



Bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire
Northamptonshire

Fenland District Council Cemetery Sites

Survey & Assessment of Wildlife Value & Potential of Chatteris Town Cemeteries

**Report prepared for Fenland District Council
by the Wildlife Trust**

July 2019

CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Methodology
- 3 Site descriptions
- 4 Site assessments & key features
- 5 Management recommendations

1 Introduction

Fenland District Council (FDC) have requested a wildlife survey and assessment of a number of cemeteries across the district, including recommendations for management. The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire (the Wildlife Trust) were commissioned to undertake this work.

The first two cemeteries, which also have the involvement of local volunteer groups were:

1. Station Road Cemetery, March
2. Wisbech General Cemetery, also known as Leverington Road Cemetery

Both cemeteries are on FDC's grounds maintenance contracts, and there was a need to prepare maintenance plan to co-ordinate the work of the volunteers and the grounds maintenance contract, and in the case of Wisbech General Cemetery to review and update an existing management plan.

Maintenance Plans for these two sites were completed in early summer 2019.

Two additional sites in Chatteris were also identified as having potential wildlife value. These sites are also on a FDC grounds maintenance contract and the work involved a survey and assessment of the wildlife potential of the sites, together with making management recommendations to support or amend the current grounds maintenance contract.

3. Chatteris General Cemetery, also known as Meek's Cemetery
4. New Road Cemetery

2 Methodology

Meek's Cemetery and New Road Cemetery were visited on 24th July 2019. A phase 1 habitat survey was undertaken, together with recording of the flora and the identification of features of value to particular species or species groups.

Incidental records of fauna were made, but the timing of the survey was not optimal for recording breeding birds and some other fauna groups.

A search was made of historical wildlife records, including the Phase 1 habitat survey for Cambridgeshire 1997 (The Wildlife Trust BCN).

Some of the grassland areas at both sites had recently been cut, and as this was a brief survey visit on a single day in late July, the grassland flora lists are unlikely to be complete.

3 Site descriptions

Meek's Cemetery (Chatteris General Cemetery)

Meek's Cemetery is an early nineteenth century cemetery and appears to have been used up to the 1860's, after which New Road Cemetery became the active burial ground. It is a closed cemetery and quite small at just under 1 Ha in size.

The cemetery is surrounded by residential areas on all sides, and a narrow driveway connects it with New Road. There is open access to the site, entrance is free, and is open to visitors from 8am until dusk every day of the week. FDC byelaws apply, and are posted at the entrance.

The site is located in a Conservation Area and has a mainly wooded character from the mature lime avenue running up the centre of the site, the trees along the western boundary and the scrub belts along the eastern side. There are also groups of yew at the northern end of the cemetery. However, in spite of this wooded feel, grassland remains across about half the site, though often partially shaded under mature trees or with isolated planted or self-set trees and shrubs present.

The cemetery contains many old trees, including an avenue of large lime trees, through the centre of the site. Other mature trees include English oak, Turkey oak and horse chestnut, while other tree species include yew, ash, silver birch, Lawson's cypress and holm oak. Many trees are covered in ivy, and have the potential to support bat roosts.

A range of native and introduced shrubs are present including young ash and sycamore, field maple, elder, elm, hawthorn and blackthorn. Introduced shrubs include box, laurel and laburnum. The groups of shrubs are often associated with dense thickets of bramble, particularly along the eastern boundary, but also as isolated patches amongst the grassland.

The ground flora is a mixture of woodland and grassland species. In the more shaded areas, ivy is abundant, with herb robert, herb bennet, garlic mustard, ground ivy, cow parsley, common nettle and white bryony also present. These are all typical woodland and woodland edge species.

The grassland had been recently cut at the time of the survey, but a number of species could still be identified from the cut material and areas around the margins of shrubs which were uncut. Grasses include false oat-grass, Yorkshire fog, rough meadow grass, cock's-foot and common bent, while wildflowers included creeping buttercup, dove's-foot crane's-bill, self-heal, germander speedwell, ribwort plantain, daisy and white clover. Overall the species richness is low, with no species indicative of old meadows and it is categorised as poor semi-improved grassland in the phase 1 habitat survey classification. The grassland is rough mown with arising left on site up to four times per year.

Some of the older gravestones, particularly limestone ones, support a covering of lichens some of which may be of interest, but would need to be assessed by a lichen expert.

In summary, the cemetery comprises a mixture of planted and self-set trees, some areas of which are becoming wooded, scrub and bramble thickets, and areas of open, regularly mown grassland. This compares to the 1990 habitat survey when it was shown as amenity grassland, with scattered trees, suggesting that 25 years ago it was more intensively managed and kept open.

However, the changes over the past 25 years have created more opportunities for wildlife to occupy the site. The relaxation of management of both the grasslands and trees provides more shelter, foraging and breeding opportunities for a range of wildlife. The dense thickets of bramble provide breeding habitats for birds (old birds eggs provided evidence of breeding), as well as shelter for small mammals and any amphibians that may be present (depending on whether there are garden ponds nearby where frogs and newts can breed). The bramble also provides a valuable nectar source for invertebrates, with bees, hoverflies and butterflies observed visiting the flowers. The large amount of ivy is also valuable, as the last flowering native species in Britain, it is a vital autumn nectar source for invertebrates. The less frequent mowing of the grassland provides some limited opportunities for common butterflies to lay eggs and their caterpillars to feed, though the frequency of mowing limits this. Meadow brown, large white, small white and speckled wood butterflies were observed during the short site visit.

New Road Cemetery

New Road Cemetery is divided into two halves. The eastern half is a Victorian era cemetery which opened in 1869. The cemetery was extended to the west in the middle of the twentieth century and this is the currently active burial site. The former chapel associated with the New Road Cemetery is no longer present. The cemetery is just over 4 Ha in size, with the old and new cemeteries each about 2 ha.

The new cemetery is actively managed for burial plots and comprises short mown amenity grassland with a network of paths either side of a central avenue of lime trees. Overall the area is of negligible wildlife value. The rest of the site description applies to the old cemetery.

The old closed cemetery does however have considerably more wildlife interest. The cemetery is again set out around a central avenue of early mature lime trees, which have been pollarded in the past. A range of other specimen trees were planted such that there are early mature English oak, Turkey oak, horse chestnut and ash. There is also a row of mature London plane trees planted along the road frontage with New Road. Other trees and mature shrubs include yew, elm and a range of non-native tree specimens including Lawson's cypress, pine and Wellingtonia. Many trees are covered in ivy, and have the potential to support bat roosts.

Overall the cemetery is more open than Meek's Cemetery with more grassland under the tree canopy, developing woodland and shrub thickets, reflecting its younger age.

A range of native and introduced shrubs are present including young ash, field maple, elder, elm, yew hawthorn and blackthorn. Introduced shrubs include box, strawberry tree and sweet gum. The groups of shrubs are often associated with dense thickets of bramble, particularly along the eastern boundary, but also as isolated patches amongst the grassland.

The ground flora is a mixture of woodland and grassland species. In the more shaded areas, ivy is abundant, with herb robert, herb bennet, garlic mustard, ground ivy, cow parsley, and common nettle also present. These are all typical woodland and woodland edge species.

The grassland is a little more species-rich than Meek's Cemetery. This may be a product of the cemetery being originally set out on an area of pasture, but also the fact that the site is a little less shaded. A range of native grasses and wildflowers was recorded, though the grassland is still relatively species-poor and categorised as poor semi-improved grassland in the phase 1 habitat classification.

The grassland areas towards the southern half of the site had been recently cut at the time of the survey, but those in the north were uncut. Grasses include Yorkshire fog, false oat-grass, cock's-foot, rough meadow grass, small timothy, common bent, red fescue and yellow oat-grass. Wildflower species include black knapweed and ox-eye daisy, both species indicative of high value species-rich grasslands, present as a few scattered plants in the northern part of the cemetery. Other grassland wildflowers include germander speedwell, self-heal, red clover, yarrow, ribwort plantain, black medick and creeping buttercup. The grassland in the southern part of the site is rough mown with arising left on site up to four times per year, while that in the northern part appears unmanaged.

Some of the older gravestones, particularly limestone ones, support a covering of lichens some of which may be of interest, but would need to be assessed by a lichen expert.

In summary, the old cemetery comprises a mixture of planted and self-set trees, scrub and bramble thickets, and areas of open and partially shaded grassland. This compares to the 1990 habitat survey when it was shown as poor semi-improved grassland, with scattered trees. This suggests that like Meeks' Cemetery it was more intensively managed 25 years ago.

However, like Meek's Cemetery, the reduced intensity of management has created more opportunities for wildlife to occupy the site. The relaxation of management of both the grasslands and trees provides more shelter, foraging and breeding opportunities for a range of wildlife. The dense thickets of bramble provide breeding habitats for birds as well as shelter for other fauna. The bramble also provides a valuable nectar source for invertebrates, with bees, hoverflies and butterflies observed visiting the flowers. The large amount of ivy is also valuable, as the last flowering native species in Britain, it is a vital autumn nectar source for invertebrates. The less frequent mowing of the grassland provides some limited opportunities for common butterflies to lay eggs and their caterpillars to feed, though the frequency of mowing limits this. Meadow brown, large white, and holly blue butterflies were observed during the short site visit.

4 Site assessments & key features

Meek's Cemetery

Overall Meek's Cemetery now forms a valuable accessible natural greenspace, which assumes even greater importance because of the sparsity of other such sites in and around the town, with this and the old part of New Road Cemetery the only two such places in Chatteris.

The variety and mosaic of mature trees, self-set trees creating a woodland feel, scrub and bramble thickets and open grassland is the most valuable wildlife feature. This provides a range of foraging, sheltering and breeding sites for fauna.

The mixture of common woodland and grassland flora provides food sources for a range of fauna, particularly invertebrates. The bramble and ivy are the two most important nectar sources currently on site.

Many of the trees have yet to reach an age where they support significant amounts of deadwood or can support cavity nesting birds such as woodpeckers, however, none-the-less there a range of deadwood features as identified in more detail in the tree report. These could support an interesting invertebrate assemblage as well as providing potential roost sites for bats. Many of the trees are also covered in ivy, and they have the potential to support bat roosts.

Some of the older limestone gravestones may support interesting lichen species.

New Road Cemetery

The old part of New Road Cemetery also now forms a valuable accessible natural greenspace, which assumes even greater importance because of the sparsity of other such sites in and around the town, with this and Meek's Cemetery the only two such places in Chatteris.

The mosaic of mature trees, scrub and bramble thickets and open grassland is the most valuable wildlife feature, providing a range of foraging, sheltering and breeding sites for fauna. The mixture of woodland and grassland wildflowers and the abundant ivy and bramble provide nectar sources for pollinating insects.

A few of the trees, particularly oak and limes support woodpecker holes and have some deadwood features. Although many of the trees are not yet old enough to develop significant amounts of deadwood, a range of deadwood features are present, as outlined in the tree report. Elms are also known to support a number of scarce invertebrate species locally, so do have wildlife value even when dead or dying. The deadwood could support an interesting invertebrate assemblage as well as providing potential roost sites for bats. Many of the trees are also covered in ivy, and they have the potential to support bat roosts.

Some of the older limestone gravestones may support interesting lichen species.

5 Management recommendations

Meek's Cemetery

The Wildlife Trust recommends that Fenland DC maintain the current broad approach to management whereby the open grassland areas are mown up to four times a year, but allowing other areas to develop into shrub thickets or woodland, to maintain the site as a natural greenspace.

The current management regime involves rough cutting of the grassland areas leaving the cut grass on site up to four times a year. While it would be feasible to undertake a more conservation focussed management regime, this would require the removal of the grass cuttings from site to promote less grass growth and greater wildflower species richness. However this would involve additional cost and the benefits are only likely to be marginal, because the grassland is species-poor.

A better approach in this case would be to slightly relax the mowing regime, only cutting 3 times per year, in late April / May, in late July, and again in September / early October. The grass paths could have an additional cut of 1.5 m width in June and August if required to maintain access around the site.

The areas of dense shrubs and bramble thickets should be retained along the eastern boundary. Many of the isolated clumps should also be retained, though there is likely to be a need to remove some shrubs and associated bramble growth from some of the old gravestones. At least 50% of the isolated shrub and bramble thickets should be retained.

A full tree survey has recently been carried out recently on behalf of FDC. This identified 101 individual trees, 7 groups of trees, 5 tree areas & 1 hedge.

The tree report identified a range of tree surgery work including crown reductions and removal of deadwood and ivy. Crown reductions and deadwood removal should be limited to high risk and urgent trees only, and the bare minimum tree surgery should be undertaken to make a tree safe. The site is open to the public, so safety management limits the opportunities to allow deadwood to build up, however, there will be opportunities to retain some deadwood in the canopy away from site boundaries or paths. Where tree surgery is essential, some of the wood removed could be left in log piles located in areas of partial shade within or on the edge of the more "wooded" areas. There is no set dimensions, but they could be 1 m x 1 m x 1 m.

The report identifies ivy on trees as a problem for a large number of trees, mainly in light of the way it can limit a detailed assessment of a trees health. However, with the importance of ivy growing in full or partial sunlight so that it flowers and provides a valuable autumn nectar source, the removal of ivy from trees should be limited to those where there is a high risk and urgent need to assess condition.

Dense Ivy growing on trees can also provide a habitat for roosting bats. All bat species and their roosts (whether bats are present or not) are protected by law (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017). The Bat

Conservation Trust have published guidelines on “Bats and Trees”, which explains where bats might be found in trees, what to do if the trees have the potential to support bats, and how to undertake essential tree surgery work in a way that is lawful.

Fenland DC should make sure that any contractors they use for tree surgery are familiar with bats and the law. The Arboricultural Association recommends that members attend the Bat Conservation Trust Lantra accredited course: *Arboriculture and Bats: Scoping Surveys for Arborists*; this course is approved by the Arboricultural Association.

Fenland DC should also be prepared to engage a professional ecologist with expert knowledge of bats, if trees to be felled have a high potential for bats or if a bat roost is discovered. A European Protected Species licence may be required in these circumstances and the professional ecologist can help with the necessary licence application. The presence of bats is not likely to prevent tree surgery work from occurring but will influence how and when the work is undertaken and any mitigation measures required to make the operation lawful. Even where there is low potential for bats they are sometimes encountered during tree surgery works. In such instances, work should cease immediately and the advice of Natural England protected species licencing team sought.

New Road Cemetery

The Wildlife Trust recommends that Fenland DC maintain the current broad approach to management of the old cemetery whereby the open grassland areas are mown up to four times a year, but allowing other areas to develop into shrub thickets or woodland, to maintain the site as a natural greenspace. The new cemetery will continue to be managed as an active cemetery and no management recommendations are made for this area. The rest of this section considers the old cemetery only.

The current management regime involves rough cutting of the southern and central grassland areas leaving the cut grass on site up to four times a year. The northern areas appear to be left uncut. While it would be feasible to undertake a more conservation focussed management regime, this would require the removal of the grass cuttings from site to promote less grass growth and greater wildflower species richness. However this would involve additional cost and the benefits are only likely to be marginal, because the grassland is relatively species-poor. The fact that grassland areas are left uncut in the northern section provides habitat for those species that cannot withstand more regular mowing.

However, it would still be worth considering a slight relaxation of the mowing regime, to cut only 3 times per year, in late April / May, in late July, and again in September / early October. Grass paths could have an additional cut of 1.5 m width in June and August if required to maintain access around the site.

The areas of dense shrubs and bramble thickets should be retained along the eastern boundary. We agree with the recommendation that the dead or dying elms in tree group 009 are retained along with the other trees and shrubs in this thicket.

A full tree survey has recently been carried out recently on behalf of FDC. This identified 55 individual trees, 12 groups of trees, & 2 tree areas.

The tree report identified a range of tree surgery work including crown reductions, pollarding, removal of deadwood, and removal of ivy. Crown reductions should be limited to high risk and urgent trees only, and the bare minimum tree surgery should be undertaken to make a tree safe.

If deadwood removal and crown reductions do need to occur, some of the wood removed could be left in log piles located in areas of partial shade within or on the edge of the more “wooded” areas. There is no set dimensions, but they could be 1 m x 1 m x 1 m.

The report identifies ivy on trees as a problem for a large number of trees, mainly in light of the way it can limit a detailed assessment of a trees health. However, with the importance of ivy growing in full or partial sunlight so that it flowers and provides a valuable autumn nectar source, the removal of ivy from trees should be limited to those where there is a high risk and urgent need to assess condition. At present it is suggested that ivy be removed from 75% of the trees. This appears excessive, and we recommend that this is reviewed so that it is not removed at this stage from trees identified as priority 3 (Appendix C of Tree Report).

The value of ivy for invertebrates and potentially in supporting bat roosts was noted in the management section for Meek’s Cemetery. The same issues and considerations regarding management of trees for bats also applies to New Road Cemetery.

Fenland DC should make sure that any contractors they use for tree surgery are familiar with bats and the law. Fenland DC should also be prepared to engage a professional ecologist with expert knowledge of bats, if trees to be felled have a high potential for bats or if a bat roost is discovered.

We support the recommendation in the Tree Report to pollard the limes along the avenue, which would help prolong their life and retain deadwood and other cavity features of value to wildlife on the trunk below the pollarding height.