

# Himalayan Balsam Report

## Otterton to Bicton

### Summary

Following the OVA's purchase of a brushcutter, the stream between Otterton and Bicton was chosen as a suitable area for testing the new machine. The area had many areas of dense Himalayan Balsam (HB) in a variety of habitats ranging from easy open fields to challenging wooded areas. The area was chosen to learn how to use the machine rather than an attempt to clear it. However, the quick and not terribly thorough methods proved remarkably successful and approximately one kilometre was cleared with very little regrowth.

### Starting Questions

The OVA volunteers attended a Brushcutting course at Bicton College. The tutor was very good and the day's compressed course suitable. However, the training was in open ground with few obstacles and before HB had grown to a suitable size to try and practice on it.

Q1 Would the brushcutter damage other non HB vegetation? No, apart from breaking into dense areas of HB there was almost no collateral damage. It was easy to cut along the boundary of the HB and then either hand pull or use a hoe to eliminate any plants missed or surrounded by other vegetation.

Q2 Would nesting birds be disturbed? In the dense beds of HB no signs of birds or any other animals were observed. From the limited work done it would appear HB not only eliminates other vegetation, it also does not seem to create a suitable habitat for native animals.

Q3 Should HB be cleared with the brushcutting blade or the strimmer? The strimmer was only able to clear small plants such as those growing in the old railway ballast where they appear to remain small as they do not have to out-compete other vegetation. In most areas where the brushcutter was used the vegetation was so dense that the operator had a job to make progress with cut material falling so thickly that it was hard to make way. The brushcutter noticeably worked better well clear of the ground. It was found that cutting just above the first node was about the most comfortable for both operator and the machine. A more powerful brushcutter might have cut lower. We had considered going back over the area with the strimmer attachment but the HB proved to be too tough.

Q4 What size of machine should we purchase? We settled for a Stihl FS90 which is the smallest recommended machine and suitable for part-time volunteers. This proved to be correct, as a bigger machine would be heavier and much more difficult to use.

### Lessons learnt using the brushcutter

1. You need to wear protective overalls, a helmet, ear defenders and a Perspex visor but you get very hot indeed. Taking turns on a 30 minute turnround was the most comfortable.

However, working for more than 3 or 4 hours is too much. The visor was covered each day with a piece of cling film which made cleaning it very easy.

2. The ideal situation is having 2 banksmen with the operator checking every few minutes that everything is OK. Control being held by the main banksman. A system of three hand signals was developed from the start which worked very well. A divers "O" for OK, two fingers pointing to the eyes then at a potential hazard, and hand held out flat to indicate stop. It took a little practice to get used to looking up at the banksmen but it soon became routine.
3. It takes quite a time to get the machine ready, helped by a tick list (essential) and to clean up at the end of the session. All items were ticked out and then in on return.
4. Despite taking as much care as possible - recce before starting, visually inspecting every new length before cutting – it was very easy not to see hazards. Old wire fencing in particular. No accidents occurred but hazards were only seen at the last moment on a number of occasions.

#### Other lessons learnt

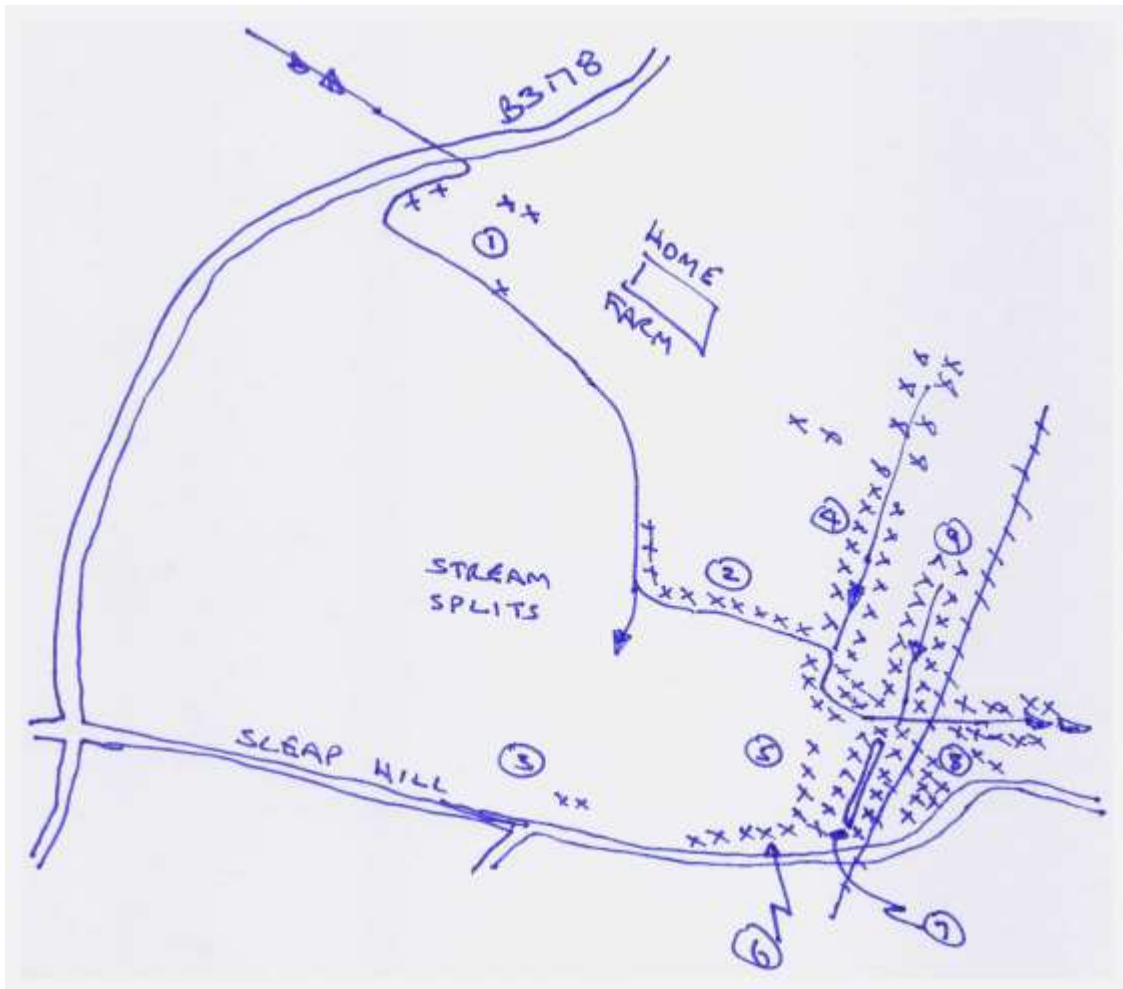
1. The use of a back facing hoe with a long handle proved very effective (as used by the East Budleigh HB team). This worked well in all types of situation but was particularly useful where
  - a. HB was out of reach, say on a stream/ditch bank
  - b. HB was amongst other vegetation which we wanted to leave undisturbed
  - c. Pulling a large HB plant about a third up will pull out most HB plants by the roots and at the same time break it thus negating any reason to handle the offending plant.
2. Once the initial trial use of the brushcutter had been completed it was decided to try and tackle the whole length between Otterton and Bicton. Due to the large area tackled and limited resources it was decided to cut down / pull as much flowering HB as possible with minimal piling up of material.
  - a. Trampling of pulled material as one made progress did seem to substitute for breaking the plants by hand.
  - b. The HB desiccated very quickly and a brief tidy up a few days later much reduced the effort.
  - c. This may have been helped by the dry weather, but even material in the shade showed little regrowth, even where very little attempt to pile the HB was made.
3. Timing – it was felt that starting once the HB was fairly mature was correct, any earlier and clearing advanced HB might make room for other seeds that had failed to make much progress to take its place. We started mid July and by mid August seeds were popping in untouched areas. For new areas, a big push working 3 or 4 days a week for these crucial weeks followed up with weekly visit to mop up stragglers and late developers should be considered. A wetter summer may of course may make this approach less effective.

#### Dates of main working parties (bracket = size of team)

(does not include casual trips to pick HB stragglers)

- 11<sup>th</sup> July (3) First practice session – beware dog walkers. Nettles left, large stands of HB cut above first node.
- 17<sup>th</sup> July (3) Hazards difficult to spot. Last week's pulled HB desiccated well.

- 20<sup>th</sup> July (2)
- 24<sup>th</sup> July (2)
- 26<sup>th</sup> July (2) Hoe proving very useful and versatile. Previously cut HB desiccated well.
- 31<sup>st</sup> July (2) Bindweed holding HB up when cut, slows progress
- 7<sup>th</sup> August (2) Strimmer does not like thick HB but good in ballast areas with small HB plants. Hoe useful to follow up on areas cut previously.
- 9<sup>th</sup> August (2)
- 19<sup>th</sup> August (2) Seeds popping so cannot extend area, little regrowth even where first node left.
- 28<sup>th</sup> August (2)
- Various short sessions to pick stragglers, last pulling 16<sup>th</sup> October



Key – showing main HB growths by crosses.

- 1 Only a few outbreaks of HB present, but source is far end of the lake in the Botanical gardens and Bicton arena further upstream.
- 2 The old wire fences had been removed and the cattle had done a good job of eating some of the HB and other vegetation making it easier to pull in this area. All cleared.
- 3 Strimmed by gardener to Old Vicarage once we had informed him of the problem.
- 4 Only a short length cleared late on in the period, deep water made progress slow. The vegetation hid the size of the ditch. Where is this being fed from?
- 5 HB along field edges, south side was continuous and cleared, east side was bad but not continuous, all cleared.
- 6 Access track had variable lengths of HB which were all cleared.
- 7 Very dense HB along the ditch and adjacent wood, lots of hidden obstacles to make brushcutting tricky. All cleared.
- 8 Field to the east of the old railway and along the old railway had lots of HB - made a good area to learn how to use the brushcutter. Very little regrowth despite mostly cut above first node. In the ballast the HB only grew to a short height, as did new infestation that was not yet fully established to the east adjacent to the road.
- 9 Length between 2 and 8 in the woods, lots of HB along stream, waders needed. The wood had many patches of HB. All cleared.



Before 1



After 1 (left hand side)

After 2 before tidy up



Before 2



After 2 (before tidy up)

## Supplementary Report

### Back Lane between Otterton and Newton Poppleford (patrol)

Very little HB was seen on the east side of the lane.

Coming South from NP;

- 1 Bridge End Cottage is very bad but someone trimmed the verge hedge thus cutting down the HB most likely to spread seed over the other side of the road. Ted and his team are dealing with this area.
- 2 Smiths Farm – only a few small plants were found and cleared.
- 3 Kitts Cross - there is HB to the west along a ditch but it is rather overgrown. There is not a huge amount but there is a disproportionate amount of cutting back needed to get access.
- 4 Ashtree farm - there is some HB in the ditch running west
- 5 Burnthouse farm - a disaster. The area covered is extensive, almost a crop! The spread seems not to be related to water therefore it must have taken many years to get so well established. This area is on such a scale only a large team with brushcutters could tackle it.
- 6 It was hoped to stop HB spreading southwards from the farm - there is some on both sides of the lane. However, large stands of HB were observed in the horse paddock above the road (south of Burthouse Cottage. HB thickly covers all the boundaries. It may be in other fields. As the field and HB is in an elevated position the spread over the road here has started and needs urgent attention next year. Steep slope on road side, making access difficult.