

# Wildlife Habitats and Landscape in East Hagbourne

## Background and Purpose

The rural atmosphere, open countryside and extensive footpath network in East Hagbourne have been appreciated for many years by those living within and outside the parish.

Our volunteer Hagbourne Environment Group has been instrumental in managing the village natural environment for many years. This group is expected to continue its activities in the future as part of the new Hagbournes & Upton Group for Sustainability (HUGS).

The East Hagbourne Neighbourhood Plan includes, as Policy E2, the objective to protect and enhance biodiversity and the natural environment. East Hagbourne Parish Council has also adopted the principles of the Woodland Trust Charter for Trees.

There is increased interest, both from SODC and from local residents for a greater focus on climate change.

Following the adoption of the Neighbourhood Plan, the Parish Council is developing a strategy for community projects. This document is intended to provide practical information on wildlife and landscape assets in the parish to guide future priorities. While not exhaustive, it surveys the existing areas of most value to wildlife and suggests some opportunities for conservation, while being mindful of the value of the open landscape surrounding our village.

## Our natural landscape

The East Hagbourne Village Character Assessment and Landscape Study 2018 notes that from the 11th century this area has been characterised by an open farming landscape. The landscape is not denuded, in fact its open nature with expansive views reflects the historical character of the land.

The Character Assessment sets out (Table 6) four natural features to retain and enhance:

- The historic routeways which extend out of the village into the surrounding former open fields.
- The natural and heritage value of the watercourses, including the pollarding of willow, poplars, oak and formerly elm (I would add mature maples and hawthorns as attractive and distinctive features of our parish landscape).
- The open character of the agricultural landscape with few trees, resulting from its enclosure with straight thorn hedges.
- The fragmentary evidence of the once extensive orchards concentrated around the historic village and Coscote.

The Character Assessment (Table 9 and Figure 40) also recognises long views as an important feature of the village surroundings. In our parish, trees and hedges are found principally along the watercourses and trackways and the open fields within this framework are equally important in defining the local landscape. Policy VC2 of the Neighbourhood Plan supports key views as an important part of our rural character.

The fields around East Hagbourne are high quality agricultural land (primarily Grade 1/2), mostly under arable cultivation, but with some livestock. As well as producing valuable food, this farming activity plays a large part in defining the landscape character of our parish. The extensive network of footpaths in the parish and surrounds, means that this countryside is readily accessible to local residents.

The value of this open land was also assessed in the East Hagbourne Green Buffer Assessment, an independent study which provided detailed evidence on the landscape value and sensitivity of the land surrounding East Hagbourne, as shown in Figure 4 of the EHNP.

We should respect and enhance the character of this landscape we have inherited and conserve both the wildlife corridors and the open countryside.

### **Inventory of key wildlife and landscape locations**

This review broadly starts at the west of the parish and moves anti-clockwise around the village. The reference letters [X] refer to locations marked on the map. The review is not exhaustive, but intended as a starting point for discussion.

It should be noted that some of the areas discussed lie on farm land, so any proposals for conservation could only proceed with the support and agreement of the land owners. Engagement and discussion with local farmers should be a priority to understand their views and hear their suggestions.

The land lying to the west of the railway embankment (known as Coscote Fields) is designated as a Local Gap in the EHNP to conserve its open character and long views. The area is also well used by birds including winter visitors.

The railway embankment (including the section outside the parish towards Upton) is a valuable example of chalk grassland with a diverse flora and insect population, as well as producing quantities of blackberries in season. The cemetery, including the wildflower meadow, lies immediately adjacent [A], both of which are valuable for wildlife. The field to the south of the cemetery is also designated as a Local Gap in the EHNP and is bounded by the embankment and hawthorn hedges.

The track running south from the church towards Fieldside is bordered by a fence to a newly built house and could be softened by planting a hedge. Where the track turns east onto Fieldside, a formerly tall hedge has been cut down [B]. This corner was formerly well frequented by small birds including finches and chiff-chaff and would benefit if the hedge were allowed to regrow naturally.

The footpath (197/25) running south from here [C] is bounded by a hawthorn hedge of medium height. This was formerly a site for yellowhammer and its wildlife value could be enhanced if the hedge were allowed to grow rather more freely. The Fieldside footpath (197/12) [D], running eastwards to Blewbury Road is bordered by trees and shrubs on its north side and provides fine views southwards towards the Downs.

The drainage channel along the southern boundary of the parish [E] has recently been cleared of overgrowth, but has some trees along its length. There may be a possibility to augment these and fill some of the gaps without impeding the wider views. Moor Lane [F] is mostly in West Hagbourne parish, but is mentioned here, because it is a major feature of the country path network. It is bordered by trees, including some impressive field maples and poplars, some of which are becoming aged and burdened with ivy. There are places where sympathetic management and infill could be carried out.

The fields south of the village are again open country, with impressive views to the downs on a slight rise before descending to the alluvial lowlands around Hagbourne Mill. This lower land is more closely hedged and there are trees along the Mill Brook as well as a willow plantation and a small and mature mixed wood just over the boundary in Blewbury parish.

There is a footpath following the Mill Brook on the Blewbury side to the site of the former papermill, with trees along the length of the brook. The field on the Blewbury side is sympathetically managed with a reserved strip for wildlife. An area of trees can be found at the papermill site which also provides a refuge for wildlife.

From here, footpath 197/19 provides a very scenic walk back towards East Hagbourne. The area marked [G] is notable for its impressive mature hawthorns, sought out by birds, particularly in the autumn, supplemented by blackthorn and a few other trees. The planting is sufficiently open to allow good views to both north and south and the lighter planting on the south side of the track has allowed a small area of diverse ground flora, good for butterflies, to develop. The priority should be to conserve what is already a rich and attractive habitat.

The continuation of FP197/19 [H] and the southern part of FP197/16 [J] follows the lower stream channel. Both are also richly vegetated and a good habitat for birds, including blackcap, chiffchaff and whitethroat, with plants such as wild damson and wild hops adding to the variety. This area is attractive as it stands, however there are a number of trees reaching the end of their lives. Some of these provide valuable dead wood habitat, but some sympathetic management may be needed into the future.

Moving north along FP197/16, the lower channel of Hacca's Brook crosses the track and continues eastward across the field. There are some mature and attractive pollard willows, but the nearest section [K] is more open and there may be an opportunity to plant additional ones, subject to the agreement of the farmer.

The northern section of this footpath [L] is hedged along the east side (including one of the few oak trees found around the village), but the west facing side is more open and again there may provide an opportunity for sympathetic planting. This site adjoins an 11 acre field (outlined with a broken line) which is owned by East Hagbourne Parish Council and leased for farming.

Turning left towards East Hagbourne, the first part of the Great Mead/Fulscot track (FP197/17) [M] was planted with mixed native species by Hagbourne Environment Group in the 1990s. It is now well grown and in need of some minor cutting back to keep the bridleway clear, but otherwise provides a good habitat.

The continuation of the track towards Cherry Tree Farm is bounded on the south by a valuable tall mixed hedge, bordered by a strip overgrown by brambles [N]. It has been suggested that this could be cleared and replanted and this could improve the visual appearance of the location. It should be noted that electric power lines follow the course of this strip of land, so tall trees would not be practical. Just adjacent, the apex of the triangular paddock has been planted with trees by the owner, which are growing well.

The footpath running diagonally back to Blewbury Road (FP197/18) runs between and under hawthorns, making an attractive walk, although it would benefit from some sympathetic trimming. The land to the east of New Road is designated in the EHNP as the Lower End Field Local Gap and is again valued for its open nature and wide views.

The land immediately to the north of the village and including Millennium Wood and Butts Piece is also a Local Gap but of a more varied character, providing a valuable green area between Didcot and East Hagbourne. The two triangular areas marked [P] are under separate ownership and both used as paddocks, which seems in keeping with the character of the area. The tall hedges in this area, particularly following the Sustrans Route from the embankment and towards Didcot are an asset as much as the wooded areas themselves and are a haven for birds.

Area [Q] is a strip of land alongside a footpath (FP197/4) alongside Butts Piece. This is currently rough grass with some hawthorn, but also includes two recently planted elms, selected for their genetic diversity and hopefully having some resistance to dutch elm disease.

Butts Piece itself is owned by the Hagbourne Parochial Charities, but leased and managed by the parish council for the benefit of wildlife and people. In addition to the village allotments, the area has an open grassy area and a 'wild' area with scrub and trees which is lightly managed by Hagbourne

Environment Group. Past efforts by the group have cleared part of the scrub and replanted with native trees which are growing well. There are opportunities to further enhance the value of the area for both people and wildlife, for example by opening up the area under the replanted trees and allowing some of the grassland to grow as a meadow.

## **Trees**

The Woodland Trust's Charter for Trees sets out a wide range of principles for tree planting, including to sustain landscapes rich in wildlife, combat the threats to our habitats and strengthen our landscapes with trees. In East Hagbourne, trees are an important element of the landscape, particularly along the historic tracks and waterways and around the built area itself. Conserving and enhancing our tree inventory is beneficial both for wildlife and for human enjoyment.

Trees are part of the national strategy to combat climate change, however the scale of the challenge should not be underestimated. Tree planting alone cannot compensate for our GHG emissions - if the whole of the parish were planted with the fastest growing tree species it would not be nearly enough to offset the GHG emissions of the people living here.

The Committee on Climate Change states that the UK needs to plant a minimum of 30,000 ha (approx. 50 million trees) every year as one component of the measures required to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. The agricultural land in East Hagbourne is of high quality and produces high yields of cereals, so should not lightly be given up for other uses, however, if we apply the above figures on a per capita basis, it would mean about 0.5ha per year for East Hagbourne parish.

There are several locations where small numbers of trees could be planted around the parish, complementing existing and perhaps ageing trees, while leaving gaps to preserve views. The choice of species should reflect the heritage of the parish, provide habitat for wildlife and include diversity for resilience in a changing climate. Poplar, willow and field maple are typical of the trees found. Oak is found less frequently, but seems to be able to thrive in favoured locations. Scrub elm persists in several places and resistant cultivars could potentially be reintroduced.

There are already some substantial plantings of trees in the parish and the immediately adjoining areas. A look at the satellite map highlights the very many trees planted in gardens and open spaces. The largest block of trees is the Didcot Millennium Wood, supplemented by the wild area of Butt's Piece and Mowbray Fields (in Didcot Parish). These three sites are already managed sympathetically. Small blocks of trees can also be found at the site of the former papermill and at Hagbourne Mill (willow plantation). There are two long tree shelter belts in the eastern part of the parish. In addition, there are many trees and tall hedges along the principal trackways and the watercourses.

However, much of our parish derives its landscape character from the wide fields and views where extensive tree planting would be detrimental to the landscape character. Areas for any tree planting should be chosen with great care.

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ATTACHMENT: Map showing key sites.

