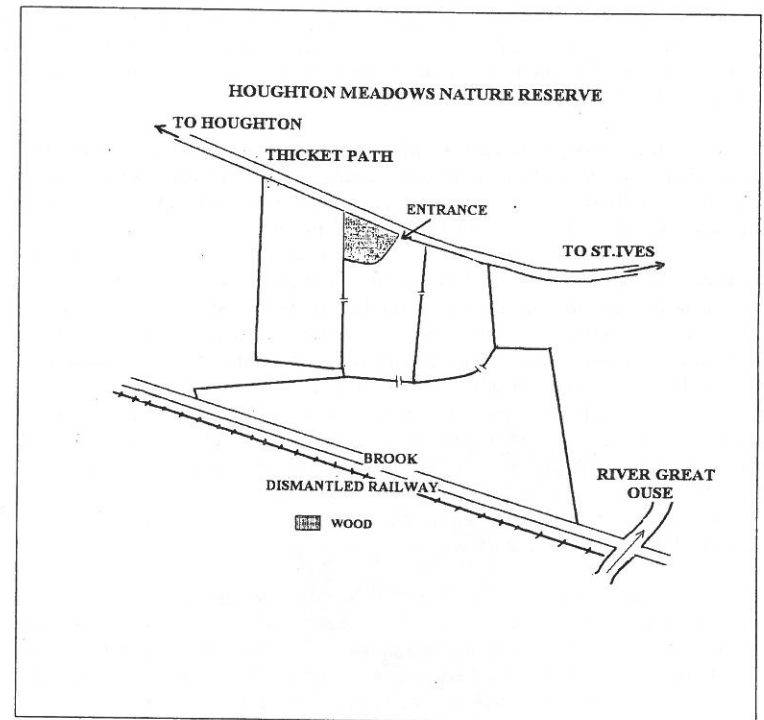


HOUGHTON MEADOWS NATURE RESERVE

Location and Access

Houghton Meadows Nature Reserve is 8 hectares (20 acres) in size and is adjacent to the Ouse Valley Way long distance footpath (The Thicket Path) midway between St. Ives and the village of Houghton. The Wildlife Trust notice board is situated at the entrance to the reserve at TL293717. Access is on foot, with car parking spaces at the St Ives Indoor Leisure Centre, or at the white bridge on Thicket Road Houghton, close to the pumping station. Please note dogs are not allowed in the reserve when cattle are grazing. The nature reserve is managed by The Wildlife Trust.



Introduction

The reserve is made up of three small meadows and one large holding flood meadow, known as Browns Meadow. The reserve also includes a small area of secondary woodland dominated by Elm (*Ulmus* spp.). Far Close, the middle meadow of the three meadows adjacent to Thicket Road, was the first section purchased in 1983 on the recommendation of Terry Wells, who drew attention to the site as being amongst the finest flower meadows in the county of Huntingdonshire.

David Chapman, the first Voluntary Warden, did much of the research into the history of the site, and worked on scrub clearance, planting hedges and recording the flora and fauna. The reserve was extended in 1988 following a fund raising effort that raised £25,000 from grants and donations. A year later there was a grand opening when Valerie Singleton of Blue Peter came and conducted the ceremony. The three meadows adjacent to Thicket Road are scheduled as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (S.S.S.I.). Browns Meadow is not included in the S.S.S.I.

History and Management

The appearance of the meadows today gives clues as to the management of the site in the past. The meadows show ridges and furrows, a relic of the medieval period when the landscape of the area would have been several large open fields containing many cultivated strips. The ridges were formed during the process of ploughing using eight oxen yoked in tandem. Each ridge is roughly one furlong in length and twelve and a half metres wide. These wide ridges are known as Broad Rig. The ploughs had fixed mould boards that always turned the sod to the right. This system of ploughing created the ridges we see today.

During the late 14th and early 15th century when the population fell by up to fifty per cent following the Black Death, cultivation in these fields ceased and they became self-sown grassland. In the mid 1660s it is believed that some enclosures may have been established prior to the Parliamentary Enclosure Award of 1773. These relatively old hedges are growing on ridges and contain 18 species of shrubs including Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) an unusual hedgerow species for this area. In 1773 when the Enclosure Award was made, one of the owners was Sir Robert Bernard, a kinsman of the Earl of Manchester, a major landowner in the area at that time. Sir Robert was also Lord of the Manor of Houghton and Wyton. A later owner was Bateman Brown, son of Potto Brown whose bust still adorns the square in the village. We are lucky that these meadows survived as these ancient sites are vulnerable to damage caused by modern farming methods, such as the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Many such sites have been ploughed up and brought into cultivation. Their survival was due, in no small part, to the smallholders that farmed in the village and used the sweet herb rich hay to feed their cattle. Winter flooding that deposited river silt and the dung from the livestock provided the nutrients required. Nowadays modern flood defence systems have reduced the flooding events that occur.

Today traditional management methods are used to maintain the grassland. Cattle are used to graze Browns Meadow during the summer; the other three fields are allowed to flower and set seed before the hay crop is taken. Any hay fed to the cattle comes from these meadows. The Wildlife Trust and the Voluntary Wardens have to control scrub invasion and maintain the hedges and fences. On occasions dangerous trees from the Elm copse have to be felled for safety reasons.

Wildlife

These unimproved grassland support a variety of wild flowers including The semi parasitic Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Salad Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba*), Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*) and Crosswort (*Cruciata laevipes*) a plant that is rare in Huntingdonshire VC31. The botanical star of the site is the Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*), which is a major attraction in the spring. The meadow flowers and the blossom of the hedgerow shrubs are an important nectar source for many insects such as butterflies, moths and bumble bees.

The hedgerows with their mixture of shrubs and the herbaceous strip adjacent to the hedges provides important habitat for small mammals. The hedges are used as nesting sites by birds in the spring and in autumn the fruits of the hedgerow shrubs are a valuable food source for birds and small mammals such as mice and voles.

Birds include a variety of finches, tits and thrushes including the Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*). In autumn and in winter, Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) and Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) are sometimes present feeding on the haws and other berries. Green Woodpeckers (*Picus viridis*) and Great Spotted Woodpeckers (*Dendrocopos major*) are regular visitors to the site. During periods of flooding Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*), Lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*) and various wildfowl have been observed.

