

*Extracts from report:*

## **Cambridgeshire and Peterborough County Wildlife Site Recording Card**

### **Croft Close Set-aside**

Grid ref: TL434643

10 May 2022

**Management condition:**

Overall site condition: Favourable, Stable

Condition of potential CWS qualifying features (i.e. scrub):

Favourable; Stable

Extract from document produced by **Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire**

### Suggested qualifying criteria:

- **1e** - Areas of scrub more than 0.5 ha in extent with NVC W21 (common hawthorn - ivy) with more than 8 woody species

Over the 4.8 ha site there is approximately 2.5 ha of dense scrub of various kinds (Hawthorn, Bramble, Blackthorn and mixed) and closely follows the W21 description, there is also 0.3 ha of scattered scrub. Woody species include Common Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Field Maple, Sycamore, Pedunculate Oak, Ash, Grey Willow, Goat Willow, Rusty Willow, Cherry Plum, Rowan, Hazel, Midland Hawthorn, Elder and Crab Apple. Bramble and Dog Rose are also frequently present, in the case of Bramble sometimes dominant.

### Site description:

The site is well documented by the locals who use and manage it, and it is not the intention of this report to go into the full detail, but rather to focus on its potential as a County Wildlife Site. Further information, both biological and historical, can be found on the website: <https://abbeyfields.online/>

As the site name suggests, Croft Close Set-aside was formerly a croft which has, since around 2000, been 'set-aside' and has developed into a rich habitat mosaic of scrub, young woodland and open grassy area. The site is and has been well-used by local residents and its development over the past 20 years well documented. In 2021 the land was secured *in perpetuity* for the use of the villagers and will be owned by the newly-formed Histon and Impington Green Spaces CIO and managed by an associated 'Friends' group.

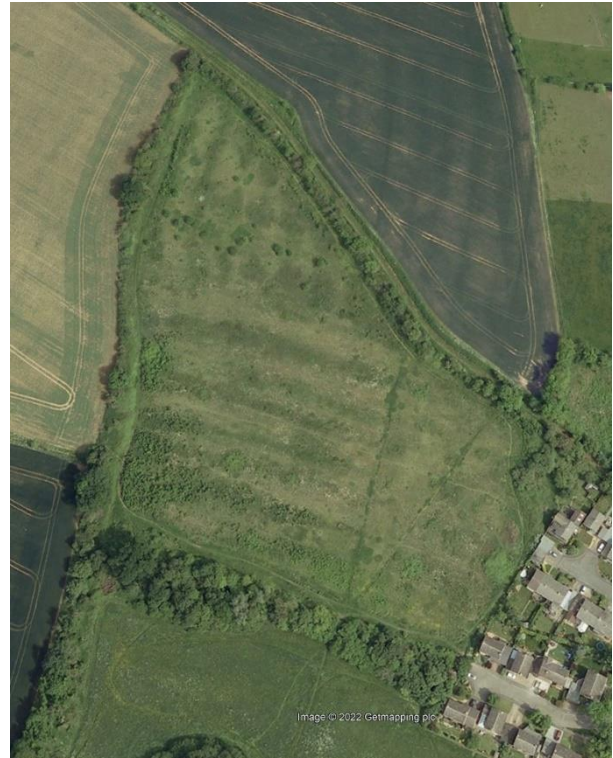
Historically the site has been part of the Abbey Farm Estate, one of the earliest farms in the settlement of Histon, which sits on a gravel ridge (Quaternary River Terrace 4) extending westwards from the village. Croft Close Set-aside is on the northern flank of this ridge and also lies on sands and gravels (Quaternary River Terrace 3) above the underlying Cretaceous Gault Clay. As river terrace deposits are usually variable in composition and depth, their juxtaposition with the underlying clay, alongside historical ploughing of the land, creates a diversity of soil types across the site.

Historical satellite images reveal the pattern of vegetation succession across the site. At the time of being set-aside the site was devoid of any shrubby vegetation or trees, except for the boundary hedges which are themselves ancient and include an ancient Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* (400-500 years old), and ancient Field Maple *Acer campestre* (also 400-500 years old) and a mature Wild Pear *Pyrus pyraster*, along with Midland Hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata* (Figure 1a). By 2007 the satellite image reveals the early stage of development of what is now a Field Maple woodland in the south-western corner of the site, presumably from wind-blown seed from the western boundary hedge and southern woodland, including seeds from the ancient Field Maple (Figure 1b). In the north-western part of the site several small trees have appeared, which are now known to be quite large individuals of Goat Willow *Salix caprea* and Grey Willow *Salix cinerea*. By 2012 scrub is developing across the site (Figure 1c) and is well

established by 2015; in many areas this is now undergoing succession to woodland (Figure 1d).



(a) 1999



(b) 2007



(c) 2012



(d) 2020

Figure 1 – satellite images of the development of the site since it was put into set-aside (source: Google Earth)

The value of this site for wildlife in the local context is considerable. The rich interplay of woodland, scrub and open grassy areas, along with two small ponds, provides a vast amount of resource, shelter and nesting habitat for many animal species. Over 150 species of flowering plants have been recorded on the site, 49 species of bird, plus many mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates, along with fungi, lichen and mosses. The vast majority of these have arrived in the last 20 years. Ten of the birds are red listed, including Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (a regular, known to have bred on the site), Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and Lesser Redpoll *Acanthis cabaret* and the site is one of the few sites in the vice-county of Cambridgeshire with Changing Forget-me-not *Myosotis discolor*, in this case the county-rare subspecies *Myosotis discolor* subsp. *discolor*.

Today the 4.8 ha site hosts 2.8 ha of scrub (of which 2.5 ha is dense), 1.7 ha of young woodland (in two blocks) and 0.5 ha of open grassy areas. Alongside these habitats are two ponds and several mature to ancient trees along the boundary. This diversity of habitat suits a whole host of fauna providing a variety of resources and different nesting areas, including dense scrub, rot holes in the old trees and sheltered grassy areas. The dense scrub and woodland surrounding the site provide a wonderfully protective belt around the calm interior of the site.

### *Scrub*

This is a dynamic site undergoing succession from open ground to woodland, as such there is a wide variety of scrub, with some large pioneer Bramble patches protecting young woody species in the open centre of the site, thickets of Blackthorn within the woodland and open area, areas of mixed scrub (often Common Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* dominant, but with Field Maple, Goat and Grey Willow) zoning from sparsely scattered, to densely scattered to dense scrub (and eventually woodland). The scrub has developed from the outside inwards (due to the seed source coming from the boundary hedges) and thus the dense scrub tends to be nearer the edges of the site becoming scattered towards the central open area. The large expanse of dense scrub in the eastern part of the site is favoured by the Turtle Dove, and indeed the site provides perfect nesting habitat for this species. Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*, although not recorded at the site, also thrives in scrub habitat of this type, specifically requiring dense thickets of Bramble or Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* which remain dense close to the ground.





*Figure 2 – patches of dense bramble scrub amongst the short grass*



*Figure 3 – Scattered scrub in the foreground grading to dense scrub and woodland in the background*



### Woodland

There are two main areas of young woodland and from the historical satellite images it can be seen that these were the first areas to be colonised by woody plants. In the southern woodland area Field Maple is the dominant species, and it is this area which also hosts the ancient Pedunculate Oak, ancient Field Maple and mature Wild Pear. The northern woodland block is more mixed with a variety of species including Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* (now dying), Pedunculate Oak, Grey Willow and Goat Willow. It is the willows which were the pioneers in this area and are now the largest trees. The ground cover under the wooded areas is typically very sparse with much leaf litter as the canopy has now closed. However, as the woodland develops, species tolerant of shade should be able to colonise, especially as gaps in the canopy start to appear to allow light in during the spring.



Figure 4 – dense young Field Maple woodland with no ground flora or understorey

### Open grassy areas

The grass sward in these areas are kept very short by the local population of rabbits and many of the plants are unable to flower. As such, its potential as a valuable resource for pollinating invertebrates (and thus food source for other animals) is limited. At the time of visit Germander Speedwell *Veronica chamaedrys*, Thyme-leaved Speedwell *Veronica serpyllifolia*, Common Chickweed *Stellaria media* Field Forget-me-not *Myosotis arvensis* and Changing Forget-me-not were the main species in flower within the short sward. The grazing is much lower in the areas of scattered scrub, allowing the sward to be taller and plants in flower in these areas include Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Sorrel *Rumex acetosa*, Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*, Soft Brome *Bromus hordeaceus* and Meadow Buttercup *Ranunculus acris*.



The open, bare nature of the grassy areas, along with plants such as chickweeds, clovers and medicks, provide perfect foraging habitat for Turtle Dove and in this regard the grazing rabbits are a crucial part of the site management.



Figure 5 – the grass sward is kept at a minimum by the resident rabbits

### *Ponds*

The pond along the southern boundary is currently of limited ecological value, partly having been devoid of water for 15 years before the heavy rains in the winter of 2020-2021, and partly due to heavy shading by the woodland. At the time of visit the water was approximately 30 cm deep, having reached 90 cm in depth by late winter in early 2021. It did not dry out in the summer of 2021, though the levels dropped.

In the north-eastern corner of the site there is a pond which holds water in all but the hottest summers. Common Frog *Rana temporaria* and Smooth Newt *Lissotriton vulgaris* are known to breed in the pond, providing a food source for the resident Barred Grass Snake *Natrix helvetica* population. Many invertebrates also utilise this resource, and it is indeed also beneficial for the local birds, especially the seed-feeding Turtle Dove which requires a water source to drink from. Yellow Flag Iris *Iris pseudacorus* and Pendulous Sedge *Carex pendula* form a stand of vegetation at the western end of the pond and Water Cress *Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum* and Celery-leaved Buttercup *Ranunculus sceleratus* are present in the shallow eastern end. The surface of the water was covered by Least Duckweed *Lemna minor* at the time of visit.



### *Veteran trees*

The veteran trees on the site provide a rich habitat for invertebrates, nesting birds, roosting bats and fungi. The Pedunculate Oak and Field Maple are both thought to be over 400 years old, and exhibit many features typical of trees of their age. The growth forms of the trees indicate that the oak was pollarded at some point in its history, and the maple coppiced. The Field Maple in particular has many rot holes, nooks and crannies, and the oak is the tallest tree in the vicinity, despite its age, though it is beginning to show some signs of senescence. The oak was vandalised in the 1970s/1980s and hollowed out by fires, but this has not caused it any long-term damage.



*Figure 6 – the ancient Pedunculate Oak, hollowed out by fire, and the ancient Field Maple with many nooks, crannies and rot holes*

### **Management notes (current and historical) and recommendations:**

The site is now managed by a group the Friends of Histon & Impington Green Spaces and, as a new group, they are currently still developing their management plans. Recent management has mostly focussed on keeping the pathways open and dealing with dangerous or dying trees. There are many future plans, but two in the near future are the clearance of woodland and scrub around the ancient oak (halo thinning) in order to remove its close competition for resources and also allow light to reach its lower branches, and the restoration of the ponds. The management group has already been in touch with FWAG East about pond restoration and the possible creation of a third pond, hopefully with funding through the District Level Licensing scheme.

The value of the site is in its structural diversity of habitat, with many different densities and types of scrub, young woodland, open areas, ancient trees and ponds. Without



intervention the site will continue its succession to woodland, and while letting it continue to develop naturally as it has done for the past two decades may be a laudable aim, the loss of structural diversity will result in the loss of many different types of nesting and foraging habitat, and thus the loss of species, including the Turtle Dove. Future management should aim to keep the diversity of habitat at this peak, allowing the woodland already present to mature, but maintaining the scrub of varying density, maintaining the stands of Bramble, and keeping some open, grassy areas.

One of the management priorities of the site is for the Turtle Dove, and its requirements – both for foraging and nesting – must be taken into account. The site is also suitable for Nightingale, a species with similar requirements to the Turtle Dove. Brief recommendations are given here, but there are many resources available to provide more detail, e.g.:

- <https://www.operationturtledove.org/>
- <https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/conservation-advice-notes/managing-scrub-nightingales>
- <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/farming/advice/managing-habitats/scrub/>

### *Scrub*

The current diversity of different densities and types of scrub at the site presents a hugely rich habitat for many species of bird, including the aforementioned Turtle Dove and Nightingale, but also warblers, larks and finches. For example, Linnets *Linaria cannibina*, Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* and Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* nest in younger, more open scrub, while mature, dense scrub is used by Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*, Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* and Dunnock *Prunella moidularis*. All of these have been recorded on site.

In order to maintain the variety of scrub types, management should be rotational with an aim to clear each patch of scrub approximately every 12-15 years. This could be done in several ways depending on personnel and other management tasks, for instance, the scrub could be divided into 12 or 15 blocks with one cleared each winter, or the scrub could be divided into five blocks with one cleared every three years. It is of vital importance that this work occurs outside of the bird nesting season. A rotational system allows scrub of varying ages to be maintained, and doing smaller amounts more often will maximise this diversity.

### *Woodland*

Allowing the woodland to develop naturally will enable future mature trees to provide nesting habitat for tree-dwelling species such as woodpeckers and tits. At present the only trees on site which present this opportunity are the veteran and ancient trees along the boundary hedgerow, and possibly some of the early willow pioneers. Thinning of the woodlands to develop a diversity of ages and sizes of tree will hasten the development of a mixed-age woodland, and also allow some light to penetrate to the ground to

encourage the ground flora and some understorey. Dead wood should be left, both standing and on the ground, to provide habitat for fungi and invertebrates, and nesting potential for birds. However, the dead wood of the dying Ash saplings is of low habitat value and could be removed if desired.

#### *Open grassy areas*

The open grassy areas are perhaps the least valuable habitat for animals on the site, other than the resident rabbit population which keeps the sward very short. However, these areas host an unusual assemblage of flora, including the county-scarce Changing Forget-me-not and GB Near Threatened Common Cudweed *Filago germanica*.

Occasional scarification of these areas would benefit this pioneer flora of bare ground, including giving rare arable plants, the seeds of which will still be in the soil, a chance to germinate. Turtle Dove also require bare ground on which to forage and favour the seeds of species such as chickweeds, medicks, trefoils and clovers. Maintaining areas of relatively open ground will encourage these species.

Not much can be done easily about the rabbit population, and the short sward they maintain reduces the flowering potential of many of the plants, and thus the habitat for pollinators. However, the long-standing meadow at Abbey Farm, which is adjacent to the site, provides a rich source of nectar and a wide variety of plants suitable for invertebrates. Insect-eating birds and bats would be able to utilise this resource while roosting and nesting in the woody habitat provided by the scrub.

#### *Ponds*

It is understood that the management committee have already been in touch with FWAG East about the potential of restoring the ponds via the District Level Licensing scheme. The southern pond is currently heavily shaded, and would benefit from some of the surrounding vegetation being removed, but some of the older specimens left remaining, especially the Midland Hawthorn and Wild Pear. The pond in the north-eastern corner is in reasonable condition, though is reasonably eutrophic; the surrounding mixture of willow scrub, emergent plants, ruderals and grassland enhances this habitat.

#### *Access and dogs*

This site is well loved by the community who use it for leisure, including walking their dogs. However, dogs can cause distress to wildlife, in particular nesting birds, especially those which nest close to the ground such as Yellowhammer and Nightingale. If species such as Nightingale are to be encouraged to the site it might be that certain areas could be fenced off during the breeding season (March to September). Consideration could be given to restricting the entry of dogs to the whole site, or perhaps fencing the inner areas, with dogs permitted only on the peripheral pathways. Interpretation boards will help to raise understanding of the importance of respecting the wildlife if it is to remain attracted to the site.