

FITTLEWORTH PARISH HABITAT SURVEY; SUMMER 2015.

OVERVIEW

This overview forms part of a comprehensive parish-wide Habitat Survey conducted by a team from the village working under the guidance of wardens from The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNA). The field-work was carried out during the summer of 2015. The full survey includes maps covering the entire parish, each outlining habitat types by area. However for reasons of scale these maps are at best indicative and it is therefore suggested that detailed field-work should be undertaken prior to any substantive planning decisions being made.

CONTEXT

Fittleworth parish lies to the north of the South Downs and approximately mid-way between Petworth and Pulborough. The parish boundary encloses an area of approximately 2280 acres (912 hectares) and to the south includes the flood meadows of the river Rother from whence it stretches north to embrace areas of woodland such as Flexham Park which exhibit the main features of Wealden forest. The parish is therefore elongated, from north to south stretching 3.5 miles (5 km) by 1.25 miles (2km) at its widest point. The whole parish lies within the South Downs National Park. The non-built areas of the parish largely supports a mixed farming economy, part agricultural and part pastoral and is therefore heavily influenced by the estates which surround it; Barlavington, Stopham and Leconfield in the immediate vicinity, and beyond Cowdray, Goodwood and Arundel.

Geologically the village is situated on the Lower Greensand ridge between the Low Weald and the South Downs. A wealth of Fittleworth stone has traditionally been quarried locally and many of the older houses and their garden walls are built of this as well as the ironstone which occurs naturally in the area. Our Parish Church, St Mary's which dates back to 1220, is a good example of this. The village itself is bounded to the west by the high heathlands of Hesworth Common and to the east by Fittleworth Common. Both offer superb views across the Rother Valley south to the Downs beyond, thereby contributing to the rural ambience of the village.

RIVER ROTHER AND IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS.

The River Rother rises in Hampshire and follows the belt of Greensand until it reaches the River Arun at Hardham. The section from Midhurst to Hardham was converted into the Rother Navigation, a successful transport concern from 1794 until 1936. Although all commercial activity has long since ceased, evidence of the past still survives and the river and its wide margins of water-meadow divide Lower Fittleworth from Tripp Hill and provide the parish with one of its most striking environmental features.

The banks of the River Rother have been designated A Site of Nature Conservation Importance and Fittleworth Bridge, described as being in two sections, is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The water meadows are intermittently flooded during winter but at other times are open to grazing. Throughout the year the river, its banks and immediate surroundings are rich in wildlife. In summer wild flowers include water lilies, water mint, balsam, ragwort, teasel, willowherb, purple loosestrife and tandy. In places alders and blackthorn grow along the bank. Water voles are present and the damselflies associated with running water breed along the river, including the White-legged Damselfly. Bird species depend upon the season. Both kingfishers and mandarin duck have been seen as have barn owls and reed buntings. Redpolls, linnets and siskins feed amongst the alders. In winter

greylag, Canada and Egyptian geese as well as widgeon graze on the damp meadows and when flooded they are joined by mallard, pintail, mute swans, little egrets, and grey herons. Green sandpipers sometimes over-winter along the river and grey wagtails feed around the sewage plant (TQ01387 18234). Marsh harriers sometimes pass over and last winter (2014/15) a black swan spent time on flood-water near the bridge. A recent vagrant visitor has been a white stork. When the floods recede the debris includes the shells of fresh-water mussels. The river's fishing rights belong to the Petworth Angling Club and catches include trout, pike, perch, chub and eels. As it passes through Fittleworth the river is not tidal although water-levels are affected by the off-take from RSPB, Wiggonholt, itself affected by the upper reaches of the River Arun which is tidal.

HESWORTH COMMON.

Hesworth Common lies immediately to the west of the built village and a Custumal dated 1386 sets out the duties of those entitled to use it. In 1978 Fittleworth Parish Council became freehold owners of the Common and in 1982 entered into a management agreement with WSCC with the objective of "conserving its natural beauty and improving the opportunities for its enjoyment by the public". The Common is designated a Site of Nature Conservation Importance and covers 100.5 acres. If left untended it would be swamped by bracken and invasive silver birch with outcrops of Scots pine, oak, beech and holly. However volunteer working parties have had some success in clearing the bracken and sapling birch with the result that re-claimed areas of heather now flourish.

Birds often seen on Hesworth include Green and Greater Spotted woodpecker, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Marsh Tit, Goldcrest, Siskin and Nightjar. A lack of sources of nectar reduces butterflies for the most part to speckled woods and purple hairstreaks. However a point of special wildlife interest is an area of acid bog at the south end of the common (TQ 00441 18909) which supports both Bog Asphodel and insectivorous sundew.

FITTLEWORTH COMMON.

Abutting the village to the east lies Fittleworth Common, an area of about 30 acres. The Common is privately owned but with public access permitted. The natural ground cover is mostly bracken with patches of bluebells where the Common comes down to Sandy Lane. The indigenous trees are oak, Scots pine, silver birch and holly. However the present owner, a keen amateur naturalist and tree expert has planted a wide selection of rarities, including many exotics which are of special interest to visiting arboriculturists. Another feature of the common is that trees brought down by high winds or old age are allowed to rot where they fall, thus creating many interesting examples of both micro-habitats and natural regeneration. Running off from the south of Sand Lane opposite Fittleworth Common but not part of it is a plantation of beech trees that were once coppiced but now form woodland. The bird-life and butterflies of Fittleworth Common are much like that of Hesworth, except that both white admirals and silver-washed fritillaries sometimes visit the former.

FITTLEWORTH PARISH TO THE NORTH OF A283

Fittleworth Woods is composed of both mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. The wood runs north from the A283 where the parish joins Stopham and surrounds a disused sand quarry. It leads naturally into Bedham and becomes part of a heavily wooded area that exhibits the main features of ancient Wealden forest. Bedham

Lane which runs north from the village in the direction of Wisborough Green cuts deep into the banks on either side, suggesting use over a long period as a cart track. The northern-most part of the parish includes parts of both Flexham Park and The Mens. The latter is classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is owned and managed by the Sussex Wildlife Trust. Six centuries ago the Mens was a centre for glass-making and charcoal obtained from the local beech trees was crucial to that process, a fact that enabled the forest to escape the woodland clearances prevalent at the time. As a result The Mens is now a rare example of ancient woodland and in order to preserve its antiquity SWT manage the woodland in a manner which causes the minimum disturbance, leaving the natural processes of growth, decay and regeneration to proceed unhindered.

Much of the open land is farmed by Fitzleroi Farm, the last working farm in the parish where the house and land are a working unit. Parts of the Fittleworth Woods and Bedham Common are coppiced on a 14 year cycle, the timber being processed either by the Estates or in a privately-owned workshop in Bedham Lane. As a consequence the woodland floor in places receives varying amounts of sunlight and the natural wild flowers for which the area is well-known fluctuate accordingly. In favourable conditions wild daffodils, primroses, bluebells and stitchwort abound and provide a spectacle of great beauty. Natural springs also abound in the area and in places have been used to form ponds stocked with trout. Stone quarrying is a long-standing business and the quarry on Bedham Common, now the last active quarry in the Parish, covers a massive area. A group of registered Commoners form an Association the purpose of which is to preserve the unique character of the Common and protect it from encroachment. The woodlands are rich in both fauna and flora. Woodland orchids abound, montjak deer are present in The Mens and buzzards nest throughout. The fresh-water springs provide insect-food for nesting grey wagtails, making the area the best for these birds in Sussex. In winter bramblings visit the beech trees to feed on the mast and there is also strong evidence that goshawks (classified by The Sussex Ornithological Society as "A very scarce resident and a Schedule 1 species") breed in the area.

THE BUILT AREA

The majority of the houses in the village are situated in the area bounded by Hesworth Common to the west and Fittleworth Common to the east. Although density in places is fairly high, gardens are both visible and well-kept and this in conjunction with the village recreation ground and wooded Commons ensures that a pleasant rural ambience prevails throughout. Other houses in more open countryside for the most part front onto the roads leading into and out of the village and are backed by farmland. In describing the village built-scene it is appropriate also to record that each spring for the past 18 years the village has opened around twelve of its gardens to the public over two days to raise funds for the parish church and that the event is now sufficiently well-known to attract more than 400 visitors each year, mostly from beyond the village. In addition four different gardens have at various times been open to the public as part of the National Gardens Scheme.