



Langdyke Countryside Trust – January 2005 Update

It has been an exciting few months in the development of Swaddywell Pit nature reserve. Soon after the last update we received news that our bid for grant funding from English Nature's aggregate levy sustainability fund had been successful. Coupled with generous support from Peterborough City Council, the Trust will receive nearly £30,000 for work at the site this winter. We are extremely grateful to both organisations.

In addition we are very grateful to Ufford Parish Council who are funding an additional stile at the entrance to the reserve. This is a welcome demonstration of their support for the project.

Already a lot of this work has been completed. Working with local company, Plant Fencing, we have fenced and gated the top field to allow us to begin grazing the site later this year. Grazing is the most effective way of managing grassland and creating optimal conditions for the spread of orchids and other limestone flowers across the reserve. Limestone grassland like that at Swaddywell is a nationally rare habitat. The grant means we can quickly enhance the wildlife value of the site.

We hope to start grazing in the spring – look out for the small herd of Dexter cattle. And if you are interested in buying beef from these cattle - fed at Swaddywell and other local sites – then call us too! Later this year we hope to start sheep grazing. The sheep are better suited to winter grazing and we will need to keep rotating both cows and sheep in order to get grazing levels right and to make sure that the animals don't eat up all the orchids!!

The grant has also enabled us to buy a compact tractor for simple management tasks on the reserve and to put up interpretation boards to explain to visitors the history of Swaddywell and what to look out for.

The grant is a major boost for Swaddywell, but we should stress that it only helps with one off costs. We do still need the continued commitment of the community in order to meet the recurring costs of running the site, including the lease for the top of the site. We are extremely grateful to the 70 households in Helpson, Eton and Bainton who are now members of the Trust and helping us to meet those costs.

Langdyke Walks and Working Groups

Similarly it is great to see so many of you joining the recent Langdyke walks and helping out at the working days at Swaddywell.

The working days on 21 November and on 28 December were well attended by both grown ups and children and much energy was expended and much work done (and quite a lot of mulled wine drunk too!). At the moment work continues to focus on picking up the accumulation of rubbish that still scars the site and tackling the bramble that threatens to dominate other vegetation. We have done a lot of work cutting back bramble along the quarry face at the bottom of the pit. This not only opens up even better views of the geology of the site, but should – as this area is south facing and warms up quickly in the summer - provide great habitat for both insects and flowers.

The children too got very muddy and messy painting and putting their names on nest boxes which have now been put up around Swaddywell. We will work with the children to help them keep a record of what lives in their box over the years. If your child would like to be involved do let us know.

Finally the first or last walk of the year, the traditional New Year's walk around Bainton pits attracted nearly 50 members of the community.

The natural world

The last three months of 2004 proved relatively mild if wet locally. The water levels continue to rise at Swaddywell, although they are still not quite back at the levels in early 2003, prior to the long hot summer of that year.

Focus on the goosander

The goosander is a striking bird – it is almost the size of a small goose, has a long hooked bill with serrated edges (hence the name sawbill) which allows it to grasp its favourite food – small fish – easily.

It is also an interesting species too. The goosander first started breeding in this country in 1871 and has since spread as far south as Derbyshire. Interestingly it nests in holes – sometimes in trees, but also in rabbit burrows and nest boxes. Most nests are close to fast flowing rivers in upland areas.

Until quite recently there was something of a mystery about the goosander. The vast majority of males disappeared every year in June and reappeared in October – no one knew where they went.

They have now been discovered – congregating around four fjords in the far north of Norway. The males fly there every year to moult, leaving the females to raise the chicks. Now that is a long stag weekend

Winter is always a good time of year to wander around the local wetlands – both Maxey and Bainton pits attract a lot of winter ducks. Numbers of goosander - an impressive, large hook billed duck. have not been as high at Maxey pits as in recent years – there were only four or so there over Christmas compared to over 30 in 2002. Maxey is also a good site for both great crested grebe (often up to 10 birds) and for kingfisher – look out for them

speeding along the cut or over the reed bed pit. Another impressive site in November was a flock of several thousand starling roosting in the reed bed and making an incredible noise and sight as they wheeled across the sky just before dusk.

Bainton attracts much larger numbers of ducks in winter, including wigeon, pochard and goldeneye. Of particular note recently were three smew that appeared just before Christmas. These are ducks from the high arctic that only infrequently turn up locally. The male is a beautiful, pure white bird with black markings – well worth looking out for.

Other notable local birds included a short-eared owl that turned up briefly at Swaddywell in November. These large birds breed in the north of the UK, but winter locally and are the least nocturnal of the owls and can often be seen in broad daylight at favourite locations such as the Nene Washes near Whittlesey. This year they have arrived there from their breeding grounds in northern Europe in record numbers, with up to 65 reported seen in one afternoon (!), so finding one at Swaddywell was perhaps not too unexpected.

Focus on Maxey Pits

Maxey Pits is a great place for a walk, whether you are interested in nature or not.

But if you are there is always plenty to see here at any season of the year. And one of the curious benefits of gravel extraction is that over the next few years the site is likely to become more and more interesting as the old workings are turned into reed bed, open water and wet woodland. There really can be benefits to development and quarrying!

The walk to the pits along the Maxey Cut is one of the best places locally to see kingfisher and grey wagtail. It has also produced recent records of otter too, so keep your eyes peeled for this impressive mammal – one that is very much on the up across England as pollution levels in rivers fall. In the evening this is also a good place to look out for both barn owl (hunting along the banks of the cut and the south drain) and little owl (perching on top of the trees in the neighbouring fields and making its cat like calls).

The pits themselves provide a home during the summer to a number of warblers and other summer migrants such as turtle dove. And in the winter they are the favourite home locally of the goosander – look for them particularly at dusk on the most westerly pit.

The tree sparrow flock at Swaddywell is also building up well – there are at least 40 birds there now – a significant increase on the small flock of 10 that first started using the site 2 years ago. This seems to be part of a national increase for this bird, which had at one stage declined by over 90%. There is also a smaller flock of 12 tree sparrows using the paddock in Heath Road.

Shooting at Swaddywell

We have had a number of questions recently about our policy on shooting at Swaddywell. As noted in the last bulletin we have an agreement with the

Ashton shoot that allows them to continue to shoot from the bottom of the pit during the winter. We are more than happy for this to continue as the shoot is an important and historic part of the community.

Similarly, we also invited the local clay pigeon shoot to continue to shoot over certain areas of the pit if they could clear up the cartridge cases and broken clays on a regular basis. The shoot decided not to take up this invitation.

Get involved

If you would like to get more actively involved with the Trust, we meet every second Tuesday of the month. We are looking for a Treasurer and for help in managing community events.

Not a member?

Then call Stuart Irons and join up!

Thanks to

All those who helped out at the working days in November and December and of course to all our members, English Nature, Peterborough City Council and Ufford Parish council for their financial support.

Next Events

23 January and 27 February – working afternoons at Swaddywell (1400 onwards)

12 April – evening visit to Swaddywell counting newts – bring a torch and wellies!!! Details to follow.

Next newsletter

Is the Langdyke annual report - due out at the end of April.

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

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Membership

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