

Report of Essex Field Club general field meeting at St. Nicholas', Laindon, on 5 July 2008.

Seven people linked with the Essex Field Club met at St. Nicholas' church, Laindon, to have a look at the area of land around, at the request of the church.

The area was roughly 16 ha. Part of this area nearer the church was probably Glebe land, belonging to the church, but some of the northern part had a few 'plotlands' on it long ago, but now it has been set aside for nature conservation as a 'Designated Wildlife Site'. Most of the land is north of the church, and is fairly flat, but the church and its graveyard are on a small hill. The whole lot is public access land, with paths leading to and from the surrounding residential roads. The area around the church is rough-mown at intervals, but most of the rest seems to be largely untouched except for two horses grazing. Much of it is covered largely in scrub and young trees, but quite a bit is open grassland. There are the over-grown remains of a stew-pond (a traditional pond stocked with carp as a source of 'meat' in winter, for stews) not far from the church on the E side, and a recently-made pond in the NW corner. This latter was dug and planted with wild-type water plants, and had Great Crested Newts put in when their original pond elsewhere was built on. Our visit had been arranged by Dawn Knox, who runs the website and edits the Parish Magazine, and she welcomed us in and took some photos of us at work.

Two people, Roger and Sylvia Jiggins, were from the Essex Bat Group, and they hunted inside and around the church building. No bats were found, but there was evidence (ie dried droppings) that bats had occasionally visited in the recent past. They commented that the church looked ideal for a bat colony, and one may have been destroyed when the steeple was renovated a decade or two ago. They also met a small Adder inside the church, which was speedily removed outside. A few weeks earlier, an adult Adder had been seen by Stuart Ricketts in grass nearby, and a beautiful picture of it was taken by Ken Porter. These two are local people who help with tidying the area and they were very helpful to us when we arrived, and when we left (one kindly got my car out of the wet verge on which it had got stuck!).

The other five of the group were mainly botanists, under the guiding hand of Ken Adams, to whom many thanks are due for his expertise. Some people, notably Barbara Chapman and Ken Adams, spotted butterflies and other insects, Barbara and David Bloomfield spotted or heard several birds, and Peter West had thigh waders and a net so he went in a pond and found 2 kinds of animals there, which he identified.

Overall, there were 228 plant species recorded, which was a very pleasing count for such a small area, however the figure was boosted by various 'grave escapes' near the church and some planted species in the younger pond. The full list is attached. None of the plants are rare, but it is the sheer total that is impressive. A whole sunflower seed was also seen, but not counted as a growing species.

A surprise was a patch of Stingless Nettle around the old stew-pond. This plant is not often found, but you could brush this across your face and feel only soft hairiness, like a feather. It has some claim to be the native Nettle, as the stinging ones were probably

brought in by the Romans. Most of us had not seen one before, but we were told by Ken Adams they only grow in a few very damp, nutrient-rich places. Another surprise was Sessile Oak, uncommon in this part of England. Although one tree might have been planted, the second one, just as large, was probably not.

Bird species noted were: Wood Pigeon, Swift, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Magpie, Blackcap, Green Woodpecker, and holes in the church steeple made by assorted Woodpeckers, who may have been after getting the bats!

Mammals noted were: 2 horses, grazing, who were a bit over-friendly!

Reptiles noted were: Adder

Amphibians noted were: immature Great Crested Newt, 'newtpoles'.

Insect species noted were: Azure Damselfly, Thick-thighed Beetle (male and female); a few butterflies: Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Large White, Essex Skipper, Comma; and a large iridescent blue-black Hoverfly, a Bumble-bee and a large anthill containing Ants. We noted leaves of Horse-chestnut which had many brown patches on due to larvae of a micro-moth, *Cameraria ohridella*, which mine the leaves of the trees, and soon kill them. The leaves have orange patches with yellowish margins early in summer, which all turn a rich brown later, and holes can be seen where the moth eventually gets out. This moth is from the Balkans, but it is spreading fast across Europe. There is little anyone can do to prevent its spread.

A spiky red Robin's-pincushion, caused by a gall insect, was seen on one bush of Dog-rose.

Molluscs noted were: Great Ram's-horn Snail.

We had a good day in spite of the weather forecast, and finished about 3pm, so we were not unduly exhausted. Thank you to all who attended, including the three people from the church who made us so very welcome.

Mary Smith, 6 July 2008.

Some suggestions on Conservation.

Two aspects are very important. First, Tidiness is the Enemy of Biodiversity. Second, 95% of Britain has forest as the natural cover, and anything less has to be constantly tended to prevent it becoming forest. Herein lies the general idea, which is to fell some trees very occasionally, clear scrub at intervals, mow or graze grassland at more frequent intervals. The intervals should be not too close in time in any one part, but should happen fairly frequently in different areas, apart perhaps, from the trees. Some of these suggestions below are already being done to some extent. These principles, applied to the land at St Nicholas, suggests that the grass around the church and in the graveyard should be kept as grass, but maybe mowing only once a year for most of it, and some areas only once every two years. Some bits, where the graves are

older, could be left entirely alone, so the shade from scrub and small trees allows the stones to have mosses and lichens growing on them. The mowing should often be in autumn, but sometimes a mow in spring or summer helps to keep down the coarse grasses. Grazing animals, even rabbits, are a very good alternative to mowing. The garden area at the front of the church can be kept traditionally decorative without loss of species, as it is such a small part of the whole.

Grazing by a few horses or other large mammals is beneficial rather than mowing very large areas of grassland. It is important not to overgraze, but there is no danger of that at present.

Scrub clearance should be done every year but in different areas, so that each scrub area is cleared about every 5-15 years, depending on the rate of growth, and keeping public access routes open.

Since there are no ancient trees or ancient woodland at the site, allowing woods to develop in many places is less likely to be a useful way forward than infrequent removal of certain kinds of trees to maintain open spaces even in otherwise shaded areas. Some kinds, such as the alien Sycamore, could be removed (ie dug out, to prevent regrowth) with benefit as often as they appear. Oaks or Hornbeam or Beech, and sometimes Ash, where present, are usually best left to age on their own. Coppicing may be an alternative to cutting right down, more suitable for Willows, Hazel, Aspen, and sometimes Ash. During scrub clearance, shrubs like Hawthorn and Blackthorn would normally be removed, but some of these could be left around the perimeter of the site as they are good hedging. But, if possible, leave large bits of dead wood lying around, especially where trees or large branches die naturally, and smaller bits in piles, as these provides homes to so many animal and fungus species. Please do not plant trees.

In addition, the old stew-pond could be cleared immediately (except of Stingless Nettle) to allow access to sunlight and hence various kinds of pond-life, then kept clear.

However, maintaining water in the pond might prove an impossible task in these dry times.

The younger pond also needs removal of encroaching willows at times, to keep it open, but keep it shallow and without fish, especially because of the protected Great Crested Newts. Also leave some scrub here, as the Great Crested Newts like it when they are not in the water.

This list is quite enough for you to be getting on with, but, as time goes by, it would be worth asking a specialist (eg from EWT) for further suggestions.

Mary Smith. Report completed 22 July, 2008.