

Hurst Water Meadow Trust

Registered Charity number 1050272

Old Bridge Meadow Three-year plan



The Old Bridge Meadow after flooding

Background

The Trustees' main objective is restoration of the site as a typical Thames Valley flood meadow. We also must enhance:

Public enjoyment

Plant and animal diversity

Wet areas

Access to all – young, old, able and disabled

Three consultants have provided reports on the current condition of the Old Bridge Meadow. The reports covered land management, ecology and biodiversity, and ponds and pond management. They also gave proposals for its future management.

We reviewed the reports and made a plan to improve the meadow over the next three years. The main issues are summarised overleaf.



Paved arch under the bridge



Fallen crack willow by the Thames

Main Issues for Maintenance and Development

Nettle control

Nettles cover much of the open ground. They will be brought under control as a matter of priority, using cultural methods (repeated cutting) rather than herbicides. Some small patches of nettles and thistles will be retained as food plants for a variety of insect species. Cleared areas will support species previously crowded out by the nettles.

Pollarding the willows

Traditionally, willows are pollarded on a roughly 10-year cycle. This prolongs their life and avoids the risks of branches falling and the trunks splitting. The willows are called crack willows because they do just that, especially on windy days. Common sense says to take care when near them. We will reinforce this with a warning on the notice board.

We will pollard suitable willows. More ruinous willows will have dangerous branches removed. Fallen timber will be left to rot. Rotting wood is a good habitat for many species of invertebrates.



Newly pollarded willow

Increasing plant diversity

The best areas for a range of plant species are the low-lying, damp patches under the willows in the old river meander. These should be scraped and deepened in order to expose more damp ground and encourage species such as purple loosestrife and meadowsweet (in the Hurst the most species-diverse area is the graded ditch where tractors cross next to the causeway).

A hedge has been planted to soften the fence between the meadow and the car park. The new hedge will provide a good environment for a wide range of species, mainly insects and birds.



Planting the new hedge



There is little point in actively trying to establish or introduce scarce or absent plant species until the nettles and thistles have been controlled. This will take a couple of years at the least.

Grazing

Grazing by cattle after a hay cut is ideal for a flood meadow. They control coarse grasses and their hooves press wild flower seeds into fresh soil. If cattle can be obtained they would also help to control the nettles. Secure fencing (permanent or electric) would be needed. Walkers should not be impeded.

Rabbits

A few rabbits can be beneficial as they help to keep the sward short – providing a better environment for a range of plant species. In great numbers they are a pest (they just eat too much). We have no immediate plans to control the rabbits, but might have to consider this in future.

Deepening the north – south drain

Work has been started on clearing the culvert under the road. This showed that the drain from there to the Thames would have to be significantly deepened to allow water to flow freely all the way to the river. This would entail the removal of a huge amount of soil, raising questions of cost and where to put the spoil.

The culvert will be kept clear so that it does not hold back the flood waters. The uneven drain will be left with its deeper, wetter spots.



The culvert - north end of the drain

Pond and wet areas



A flooded part of the old meander

We did consider digging a new pond on the higher ground in the open field as it would encourage a great range of species (especially amphibians and invertebrates). There would be a high initial cost, and again the question of where to put the large amount of spoil from any deep excavation.

We plan instead to deepen a part of the meander, a natural feature of the meadow, and to consider the possibility of a separate pond at a later stage of the project.

Public enjoyment

We should pay special attention to ways of making the meadow more enjoyable, namely providing access to the river banks and pathways through the site. A kissing gate where the path leads into Cook's field (and on to the Thames) is essential, not just to allow wheelchair access but also to prevent livestock going in or out. Retaining the beauty and charm of the meadow is very important. This will be kept in mind in all of our plans.

Help is needed

We hope that you enjoy both of the meadows. We cannot maintain or develop them without the help of volunteers and donations to enable us to continue our work. If you would like to help as a volunteer or contribute as a donor, or through a legacy, please contact the honorary secretary (details below).

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