

7 'Whinberry Hill' revival in the 21st century.

While the foregoing passages have considered the history of Whinberry Hill within its wider geographical context of Black Hill and other surroundings, this final section looks at the way in which the 9 acres of Clunbury Parish land set aside as a turbary and recreation ground by the Inclosure Award of 1854, has been managed in the third decade of the 21st century.

While successive Parish Councils may have been aware of, and discussed, the land which they have responsibility for on Black Hill, it was not until 2022 that action was taken by the then Council to manage the land directly. The purpose of the intervention was to safeguard remaining areas of heather and whinberry and to prevent it becoming completely dominated by bracken and invasive conifers. If achieved, this purpose would bring multiple benefits including creating a varied habitat suitable for many different bird and animal species while offering opportunities to the local community for engagement, education and recreation. Another and important benefit was to retain a fragment of the heathland that had played an important part in the lives of the poor of local communities as both a source of fuel and of a saleable crop - the whinberries. We were seeking to keep a memory of this alive and to salvage a little of the sense of place that had been lost to blanket afforestation. The Parish Council gave the responsibility of managing the land to a group of volunteers, the Clunbury Climate and Environment Group (CEG).¹

The first target of the CEG at Black Hill was to tackle two invasive species – self-seeded sitka spruce and bracken. The photo on the title page of this article shows the land looking south in July 2022 and fig. 41 is from the same date but looking north east.² Ground cover is dominated by bracken while tree species include a number of deciduous species, some scots pine but also many self-seeded sitka spruce. The spruce can be recognised in the drone photographs by their dark green colour and 'Christmas tree' appearance. Examples can be seen dotted across the



Fig. 41 looking NE across the Parish land in July 2022.



Fig. 42 a similar view in July 2024. The arrow indicates the approximate area which has been left unplanted during the latest replanting process.

area in 2022 but there is a concentration close to the boundaries of the Parish land.

The spruce were tackled both by a commercial contractor and volunteer groups in 2022 and 2023. The sale of the timber generated over £700 for the Council which earmarked the sum to the CEG. The volunteer work parties involved over 40 individuals of all ages demonstrating a high degree of local interest which was also shown when a pick-nic³ was held in July 2023. As a condition of the felling licence granted by the Forestry Commission, 72 mixed broadleaf and woody shrubs were planted in an area of 0.18 hectare in the north-east corner of Whinberry Hill. These trees have been staked and protected from grazing animals by biodegradable shelters. Individual trees have been replaced if the initial planting proved unsuccessful.

Control of bracken has proven to be problematic. In 2022, a contractor applied the chemical Asulox using a Robo cutter and spray boom and in two areas an excavator was used to scrape away the bracken litter and some surface soil including bracken rhizomes. Results have been variable. Asulox, the only herbicide that is sufficiently selective to

¹ Changes to the way in which the Parish land on Black Hill were managed have been summarised in a report to AONB Trust's Conservation Fund at the end of 2023 - <https://www.shropshirehills-nl.org.uk/Documents/Conservation%20Fund%20final%20report.pdf>

² The cleared area to the right in fig. 41 is part of 'Sector B' which was discussed in part 6 of this article..

³ Pick-nickers were encouraged to pick bilberries, eat bilberry-based home produce and witness the renaming of the area as 'Whinberry Hill'.

be used against bracken, has been withdrawn from sale. This leaves only cutting and scraping as viable options for control. In 2023/2024 working horses were used to rake some areas. Both strategies were applied over part of the 9 acres but neither had such a convincing impact for them to be repeated and Asulox is no longer an option. In the autumn of 2024 a robo cutter was used to 'mow' the bilberry/bracken mix to leave a short bilberry sward. This meant that when it emerged in the spring, the bracken stood proud of other vegetation and was easy to cut or bash. For the summer of 2025, the CEG decided to use further volunteer groups to cut or 'bash' the bracken using scythes and similar equipment. Groups involving 23 volunteers worked on 4 occasions during the summer across much of the northern part of Whinberry Hill. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these efforts on bracken regrowth rates has yet to be made but the degree of engagement by the local community was encouraging. This process is scheduled to be repeated in 2026.

A comparison of the images in figs. 41 and 42⁴ shows that the measures taken have been quite effective to this point in terms of knocking back both invasive species. However, the invasive threat posed by both species has not been removed and both are expected to need regular attention and intervention by the management group to prevent further incursions in the future. To this end, scythes and other equipment has been purchased for use in 2026 and a training programme in scything will take place for 16 volunteer users.

The purpose of tackling the invasive spruce and bracken was to reduce competition and therefore allow more light and nutrients for the benefit of other species, in particular heather and bilberry which are more characteristic of heathland.

In addition to the habitat restoration work that has taken place, much emphasis has been placed on community involvement. As well as the volunteer groups and community "pick-nic", several enthusiastic school visits have taken place and an information board has been created and erected at the north-west corner of the site (fig. 43). Two rustic benches have been erected nearby.

The mode of transport used by some visitors to Whinberry Hill has not been welcomed, so fencing has been erected near the information board site to deter motorcycle users from entering the Parish land while a mound of brash achieves the same objective along other boundaries.

The costs of the habitat, community and educational measures has been met by grants. Grants have come from the Shropshire Hills Conservation Fund and Farming in Protected Landscapes, both of which are administered by the Shropshire Hills National Landscape formerly known as the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

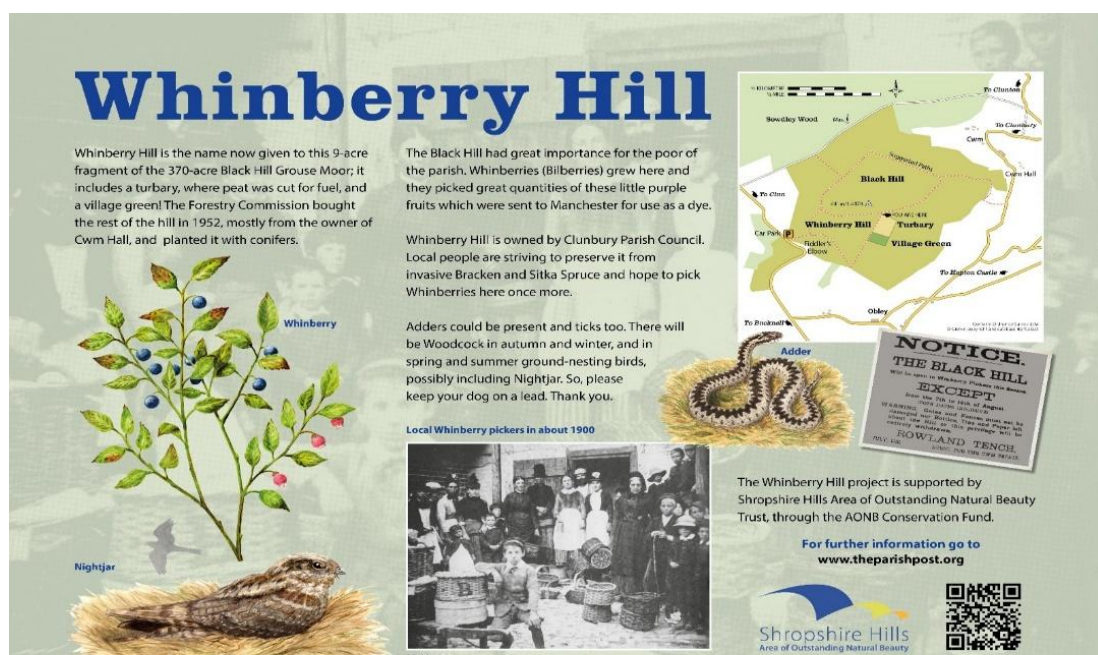


Fig. 43 Information board erected close to the NW corner of Whinberry Hill. Its creation was funded by grants from the Shropshire Hills Conservation Fund and the Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme administered by Shropshire Hills National Landscape.

⁴ The area of bare ground visible towards the top left hand part of Whinberry Hill in fig. 42, is the result of an experimental mechanical scraping of the ground surface in that area in March 2024. The vegetation regrowth which is taking place continues to be monitored in 2026.