

## **Management Plan for Lousy Bush Nature Reserve – Wrestlingworth**

### **1. Background**

#### **Extent**

The reserve is situated in the parish of Wrestlingworth and Cockayne Hatley, away from most of the dwellings and surrounded by agricultural land. The land is approximately square, covering an area approaching one hectare. The adjacent land on three sides (north, east and west) is cropped annually, while the land to the south is maintained as set aside.

In the recent past the site was unused except for occasional pigeon shooting and rubbish dumping. The lack of management allowed the site to develop into a Willow and Sallow woodland with a few other species including Elder and Hawthorn. With time the trees have grown very large and the amount of water in the ponds reduced such that they dry out during the summer and autumn months.

#### **Historic**

The reserve was originally made up of gravel pits, used by the Parish even before being referred to in the Wrestlingworth Enclosure Act of 1801. It was designated for the use of villagers to access building materials for housing and road maintenance. Once formally acquired by the Parish Council as part of the review of common land, the area formed part of the local village P3 plan and gave impetus to the newly formed 'Parish Walking and Wildlife Group' which set about managing the area in a way that was sustainable for both wildlife and visitors.

Originally known as the Wrestlingworth Gravel Pits, the reserve's current name comes from our earliest record of the site in "The Wrestlingworth Enclosure Act of 1801" available in the Bedfordshire County Records Office. There it records the area as a stone, gravel and mortar pit "containing two acre situate in lousy bush field Wrestlingworth".

The derivation of the name "lousy bush" is speculative. It may equate with Lousy Bush Wood in Norfolk whose name is believed to derive from the presence of a large population of Spurge Laurel (once known as Lowery or Lowrie). Alternately it may refer to the past occurrence of large populations of pests on plants in the original field.

#### **Present**

Wrestlingworth and Cockayne Hatley Parish Council is acknowledged as a freeholder of Lousy Bush Nature Reserve and the area is registered as Common Land under the CROW Act.

Work on the reserve began in 2012 by the newly formed Parish Walking and Wildlife Group.

The ponds have a tendency to dry out but our careful management of overgrown tree canopies and undergrowth has let in water and light, enabling the ponds to fill better and create improved aerial access for birds, bats and winged insects. Nest boxes have been installed along with a much valued, donated bird hide and numerous types of feeders.

In October 2014, the PWWG was commended by the Campaign to Protect Rural England for work in the biodiversity and landscape improvement category. In December 2017, members of the PWWG unveiled a newly installed Lousy Bush Nature Reserve information board close to the entrance of the reserve.

## **2. Context**

### **Ecological**

The main ecological importance of the reserve is as a well established wet willow woodland isolated within an intensive arable setting. It has probably had little active management for at least 100 years and possibly for over 200 years as its main purpose as a supply of gravel for road mending in the parish would have declined rapidly by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century after parishioners were no longer required legally to maintain roads in the parish. It may therefore contain species that were once more widespread but are now relatively rare in modern agricultural settings. Some of the moth species recorded support this.

Wetland areas with standing water are rare in the area so the reserve also provides an important area of temporary pools and associated species.

### **Habitat/Species present:**

#### **Flora:**

No formal botanical surveys have taken place. The reserve is dominated by large White Willow trees and one large Ash tree. There are also Hawthorn, Sloe, Elder, Spindle and Sallow and Sycamore present as well as several species of sedge. Amongst the herbs are Sweet Violet (*Viola odorata*) and Marsh Bedstraw.

#### **Fauna:**

##### **Invertebrates:**

Currently only Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) and Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies) have been recorded consistently. 170 species of moths have been recorded; nine of these are classified as 'uncommon residents' and one as 'rare resident' in Bedfordshire. Several of these are willow and sallow feeders, such as the Cream-bordered Green Pea (*Earias clorana*) underlining the importance of maintaining this aspect of the reserve.

Seventeen species of butterflies have been recorded on the reserve and there is a colony of Marbled Whites in the adjoining set-aside meadow. The large area of regularly mown nettles by the notice board is particularly productive as a breeding site for nationally declining Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells.

Six species of dragonflies have been recorded. Attempted breeding has been recorded for four of these but probably only the Ruddy Darter has been successful in maintaining a long-

term population, as it is adapted to the temporary nature of the reserve's ponds. It is hoped that the recent addition of a permanent liner in one of the ponds (December 2017) will enable more dragonfly species to colonise the reserve. The ponds are also regularly colonised by many aquatic invertebrates, e.g. Whirligig beetles, Great Diving Beetles, pond skaters, water fleas and water louse.

#### Birds:

About 50 bird species have been seen on or around the reserve. The species range from raptors (Buzzard, Red Kite, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk), waterfowl (Moorhen and Mallard), woodland (Great spotted woodpecker, Tree creeper, Barn Owl and Tawny Owl), migrant passerines (Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest and Redpoll) and endangered farmland birds (Linnet and Yellowhammer). Great Tit have used nest boxes provided and Carrion Crow have nested successfully high in the Ash canopy.

#### Mammals:

Eight species of mammals have been recorded including Badger, Fox, Muntjac and the black form of the Grey Squirrel. There is an active Badger set in one corner of the reserve. One attempt at bat recording has taken place by the Bedfordshire Bat Recorder but without success, perhaps due to the isolation of the site.

#### Non-mammal vertebrates:

These include frogs and Smooth Newts and even one surprising record of a Minnow. Great Crested Newts have been searched for by local licensed experts but without success so far.

### **3. Objectives**

1. Manage the reserve for the benefit of nature providing an oasis of biodiversity in the middle of existing large area of agricultural fields.
2. Enhance and maintain the environment of the reserve without artificially adding new species of flora or fauna.
3. Provide public access to and information about the reserve whilst keeping it as natural as possible and ensure it is not turned into a park garden.
4. Maintain good relations with the land owners and managers responsible for the adjacent land areas. Their good stewardship of the east and south ditches are critically important for the water levels on the reserve; while (1) the south-side, set-aside land and (2) the west-side, conservation headland and (3) the linked hedges are also valuable as linked ecological assets to the reserve.

### **4. Management required and Rationale**

1. Regularly cut back tree boughs, bushes and excess undergrowth, strategically and sympathetically to prevent blockade of light, excess water loss and loss of the more vulnerable, existing species such as Sweet Violet.
2. Maintain the pathways that lead to the bird hide with minimum intrusion to plants and wildlife.
3. Maintain bird hide and service the feeders (situated only around the hide area).
4. Maintain the depths of the ponds and explore ways of maintaining some level of water throughout the year.
5. Maintain the north facing boundary adjacent to the bridal path to enhance its wildlife value and ensure access to the educational board for the use of visitors.

## **5. Survey & Monitor**

Informal monitoring occurs regularly, at least once a month, by various members of the PWWG, while a more detailed survey is more formerly carried out during late summer /early autumn to guide actions planned for the coming year. Activities and events on the reserve are brought up for discussion at every monthly meeting of the PWWG. Surveying of the reserve's fauna and flora by experts is actively encouraged whenever possible and we have an enthusiastic core group of about 10 volunteers with various skills and knowledge.

## **6. Constraints**

The main constraint for regular biological monitoring and some management tasks is vehicular access, which is along middy farm tracks and usually requires a 4-wheel-drive vehicle or tractor if any heavy equipment is required. Normal pedestrian access is 1km from Wrestlingworth village along a public bridleway. There are no other serious current constraints due to the generosity of PWWG members and volunteers from the Parish as well as financial support from benefactors gratefully acknowledged below.

## **7. References**

Wrestlingworth Gravel Pits – a new parish nature reserve; a BNHS article published in 'Wild about Beds' by Ian Woiwod in issue 164, September 2012.

Information about the reserve, including some species lists, is available on the PWWG webpage: <http://www.pwwg.org.uk/naturereserve.php> . There is also an active PWWG Facebook page that often includes observations from the reserve as well as lists of birds, mammals and insects <https://www.facebook.com/groups/179742955376695/> .

Bedfordshire Council for the Protection of Rural England.

Website: [www.cprebeds.org.uk](http://www.cprebeds.org.uk); tel: 01234 353331

Commons Registration Act 1965 – Decision “ In the matter of Gravel Pits, Wrestlingworth, Biggleswade R.D., Bedfordshire”. A.A. Baden Fuller, Commons Commissioner, reference no. 1/U/24, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1973.

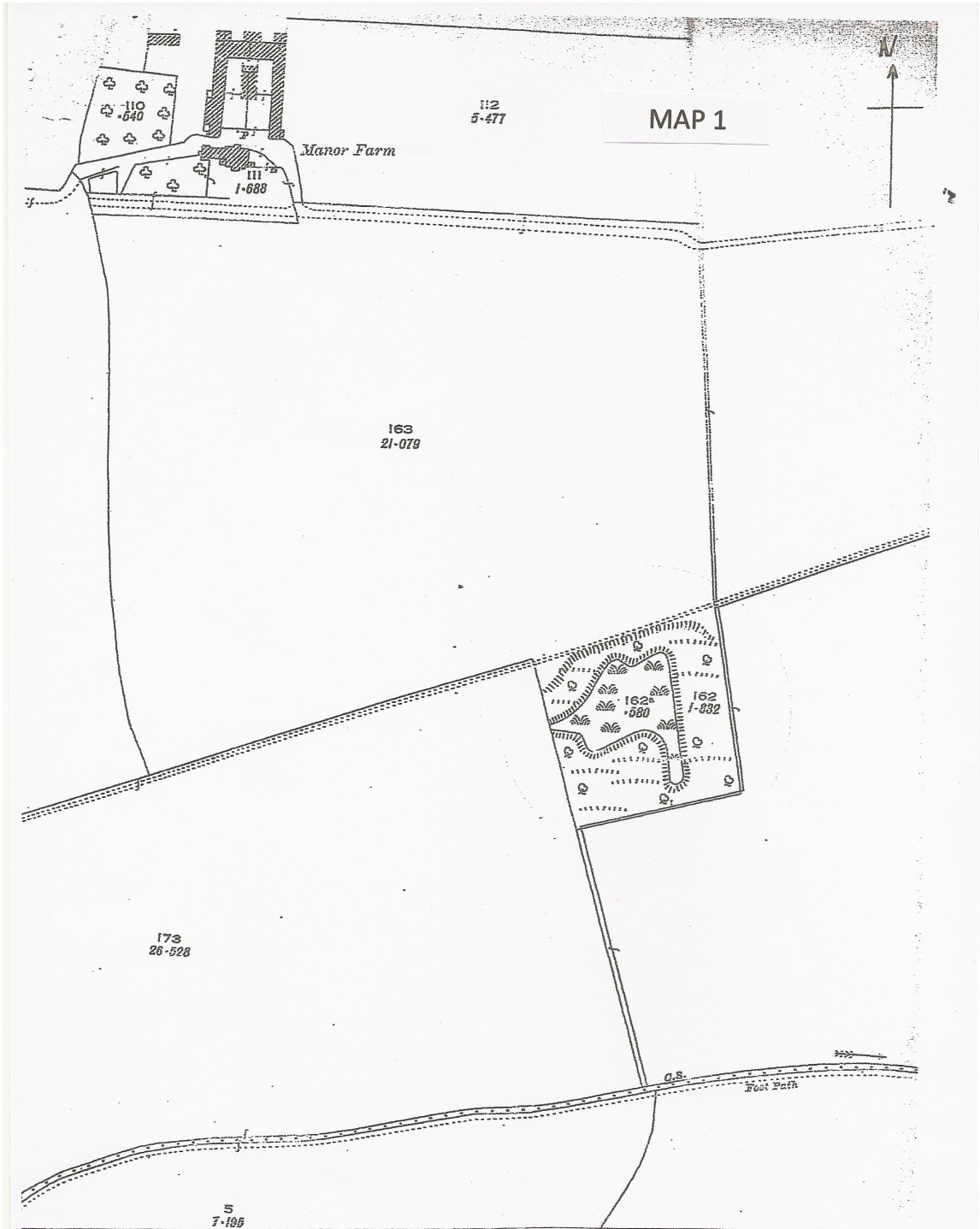
### *Acknowledgements*

*Prepared by Patrick Humphrey and Ian Woiwod, March 2018, with input from other members of the Parish Walking and Wildlife Group. We thank John Comont, Conservation Manager for The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire, for helpful guidance.*

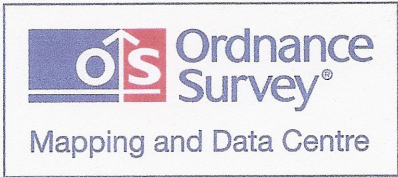
*We also thank the Wrestlingworth and Cockayne Hatley Parish Council as well as the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity and Central Bedfordshire Council for funding support.*

## **8. Appendices**

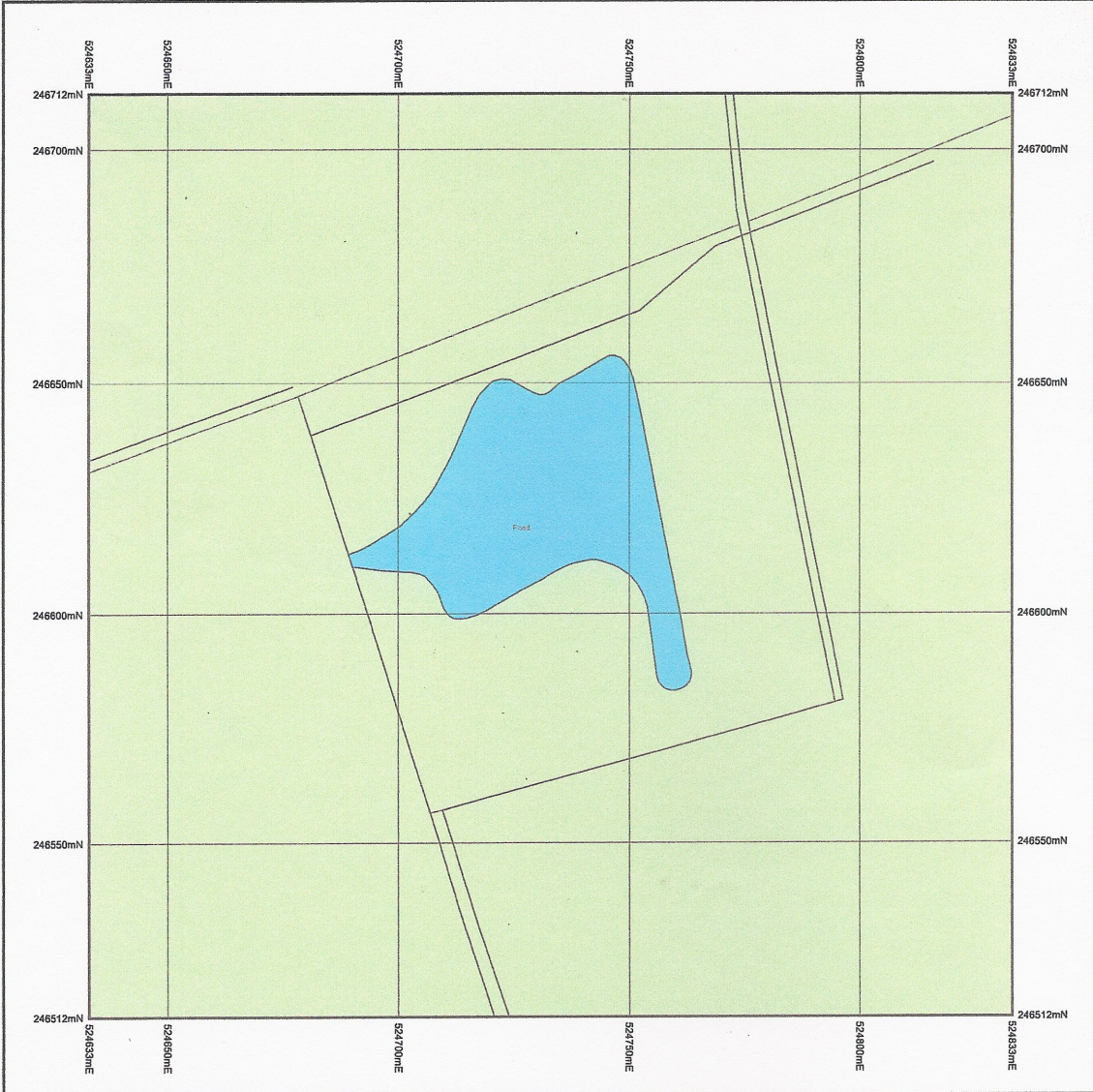
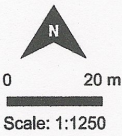
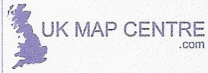
1. Scale map from a survey conducted in 1882/3 and updated in 1926. The site registration number is shown as 162 and the other numbers are field acreages.
2. Ordnance Survey map of the reserve area, 2013, scale 1:1250.
3. Parish map of 2009 to show location of the reserve (TL247466) relative to the outskirts of the west side of the village of Wrestlingworth/



This map is a detail taken from a survey conducted in 1882/3 and updated in 1926. The scale is 208.33" to the foot. 162 is the site registration number and the other numbers are the field acreages. .



# MAP 2



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PWWG Nature Reserve

Map 3

