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Dear Mark,

You asked me to jot down some background on Prickmore Wood and the area around Chittoe Mill. In brief, I don't think that the summerhouse is in any way detrimental to the adjoining woodland. The adjoining wood on both sides is plantation on ancient woodland site, PAWS.

I have had involvement in woodland to both sides of Chittoe Mill with the Forestry Commission from 1981. I've have continued to manage the local woodland, now for Spye Park. All the land surrounding Chittoe Mill is owned by Spye.

The history of the woods and meadows around there is well documented. To the west is Prickmore Wood, and to the East a small strip of mixed woodland.
Both were planted with hybrid poplar in the 1970s, a non-native commercial tree used for matches at the time. It was probably not much more than scrub from 1915 (when timber was felled for the war effort), though WW2, and up until the 1970s when it was planted in poplars to be harvested for matchwood. It is possible that for 65 years it wasn't woodland but scrub.

Spye took the woods back from the FC lease in the early 2000s, and it was unchanged since the plantation. The poplars are still there, and some ash has self-seeded in between. The ash is now suffering with ash dieback.

After consolation, and a tree falling into your open area around the mill, we agreed between us, Spye and the Fletchers that a few ash had to be felled, particularly 2 or 3 that were already dead and threatening to fall across into Chittoe Mill, particularly the curtilage around your office and the site of the new summerhouse. They were liable to fall, and needed to come down.
I also checked out the summerhouse/office. It is situated on a mound that had little but nettles and horsetails. It's setback from the woodland by about 10-15m, the other side of a ditch. The whole of that back area behind the garages was historically used to farm pigs. There were the remains of three pigsties there, until you built your office in 2003. That far corner is of little conservation value, disturbed and nitrogen rich, due to its historic use. Having said that, parts are slowly repairing themselves higher up, towards the meadow, but the mound was showing no signs of recovery.
Angus Campbell is a tree surgeon and builder who also knows the area, and he built the summerhouse. I think that there was no impact on the chosen that site – it was the area least likely to be of any value to conservation, and the most sensible place. I know Angus wanted to use zero impact foundations – a system of thin screws that push any roots aside, and I agree that was a good decision. The oak tree next to the site would not be impacted, in my view, and if anything, the frame of the summerhouse could hold the mound together, to the benefit of the oak. Returning now to the site, I can see that the oak is as healthy as ever, three years later.

I first visited the area as forester for Forestry Commission in the 1980s and 90s. The pond was then filled over, and everything else was brambles and nettles. It had been abandoned in the 1950s, when the track deteriorated, and neglected since. Pre 1950s, the mill had originally been a homestead, part-time mill and smallholding for at least 200 years, probably longer. It was in four quadrants – the mill pond, a meadow, an orchard and an area used for pigs.
It was bought by the then owners of Mill Cottage, and then sold as a single unit to the Fletchers in 1996. Since getting planning permission to restore the mill, they have reinstated the pond, the orchard and the meadow. They worked closely with WWT and I helped them achieve an impressive wildlife area.
The plot behind the garages was used for pigs up until the 1950s, and so is much harder to bring back to a more natural state. It's high in nitrogen, boggy disturbed earth, so nettles and marestails do well.

You ask about flooding. It really doesn't happen along the Westbrook, the topography makes it almost impossible. It's never been known, and the fact that the mill is right there, shows that historically it's extremely unlikely to even rise more than a few inches. The fall in height of the stream over the 100m or so along Chittoe Mill is significant, and so can drain rainfall easily. The stream originates in Spye, from a lake where the level is controlled, less than a mile away, and the catchment area is small. As it originates from a small lake, the flow is pretty constant all year round.

With kind regards

Bill Ayers