

Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve

Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve occupies a low-lying 32-acre site to the south-west of Thame centre: designated a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) in 1994, it is owned and managed by Thame Town Council with volunteer help. As figure 1 shows, the area is bisected by the Cuttle Brook, a tributary of the Thame, and stretches northwards from the Phoenix Trail, a disused railway line, to the Oxford Road bridge (formerly Ford Bridge) -- and now further, following the recent addition of Rycote Meadow, a small field beyond the road. Aptly described in the early 1990s as 'relatively undeveloped, wet meadows' (Furness 1992, 1), the area was largely wasteland, with some cattle grazing, but included some wetland and a school playing field. Its early history is fragmentary, but a clearer picture emerges over the last two hundred years, with sewage and industrial effluent polluting the brook during the 19th century and the town refuse tip located here until the 1950s. In 1978, however, Thame Town Council began buying parts of the site and embarking on a range of improvement schemes, which continued until its designation as an LNR under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The purpose of this paper is to review the history of the area around Cuttle Brook in the hands of its various owners down to the present day.

Evidence for early occupation of the immediate area is scant, principally pottery fragments, a neolithic flint axe-head, an axe hammer and a few Roman coins (Brown and Guest 1935, 2-3), suggesting a small settlement at most, but by the late Anglo-Saxon period Thame manor was substantial enough to be counted among the endowments of the bishopric of Dorchester, which passed in 1070 to the see of Lincoln, whose bishop was recorded in the Domesday Book as 'holding Thame of the king' [VCH 1962, 170]. Endowed as a prebend in the 13th century,

Cuttle Brook, Thame

local nature reserve

The Family Area

Surrounded by willow trees and a hedge, a good place to watch the colours changing with the seasons. Look across the valley to trees and shrubs on the east side, or look south west to the wildflower meadows. An attractive spot by a bend in the river, it's usually quiet enough to hear leaves whispering and the water babbling. Often used for arts projects such as sculpture, open air theatre, storytelling... and picnics!

West Meadows

A fascinating group of meadows, each with its own character and community of plants. Cutting for hay encourages a good variety of grasses, which mingle with familiar meadow flowers like ox-eye daisy, buttercup, clover and meadow-pea (at their peak in May and June) and perhaps the odd rarity. The meadows are also a great place to find grasshoppers and butterflies throughout the summer. Closer to the river bank, watch out for fish, mallard and moorhens in the water. Also for a huge willow leaning over the river (planted by William Cox, a local farmer over 100 years ago).

Cox's Wood

A low-lying woodland planted in 1995 with native species such as oak, ash, alder, birch, hornbeam, field maple and cherry, all growing rapidly. There's a diagonal 'ride' through the wood. Close to the houses, thickets of hawthorn and blackthorn provide food and shelter for birds and good foraging for shrews and voles. Hedges around the wood are laid in rotation, to increase scope for nesting sites - look out for other hedges being managed in this traditional way. Cox's wood is particularly good for spiders, harvesters and damp loving insects, such as the 'devil's coach horse' beetle.

Nontron Meadows

Once just parkland, this space is now managed to attract a greater variety of grasses, flowers such as 'Lady's Smock', birds and insect life. At the Spring Path bridge, you can watch the flow of the stream and perhaps catch a glimpse of a pike, a grey wagtail or even a kingfisher. In 2017 the Volunteers dug a channel into the meadow. Fed by the brook, this provides a refuge for young fish.

The Pond

Created in 1996, it's different every time you visit. As you approach the pond, keep an eye open for swimming grass-snakes - you might be lucky! On the surface you may spot dragonflies hovering, pond skaters and water lilies. There's also a pond-dipping platform, to discover water-boatmen, diving beetles, tadpoles, frogs and much more. Please put them back! In the boggy area beside the pond look out for yellow iris ('flags') and teasels.

The Overview

From the playing fields entrance by the wooden welcome sign, you can view several wildlife habitats - rough meadow down the valley slope, hedges, woodland and the nationally scarce wet, flood-plain grassland. The Cuttle Brook itself runs right through the landscape in a huge curve. As you approach the river, watch out for signs of moles!

Old Tip Wood

Planted with native species at the same time as Cox's Wood, this is a much drier area (in earlier times, Thame's town 'tip') favoured by trees like ash, rowan and birch. There are also larches, firs and scots pine. Some of the birches have a striking white bark. A good area for goldfinches, spiders and minibeasts, watch out too for numerous 'banded snails', which seem to like the huge groups of escaped horseradish!

The Railway Bridges

A good place to look out over the reserve and find wildlife associated with scrub land - black-thorn, honeysuckle, dog-rose and rosebay willow-herb. Listen for babbling water and dunnocks (especially south of the river in 'The Triangle'). In 2005, the 'Phoenix Trail' (a shared-use cycle path forming a link from Princes Risborough to Oxford as part of the Sustrans National Cycle Network) was extended to include this section of old railway line.

The Wooden Bridge

A patch of coltsfoot here is one of the first flowers to bloom in Spring. Look out for waterside plants like reed mace (false bulrush), common winter cress (many shades of green) and purple comfrey (pale purple in this part of the reserve, dark elsewhere). Dragonflies often patrol here. Popular for Pooch-sticks, the bridge was designed and built by the Cuttlebrook Conservation Volunteers in 2013.

Wetland Areas

A haven for wetland plants like marsh marigold, pussy willow, meadowsweet, rushes (three kinds - soft, hard and jointed) and sedge. Sedges are the plants with triangular stems. The volunteer group maintains them with regular cutting. There's also a boardwalk, providing access to the south side, protecting the fragile sedge-bed environment and if you're quiet, perhaps giving glimpses of specialised birds like reed bunting and grasshopper warbler.



Figure 1: Cuttle Brook Nature Reserve leaflet

Thame continued to be held by the bishops until the mid-1500s, when it was sold to Sir John Williams and subsequently passed to his descendants, including James Bertie, created Earl of Abingdon in 1682. The property consisted of the original settlement ('Old Thame') and 'New Thame', the planned town carved out of Old Thame's open fields, with buildings and burgage plots facing on to a high street and market place, and also the separate manor of Priestend, based around the church and prebendal, with its own field system.

About half the land now occupied by the reserve lay in Priestend, the brook forming part of the boundary with Old Thame; the field to the north of Spring Path in figure 1, now in private hands, was the site of medieval fishponds thought to have served the prebendal. Still identifiable at times of flooding (see figure 2), they were fed by what local author Harry Lupton



Figure 2: Site of medieval fishponds

described in 1860 as 'a fine pure spring, of high repute for its many virtues' (Lupton 1860, 7), which also supplied Court Well, now dried up and hardly recognisable (figure 3), but suggested by the same author as the origin of 'Cuttle' in 'Cuttle Brook' (Lupton 1860, 8). However the name is not an uncommon one, and its origin remains obscure.

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Figure 3: Court Well

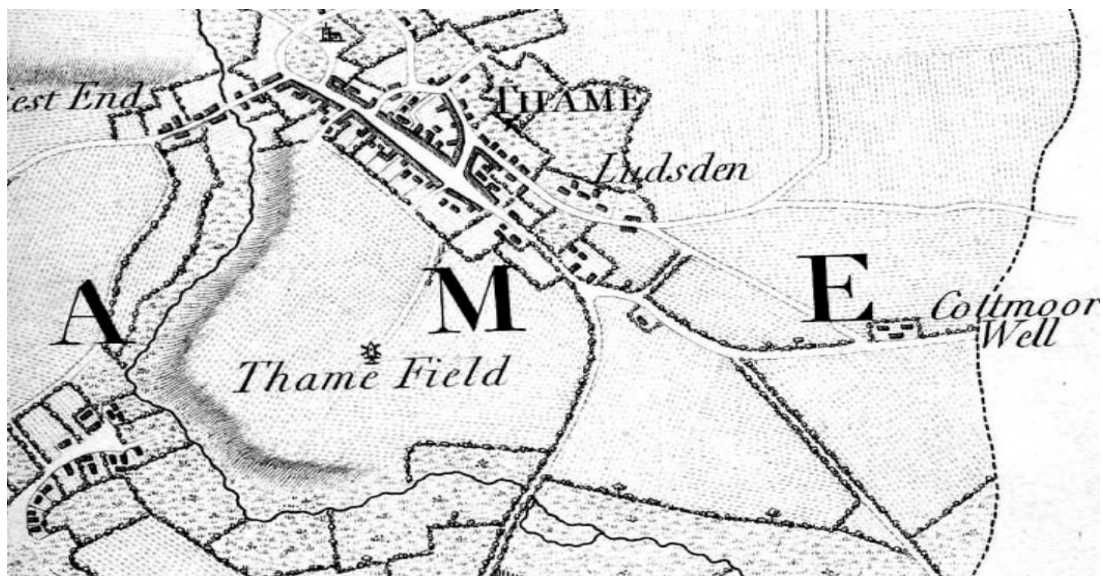


Figure 4: Detail from Richard Davis's A New Map of Oxfordshire (1797)
[source: <http://www.thamehistory.net/maps/Davis1797.htm>]

Richard Davis's map of 1797 (figure 4) shows the low land alongside the brook making up most of Thame's pasture: ridge and furrow can still be seen to the north-east of the pond shown in figure 1, but it must always have been marginal as arable, given its tendency to flood. These meadows, said to be among the best in the county for grazing (VCH 1962, 192), still belonged to the Earl of Abingdon, and parliamentary enclosure of 1823-26 completed a process already begun (see figure 5). The land continued in the family's ownership throughout the century, with the field immediately to the east gradually becoming a public space: used for the annual

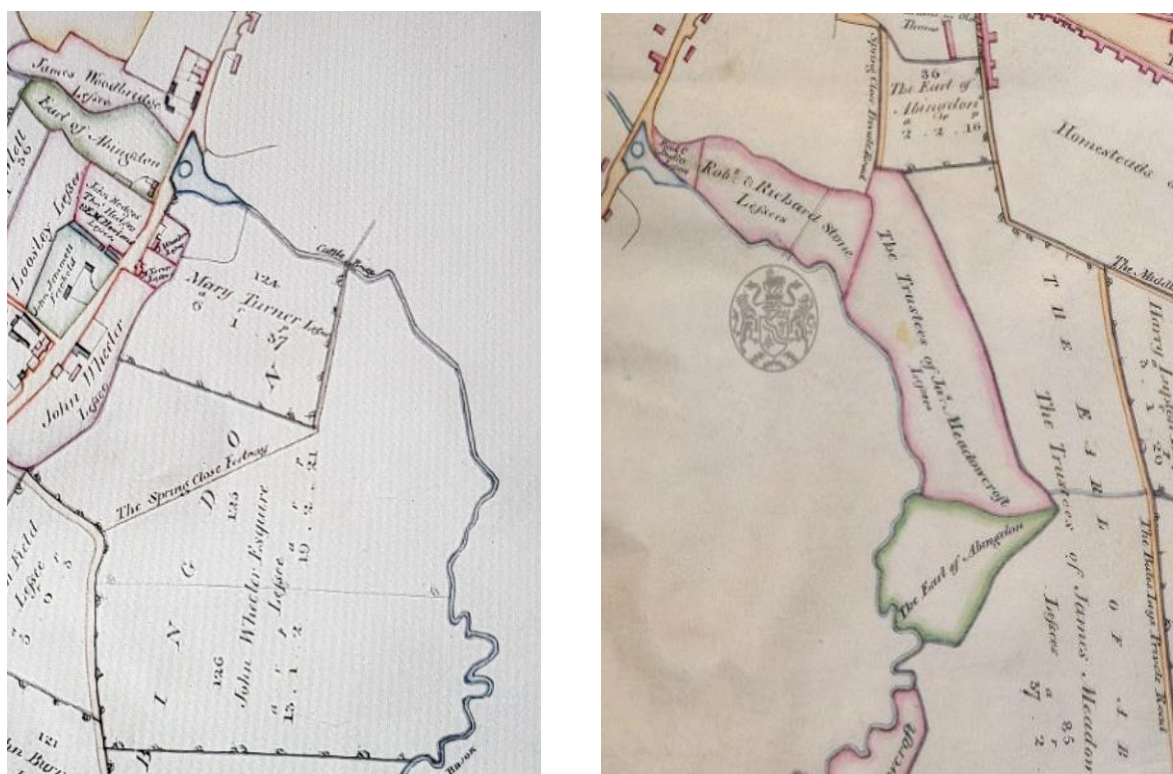


Figure 5: Details from Thame enclosure maps (1826), showing enclosures to west and east of Cuttle Brook: those shown in red predate parliamentary enclosure and were leased by the Earl of Abingdon [source: <https://www.oxfordshirehistory.org.uk/>]

Thame Agricultural Show from 1855 and rented for public use from 1871, the land was presented to the town in 1895¹ and now forms the Southern Road Recreation Ground.

However the 19th century saw increasing problems related to water supply and sewage disposal: the town is said to have been served by 150 shallow wells, easily contaminated (VCH 1962, 198), and following a scarletina outbreak in 1871 the medical report recorded some 'notable arrangements' at Ford Bridge: ditches entering the brook brought the contents of the town's gutters as well as slops from a fellmonger, and

in the middle of the ford was a horse and barrel-cart . . . into which the driver was ladling the sewage . . . The destination of the stuff was a certain brewery, in which, I was credibly informed, it was converted into beer (Brown and Guest 1935, 231).

Work on sewage disposal continued throughout the 1890s, with the construction of catchpits at the ford and, when these were found to be inadequate, under-drainage and a pumping station. However rainwater proved to be insufficient to flush the sewers, and pollution of the

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brook was finally relieved only with the completion of waterworks in 1905, when deep wells were bored to the east of the town and a water tower constructed, replacing public pumps (Brown and Guest 1935, 246-50; VCH 1962, 198).

In 1978 Thame Town Council bought part of the site, paying Oxfordshire County Council £17,650: exactly what motivated the purchase (or indeed when the land had become the County Council's to sell) remains unclear, though it was considered 'of poor agricultural quality' (TTC P&A 6.12.77) and probably too flood-prone for housing development: some was donated by the developers of Lea Park estate to the north-east of the town (Furness, personal communication 30.1.24). The Council planned to open the space as a public amenity, but without a clear idea as to what shape it should take, or how to finance it: for example they changed their minds repeatedly over whether to continue to allow grazing on the western meadow before finally terminating the agreement in 1982². The Cuttle Brook Sub-Committee, set up in February 1980, invited project suggestions from local schools, reporting four months later that 'not many ideas had originated from this approach' (TTC CBS 4.6.80); and in September 1981 there was even a proposal (swiftly rejected) that a swimming pool might be located on the site (TTC CBS 15.9.81). Meanwhile Nontron Meadows appeared in the town guide for 1982/83 as Nontron Gardens, clearly intended for parkland (figure 6; see also Furness 1992, 9). On tree planting the new sub-committee sought advice from The Men of the Trees (now the International Tree Foundation), who produced a detailed planting scheme in July 1984, including exotic species such as Wellingtonia (giant sequoia), still an incongruous feature on the reserve and arguably better suited to a park or arboretum (figure 7): this may reflect on the vagueness of the Council's aims as much as the planters' judgement.

Meanwhile plans were made to partition the site into sections (TTC P&A 6.2.79) and to



Figure 6: Nontron Gardens, 1982 [from Thame: Official Guide 1982/83]



Figure 7: Wellingtonia, with Old Tip Wood in the background

complete a circular path including a section of the Phoenix Trail (TTC CBS 15.6.82). With grazing discontinued, the grassed areas were let out and mown for silage,³ raising a few hundred pounds a year in the eighties.⁴ But new housing developments to the west and south-east (see figure 8) increased the threat of flooding, with run-off from roads emptying into the brook. Following reports of water in nearby back gardens it was dredged and straightened at

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Figure 8: Aerial view of Cuttle Brook area, April 1988 [source: Furness 1992]

the south end of the site, and the banks raised by a metre (TTC CBS 9.11.82, 15.12.82).

The impetus to turn the Cuttle Brook area into a nature reserve came from local conservationist Mike Furness, who persuaded the Council to apply for LNR status on the basis that it would be maintained with minimal expenditure through a combination of grant aid and volunteer labour, and the thirty years since have turned the rather unloved area seen in figure 8 into an invaluable 'green lung' for the town. Apart from the pond and various constructions – bridges, paths, boardwalks across wetland areas – tree planting (with native species) has been key, especially in creating Cox's Wood and Old Tip Wood. Throughout, it has

been crucial to keep a balance between wet and dry – maintaining water levels in the wetland areas while minimising flood risk to nearby housing – and between community use and conservation. This is a continuing concern: the reserve is popular and heavily used by local walkers, especially dog walkers, and under the 1949 Act recreation in LNRs comes second to conservation (CBCV 2020).⁵ So plans currently under consideration include establishing some parts, including Nontron Meadow and the newly acquired Rycote Meadow, as quiet, 'wild' areas where walking is discouraged, and extending the area of the reserve along the length of the brook, providing a conservation corridor and facilitating natural flood alleviation techniques, which are likely to prove increasingly important in the context of an expanding town.

Endnotes

¹ Dates from VCH 1962, 186; Brown and Guest 1935, 233; and 'Key dates in the history of Thame', at <https://www.thame.net/discover/history-of-thame-oxfordshire/> Accessed 30.3.24.

² TTC P&A 18.7.78, 5.9.78, 6.3.79; CBS 4.6.80, 14.9.82.

³ TTC CBS 15.6.82, 14.9.82.

⁴ TTC CBS 14.6.83, 17.6.86, 16.6.87, 25.4.89.

⁵ 'The Act lays down that recreation is a legitimate adjunct to conservation but only "if the management of the land for the recreational purpose does not compromise its management for the conservation purpose" (S.15(1)(b))' (CBCV 2020).

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