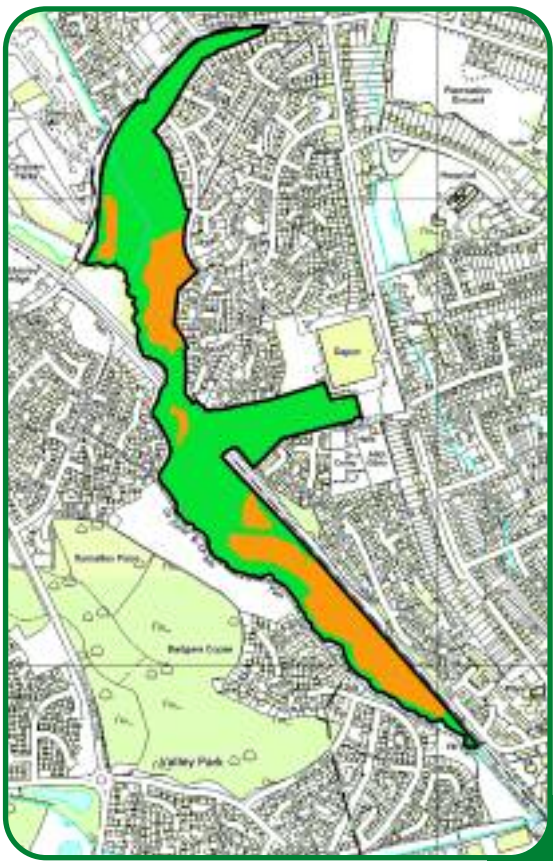
Action for the Flexford Priority Area



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Quick facts

Total area: 22ha (same area as Lakeside Country Park)
Designations: SINC – 98%

Location

The Flexford Priority Area is located on the extreme northwestern edge of Eastleigh Borough, along the valley of the Monks Brook, a tributary of the River Itchen. Urban Chandler's Ford is to the east and the new development of Valley Park is to the west. The railway line to Romsey divides this priority area in two. There is good access to the area for pedestrians with a network of footpaths crossing the site.

Description

Once, the majority of the area was managed by Hiltingbury Farm with blocks of ancient woodland (a key habitat in the area supporting many rare sedges) interspersed with grazed meadows and species-rich hedgerows. Now all of the Flexford Priority Area is owned by Eastleigh Borough Council, having acquired it as a condition of planning permission for the Millers Dale housing estate back in 1980.

The stream corridor of Monks Brook, a tributary of the River Itchen runs through the heart of the area and forms an important green corridor for both people and wildlife, linking together remaining fragments of semi-natural habitat along its course and bordered by large stands of alder carr.

The first development in the area was the construction of the railway line back in 1847. It now separates the Priority Area in two with Upper Flexford and Ramalley Copse on the northern side of the line and Lower Flexford along the Monks Brook to the south.

The whole Flexford Priority Area is well served by public footpaths and regularly used by the local community to enjoy the wildlife and countryside. However, some problems with rubbish tipping and garden waste disposal occur and this can cause problems to grazing New Forest ponies and encourage the spread of rampant alien species as well as looking unsightly. In addition, severe erosion is caused by bikes being used off designated tracks.

Ramalley Copse, to the northeast of the railway line, is owned and managed by Eastleigh Borough Council. It is termed ancient semi-natural woodland, with documented records for it going back to the 16th century. Management for specialised woodland plants and animals is practiced by coppicing which benefits biodiversity through increasing the variety of conditions available for different species within the wood.

Woodland Management

Many species of our native trees do not die when they are cut but instead send up new shoots. These replace the trunk cut down with several smaller trunks. This process is called coppicing and has been used by man since Neolithic times to produce a renewable source of wood products. Areas of woodland were cut on a rolling basis, about once every 10-15 years. Traditional coppicing includes the retention of some larger trees (known as standards) amongst the stools. In the past, these trees provided planks for house, ship and furniture building and its legacy can be seen within Ramalley Copse today, notably by the presence of several large wild cherry trees.

The rest of the area within the Flexford Priority Area falls within the Upper and Lower Flexford Nature Reserve, an area of ancient woodland, alder carr woodland and wet grazing meadows, interspersed with old hedgerows. The land is leased to the Hampshire Wildlife Trust which manages it for wildlife conservation and the quiet enjoyment of the public. This oasis is characteristic of how much of the countryside would have appeared prior to the major housing developments at Chandler's Ford, Millers Dale and Knightwood.

The wet grasslands on the reserve support many plants that are declining a great deal within the countryside as a whole through the increase in intensive farming practices such as fertiliser and pesticide application. Marsh marigolds are amongst the first plants of spring to flower and are found on the wettest areas of grassland. They brighten up any walk with their glossy bright yellow flowers and large kidney-shaped leaves. Later, ragged robin, southern-marsh orchid and yellow iris put on their summer-time floral display and butterflies and other insects arrive to feed on their high nutrient 'bio-fuel' – nectar. Common meadow butterflies such as orange-tip, meadow brown and gatekeeper flit from flower to flower, topping up their energy levels as they search for a mate. The gatekeeper, meadow brown and the rarer, marbled white are particularly associated with grasslands as their caterpillars feed on grasses. The reserve supports good populations of yellow loosestrife which itself is used by a rare bee that collects the oil from the flower to feed its larvae and a nationally scarce moth (Dentated pug) whose caterpillars feed on the leaves.

Unfortunately, observations of the plants and animals over the past 10 years or so have indicated a gradual drying out of the soil in the area. Once, birds such as redshank and snipe that favour wet meadows used to breed here but they have not been seen for nearly a decade. The falling water levels in the area have probably been caused by the surrounding development. As open land was replaced by brick, mortar and paving, water that once entered the soil and percolated underground through the reserve now enters sewers and is channelled directly into the Monks Brook. Species that favour wet soil conditions are gradually being replaced by those more adapted to dry soil and in particular trees are gaining a foothold where once was open grassland. Although trees are a valuable and important part of the natural environment, other habitats such as unimproved grassland are also very important for wildlife, harbouring species that need open, sunny conditions rather than shade. Often it is the variety of habitats in an area that encourages the most species. Many need more than one particular habitat in which to successfully survive and breed. For example, the green-woodpecker mainly feeds in grasslands, searching for ants and other invertebrates but it also requires woodlands, to bore its nesthole in a tree-trunk. To combat this gradual conversion of grassland to woodland, grazing by New Forest ponies has been re-introduced on the reserve. The ponies stop trees establishing by feeding on saplings before they become too big and tough for them to consume. This grazing similarly benefits the grassland by maintaining and increasing the variety of grasses, sedges and flowering plants present by keeping fast growing species under control.


MARBLED WHITE

Run-off from surrounding concrete areas is high in calcium and when this water meets the predominantly neutral conditions on the reserve, and coupled with pollutants from the road and railway there will almost certainly be a noticeable effect on the plant communities. The sudden run off from the housing is also causing severe flooding of the site. There is a need to manage the water levels to ensure a more natural water flow through the reserve is maintained.



The woodland within the Flexford Nature Reserve can be roughly categorised into two types: woodland that occurs on the wet soils along the stream, dominated by alder, and that which is present on the drier soils on the higher ground away from the stream, consisting mostly of oak and ash. Much of this woodland has been present for many hundreds of years in this location and is termed ancient woodland. Much of this woodland would benefit from coppice management allowing light to the ground flora and creating a diverse range of stand ages, which will increase the longevity of the woodland.

Ancient woodland

Ancient woodland is woodland that has been present since at least 1600, if not before this date. It is often much richer in woodland plants and animals than those that have developed only more recently. This is due to the slow rate at which such specialised woodland species colonise woodlands. The older the woodland is the longer the time species have had to colonise it. Therefore there is a greater diversity of species present in ancient woodlands than in more recent ones.

Wildflowers include bluebell, yellow archangel and solomon's seal and because these species are usually only found in ancient woodlands they are termed 'ancient woodland indicator species'. If you spot these species in a woodland it gives you a good clue that the wood as a whole has a long history, probably dating back before the 16th century.

Along much of the stream bank, wild garlic (otherwise known as ramsons) grows in profusion. It belongs to the same family of plants as garlic and onion, and this association becomes very evident if you bruise a leaf, a strong smell of garlic is given off. Waterside birds such as kingfisher and grey wagtail can be spotted flitting along the stream hunting for fish and insects.

Action

Issue 1: **Water quality and quantity**

Current action

The Environment Agency monitors the water quality of rivers and streams and takes action to minimise pollution incidents. In 1996, a physical survey of the whole of Monks Brook was carried out on behalf of the Environment Agency and this included noting any plants and animals seen.

Proposed action

Carry out a vegetation survey of the reserve to re-classify the now stable plant communities and use for future monitoring.*(HWT)

Complete an analysis of the reserve in terms of water levels and water chemistry to inform the management process. *(HWT/EA)

Explore ways in which the management of adjacent railway embankments, roads and the upstream pumping station can be altered to minimise damaging effects that occur to the reserve.**(HWT/EA/HA)

Explore ways in which run-off from surrounding housing can be regulated to prevent flooding incidents through the reserve.**(EA/HWT)

Issue 2: **Mis-use**

Current action

Voluntary wardens, members of the nearby neighbourhood, monitor the Flexford Nature Reserve on a regular basis, keeping the Hampshire Wildlife Trust's warden up-to-date with any issues or problems that have occurred on the reserve.

Proposed action

Discourage people from dumping waste into the reserve by liaising with the public and community groups on a one to one basis *(HWT)

Fully audit the damage being done to the reserve by unauthorised activities and raise awareness of these by locals and involve them in practical solutions such as footpath improvements, moving some rights of way etc **(HWT)

Issue 3: Woodland management

Current action

Coppicing has been re-introduced to Ramalley Copse and is carried out by Eastleigh Borough Council's Countryside Service.

Proposed action

Continue to periodically coppice sections of Ramalley Copse in line with the woodland management plan.* (EBC)

Promote management of the alder carr woodland by coppicing and removal of laurel to create more light, therefore increasing diversity.** (HWT)

Where woodland and grassland meet, the woodland edge should be cut to provide a wavy edge thereby creating sheltered bays and increasing the diversity of conditions for wildlife. *(HWT/EBC)

Monitor the effects of coppice management on the plant and animal communities, surveying the woodlands at a minimum, once every 10 years * (EBC/HWT)

Issue 4: Grassland management

Current action

Grazing, scrub removal by hand and mowing are practised on the valuable grassland habitats.

Proposed action

Ensure that light grazing of appropriate areas of grassland continues into the foreseeable future *(HWT)

In areas where grazing is not possible, continue to cut and rake every other year.*(HWT)

Continue the programme of scrub control on valuable grassland areas by cutting encroaching scrub if necessary *(HWT)

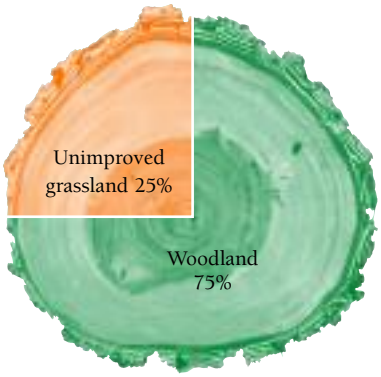
Encourage the laying of scrub around the edges of the reserve to form valuable hedgerows ** (HWT)

Carry out a vegetation survey of the grassland areas once every five years, particularly noting any changes that are occurring to plant communities **(HWT)

Scrub of all ages occurs in boundary areas and dominant species are hawthorn and buckthorn with smaller yet still noteworthy populations of dogwood, elder and blackthorn. These areas provide good nesting and feeding opportunities for many species of bird such as blackcap, nuthatch and willow warbler. In the past, there has been some hedge laying, but there is the potential to do more to enhance this habitat

The reserve is managed by volunteer wardens and a local working group that carry out tasks to maintain the habitats within the reserve. Standard monitoring techniques, developed by English Nature are used on the reserve to ensure that the site remains in favourable condition.

Areas of habitats within the Flexford Area



NB: 2km length of Monks Brook stream also within the priority area

Eastleigh Priority Species recorded within the Flexford Priority Area

Recorded in last five years

Yellow loosestrife*

** Priority species in Eastleigh Borough only*

Relevant Hampshire species or habitat action plans for Flexford Priority Area are:

Pipestrelle bat
Birds of wet grassland
Ancient semi-natural woodland
Unimproved neutral grassland
Hedgerow

ACTION TIMESCALE

* within next 2-3 years

** within next 5 years

*** within next 10 years

KEY TO ORGANISATIONS

EA Environment Agency

EBC Eastleigh Borough Council

HA Highways Authority

HWT Hampshire Wildlife Trust