to handle due its unforgiving spines.

If there is more silver birch and sallow brash than Natural England can use for fascines, we are exploring whether it could be chipped instead. Unfortunately, preliminary reports suggest that, unlike silver birch and sallow, gorse doesn't make a suitable mulch. If any readers have any suggestions as to possible uses for gorse brash, please do let us know.

Chipping isn't straightforward for the reasons indicated in the report of the excellent talk of Adam Burrows (Natural England) last month: <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/walberswick-common-lands-charity/environmental-work/> (Click on the first link). A variety of factors are in play here, including access (whether a truck and machinery can reach the area in question and do so without causing too much damage) and cost (equipment hire plus labour). But a bonus is that the chipped wood could be delivered to sites in the village where mulch is needed, for example for the planting done last year in Sandy Lane and Bennett's Copse, and maybe for the allotments too.

Cut brushwood on the Fen



Bound brushwood fascines, awaiting collection at old railway station site

