

Sandy Smith Nature Reserve

The Sandy Smith Nature Reserve lies on the floodplain and northern slopes of the Flit Valley between Clophill and Chicksands, covering an area of 93ha. It is owned and managed by the Greensand Trust, having been bought in 2006 by Peter Smith, the Chairman of the Trust's Trustees, and given to the Trust to be managed as a nature reserve, named after his wife Sandy.

The reserve is being developed to conserve important and threatened wetland and farmland habitats and species. You are welcome to visit the reserve - footpaths around the site enable you to see the site's habitats and wildlife and enjoy fine views over the Flit Valley.



Development of the reserve

When the site was bought the southern part had already been recognised as a County Wildlife Site for its important wetland habitats – the wet woodland of Upper Alders, floodplain grazing meadow, marsh and reedbeds. Since then we have installed sluices in one drainage channel to raise water levels and removed two plots of non-native conifers from the wet woodland area. Cattle now graze the wet meadow and marshy areas during the summer months, several ponds have been restored and an otter holt has been constructed.

The northern part of the site had been farmed as arable land until it came into Trust ownership. Here we are creating an extensive area of grassland and woodland. Three grazing units have been set up, divided by wide green lanes which have had hedges planted along their edges and on which herb-rich hay has been spread to encourage the development of flower-rich verges. Sheep grazed the grassland for the first time in 2009.

Woodland is being allowed to develop by natural regeneration around the edge of the site, linking Chicksands Wood to the north-west with Upper Alders. Two trial heather plots have been created to investigate whether it is possible to encourage the development of heathland vegetation on site. Open sandy pits have been created as habitat for invertebrates such as mining bees and solitary wasps.

Wildlife

The wetland areas of the reserve are home to a range of interesting plants and mosses and breeding birds such as reed warblers. The fen areas are colourful with purple loosestrife and meadowsweet in summer and the long vegetation is home to harvest mice. Otters are known to use the River Flit in this area and kingfishers are occasionally seen.





Important farmland species such as skylarks, yellowhammers, brown hares and barn owls already use the upper slopes of the site and it is hoped that as the change from ex-arable to grassland with rich diverse hedges progresses, the site will become even better for them. Interesting plants such as ladies bedstraw, cowslips and bee orchids are already being seen. The three veteran oak trees along the centre footpath are the sole survivors of the many old trees that used to be scattered over the fields.

With the help of local naturalists, we have started a programme of surveys and monitoring to understand more about the range of wildlife on site and how it changes as the reserve develops.

Heritage

The area was formerly part of the lands of Chicksands Priory and then the Chicksands Estate of the Osborne family. Until the mid 19th century, Chicksands Wood covered part of the western area of the current reserve, the remainder being open farmland and pasture, with Upper Alders to the south. Major changes occurred over the next 30 years with this part of Chicksands Wood being grubbed up and much of the River Flit straightened to create the landscape we see today. During WW2, aeries were present all over the site, linked to Chicksands' role as a listening station for Bletchley Park. The bases of a few of these are still to be found on the reserve.

Access

The main entrance to the site is on the private road leading east from Beadlow. This road is also a public bridleway linking to the A507 so access on foot and by bike is simple; bike racks have been installed at the main entrance, at which there is an interpretation board showing a map of the site.

There is a circular walk around the grassland area, passing also through the area of regenerating woodland. A footpath, now a dead end, leads along the southern boundary of the site, to the woodland of Upper Alders.

Much of the management work is carried out by volunteers and regular conservation tasks are held; the site also has a voluntary warden. Occasional wildlife events are held and links are being developed with local schools.



Our grateful thanks go to the following funders and supporters who have made this work possible:

Peter & Sandy Smith
WREN
Central Bedfordshire Council
Breathing Places
Natural England

Forestry Commission
Clophill PC
Campton & Chicksands PC
Internal Drainage Board
Bedfordshire Natural History Society

If you would like to know more about the reserve and the work we carry out there, please contact the Trust on 01234 743666.