

5 Landscape, Ecology and Open Space

"Kent Design" outlines the importance of landscape, ecology and open space, and their potential to provide a number of different and complementary functions. Site-specific policies for Development Site 13 in the Local Plan stress the importance of retaining and enhancing existing landscape features and providing a countryside setting for the development. The following sections are supported by Figure 5.1 overleaf.

5.1 Landscape Strategy

The Overall Landscape

The structure and character of the landscape of the site and its context have influenced significantly the planning and design of the overall development. Indeed, East Stour Village as a whole will comprise a broad mosaic of landscapes covering half the site and setting the context to the other, built half.

The landscape we see today is largely a product of, on the one hand, geology, drainage and topography, and, on the other, land use and land cover. The illustration overleaf shows the key elements of this landscape:

- The broad tongue of Weald Clay which rises above the floodplain and creates the main building platform;
- The surrounding flat and largely open floodplain with coarse sandy soils under arable cultivation;
- Captain's Wood, the most memorable single element in the local landscape;
- South of the wood, a transitional area of pasture enclosed by hedgerows;
- The East Stour river and its associated network of dykes.

These landscapes help shape the proposed development and will give it its character, open space and biodiversity and facilitate its sustainable drainage.

The broad pattern of proposed landscapes fall into six types:

- Open meadowland in the floodplain;
- Woodland planting in the north of the site;
- A landscape of sustainable drainage fringing the built environment;
- A network of river and dyke landscapes;
- An enhanced Captain's Wood;
- Landscapes within the built area.

The six types will be conservation driven in their establishment and management with the aim of enhancing biodiversity as well as providing a visually rewarding context. The scale of the landscape setting and the need for well-informed, responsive management requires that this aspect of the development is approached sensitively and comprehensively. The Church Commissioners will retain ownership of the landscape areas of the site and arrange for the management of the overall rural estate. The aim is for the farmland, woodland and drainage network to be under the control of a tenant estate manager who will, say, work the land directly, or let it to a local farmer or, with the most sensitive habitats, manage them with the guidance and help of conservation agencies or trusts. The open space within the built development may best be managed by a community trust.

The Meadowland

The greater part of the landscape is at present under arable cultivation. With the overall aims of enhancing biodiversity and giving the setting more visual distinction the proposal is to convert from arable to permanent, wildflower-rich grassland. Conservationists from the High Weald Unit recommend, subject to soil conditions, the use of a seed mix of Weald native origin harvested from local hay meadows.

The meadows could be grazed on a rotational basis by sheep or cattle which would help animate the landscape,



Wildflower grassland

or be mown, say twice yearly, to help create the optimum flora for insects and birdlife. The potential problems of grazing livestock in the urban fringe may dictate the best management regime.

The landscape of the floodplains today is largely open with gappy hedgerows and occasional hedgerow trees. There are few strong lines of trees and the proposal is to maintain this open character with the exception of some woodland planting in the north, as described next.

Woodland Planting

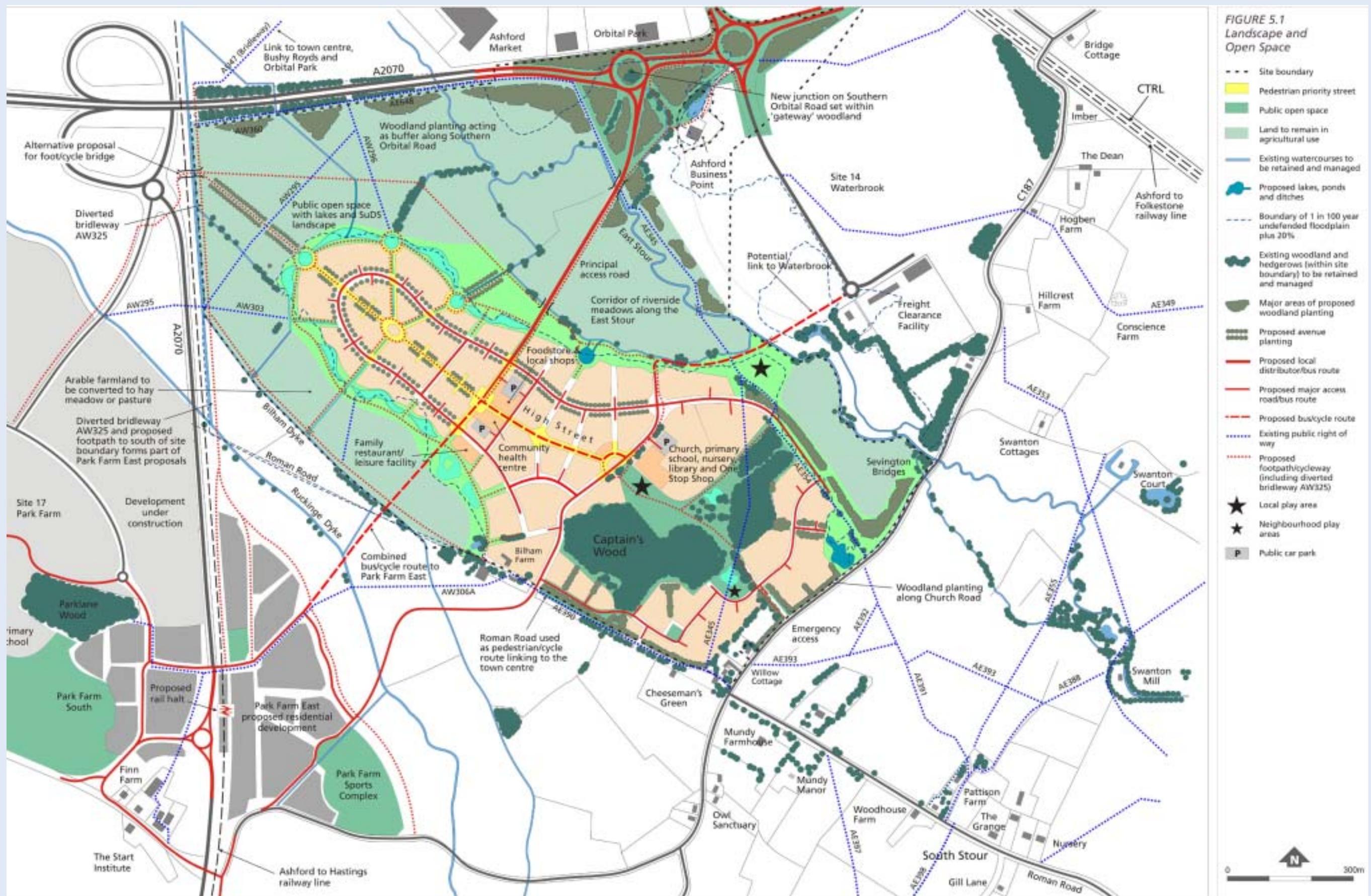
The traffic on the Southern Orbital Road to the north of the site, and the employment areas beyond diminish the quality of the setting to the village and this impact needs mitigation. The proposal is to plant a narrow corridor of native trees along this boundary helping enclose the site.

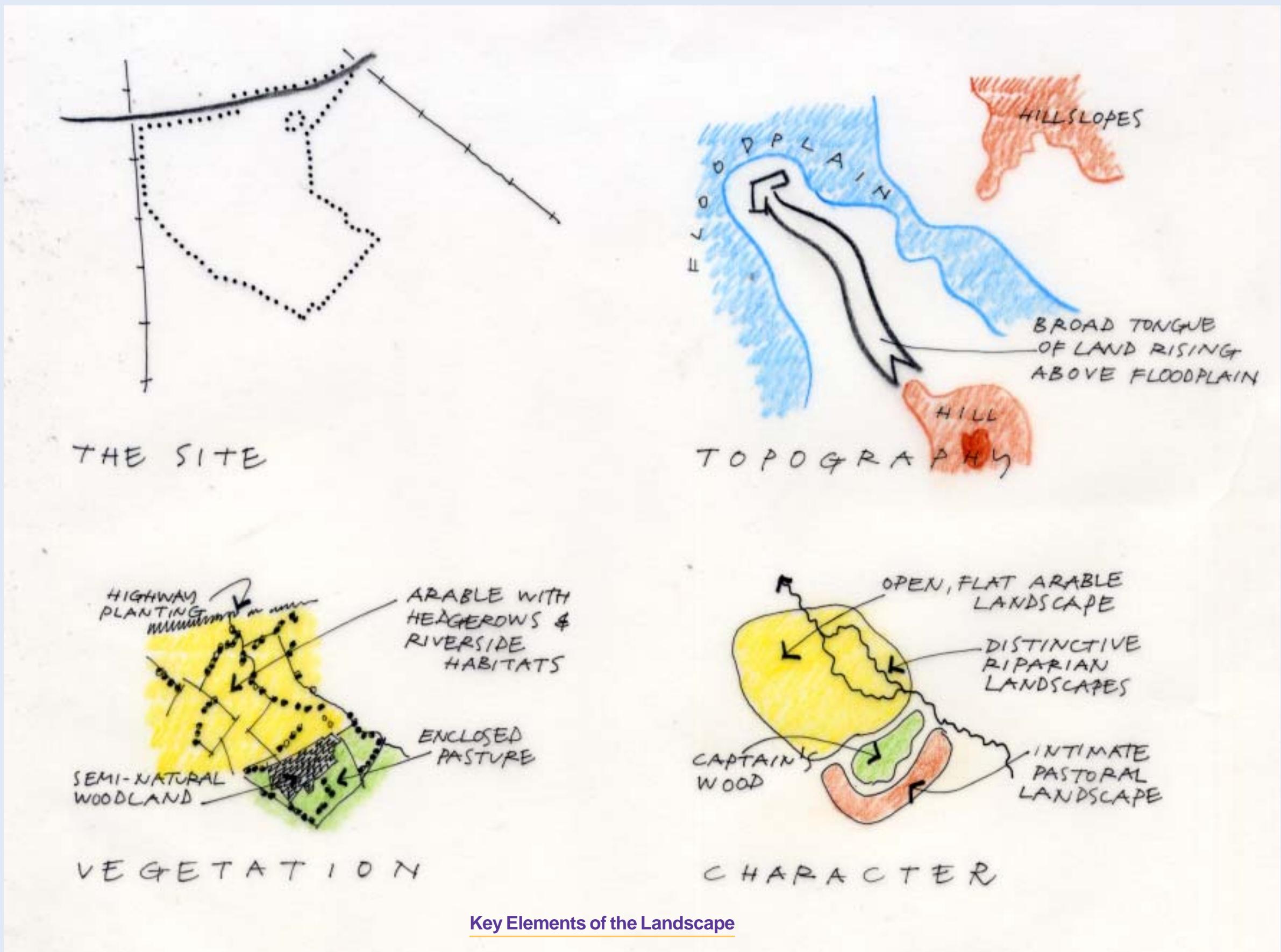
This would be supplemented at the gateway to the site, the proposed roundabout on the Southern Orbital Road, with woodland planting helping to create a transition between that part of South Ashford and the open floodplain.

There is little other proposed tree planting in the floodplain save an avenue along the main foot/cycle path

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into Ashford. This planting should be advanced nursery stock using the oak species which grow well in the floodplain.

Wherever possible in the development, shaws and hedgerows have been retained. These will be reinforced with fingers of tree planting extending from Captain's Wood to form wildlife corridors to other existing species-rich hedgerows.

The SuDS Landscape

The proposals for sustainable drainage systems will be expressed through a landscape of water and wetlands in the fringes of the village. The SuDS approach requires the retention of stormwater through permeable surfaces, swales, ponds, wetlands and dykes from which it flows gradually into the wider drainage network.

This will be a rich and diverse landscape of great visual and ecological interest. However, it also needs to be robust in the face of potential pressures and safe for local residents and children. The ponds will be largely associated with the employment area. Some elements, such as swales planted with emergent and marginal plants, will originate in the pedestrian paths of the employment area.



Emergent and marginal plants

Rivers and Dykes

The East Stour River, Bilham Dyke and the associated ditches form an ecological and visual pattern of great interest and merit. This network lies almost entirely within the proposed meadowland forming a complementary landscape within it.

Subject to the agreement of the Environment Agency, the intention is to enhance these riparian habitats by reprofiling the banks in selected reaches for emergent and marginal plants. It is hoped that habitats can be created to encourage otters and bank voles to use the rivers and birdlife such as kingfishers.



East Stour River

Captain's Wood

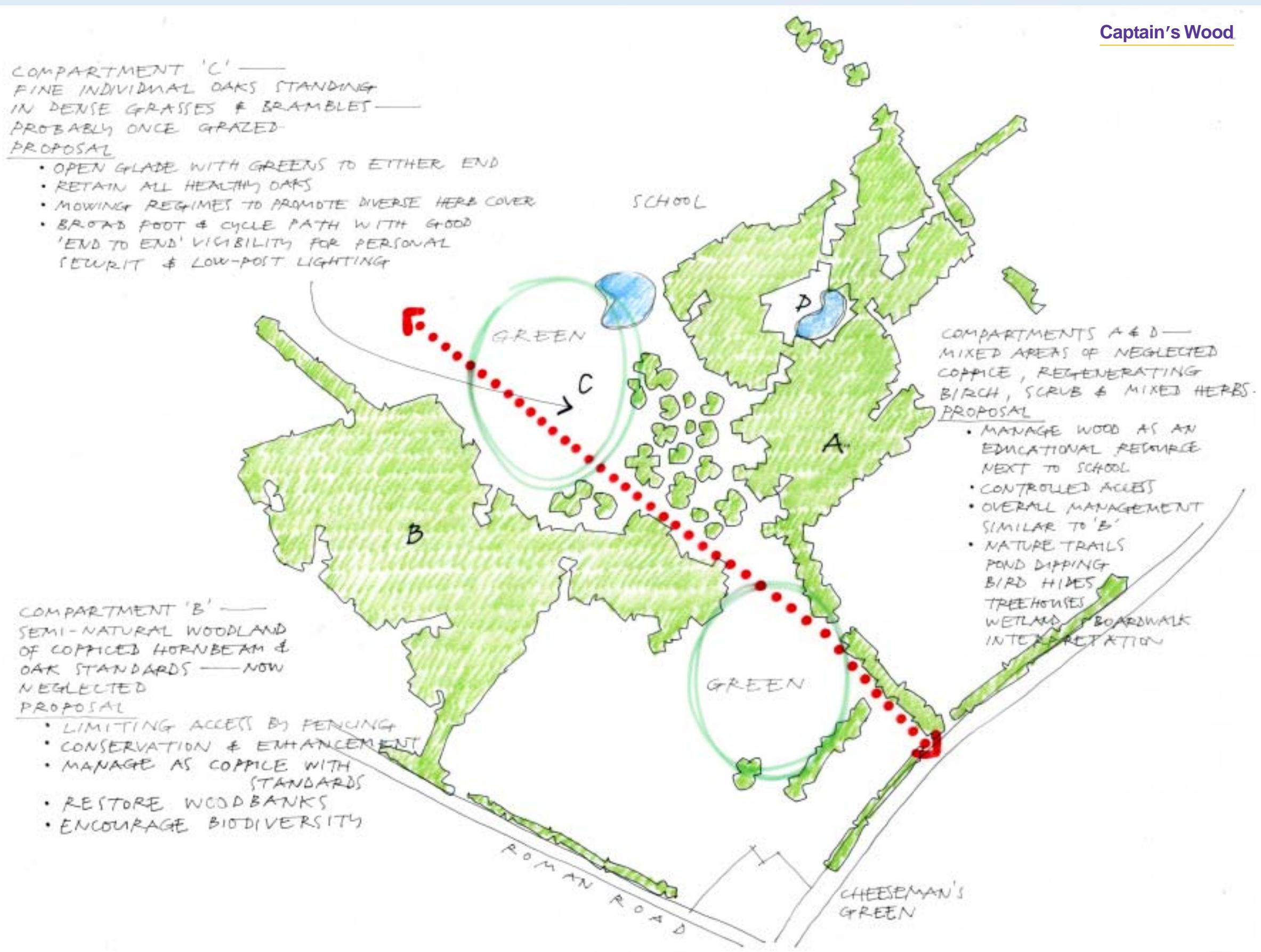
Captain's Wood is a semi-natural woodland of interest ecologically and in terms of landscape history. It can be divided into three main compartments.

To the south west the compartment comprises coppiced hornbeam with oak standards and is enclosed by an historic wood bank. The wood is now neglected and the proposal is to conserve and regenerate the woodland by careful management, reintroducing a regime of coppicing. The compartment will be fenced for strict access control, to prevent dumping and grazing by, say, deer.



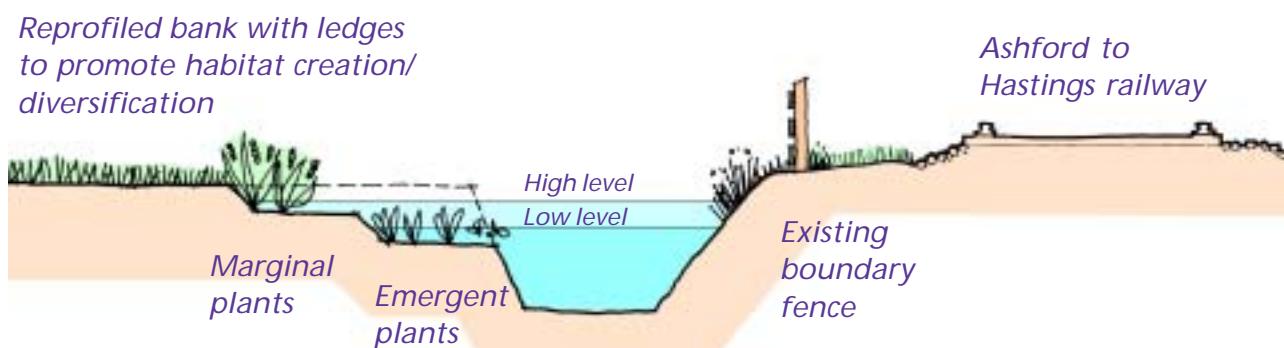
Coppice

The central compartment comprises fine, free standing oaks rising above an understorey of dense herbaceous and brambles. It seems likely this area was once grazed as there is no coppicing here. The purpose is to manage this compartment as a large glade, retaining the tree group but introducing a range of mowing regimes and taking a foot and cycle path through the glade to link housing to the south east and the High Street to the north west. The path could have a sealed surface and lit by low post



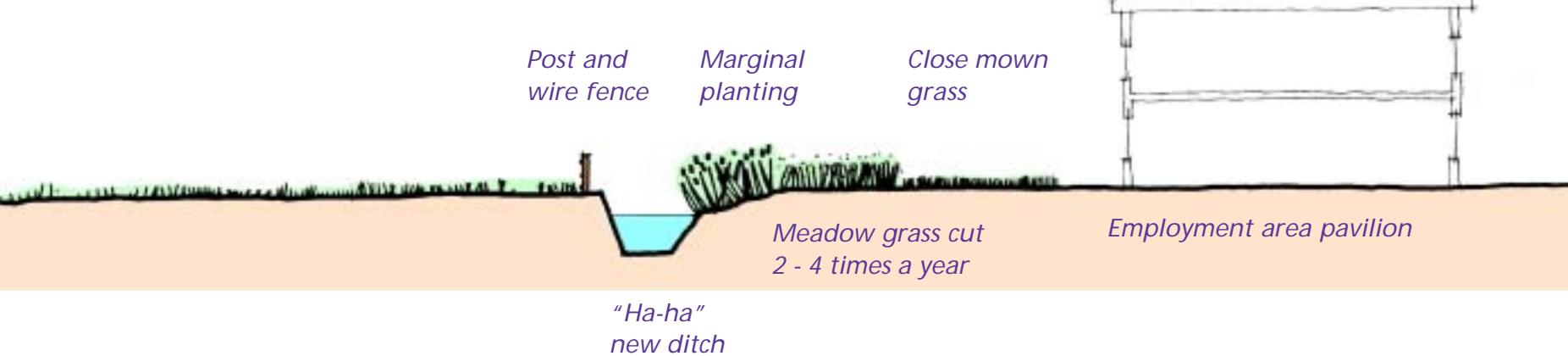
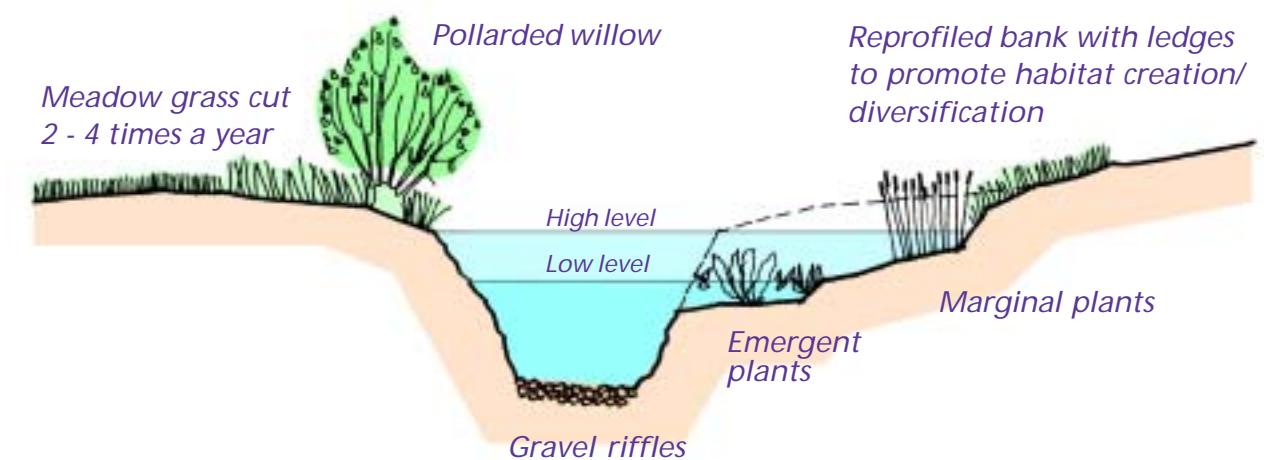
Bilham Dyke

This channelised ditch offers scope to modify its eastern bank to create wetland habitats on profiled ledges.



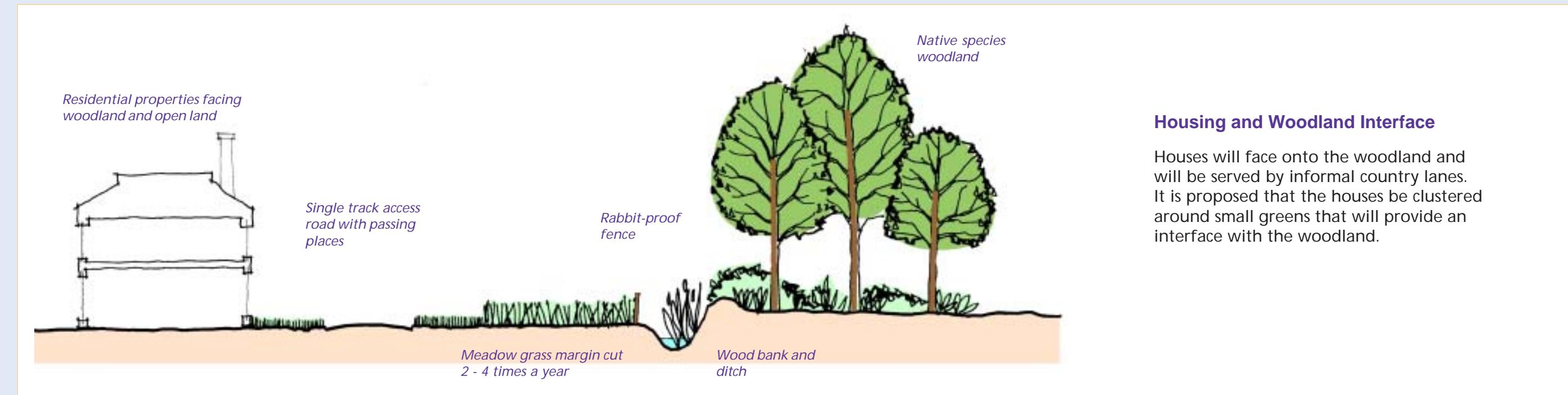
East Stour River

Subject to the agreement of the Environment Agency, it is proposed to enhance the ecological potential and visual amenity of the river by cutting back the riverbanks in sections to create ledges for marginal and emergent vegetation.



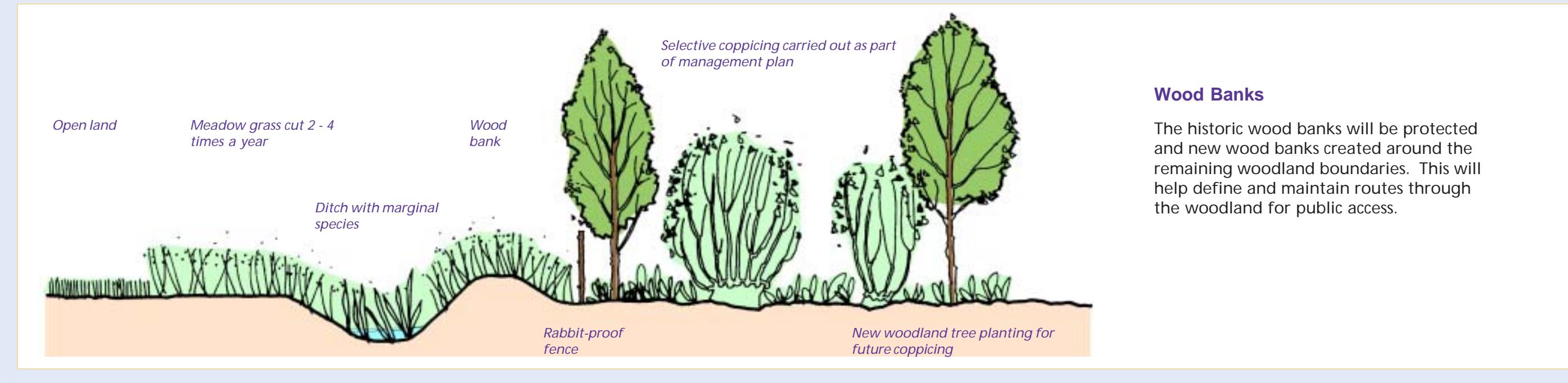
Employment Area Landscape Edge

The buildings within this zone will face onto meadow grasslands, new lakes and reed beds. These will include both formal and informal water features, fed by the surface drainage of the employment area.



Housing and Woodland Interface

Houses will face onto the woodland and will be served by informal country lanes. It is proposed that the houses be clustered around small greens that will provide an interface with the woodland.



Wood Banks

The historic wood banks will be protected and new wood banks created around the remaining woodland boundaries. This will help define and maintain routes through the woodland for public access.

lighting. It would aim to have end to end visibility to ensure personal safety.

The remaining compartment comprises neglected coppice and areas of regenerating downy birch. It has high conservation value and will be fenced to control access, but it will be managed on more educational lines. It is situated adjacent to the village primary school and could be associated with it for teaching purposes. Ideally it could form a mosaic of woodland, coppice, ponds and wetlands embracing a nature trail, owl and bat boxes, bird hides, treehouses, boardwalks, interpretation and places for pond dipping. The principle could be, "conservation as fun."



Landscape Within the Built Area

The character within the built environment will be diverse depending on use, density and movement. The landscape should reflect this with its varying degrees of formality and presence. In the employment areas, there will be a formal planted boulevard on the distributor road and well planted swales leading to the fringes. The local distributor road on the southern edge of Stour Meadows might also have avenue planting. Lower density housing areas will have gardens and street planting. In the transitional area between the village and Church Road, much lower densities will allow an arcadian landscape to evolve.

5.2 Ecological Strategy

A draft ecological strategy has been prepared for the scheme as summarised below and presented in Appendix A of the ES. The strategy covers the following habitat groups:

- The wetlands either side of the East Stour and the Ruckinge Dyke, part of which are designated as the South Willesborough Dykes Site of Nature Conservation Interest;
- The ditches and associated hedgerows and shaws which criss-cross the site and provide important wildlife corridors;
- Captain's Wood.

The proposed approach to each of these habitat groups is summarised in turn below.

The Wetlands

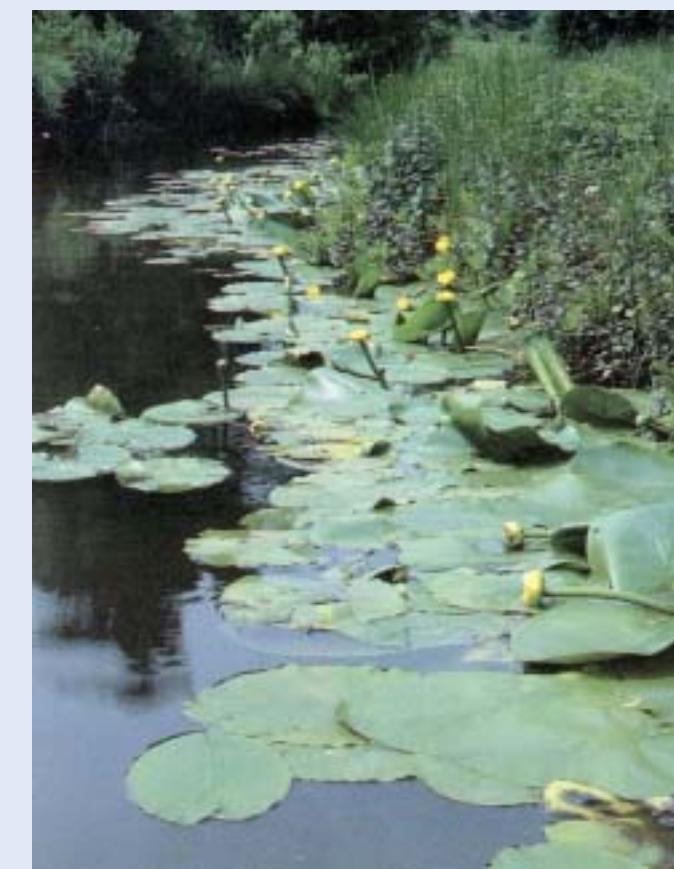
As part of a sustainable approach to floodplain management, the green corridors either side of the East Stour and the Ruckinge Dyke will be treated in such a way as to reduce the incidence of flooding and provide for habitat creation.

Consideration will be given to the following issues:

- Arrangements for the future management of the land, including conversion of arable land (within areas allocated for public open space) to meadowland;
- The need for regular cleaning, maintenance and management of the drainage ditches, including the removal of overhanging vegetation;
- The provision of sluices to control water flows in the ditches to the benefit of aquatic flora;
- Tree planting (mainly in the form of screen planting adjacent to some of the more obtrusive neighbouring developments), the extent of which will be limited so as to maintain the open character of the area;

- Pollarding of mature willows alongside the watercourses, together with the planting of new pollards (using limbs cut from existing willows) to help recreate a traditional waterside environment;
- Measures to attract wildfowl and waders, including the possibility of providing scrapes (areas of shallow standing water replenished during flood events).

Public access to the green corridors will take the form of both formal and informal routes. The main shared footpath/cycleway linking to Waterbrook will be surfaced and lit so that it can be easily and safely used throughout the year. Elsewhere, there will be a presumption against lighting (unless there is a case for such) so as to limit light pollution. In accordance with the Borough Council's management plan for the dykes, care will be taken over the location and way-marking of the more informal routes so as to protect fauna and flora and discourage access to the more open areas frequented by birds.



Dykes

Ditches and Associated Hedgerows/Shaws

The treatment of those existing hedgerows and shaws which are to be retained will take into account their value (in conjunction with the existing drainage ditches, replacement water features and proposed planting) in providing continuous wildlife corridors linked to the green corridors either side of the East Stour and the Ruckinge Dyke.

Captain's Wood

As described in Appendix A of the ES, a management plan will be drawn up for Captain's Wood. Based on the re-introduction of coppicing, the aim of the plan will be to reverse the neglected state of the wood, manage public access and encourage wildlife. The management of public access and encouragement of wildlife are inextricably linked. To this end, access to the more sensitive parts of the woodland will be restricted and controlled (through provision of defined rights of way) to help prevent inappropriate, excessive and uncontrolled use which would result in the trampling and loss of ground flora.

Following approval of this outline planning application, additional surveys of Dormice, breeding birds and detailed flora will be undertaken to inform the Captain's Wood Management Plan and detailed planning applications. Consultation will also take place with the Forestry Commission to determine future management arrangements.

5.3 Open Space

The anticipated population of the new community is some 2,800. Community facilities will be provided in accordance with the following requirements of Ashford Borough Council, confirmed after the Planning and Design workshop in September 2002 and at a subsequent meeting with the Borough Council in January 2003:

- A community/leisure facility - to be provided in the vicinity of the group of facilities comprising the church, primary school, nursery, library and One Stop

Shop. An alternative to this preferred location has been identified near the site allocated for a family restaurant/private leisure facility, south west of the High Street (as shown on Figure 4.1 on page 31). This facility could be an arts space as opposed to a sports facility which has better synergy located at the Park Farm sports complex;



Two local play areas and a neighbourhood play area will cater for children under five, between five and 12 and also teenagers

- Two local play areas - one to be located within the East Stour Valley Park (catering for teenagers and containing a kickabout area and adventure play equipment) and the other on the north side of Captain's Wood for children up to 12 years old (with two sets of play equipment, one for children under five years old and the other for those over five);
- A neighbourhood play area on the south side of Captain's Wood (with a smaller range of equipment to that in the nearby local play area, suitable for children up to 12 years old).

A financial contribution will be made for sports facilities to be provided off-site. These facilities comprise a multi-use games area (MUGA) three tennis courts, three sports pitches and a bowling area to be provided either at the Park Farm sports complex or elsewhere in the borough. Land has been reserved for the MUGA and three tennis courts near the alternative location for the community/leisure facility referred to above, in the event that such facilities cannot be provided off-site.

Informal Open Space

In addition to the requirements for active recreation described above, a network of informal open space is proposed. This consists of the meadowland, lakes, ponds and banks of the East Stour River within the green corridor, Captain's Wood and the two neighbourhood greens either side of it.



A network of informal open space

5.4 Management of Existing Habitats and Open Space

As part of the overall ecological strategy, a management plan will be prepared for the existing habitats referred to in section 5.2 above and which are to be retained following the development of the site.

The approach to be adopted will follow the management plan for the South Willesborough Dykes produced by the Borough Council in 1998 and the supplementary planning guidance set out by the Borough Council in its Green Corridor Action Plan, part of which specifically relates to the site.

The Commissioners will retain the agricultural land, drainage areas and other undeveloped areas including the green corridors. The estate management arrangements are likely to include the use of a tenant farmer who will maintain and use the land on special terms that balance the ecological and farming obligations with the estate management work needed as the development is implemented and the public begin to use areas such as Captain's Wood for recreation. The financial arrangements between The Commissioners and the farmer will recognise the scope of the estate management duties, performance objectives and the constraints on farming activity. It is understood that Ashford Borough Council manages pastureland in a similar manner by the grant of grazing licences to local farmers. Agreements with the farmer would have regard to appropriate management plans.

The management for Captain's Wood will address the sequence of restoration, the rotation of coppicing, treatment of the oak standards, and clearance of scrub and replanting. The Commissioners will retain ownership and make arrangements for the future management of the woodland.

Details of the ecological strategy and the treatment of the green corridors will be formulated through consultation with the relevant authorities (including Ashford Borough Council, English Nature, the Forestry Commission and the

Environment Agency), expert bodies (including Kent Wildlife Trust, Stour Valley Countryside Project Team and The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and adjoining landowners.

These consultations will also address the most appropriate means for implementing proposals, taking account of the management plan for the South Willesborough Dykes.



Woodland management

The strategy will be finalised after the grant of outline planning permission in accordance with the principles set out in the ES. The timing of the finalisation of the strategy is dependent upon the survey "windows" set out in section 3.1 above. The first of the surveys will be undertaken in spring 2003 and the remainder will follow thereafter.

Management of Public Open Space and Proposed Woodland

Public open spaces, including the village greens and play areas within the development could be managed by the Borough Council's grounds maintenance contractors; as could the open space within the green corridors. A Community Trust, as addressed in Section 8.4, could provide another means of managing these facilities.

In addition to the roads themselves, it is envisaged that the highway verges and associated planting would be adopted by the Highway Authority.