

The Friends of Harmers Wood Trust Annual Report 2026



It is about 13 months since the current committee took over the management of Harmers Wood. During this time, we have been learning about the flora and fauna of the wood, the state of the maintenance in the wood and around the quarries, the nature of the legally required administrative tasks we are expected to carry out, possible sources of funds and a way of making our constitution simpler.

Harmers Wood

We often describe Harmers Wood as a small 8 acre wood near the summit of Helsby hill but really that fails to mention its unusual feature: this small wood has four old quarries within its boundaries. Those quarries finished working in the 19th century but enough stone was extracted to result in substantial spoil heaps in the surrounding area. The wood has developed on those spoil heaps so the ground is very stoney and in places the soil depth is very shallow. It is believed that the wood is fairly new as it was burned down in World War 2. At that time Cholmondeley Estates were the owners.

To make this a safe public place for people to walk, the quarries had to be fenced off before the wood could be opened to the public in 2007. This was more difficult than it sounds. The stony ground and shallow soil meant that the fence posts were often fixed in the holes painstakingly dug and fixed into the rock. All these fences have to be regularly inspected and repaired or replaced where necessary.

In addition, stormy weather conditions will sometimes cause branches to fall, trees to bend over and become dangerous and sometimes whole trees to be blown over. We try to do as much of this maintenance ourselves but we do need the help of professionals sometimes.

Maintenance in 2026

Fences As well as boundary fences the four quarries have fences at the top of the excavation to stop people (and rubbish) from falling into the quarry. The quarries have very different characters.

Haydens quarry is separate from the rest of the wood's main pathways but within the boundaries. The quarry floor is highly overgrown with more than 20 species of plants including the native Hogweed which can grow up to 7 or 8 feet tall and is sometimes confused with Giant Hogweed. It is only rarely visited.



Hayden's Quarry



Small Quarry

The Small Quarry has been used very occasionally by climbers and is also overgrown.

The quarry most often used is the Classroom Quarry whose sheer sides are a favourite with climbers. There is a well-used path leading to the quarry floor which is largely free of low growing plant material.

Ben's quarry is fenced off on all sides to prevent access. It represents the biggest danger to the unwary as the deep excavation to the floor of the quarry has four vertical sides and no easy way out.

All these quarries had to be fenced off properly when the wood was opened to the public in 2007 and now many of the fence posts are reaching the end of their useful lives. This year we replaced several of the posts which had become loose or were showing signs of rot and decay at the base. The work is done by our small band of volunteers, David George, Ian Hogan, Graham Maclachlan and Bob Hughes with occasional help from others. In the last 18 months eleven fence posts have been replaced with materials costs of about £133. Six posts were replaced around the classroom quarry and five around the top of the small quarry. In addition, some netting was straightened then re-used and restraining wires re-tensioned.

Trees and plants In any wood, ordinary winter storms will cause branches to fall and occasionally whole trees to be uprooted. This year much of the winter storm damage was managed by our volunteers but some large branches partially severed and therefore in danger of falling at any time had to be removed by professional tree surgeons. We hired Frodsham Tree Solutions to do this work for us this year at a cost of £504.

The very poor soil in Harmers Wood does not lend itself to a typical wood and flora and although there are a few native bluebells growing near the main entrance, inside the wood the floral diversity is low with a few grasses, Heather, Bilberry and ferns. Apart from normal woodland ferns like Broad Buckler

Fern the ground vegetation is dominated by Bracken. Bracken can create very dense impassable cover and it is possible to find it growing over 7 feet tall if conditions are right – although not usually that tall in Harmers Wood.

To deter the bracken just a little bit we arranged for a bracken whacking day where volunteers armed with sticks could come to the wood and batter down some of the many patches. Bracken forms a network of roots underground from which the fronds shot up in mid Spring, usually April/May. Bracken whacking (also known as bracken bruising, bashing, or crushing) is a highly effective, chemical-free method used to manage and deplete invasive bracken populations. Unlike clean cutting or mowing, whacking intentionally bruises and cracks the main stem rather than severing it cleanly. This causes the plant to continuously bleed sap, starving the massive underground rhizome (root) network of nutrients and severely weakening the following year's growth

As well as Bracken there can be invasive shrubs . One such is Cherry laurel, a quite popular hedging plant. Cherry Laurel shrubs have been removed from three areas of the wood and the stumps treated with herbicide

Woodland furniture This year some benches were repaired or replaced as they had become loose through rot. Benches were sanded down and oiled. The seats at entry to the wood and both bench seats in the wood were treated by our team. Cost: £43 If they need replacing it is quite an expensive job and we have paid £340 to replace one which is beyond repair.

Activities in the Wood

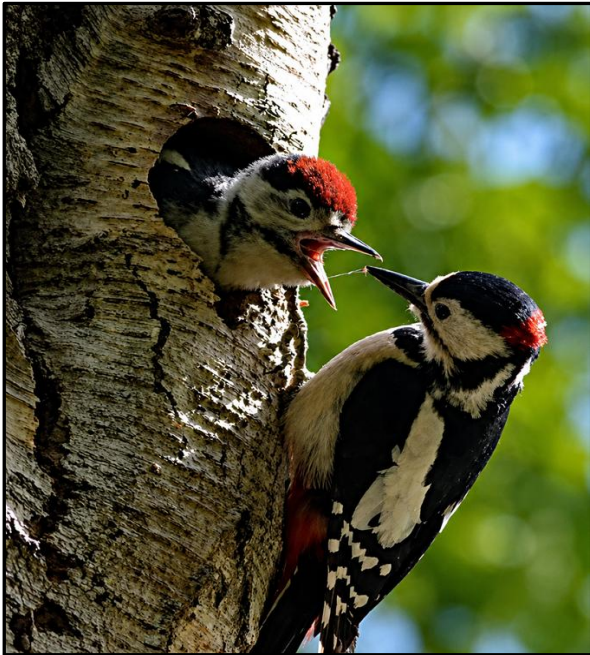
Artistic Activities In the early March four paintings by a local artist Lydia O'Hara, could be seen hanging from the trees of Harmers Wood. During COVID lockdowns we were (nearly) all restricted as far as gatherings and meetings in person. The ample space of Harmers Wood provided space and peace for some expectant mothers who found it one of the few places where they could meet and share experiences.



In the Autumn Lydia asked the committee if she could hang a few paintings in the wood to commemorate those valuable gatherings. It seemed an unusual request but we said yes. Judging by comments in social media this very different use of Harmers Wood was very well received by the public who use it.

Later in the year, the Classroom Quarry floor was used as a setting for a performance of Midsummer Night's Dream. This was performed by Helsby Players on June 22nd.

Surveying the Wood As reported in the February newsletter, we asked a Howard Pimbrough, a woodland expert, to give his view about the state of our little wood. We were pleasantly surprised by



Greater Spotted Woodpecker



New Bat boxes

his assessment of our wood as pretty much disease free. He reminded us that keeping it disease free meant stopping anyone from planting random specimens for whatever purpose. If trees need to be replaced, we must be sure they are supplied by a reputable nursery supplying disease free saplings.



The Harmers Wood surveillance team at work

Since then, Tom Smith our committee ecologist, ably assisted by other colleagues have performed one survey of the wood and placed new bat boxes in a few places. We are pleased to report that at

least one had a new Pipistrelle occupant. The bird boxes and natural holes in trees have also been used by Tawny Owls and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers.

Climbing Climbers use our quarries. You sometimes see them bringing their gear, including a mattress, along the path leading to the Classroom quarry. They have used the quarry from times when it was in private hands and their activities are not insured by the Friends of Harmers Wood Trust. They pursue their hobby at their own risk.

Without Permission

To maintain a disease free wood for the public of Helsby Frodsham and Alvanley to enjoy, we need to be careful about what activities are encouraged. We have a website; we advertise our presence as a managing committee on the Helsby Facebook page as well as having a Facebook Page of our own. In addition, there are notices at the entrances so there can surely be no doubt that any reasonable person wishing to engage in a new use for the wood can seek our advice. But it doesn't always happen.....

Fires Occasionally we find the clear signs that a fire has been lit and used within the wood which in the more recent hot Spring and Summer weather is irresponsible.

Biking The woodland paths are primarily for walkers to enjoy. We believe it is reasonable to say no biking on our footpaths please as biking and walking really do not mix well.

Commemoration Occasionally we have found what looks like a grave or a memorial construction which has been planted/erected without permission. While we are not in principle against the idea, but we do need to know what is intended. Planting of trees, shrubs or plants gives an unacceptable risk of accidentally introducing disease into our currently disease free wood.



Ben's Quarry

Gardening/Tidying removal of trees, plants etc. should be done by our volunteers not by anyone else. Our volunteers work closely with the committee. However skilled you may be, please don't cut down undergrowth or trees without talking to us. Some "tidying" of Ben's Quarry has recently been attempted for example. You can see the stumps of trees which have been cut down in the photo above.

Constitutional Matters

The existence of four quarries made it essential that the managing committee bore only limited liability, so the original constitution was twofold: it made the Friends of Harmers wood Trust both a limited company and a registered charity. It also made us liable for paperwork for two separate entities, the Charity Commission and Companies House and, as stated in the previous EGM, liable for fines if we don't submit paperwork on time.

We have applied to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation accountable only to the Charity Commission. As we understand it, our application will be successful if members pass our special motion at the Annual General Meeting on 17th September 2026.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Paul Downey for use of his fantastic photos of the Tawny Owl chicks and the parent Greater Spotted Woodpecker feeding a young bird. Grateful thanks to John Llewellyn, Donna Jackson, Lydia O'Hara for the use of other photos.

We also owe very grateful thanks to our Green Party councillor for Cheshire West and Chester, Chris Copeman. Using his Councillor's funds, Chris has made a grant of £1,000 for 2026 to the trust. We can use this grant for the routine but expensive maintenance items described in the report.

Links

Helsby Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/46593205645>

Friends of Harmers Wood Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/861336352911687>

Friends of Harmers Wood Trust Website: <https://www.harmerswood.org/>

Contact us: harmerswood@yahoo.com

Peter Llewellyn September 2026