

WOODTHORPE HALL MEADOWS

The group of fields alongside the Totley Brook are of considerable wildlife interest. Notified in 2007 as a Local Wildlife Site known as Totley Meadows, the fields have a history of low intensity management as pasture for a small herd of cattle. In the past the northernmost field has been mown for hay. The variable mosaic of grassland, scrub and small patches of woodland together with the adjacent stream and woodland provide a rich and very valuable habitat for a diverse range of plants and animals.

Hedgerows & Scrub



The field pattern made up of small irregular fields originally cleared from woodland, is typical of ancient countryside - possibly Anglo-Saxon, Norse or even earlier. The field names locally, as well as the field pattern, also support this hypothesis. Hedgerows form all of the field boundaries, supporting a wide range of trees and shrubs – as many as ten species in a single hedgerow. Many of the shrubs have been coppiced in the past – cut down to ground level and allowed to re-grow. A few trees, most commonly alder show evidence of having been layed, where stems have been cut part way through and bent over. However there has been no recent management.

Patches of scrub – made up of mostly shrubby species but including standard trees - are distributed throughout the fields but are most frequent in the middle and southern field. Elsewhere shrubs particularly blackthorn and rose are spreading out from the hedges.

Both the scrub and hedgerows are important for feeding and breeding birds and invertebrates. Oak, alder, hawthorn, blackthorn and elder are particularly important for birds because of the source of fruit including berries. The high hedges also provide birds and bats with corridors of connection and cover/protection. They provide shelter, screening from the wind and sun traps.

Grasslands

In the northernmost field the grassland is species poor and dominated by productive grasslands. Local knowledge suggests that the flower-rich hay meadow community that was present here in the past, was lost over 20 years ago as a result of increased inputs of manures and fertilisers.

In the brookside and the middle fields wildflowers of interest are largely confined to the margins of the fields and the edges of the scrub. Elsewhere only common species such as buttercups are present.



The southern two fields support flower-rich grasslands of considerable conservation importance. The smaller field supports a variety of taller herbs including great burnet and wild angelica whilst the larger field supports a range of grassland types varying from areas of drier grassland typical of nutrient poor acid soils to wet rushy grasslands with marsh marigold. Of particular note are species such as lousewort, sneezewort and devil's bit scabious which are increasingly uncommon in our agricultural landscapes.

The rich grassland habitat including damp, seasonally wet areas is of value to birds and invertebrates. The wide variety of wildflowers are particularly important for butterflies, bees and hoverflies, and owing to this rich food source to predators like the Southern Hawker Dragonfly.

Birds

At least 21 species are known to breed on the site including spotted flycatcher and both thrushes which are considered to be nationally under threat. The scrub habitat and ground vegetation is of particular importance to the presence of the summer visitors Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Garden Warbler. Additional birds visit in the winter including species like fieldfare who are attracted by the rich resource of berries.



Butterflies

17 species have been recorded on the site including white letter hairstreak which breeds only on elm trees and dark green fritillary which has a stronghold in the Peak District.

Other animals

With its rich variety of habitats the site is likely to be of value for toads, frogs and newts, small rodents and a variety of bats. Roe deer and badgers are known to use the site, valuing its seclusion.

Management Constraints

Owing to the long history of traditional low intensity management and the semi-natural character of the landscape, the site is likely to be protected from agricultural improvement by the Environmental Impact Assessment regulations. Natural England should be consulted prior to implementing any activity that would be likely to increase agricultural productivity such as the application of artificial fertiliser or herbicide or ploughing and re-seeding. For more information see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/eia-agriculture-regulations-apply-to-make-changes-to-rural-land>

Owing to the variety of woody species present in the hedgerow and the ancient field system the hedgerows are likely to be protected from removal by the Hedgerow Regulations which are administered by Derbyshire County Council.

Management Opportunities

The wildlife significance of this land makes it eligible for support from Countryside Stewardship - the national agri-environment schemes. Grant aid is available to support low intensity management designed to conserve and enhance the historic landscape and the wildlife found on the site.

The Future

This is a time of uncertainty for both farming and environmental schemes. However, in the future it is likely that financial support for farming and the countryside will become more focused on the delivery of 'public goods' including the conservation and enhancement of landscape and wildlife features such as those found on the land at Woodthorpe Hall.

