

Proposal for Heritage Foundation managed Nature Reserves

Part of the plan for Letchworth Garden City Heritages Foundation to restore nature includes recognising some pieces of land as nature reserves*. These will be places that the public can visit to experience and learn about nature, we will also aim to leave some areas undisturbed for nature to flourish.

Within these reserves we will:

- Carry out surveys to understand and monitor the complexity of nature. This involves recognising and understanding:
 - Habitats (environments that support individual species by providing food, shelter and places to breed).
 - Species that thrive within these habitats, particularly species that are most threatened and so becoming rarer.
- Draw up a Management Plan to protect and enhance nature.
- Carrying out work to ensure that the site and its habitats are brought into good condition – as detailed in the Management Plan.
- Commit to maintaining sites in good condition.
- Understanding how the public access the site and encouraging this access, while at the same time leaving some areas undisturbed.
- Displaying information on the site about wildlife that you may expect to see.
- Visit the site regularly to ensure it remains cared for, with litter cleared away and antisocial behaviour discouraged.
- From time-to-time hold educational and community events.
- Look for ways to support voluntary Friends of Groups that would like to establish.
- Recording progress as part of our annual reporting.

*These nature reserves will not be statutory designated Local Nature Reserves which require ownership/control by a local authority or delegated town/parish council. These will be sites that we are identifying for nature, access, and education in a similar way to reserves run by the wildlife trusts and other organisations.

Hillbrow Orchard Nature Reserve Management Plan



Introduction

Hillbrow Orchard is situated to the west of Letchworth Garden City. It is bounded by a train line to the north and allotments, garages and a recreation ground to the east, with access by a footpath leading from Hillbrow. While there is grassland in adjacent fields to the south and west, it lies in an area of predominantly arable farmland and urban development.

The site lies within National Character Areas 87 – East Anglian Chalk, and close to the boundary of the Chilterns, with an expansive view to the west. The underlying geology is Cretaceous chalk, covered in ice and river deposits.

The main area is grassland with scrub that has been allowed to establish. There is a deliberate area of scrubland to the south, the remaining scrub has established due to infrequent maintenance. Toward the north the grassland has been planted, on two occasions, with orchard trees, the last planting was in 2024 as part of the Arbor Day Celebration with a local primary school.

The site is bounded by unlaed predominantly hawthorn hedge to the east, a metal fence along the trainline to north with an establishing hawthorn hedge, and bramble and hedge species to the south. There is a narrow strip of woodland running along a ditch to the west.

The Greenway multiuser permissive footpath runs diagonally though the southern part of the site. There is also an unofficial footpath along the eastern and northern boundaries which is kept mown short along with the Greenway maintenance. A desire line runs along the western boundary in front of the trees. Clearly the site is well used by walkers, dog walkers and runners. Gaps at the northern boundary, and the Greenway to the south, allows access to the adjacent field. Within the field lies Ickniel Tumulus, a Schedules Ancient Monument (SAM) ref: 1017406. This consists of two bowl barrows dating back to the Bronze Age (2000-700 BCE).

The area has been in Higher Level Countryside Stewardship from 2018-2023 with a prescription to manage the grassland for target features. This has not been renewed as part of our 5 in 10-year agreement.

Known special features

Botanical species have not been recently surveyed, although we do know that kidney vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) grows on part of the site. This supports a small population of small blue butterfly (*Cupido minimus*), a priority species in Hertfordshire.

Approach to management

There is potential to enhance the quality of the main grassland area to improve botanical diversity. Although the soil feels quite sticky, the presence of chalk indicates potential for calcareous grassland restoration. The main grassland areas are bounded by orchard, scrub hedges and trees which can provide a range of habitats to support pollinators, invertebrates and possibly reptiles.

Infrequent cuts means that scrub is starting to encroach. There is an establishing area of scrub towards the southwest which we will leave intact. We will also leave one small area of scrub to the north of the orchard planting as well as scattered patches of dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). A number of solo non-orchard shrubs are establishing. We will choose a small number of these to preserve. There is potential to plant additional hedge species to the north and to improve the hedge to the south. The eastern hedge is suitable for laying.

Location and access

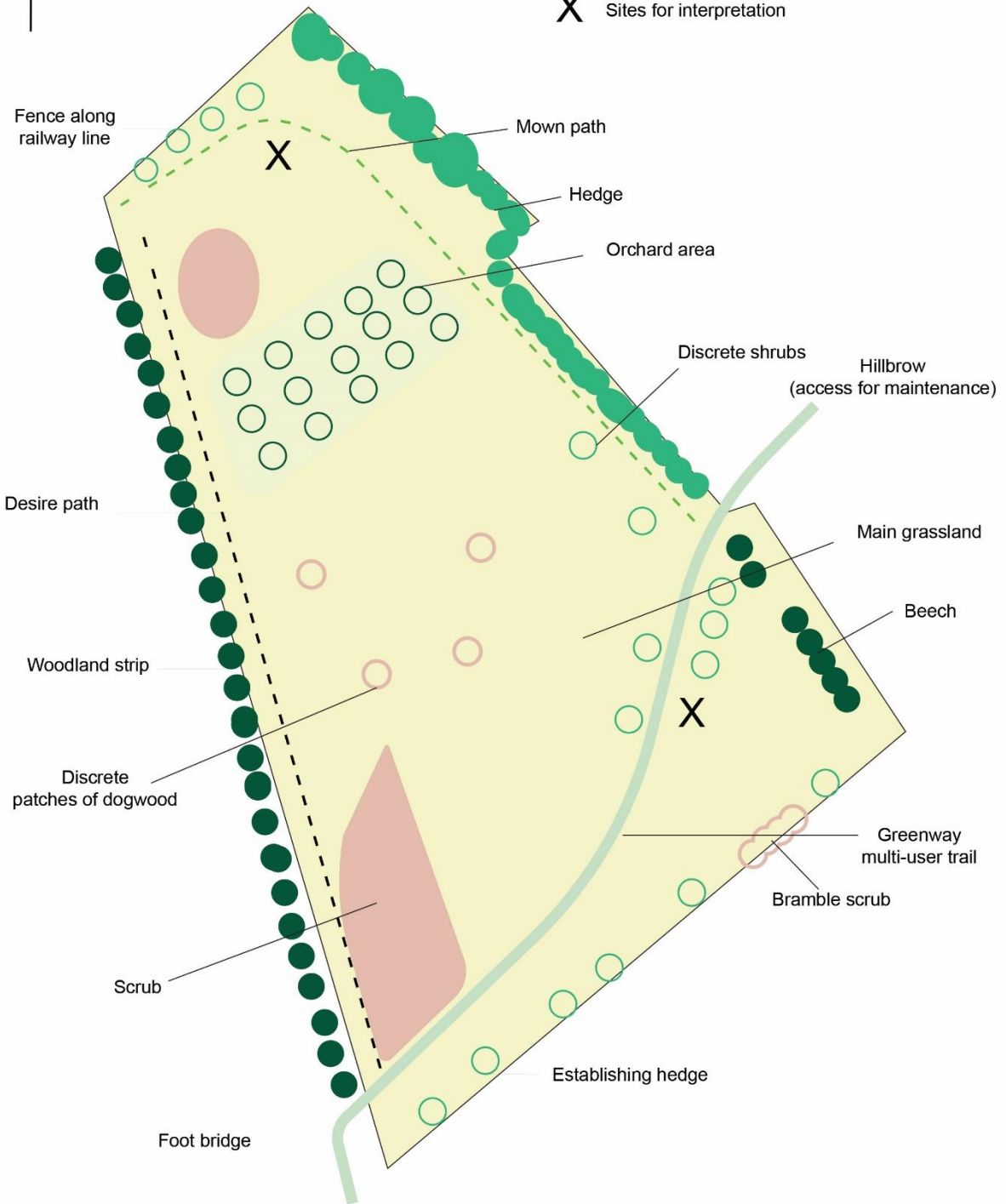
The easiest way to access the site is to walk a short distance along the Greenway from Hillbrow in Letchworth, the track leads between houses 55 and 57. Alternatively you can approach along the greenway from the A505, Hitchen Road. Grid Reference: TL206319. What3Words: <https://w3w.co/else.fish.table>

N



Hillbrow Orchard *(Not to scale)*

X Sites for interpretation





5 year works plan - 2025-2030

<u>Area and aim</u>	<u>Details</u>	<u>Main actions</u>
<p><u>Main Grassland</u> This is to be managed as calcareous grassland to support the growth of Kidney vetch and populations of Small blue butterfly. This will provide habitat for additional botanical and invertebrate species such as the Common blue butterfly and the Six-spot burnet moth.</p>	<p>Main grassland area to be cut late August:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Area should be cut ideally prior to a period of dry weather, leaving a short sward height. Arisings should be collected after 5-10 days and either stored along the northern boundary or removed from the site ○ On a rotational basis, prior to each cut an area/areas of long grass free from scrub should be selected and left to provide butterfly roosting sites (5-10% of grassland area). ○ Scrub areas identified on map and discrete shrubs to be maintained and not allowed to expand. ○ Following monitoring of botanical species, small scrapes or areas of disturbance may be required to assist germination. <p>Years 1-3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ideally scrub developing throughout the grassland areas should be removed by hand. ○ Where scrub persists a second cut and lift can be made at the end of October. 	<p>Cut and lift late August</p> <p>Years 1-3, cut and lift late October if needed.</p> <p>Annual monitoring and adjustment of plan is essential to ensure management is correct for target species.</p>
<p><u>Orchard</u> Managed to retain orchard landscape and allow access to trees.</p>	<p>Sward around trees to be kept short by cutting throughout the year, at the same time as mowing paths.</p> <p>Year 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Trees to be catalogued ○ Tree guard from original planting to be removed. <p>Trees to be inspected late summer and any required pruning undertaken during autumn or winter. This will initially be minimal and focused on healthy tree establishment and an optimal level of fruit production.</p> <p>Fallen fruit to be removed from site during the late autumn.</p>	<p>Grass to be kept short throughout the year.</p> <p>Fallen fruit to be removed by end of November.</p> <p>Late summer inspection followed by maintenance.</p>

<p><u>Paths</u> To maintain easy access along the greenway and path running along the eastern and norther boundary. This may include an area around a bench.</p>	<p>Follow established cycle of greenway maintenance for main paths.</p> <p>No maintenance to desire line path to the west, other than to cut back understory encroaching from woodland every 2-3 years to stop path shifting into grassland.</p>	<p>Frequent cuts throughout the growing season.</p> <p>Over winter, monitor and cut back understory to maintain desire line.</p>
<p><u>Main hedge to east</u> This has potential for laying and could be a site for running a hedge laying course followed by volunteer involvement.</p>	<p>Maintain a sequence of cutting every 3 years, starting in autumn 2025.</p> <p>Obtain quotes for hedge laying and consider potential for hedge laying course and volunteering.</p>	<p>Autumn hedge maintenance cycle.</p>
<p><u>Establishing hedge</u></p>	<p>Support growth of developing plants and consider gapping, maintaining a diversity of at least 5 native species.</p> <p>Once established manage as hedge.</p>	<p>Autum planting and maintenance.</p>
<p><u>Scrub</u> The aim is to diversify the range of on-site habitats and provide additional areas for birds and invertebrates to shelter and feed.</p>	<p>Following annual inspection, carry out work over autumn to maintain a maximum height of 5 m, with a variety of structure and form.</p> <p>Prevent from becoming uniform and overly dense</p>	<p>Autum inspection with works carried out by the end of December.</p>
<p><u>Discrete patches of scrub and shrubs</u></p>	<p>Maintain current footprint, as shown on map.</p> <p>Prevent the establishment of larger trees.</p>	<p>Maintained when grassland cut and over autumn if needed.</p>
<p><u>Woodland boundary</u></p>	<p>Regular surveys to maintain health and safety, and promote woodland health.</p> <p>Also see notes on removing understory to maintaining current location of desire line path.</p>	<p>Annual monitoring.</p>
<p><u>Interpretation</u></p>	<p>Year 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Install 1 x interpretation lectern and 1 x notice board in time for Nature Reserve recognition 	<p>Annual inspection.</p>

	<p>Inspect annually, and clean or maintain as needed. Ensure information remains relevant and website links work. The notice board is intended to be updated to that visitors understand and feel involved with the site.</p>	<p>Seasonal check that notice board is up to date.</p>
<p><u>Monitoring</u></p>	<p>Year 1-baseline surveys</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ May-June, NVC survey to establish potential as calcareous grassland. ○ Over summer Monitoring of butterfly and moth populations. <p>Years 2-5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spring and summer visits to monitor species against baseline levels. ○ Kidney vetch, Greater knapweed and Birds-foot trefoil should be maintained throughout the sward. ○ Consider extending survey work as site develops and information is uncovered. 	<p>Spring – summer monitoring of identifies species and overall level of biodiversity.</p>
<p><u>Litter and ASB</u></p>	<p>There is a bin at the entrance for the site for dog waste. Interpretation panel and notice board will carry sign to promote responsible site use. Check the site regularly for dog mess, litter and other signs of ASB, clear any fly tipping quickly.</p>	<p>Regular monitoring and action as needed.</p>