

# SOHAM AND BARWAY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

## Topic Paper – Habitats and Biodiversity

Final Version 2.0

14<sup>th</sup> March 2024



## Wildlife in the Parish of Soham

The parish of Soham is a large parish and the majority of the land remains in agriculture. Because this area is essentially fenland there are very few trees which grow naturally. Most of the trees which can be seen in the countryside have been planted, either as windbreaks or landmarks or they started out as hedges.

Over the decades the nature of the agriculture has changed from mainly animal and mixed farming, employing many farmhands to look after both the land and animals.

Since the second world war agriculture in this area has changed radically so that almost all the land in the parish is being used to grow crops. Increasing mechanisation and the loss of horse drawn farm machinery, has also affected the nature of farming because small fields were difficult to manage with large machinery so that many fields were combined into larger areas to farm. It also meant that there were fewer people needed on farms and so fewer people to keep up the maintenance of ditches, drains and hedges in the winter season. This is important because the only way much of the Fens can be successfully farmed is because of the effective drainage system which had been introduced.

It means that most fields successfully growing crops will have a network of tile drains or plastic pipes running under the field and draining water into the ditches and drains which line most of the field boundaries. These ditches and drains eventually empty into either small rivers (like the Soham Lode) or directly into the main river.

These ditches and drains provide important wildlife corridors between areas where wildlife can flourish. A good example is the water vole (***Arvicola amphibius***) which has been recorded in many places along the Soham Lode and in many ditches and drains around the parish.



In most instances the ditches and drain also have rough vegetation along their banks which enables other animals and insects to move about safely and find food. This rough vegetation may also contain rare or unusual plants which have an opportunity to spread along the ditches and drains.

Some of these drainage channels used as boundaries also had hedges along their banks and these provide an even better wildlife corridor for many species. These enable populations of animals and plants to interact, interbreed and spread out possibly creating new populations in new locations.

It is clear from this that areas where there is little to encourage wildlife to make its home in safety, then the wildlife will leave and go somewhere that is more congenial. So in order to encourage more wildlife to stay or new species to move in we need to make as much land attractive to wildlife as possible, as well as managing to produce food.

Water is always important to wildlife and so wherever there is water - be it a river, a drain, a ditch, a reservoir, a fishing lake, a natural pond, an ephemeral pond or a garden pond - these need to be retained and their surrounding vegetation encouraged to provide as many different plant species as possible.

Anything that can be done to encourage people to care for their water and the waterside vegetation in gardens and on farms will benefit not only the wildlife but also the mental health of people who are able see it.

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Environmental Records Centre (CPERC) have provided us with a full list of all the flora and fauna recorded in the parish of Soham over the past 15 years or so. (Unfortunately, these records do not include many records after 2019 due to difficulties of staff supply). We also have a habitat map which clearly shows the huge areas of arable land, which surrounds the town and is not conducive to encouraging wildlife. This map also shows those areas of vegetation (grassland, trees, hedges and water) which may be suitable habitat for some of these threatened species.

However, given that, it is clear from these records that there are or have been very recently quite a large number of threatened or vulnerable species and species on the National Red List which occur or have occurred recently in our area. We, therefore, need to take particular care that any new development does **not**:-

- take place in areas important for wildlife,
- place additional pressure on wildlife on land adjacent to a development (opening up access to important sites which will cause extra disturbance),
- destroy or damage boundaries to important sites which may be important habitat in themselves.

In fact we expect a developer to do as much as possible to improve the habitat for wildlife on and around the site itself.

**In the parish of Soham**, we have several 'hotspots' for rare or vulnerable species where we would like to encourage the populations to expand by protecting the site in which they are found and hopefully providing additional areas they could colonise.

There are two areas which are important for various bat species. They are around the railway station and St Andrews Church. Unfortunately, during the construction of the new railway station many of the surrounding trees were felled. It is to be hoped that the bats have managed to find other suitable places. There are some trees close to the Village College (Lodeside entrance) where bats have been seen recently 2023.



***Pipistrellus pygmaeus***  
**Soprano pipistrelle bat**



***Triturus cristatus***  
**Great crested newt**

There are several places along the Soham Lode between Barway and eastward in the direction of Fordham, where otters have been seen. European water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*) have been recorded all along the Lode and in several ditches and drains around the parish.

There are several areas where Great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) have been recorded (Qua Fen Common and Mereside Grasslands) and occasionally smooth newts too.

There are records for many varieties of bird many of whom are rare or threatened. E.g. Kingfisher, turtle dove, house sparrow, tree sparrow, lapwing, yellow hammer, barn owl, swift and Bewick's swan. Many other species have been recorded in the parish.

Small heath and wall butterflies are among the priority species of insects recorded in Soham and also the white spotted pinion moth.

With regard to the flora, there is a large number of different species recorded from the parish many of which are priority species, threatened or vulnerable.

This area has a very low number of trees and most of those which are here have been planted by humans. The flora is much influenced by the presence of water and how the land has been treated over the decades. Places which have never been farmed such as many areas on the commons have the greatest number of rare and threatened species.

These are some of them:-



***Sium latifolium***  
**Greater water parsnip**



***Oenanthe fistulosa***  
**Tubular water dropwort**



***Coeloglossum viride***  
**Frog orchid**



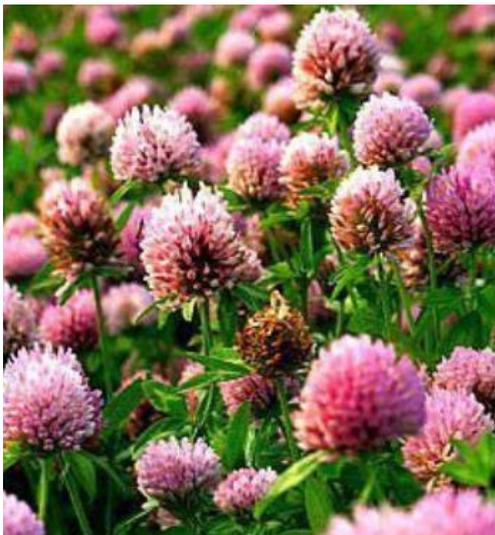
***Ononis spinosa***  
**Spiny restharrow**



***Taraxacum palustre***  
**Fen dandelion**



***Anacamptis mori***  
**Green-winged orchid**



***Trifolium fragiferum***  
**Strawberry clover**

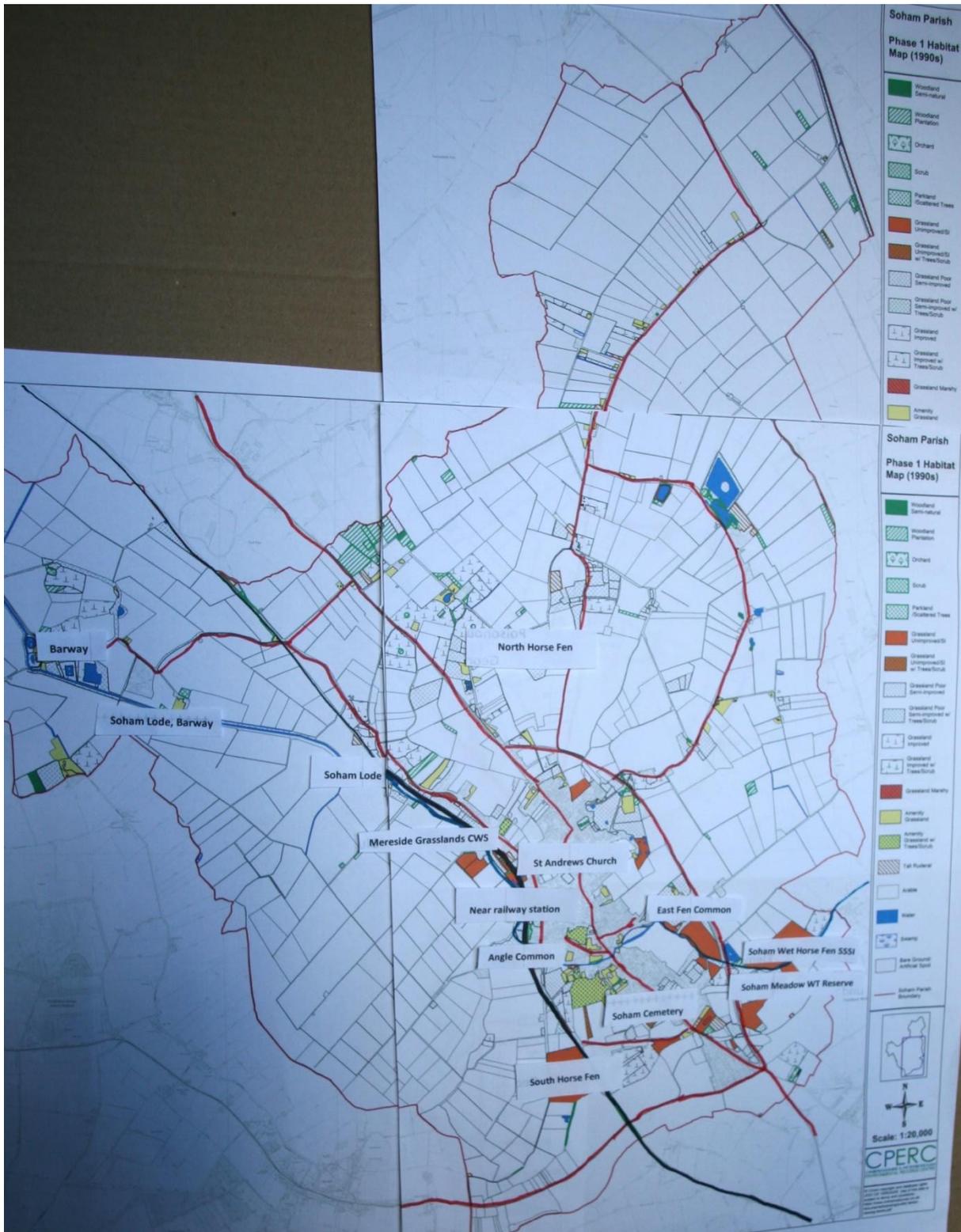


***Ranunculus flammula***  
**Lesser spearwort**

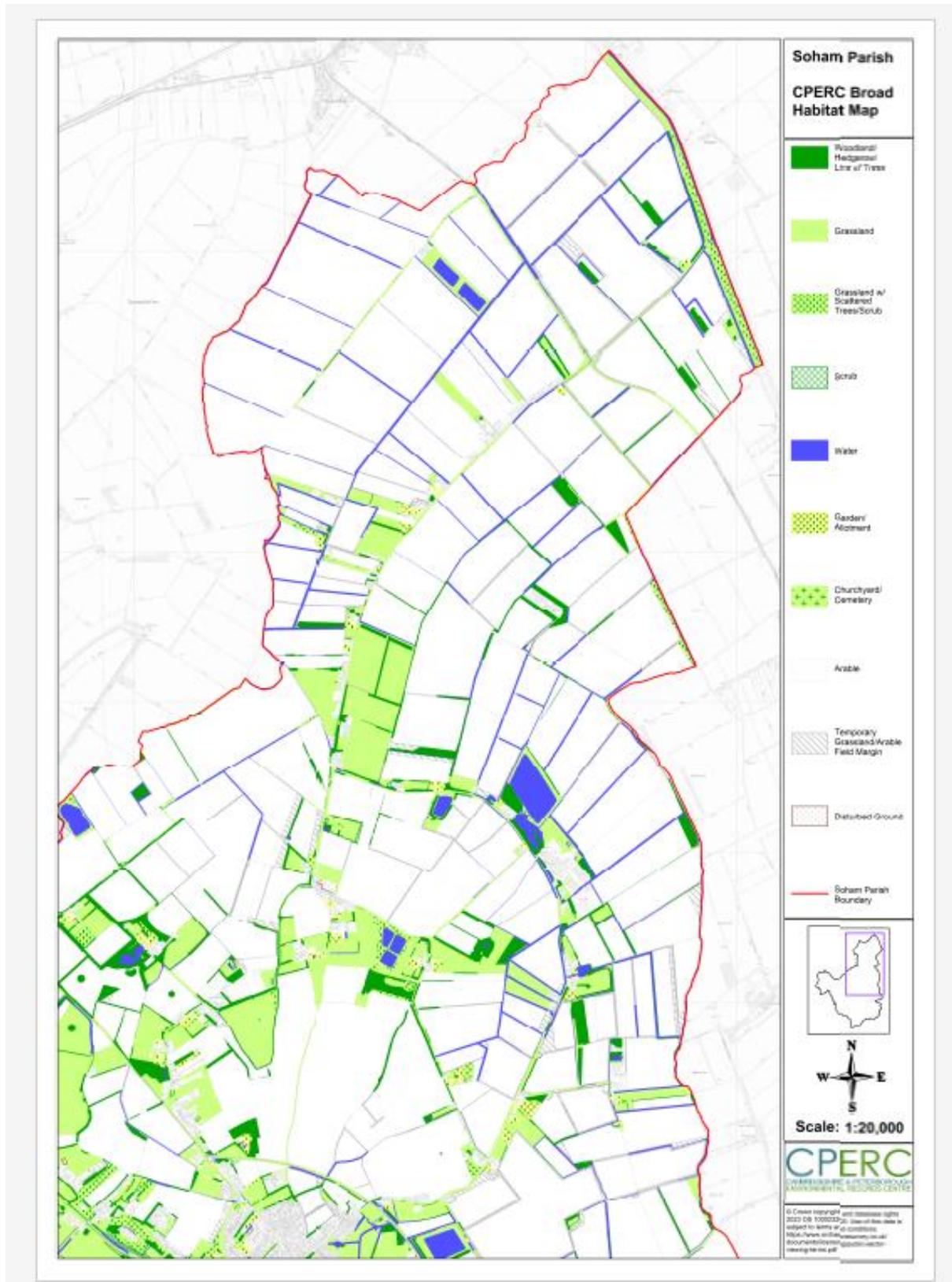
There are many other flowering plants which have been recorded in the parish, many quite common and well known to many. Some of these plants are rare or seriously threatened.

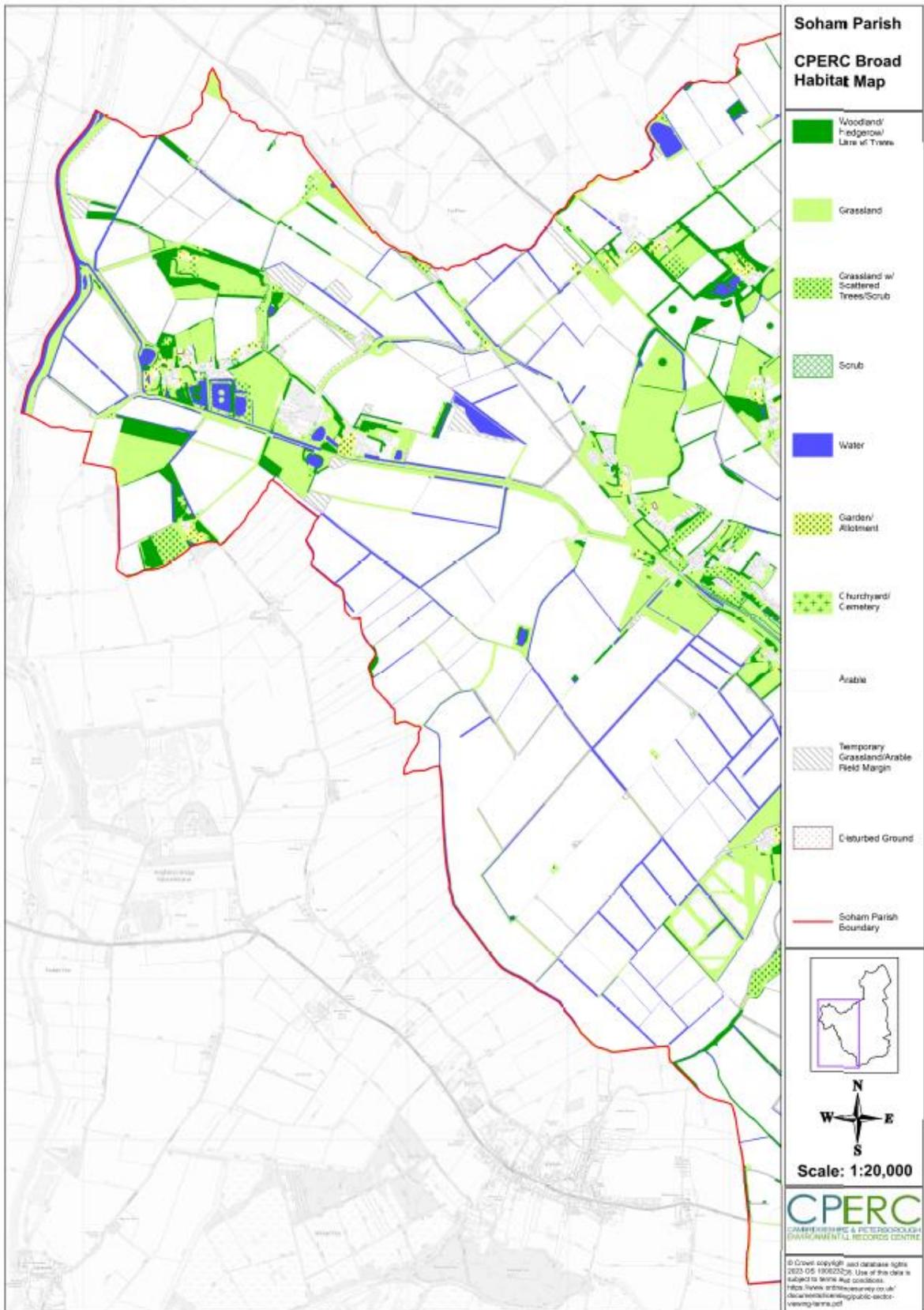
The county of Cambridgeshire and Soham in particular, is noted for its lack of trees. We want to encourage developers to plant trees but they need to plant the right species in the right habitat – trees that will benefit not only the people living in their houses and soften the built environment but also will create habitat for birds, animals, insects and the supporting flora.

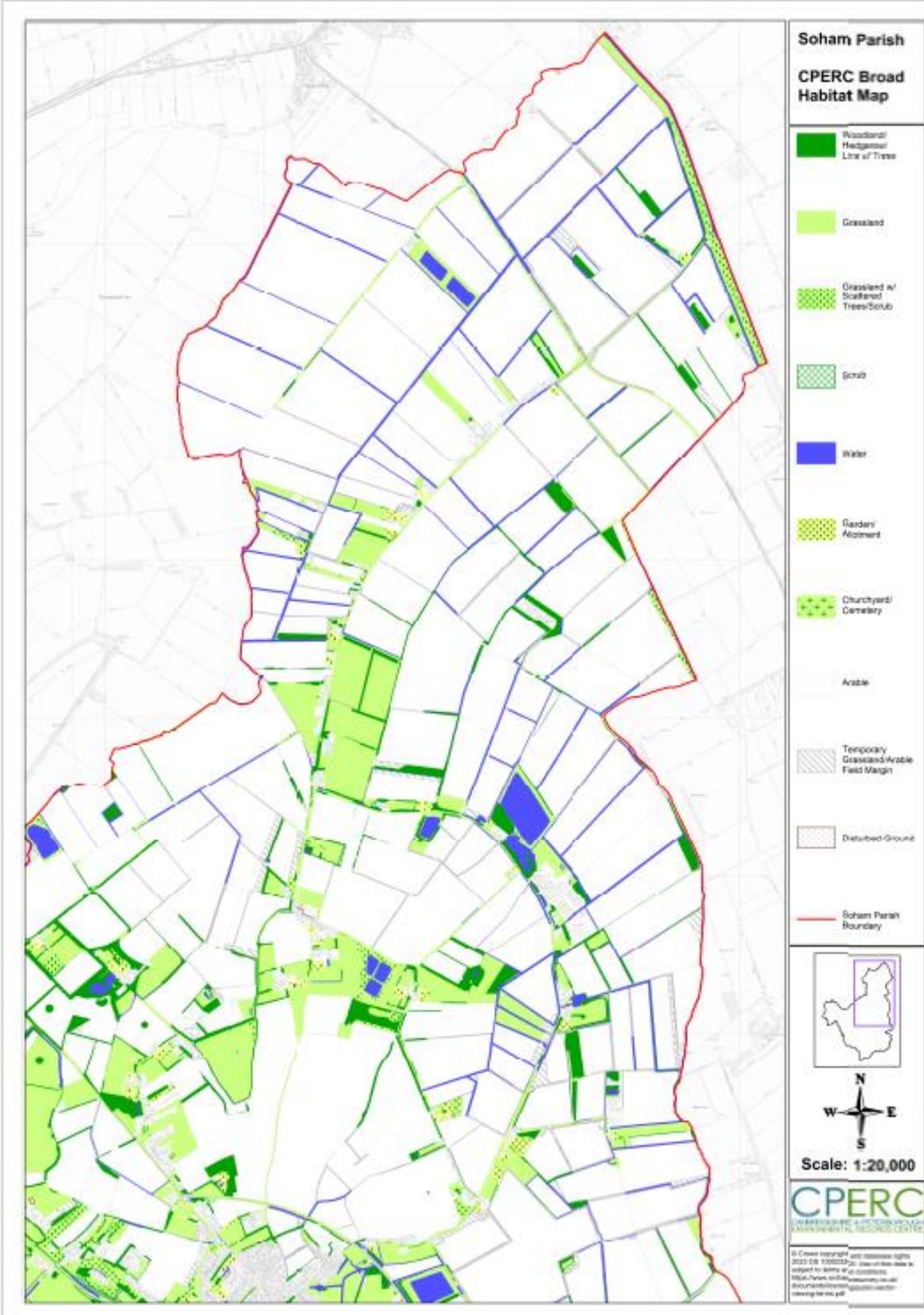
**Map showing the wildlife hotspots determined from the data provided by Cambridge and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre**



# Map showing the Broad Habitats in Soham Parish







## Trees

There are a number of important and significant trees on the Recreation Ground. These trees are protected by the Conservation Area.

There are also several good trees in the grounds of the Village College (both Beechurst and Lodeside sites) and these are also protected.

Several significantly large trees i.e. 2 large copper beeches and an avenue of limes. These are protected by Conservation Order.

In the town itself there are several iconic trees.

- King George VI Coronation Tree at junction between Fordham Rd and The Butts
- Large elm tree outside the Staploe Health Centre down Brewhouse Lane
- Large London plane tree in St Andrews Park, off Clay Street

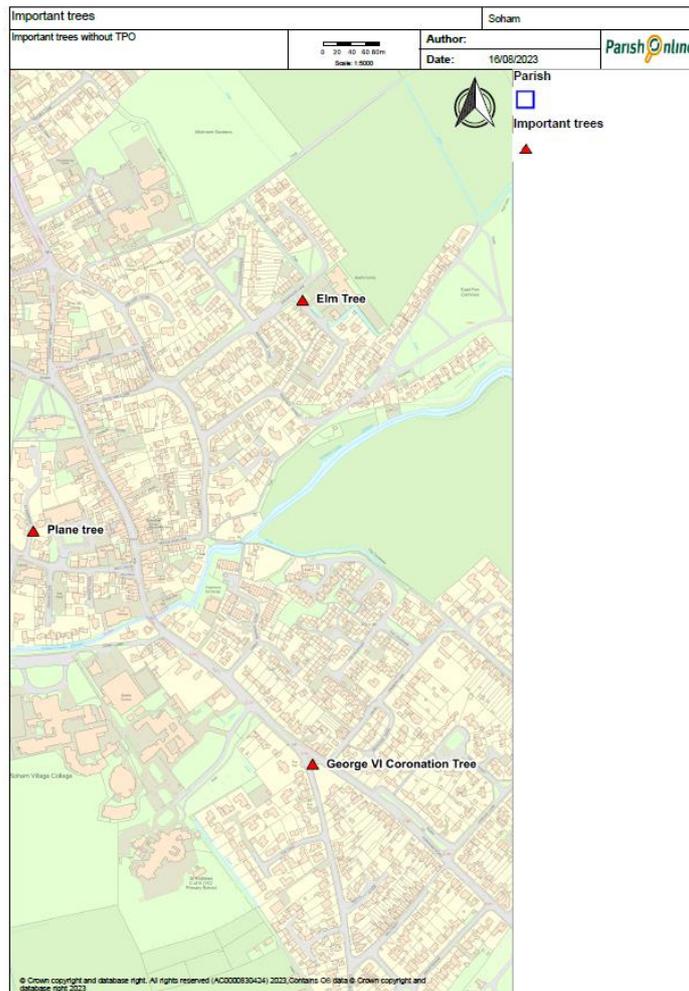


**King George VI Coronation tree  
Centre**

**Elm tree outside the Health  
Centre**



London Plane, St Andrews Park



## **Ponds and lakes**

There are a number of ponds and lakes which are important to provide wildlife habitats and support the area's biodiversity. These include

- Bypass lake
- East Fen Farms reservoir
- Downfield reservoir
- Barcham Reservoir
- Barcham Farm Lake
- Barway Fishing Lakes
- Randalls Pit Barway
- Greens Pit Hasse road
- Greens reservoir
- Broadhill Farm pit
- Coronation Farm Reservoirs
- Several ephemeral ponds on the commons – East Fen, Qua Fen, North Horse Fen, South Horse Fen, Angle Common
- There are many other pond or lakes on private land used either as fishing lakes or reservoirs
- The Lode is a very important waterway which right through the town, on to Barway and then eventually out to the River Ouse near Ely.
- There are also many ditches and drains around the boundaries of many arable fields.
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- **Old Hedges**
- Blackberry Lane
- Down the side of Scampers from Northfield Rd and Townsend( Medieval strip field)
- Drove side of North Horse Fen
- South Horse Fen
- Bracks Drove towards Wicken
- Eastern boundary of Qua Fen Common
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- **Floral roadside verges**
- Roundabout at Downfield various bits of land in the areas between the junctions for Fordham and Wicken



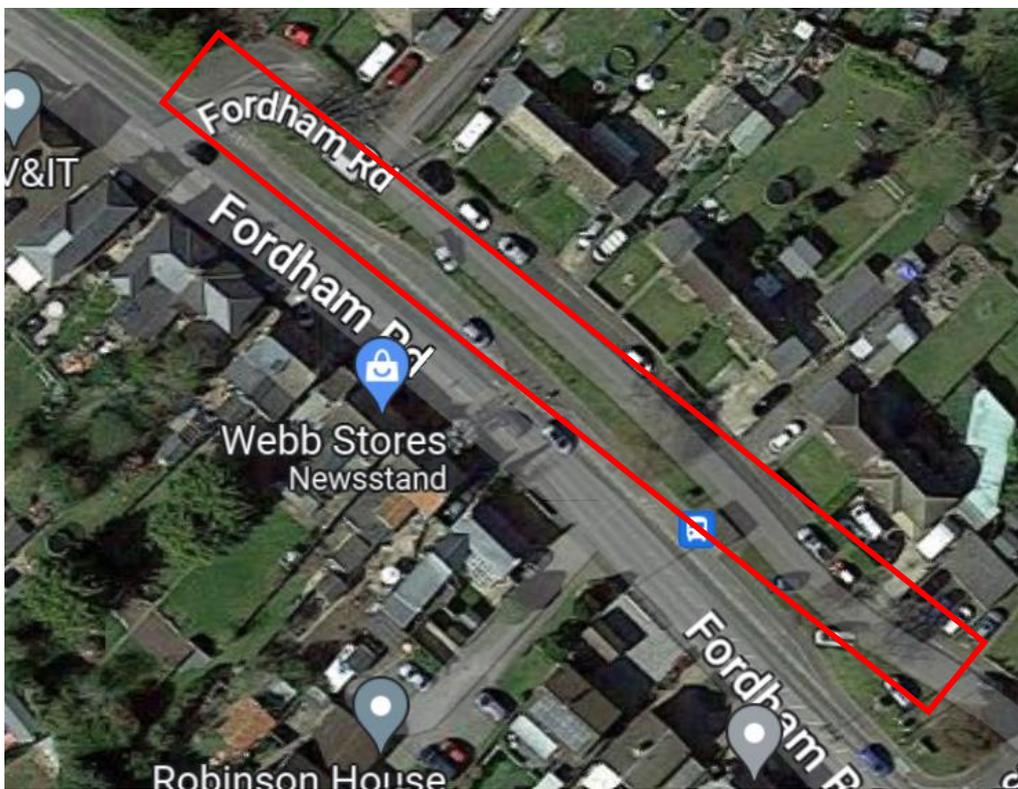
### **Open Spaces**

As well as all the 'green' open spaces, there are also a number of other open spaces within the town which are important.

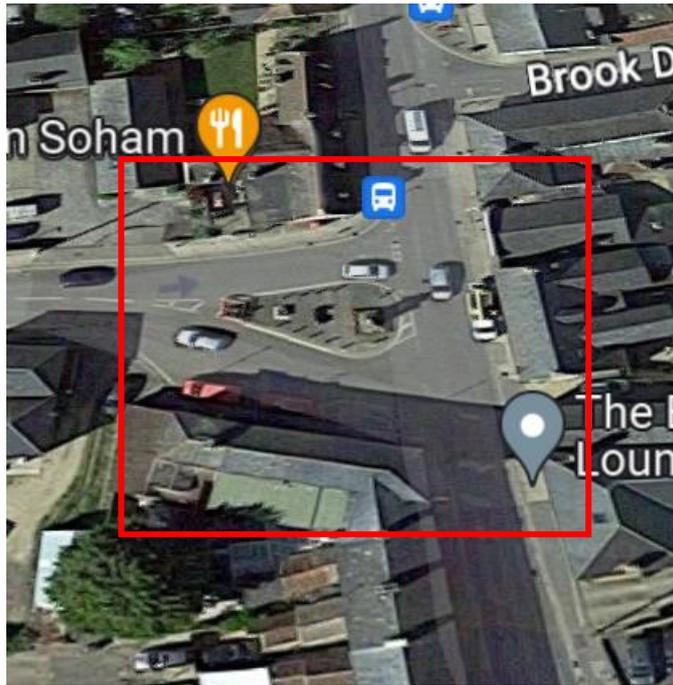
- Duck pond (actually part of the Lode) on Brook Dam Lane
- Red Lion Square, end of Clay Street
- Triangle at junction with Churchgate St and Paddock St
- Area of grass on road side on Paddock Street leading to East Fen Common
- Area of grass between houses on Northfield Park
- Area of open land down Celandine Way
- Open space on Cloverfield Drive
- Roadside grass area alongside Fordham Rd
- Roadside grass area at junction of Regal Lane and Fordham Rd
- Area of grass and trees acting as island on Eastern Avenue
- Area of grass on Julius Martin Lane



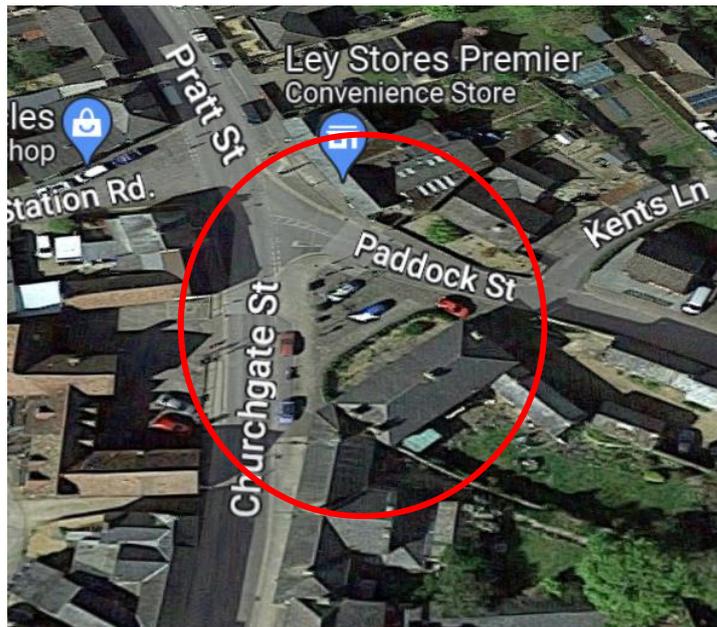
**Duck pond at junction with Paddock St and Brook Dam Lane**



**Strip of grass alongside part of Fordham Road**



**Red Lion Square and war memorial**



**Junction with Paddock St and Churchgate Street**



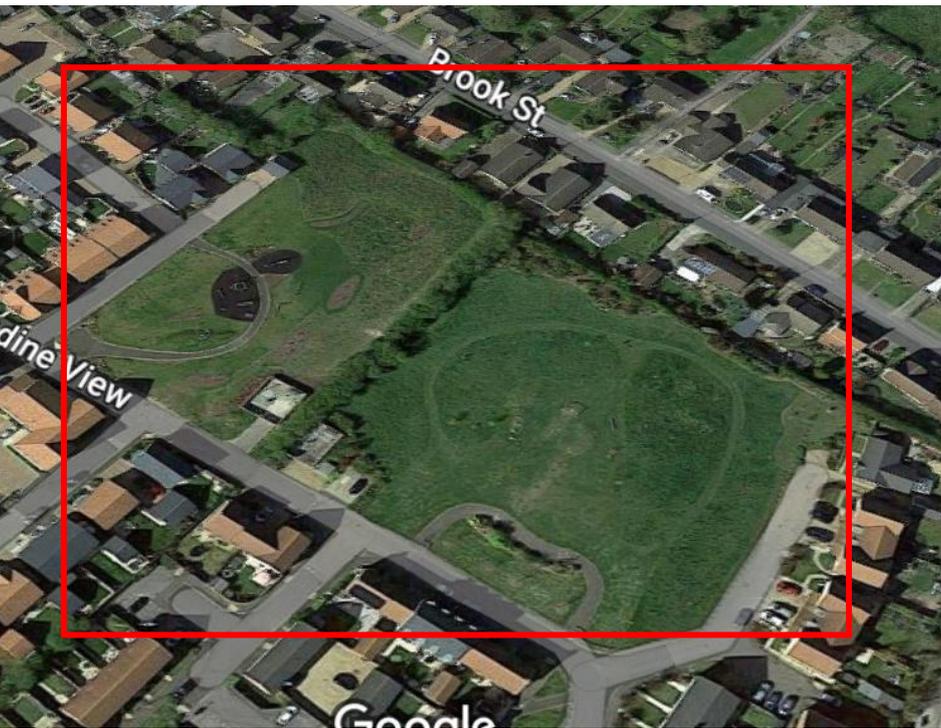
**Area of grass on corner of Paddock Street leading to East Fen Common**

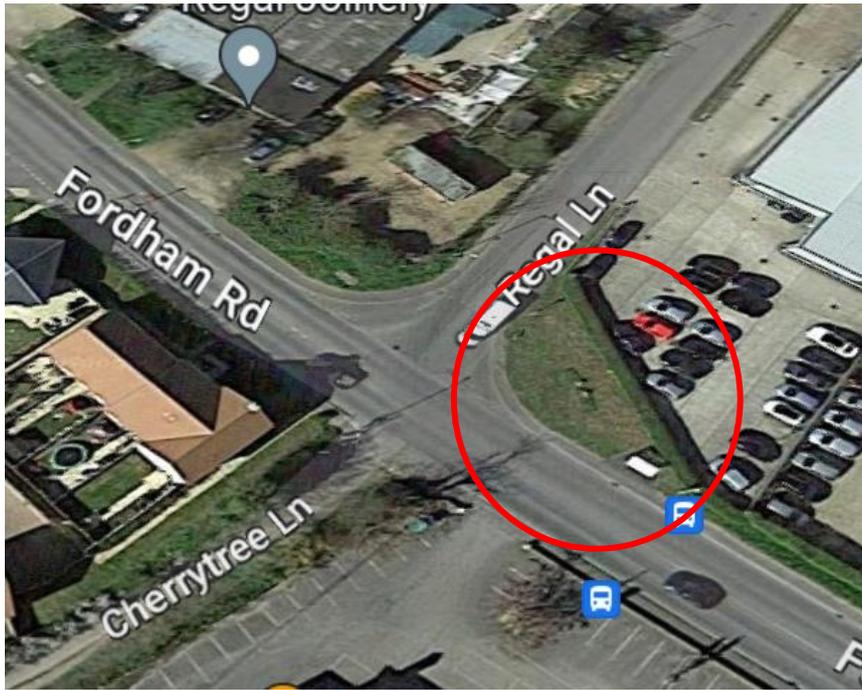


**Area of grass and trees acting as island on Eastern Avenue**



Area of grass in a corner between houses on Northfield Park





**Grassland at the corner of Fordham Road and Regal Lane**



**Grass area on junction between Julius Martin Lane and Thorn Close**



**Area of grass with some trees between Cloverfield Drive and Blackthorn Close**

## Policy SBNP12 – Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitats.

### **POLICY SBNP12 - BIODIVERSITY AND WILDLIFE HABITATS**

All development proposals should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment and shall demonstrate in an ecological assessment that a hierarchy of mitigation has been embedded into the design of the proposal with the following steps implemented in order:

- ai. Firstly avoid impacts: this means retaining habitats of value (including Lodeside Walks, hedgerows, trees, ponds and any wildlife corridors and habitats) for enhancement and management and retaining species in situ;
- aii. Secondly, mitigate impacts where these have been found to be unavoidable and include measures to replace lost, protected and priority habitats and their ecological connectivity and accommodating displaced species in the site boundary;
- aiii. Thirdly, compensate if mitigation measures are insufficient. Include suitable measures to compensate for harmful effects.

In addition to the mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements as established by the Environment Act 2021, the following additional requirements should be met:

- bi. The minimum biodiversity net gain for all qualifying developments shall be 20%, rather than the national mandatory minimum of 10%, unless demonstrated through an independent assessment that it would make the development unviable; and
- Bii. For householder proposals which are otherwise exempt from mandatory biodiversity net gain requirements, an element of biodiversity gain should nevertheless be incorporated into the proposal of a degree proportionate to the scale of the proposal. Measures could include bird boxes, swift bricks, insect 'hotels', bee blocks, bat boxes and/or hibernation holes, the creation of new ponds for amphibians and invertebrates, making changes to garden fencing to allow access for small mammals, or other nature-friendly landscaping feature within the householder's garden; and

Proposals should protect and use available opportunities to enhance the existing network of habitats currently present in the parish. Specific opportunities include:

- ci. Improve habitats and their networks;
- cii. Improve the naturalness of greenspaces and access to them; and
- ciii. Improve connectivity with and between green spaces.
- civ. Creating new wildlife corridors especially where these will help protect or enhance existing corridors in the parish
- cv. The restoration or creation of new natural habitats especially where these will help protect or enhance existing habitats
- cvi. The planting of additional trees and hedgerows

All development proposals unless an exempt development, in addition to the statutory requirements must provide clear and robust evidence setting out the ongoing 30 year management strategy for significant on site gains and all off site gains which will be secured by a legal agreement.

Development proposals shall identify and assess any potential impact of a Site of Special Scientific Interest, by taking into account of Natural England's Impact Risk Zones.

## **Biodiversity Net Gain**

An ecological assessment, where required, will be submitted with the planning application to assess effects on habitat, species, connections, flora and fauna, commensurate with the scale of the impact and the importance of the species or habitat. Ecological surveys must be carried out to the required standards by suitably qualified and experienced people. The Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM) will provide lists of recognised professional ecologists. The ecological assessment must be up to date, surveys must be undertaken at an appropriate time of year for the habitats and species concerned, using appropriate survey methods. BS42020:2013 'Biodiversity – Code of practice for planning and development', or any updated code, is seen as an indication of the assessment's validity and relevance to the determination of the development proposal.

Where there is harm, the ecological assessment should demonstrate that mitigation hierarchy has been applied (avoid, mitigate and compensate). Where there is insufficient survey data, or data is gathered at an inappropriate time of year, planning permission should be refused on the basis of the extant government circular on planning and biodiversity (Circular 06/2005). This makes it explicit: "the presence or absence of protected species, and the extent to which they could be affected by a proposed development, should be established before planning permission is granted, since otherwise all material considerations might not have been considered in making the decision".

In January 2020, the government published the Environment Bill. The Environment Act received Royal Assent in November 2021, and its various provisions being enacted in phases since then. The Act includes a requirement for biodiversity net gain of 10% for developers through the planning system. The government has committed to apply a requirement for biodiversity net gain of 10% for developers through the planning system for almost all development from April 2024. This is the legal minimum. Given the threat to our environment from significant development proposals in Soham and Barway, the need to secure improved habitats for our more threatened and vulnerable species is critical.

Natural Cambridgeshire is a partnership of key local authorities, including East Cambridgeshire District Council, and environmental stakeholders who have adopted a Strategy, 'Doubling Nature 2018 – A Vision for the Natural Future of Cambridgeshire & Peterborough in 2050'. Its vision is that by doubling the area of rich wildlife habitats and natural green-space, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will become a world-class environment where nature and people thrive, and businesses prosper.

It states that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has some very attractive landscapes and many special areas designated for their rich wildlife. However, these need enhancing and augmenting in order to support public health and the economic success arising from of the area's growth. We need to do this because this area faces the significant challenges of being in the driest part of the country with limited water resources, and also soil degradation, habitat fragmentation, low tree and grassland cover, climate change, increasing flood risk, and low proportions of land under management for nature. A key objective is ensuring new housing and work place developments incorporate high quality green and blue infrastructure providing multiple benefits for people and the environment. The Strategy can be found at [naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk](http://naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk).

Additionally, the Soham Commons Study notes that the Local Plan proposes around 2,300 new dwellings which would result in between 57% to 69% increase in recreational use of the Commons. It notes that the wildlife interest of the commons has declined over the last few decades. The Study recommends habitat restoration including grassland restoration, reinstating rotational pollarding, pond and water course restoration. To implement the recommended objectives ecological enhancements to the commons are proposed including, restoration of species rich grasslands to increase wild flowers in key locations and restoration of Soham Lode to make the commons a more attractive place for commons users.

This policy has regard to the national policy on securing Biodiversity Net Gain. It seeks to increase the biodiversity net gain to 20%, in excess of the 10% minimum set for qualifying developments set out in the Environment Act. It is essential that in terms of mitigating the impact of climate change, supporting increased biodiversity, and meeting the challenges set out in the Doubling Nature 2018 strategy and the Commons Study, a net biodiversity gain of at least 20% is promoted unless demonstrated to make the development unviable.

Swale Borough Council used the Defra impact assessment 'central estimate cost per dwelling for the South East' for their draft Local Plan Viability Study. This looked at the difference between provision of 10% and 20% BNG and put costs at £948 per dwelling for 10% BNG with an additional £180 per dwelling for 20% BNG.

The Town Council has examined work completed by local planning authorities which reports that the move from 10% to 20% BNG will not materially affect the viability of the development. The Kent Nature Partnership net gain group has published a county-wide strategic viability assessment to understand the implications of a 20% BNG approach for Kent: <https://kentnature.org.uk/nature-recovery/biodiversity-net-gain/>. In summary:

- A shift from 10% to 15% or 20% BNG will not materially affect viability in the majority of instances when delivered on-site or off-site.
- The biggest cost in most cases is to get to mandatory, minimum 10% BNG.
- The increase to 15% or 20% BNG in most cases costs much less and is generally negligible.

Evidence prepared by a number of local authorities in the preparation of their Local Plans has demonstrated that a shift from 10% to 15% or 20% BNG will not materially affect viability in the majority of instances when delivered on-site or off-site. The biggest cost in most cases is to get to mandatory, minimum 10% BNG. The increase to 15% or 20% BNG in most cases costs much less and is generally negligible.

If onsite provision is how the majority of BNG is delivered, this could have implications on land take as a result of lowering of average housing densities. However, as the majority of this burden relates to the mandatory 10% BNG, and the increase to get to 15% and 20% BNG are comparably small, this should not be seen as a reason for not going beyond the 10%.

Biodiversity net gain complements and works with the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy set out in the policy. It does not override the protection for designated sites, protected or priority species and irreplaceable or priority habitats set out in the NPPF. The policy seeks to ensure that habitat improvement will be a genuine additional benefit and go further than measures already required to implement a compensation strategy.