

Preliminary Assessment of Selected Grasslands Around Tenterden

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on behalf of Tenterden Town Council

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BACKGROUND

This brief ecological assessment of selected areas of grassland in and around Tenterden in Kent was commissioned by Tenterden Town Council.

The purpose of the assessment was to provide the Town Council with an overview of whether there appears to be ecologically valuable grassland habitat present on any of the sites.

The information will contribute to other projects taking place across the Parish that aim to identify and conserve local biodiversity, evaluate important “green” assets close to the town and designate a series of Local Green Spaces as part of a Green Neighbourhood Plan.

Any areas of species-rich grassland habitat that are identified in and around Tenterden are likely to form an integral part of the town's green infrastructure.

The 10 grassland sites were visited on 21st May (Limes Land only) and 21st June 2019 by Kate Ryland BSc, CEnv, MCIEEM of Dolphin Ecological Surveys in the company of Richard Masefield of the Tenterden Neighbourhood Plan steering committee.

Access to four of the grasslands was via public footpaths, two have permissive open access and four sites were visited with the consent of the landowners.

This ecological assessment is a preliminary evaluation of the grassland elements on the selected sites. It was carried out very rapidly, with incomplete access to some fields and the assessment of grassland quality is based on the author's professional opinion and experience. No systematic botanical survey work was carried out.

The assessment results are not definitive and are intended for use as a basis on which to decide whether further ecological surveys should be considered with landowner consent for full access to the land.

SUMMARY

- The selected grassland sites included in this assessment are just part of the network of connected semi-natural habitats that surrounds Tenterden.
- The grasslands assessed range from neglected and agriculturally improved swards of limited botanical interest to very diverse and unimproved ancient grassland of Priority Habitat quality.
- Ecologically valuable Wealden grassland habitats, including quite small fragments, are present at Chennell Park, Turners Field Nature Reserve, Westwell Land, Hales Place Orchard, Kiln Field and Limes Land.
- Further surveys of these six sites where fragments of valuable grassland occur are recommended, subject to landowner consent.
- Heronden and Heronden Hall are important sites for their parkland habitat but may also support grassland swards of interest. Further survey of these areas would be valuable, subject to landowner consent.
- Some neglected areas of grassland that are currently of relatively limited botanical interest, but which may nevertheless be useful habitat for native fauna, have very good potential for enhanced management to increase their value to wildlife. Westwell Land, Church Glebe and Eastwell Meadow in particular fall into this category.
- The sites included in this assessment support a rich array of ancient habitats and features that are typical of the High Weald's historic, pastoral landscape. That they have survived on the edges, and even within the town of Tenterden, is unusual and a feature of ecological and historical importance.

ECOLOGICALLY VALUABLE WEALDEN GRASSLAND

Species-rich grasslands that are agriculturally unimproved are an increasingly rare and threatened habitat, both locally and nationally. These grasslands can support high levels of biodiversity, from wildflowers and grasses to invertebrates such as spiders, beetles and especially pollinators including bees, hoverflies and moths. Unfortunately such sites are often small, fragmented and are particularly vulnerable to changes in management, neglect and to development pressure.

Based on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) of the 1990s, in 2012 the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework focused habitat conservation work at a country-level rather than UK-wide. Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 required that there should be a list of Priority Habitats for England. Unimproved Lowland Meadows is a Priority Habitat under Section 41 of the NERC Act.

Lowland Meadows Priority Habitat includes a range of unimproved, neutral grassland types which are managed for hay and as pasture. Examples of this Priority Habitat can occur outside farmland on road verges, in churchyards, on Commons and in recreation grounds. Even small fragments of valuable grassland habitat can act as important wildlife "stepping stones" if they occur in close proximity, for example as individual fields or fragments linked by flower-rich road verges.

The statutory list of Priority Habitats for England that was drawn up is based on the 65 UKBAP priority habitats. The full list of NERC Act Section 41 Priority Habitats for England can be found on the JNCC website along with links to the definitions of these habitats <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5706>.

The full habitat definitions are an important reference when it comes to identifying and mapping the extent of Priority Habitats, however, it is important to note that the Lowland Meadows Priority Habitat definition focuses on forms of grassland that contain a suite of scarce and declining plant species. Recent unpublished work by the High Weald AONB Unit (HWU) suggests that this narrow definition is far from ideal for many grassland sites that are present within the High Weald.

In early 2019 the HWU report was submitted to Defra as part of a Nature Recovery Area proposal. It contends that there is highly valuable Wealden grassland of conservation importance which should be considered as a Priority Habitat for conservation effort but which may not support the plant communities within the current, limited definition of Lowland Meadows.

High Weald meadows often have a mosaic of different plant communities present as a result of the geological complexity of High Weald soil conditions. Examples occur on seepage lines where sandstone meets clay or in the washlands along watercourses.

The network of grassland sites in and around Tenterden includes at least some examples of these diverse grassland types that are particularly valuable as part of the wider, landscape scale resource.

THE TENTERDEN GRASSLAND SITES

Westwell Land

The Westwell Land is a large area of mostly unmanaged and neglected grassland with hedges and a stream on the western edge of Tenterden at central grid reference TQ877333.

This site was viewed from the public footpaths that cross the site though there appears to be much unofficial public access across the area.

Most of the grassland sward seems to be dominated by tussocky grasses including false oat-grass, cock's-foot, Yorkshire fog, perennial rye-grass, meadow foxtail and bent-grasses. White clover is abundant in places and across much of the area that is visible from the footpath most other common herbs are rather sparse.

In the north of this site there are slopes and banks along the stream and field edges where there is a much lower sward with fine-leaved grasses and a higher proportion of wildflowers than in the rest of the Westwell Land grassland.

Plants such as common bird's-foot-trefoil, greater bird's-foot-trefoil, ribwort plantain, sweet vernal-grass, common dog-violet, red fescue, creeping buttercup and common sorrel were noted in the visible parts of these edge zones. In some places the proportion of herbs is particularly high with locally frequent barren strawberry and occasional common spotted-orchid.

These field edges have the appearance of relict fragments of species-rich, semi-improved grassland which are maintained by rabbit grazing.

This land is likely to be valuable to a variety of native fauna such as invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals. Badger activity was evident along the footpath and there are two large, active badger setts in land next to one of the footpaths and in the wooded stream valley.

The scattered mature trees are ecologically valuable features of the Westwell Land whilst the scrubby field edges provide structurally diverse transitional habitat (or ecotones) between the grassland and woodland habitats.

This land adjoins the town and has great potential as a Local Nature Reserve or similar. Whilst most areas of the grassland are tussocky, species-poor and neglected, there are some fragments of much more valuable flowery grassland of a type that probably once covered much more of the area.

Further ecological surveys of Westwell Land are recommended, in particular to assess the quality and extent of remaining flowery grassland fragments.

Chennell Park

Chennell Park is a large area of private land a short distance from the western edge of Tenterden. Only a small portion the grassland in the southeastern corner of this property was considered likely to be of botanical interest and was viewed from a public footpath.

The grassland that was visited in Chennell Park, at central grid reference TQ877338, has numerous anthills on a series of grassy slopes around a small stream. It appears to receive only light management at most and is clearly treated differently from the main part of the property where grassland paddocks are enclosed by equestrian fencing.

The rabbit-grazed sward in this area appears to be largely unimproved and species-rich with a very high proportion of herbs in the sward and a minimal amount of white clover and perennial rye-grass in places. Plants noted from the footpath include mouse-ear hawkweed, common bird's-foot-trefoil, common knapweed, red clover, lesser stitchwort, red fescue, crested dog's-tail and yarrow.

There is a wide flush of diverse wetland vegetation along the stream channel and apparently ancient hedgerows on the edges of the grassland.

This quiet corner of Chennell Park has a variety of habitats and diverse vegetation in a small area. It is likely to support a good range of wild flora and fauna. The grassland in this small corner of Chennell Park would almost certainly qualify as Lowland Meadows Priority Habitat. It would certainly merit further ecological survey.

Turners Field Nature Reserve

Turners Field Nature Reserve is a private reserve on the western edge of Tenterden at central grid reference TQ882339. The reserve has permissive access and landowner consent was granted for the site assessment.

Kent Wildlife Trust are involved in the management of the reserve and a considerable amount of wildlife recording is carried out by local volunteers (Richard Masefield pers.comm.).

Turners Field Nature Reserve, with its irregularly shaped grassland fields, hedgerows, shaws and scattered open-grown trees, is an example of the characteristic High Weald AONB landscape, that has remained essentially unchanged over centuries. There are excellent views across the High Weald AONB from several parts of the reserve.

The grassland within the three large fields of the reserve appears to be generally species-rich. Whilst probably semi-improved for the most part, at least some areas could meet the Lowland Meadows Priority Habitat criteria.

Church Glebe & Eastwell Meadow

These two adjoining areas of grassland lie in the centre of Tenterden, just north of the church at central grid reference TQ883335.

The two fields are separated by an outgrown hedgerow and appear to be very similar in character. Access consent was granted for Church Glebe but was not available for Eastwell Meadow.

Both fields lie on a west-facing slope and both have a generally tall, tussocky sward that is dominated by grasses. Perennial rye-grass and white clover are present in some quantity and these fields can best be described as species-poor semi-improved grassland.

It appears that Church Glebe and Eastwell Meadow have been managed recently for hay, though in the past they are likely to have been grazed by livestock as well as having been mown.

Coarse plants observed in the sward, such as hogweed and false oat-grass, suggest that nutrient levels in the soil are high and that the management is currently rather too light and/or infrequent which probably affects the quality of the hay crop.

Church Glebe and Eastwell Meadow together form a substantial area of grassland habitat in the centre of Tenterden. Whilst the fields appear to be of rather low botanical interest, they are likely to be of historic and cultural importance. From the highest points in this site there are far-reaching views across the High Weald AONB.

The benefits of having a Local Green Space in this location are easy to imagine and it has the potential to become an outstanding community asset. There is huge scope for grassland enhancement and habitat management here to create and restore more ecologically valuable and flowery grassland, along with other complementary wildlife habitats. This could help to create an easily accessible area of green open space for residents and visitors to the town.

Further survey of these grassland areas are recommended.

Kiln Field

Kiln Field, at central grid reference TQ891331, is a small nature reserve on the edge of a relatively new development in the southeast of Tenterden. The land, which is owned by Ashford Borough Council and leased to the town, has open access and several mown paths. It is managed by the Council maintenance team with advice from the Kent Wildlife Trust.

Kiln Field contains an area of largely unimproved and species-rich grassland with a pond, woodland edge and hedge habitats.

The grassland sward is rich in wildflowers that are typical of valuable Wealden grassland sites and is potentially of Lowland Meadows Priority Habitat quality. Plants noted include ox-eye daisy, common knapweed, lady's bedstraw, common bird's-foot-trefoil and grass vetchling.

The quality of the grassland may be deteriorating gradually as coarse species that are indicative of too little management, such as bramble and hogweed, are more prominent than they should be in a such a valuable grassland sward.

At the time of the site visit a recently mown path had a very dense layer of dead vegetation, which suggests that when the grassland is mown, the cuttings are not routinely removed. If grass cuttings accumulate they form a mulch which will gradually increase nutrient levels in the grassland and promote the growth of coarse species. This will inevitably lead to a loss of ecological interest from the grassland in the medium to long term.

A 5 year management plan that sets out a mowing rotation with removal of cut material would be very beneficial for this site. It would also be very helpful to enlist local residents to become involved in the management and protection of this particular site, perhaps via a Friends of Kiln Field group.

There may already be biological survey data for this site if Kent Wildlife Trust have been involved in the past but if not then further surveys are recommended.

Hales Place Orchard

Hales Place Orchard is within the grounds of Hales Place, a substantial property in the south of Tenterden. This 10 acre traditional orchard is very close to the town centre at central grid reference TQ889332.

There is no public access to this site but the site visit was made with the generous permission of the landowner.

The orchard contains a large number of mature apple trees, many of them rich in the features that make old orchards so valuable to specialist wildlife, most notably deadwood invertebrates, fungi and lichens.

Where dead branches have been pruned from the trees they are carefully stacked to provide useful habitat for invertebrates. This practice would be particularly valuable to the rare and declining stag beetle that is strongly associated with traditionally managed orchards.

In contrast with the vast majority of old orchards where the grassland under trees tends to be mown, at Hales Place the grassland is still managed in the traditional way by sheep grazing.

Much of the grassland sward has clearly been re-sown the past with productive grass varieties and white clover. However there are still fragments of older, species rich grassland sward on the edges of the orchard, often marked by the presence of anthills. This type of old grassland when associated with long-established orchards can be especially good habitat for the colourful and increasingly rare waxcap fungi.

If the owners of Hales Place are willing to grant further access consent then ecological surveys of the orchard are recommended.

Heronden Hall & Heronden

Heronden Hall and Heronden are two substantial properties on the southern edge of Tenterden at central grid reference TQ879328. Both houses are set within extensive grounds containing parkland trees and open grassland, large parts of which are closely mown.

Much of the land around these properties is likely to qualify as Wood Pasture & Parkland Priority Habitat because there are numerous ancient and veteran trees within what are likely to be designed parkland landscapes.

Only a small proportion of the grassland at Heronden was assessed due to time and access constraints.

There appear to be at least some areas of quite species-rich, slightly acid semi-improved grassland with a relatively low sward and fine-leaved grasses such as sweet vernal-grass, red fescue and bent-grasses. Bird's-foot-trefoil, lesser stitchwort and field wood-rush are all frequent in these areas.

One part of the grassland at Heronden has been the focus of meadow enhancement work by the owner using wildflower seed. At only 3 years old this new meadow on an area of quite damp ground adjoining the main driveway already has a colourful and herb-rich sward.

Both areas have extensive grassland areas and whilst the ancient and veteran parkland trees are likely to be the features of most ecological interest, further survey of the grassland component would be very valuable if the landowners grant consent.

Limes Land

Limes Land was visited on 21st May, a separate occasion from the other grassland sites around Tenterden. This large site at central grid reference TQ894337 was viewed from the public footpath as no access consent was obtained, though there is clearly much informal public amenity access across the site.

Despite rather intensive sheep grazing the site appears to support some excellent areas of apparently unimproved pasture with very high numbers of large anthills visible even at a distance.

In some places the grassland seems to have been over-sown with white clover and rye grass and there is evidence of nutrient enrichment/poaching in places. However, much of the grassland appears to have a high proportion of herbs and fine-leaved native grasses in the sward.

There are apparently ancient grassland areas combined with the wet flushes, linked ponds and outgrown hedgerows within and around this site. This suggests that within the boundaries of Limes Land there is a very rich habitat mosaic, typical of the Wealden pastoral landscape.

It would make an excellent Local Green Space and a more sympathetic management regime would probably increase its biodiversity even further.

Further survey of this area is strongly recommended.