

Habitat/Wildlife Survey: Sleight Lane Copse and Surrounds – 4th and 9th October 2023,

<https://black8.org.uk/>



An initial, informal ecological survey/assessment of the copse that runs alongside Sleight Lane between Galhampton and Yarlington was carried out at around 4pm on 4th October and at dusk on 9th. Measured on Google Maps, the copse is 253m long and 28m at its widest. According to the pegs in the field, the proposed farm will come to about 20m from the copse. At nearly 400m away, the nearest wooded habitat to the copse is the tree avenue at the top of the escarpment to the north-east. Bigger woodlands are at Hadspen, across the road and over the buildings, at nearly 1.5km, or at Yarlington House, 1.2km. It seems likely that what has spared the copse so far is that it sits on a steep bank unsuitable for dairy grazing.

Approaching the copse across the monocrop grass field to the south there were numerous animal tracks through the grass suggesting the copse is an important island of habitat in a landscape otherwise denuded of all tree cover or shrubs, but for some low hedges. A hare exited stage right as we neared the copse itself. A lesser-spotted woodpecker was seen flying away along the hedgerow.

On the field side, stretching more or less the whole length of the copse, is a classic mixed native hedge of hawthorn, blackthorn, dogwood, hazel, elder, rose and field maple. Again, critter-sized gaps and small tunnels in this hedge demonstrated the comings and goings of animals. Alongside the lane is an old barbed wire fence and little hedging. The fence is down in many places and buried among vegetation.

Broadly, it is possible to divide the copse into three main, species-specific areas of similar dimensions. Going from west to east these are; wild cherry, hazel coppice and sycamore. Within these are other trees, for example goat willows, and a few larger, semi-mature/mature trees such as ash and oak, the largest of around 1m in diameter and 20-25m tall. Some trees have been wind damaged, for example, a cherry whose top has blown out and a split dead holly. There are numerous nests and dreys in the canopy, and an extensive, moribund badger sett throughout the copse. A few ferns reside within, and in spring the copse is ablaze with bluebells, both tentative indicators of ancient woodland.

On the 9th, two people, one at the western end, one at the eastern, sat silently in the copse for an hour at dusk. To adapt Rachel Carson¹, it seemed a near silent autumn, but birds heard and seen included; blackbird, pigeon, wren, robin, crow, blue tit. Insect life was also negligible, one likely reason for the quiet and lack of larger life. The fallen and cracked trees seemed to offer ideal habitat for bats, and indeed, a bat was seen against the darkening sky when we returned to the lane and began walking home. On the whole, the lack of wildlife was an indictment of modern farming methods and agricultural policies and a desperately sad manifestation of the parlous state of the natural world.

1 Carson, R (1960), *Silent Spring*.

If the list of birds above seems mundane, it is worth pointing out that many of their once common relatives no longer live alongside them – the copse was a lonely place. The RSPB² blames wild bird population declines on ‘changes in agricultural practices’, that is, intensification, high chemical inputs, crop monocultures and hedgerow removal. The consequences of these practices are clearly visible at Black 8 acres. Turtle doves, for example, which I remember from my own childhood, but have not seen for decades, have decreased by 71%. I have not heard a cuckoo for years, and, where are all the starlings (numbers have fallen by 75% since 1970³)? Even the seemingly ubiquitous pigeon, to many a ‘pest’, is no longer seen in the flocks of only a few decades ago. If this trend continues, that list of ‘common’ birds will inevitably decrease.

To focus on just one species: According to Dawson⁴ (2020), lesser-spotted woodpecker numbers have ‘crashed’ by 83% since 1970. ‘The primary threat that woodpeckers in the UK face is the loss of habitat. Typically woodpeckers prefer broad-leaved deciduous woodland, as well as deadwood habitat.’ Because The Newt has had a long programme of removing deadwood from all its trees, it is possible that the woodpecker we saw had ventured forth from its depleted woodland home in search of food. Of course, woodpeckers sit amidst a complex, inter-related web of species; mammals, insects, soil mycorrhiza and fungi, and trees and plants. Disturbing one, disturbs all.

In the photograph at the bottom of Black 8’s home page (<https://black8.org.uk/>), the copse can be made out lying just north of the top-most, white rectangle of the proposed farm buildings. Its apparently small size belies its importance because, if a wider view is taken, it can be seen that it is

2 RSPB, ‘Is the number of birds in decline?’ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/where-have-all-the-birds-gone/is-the-number-of-birds-in-decline/>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/08/uk-wintering-birds-sharp-decline> (this is particularly interesting as it was written this year and the author lives in Somerset).

4 <https://arocha.org.uk/woodpeckers-of-the-uk/>

a vital piece of habitat within an ecologically-poor area. This does not, in my view, lead to the conclusion that the surroundings are ripe for development. On the contrary, it reveals that after decades of ecological mismanagement by the farm's previous owners, what is now required is a concerted programme of habitat enhancement. If not entirely rewilded, the site is a prime location for some form of wood pasture⁵ (pictures below). Not only would this mean thicker, wider hedges that crucially link with the nearby copses and woodlands, and parkland type trees in the fields (oak, beech, lime, for example), it would also create healthier grazing for the Newt's trophy livestock. What the area needs least of all is more disturbance and disruption that will inevitably result from invasive building, intensive modern farming and high traffic volumes on the lane and in the fields. This is especially true as a working farm already exists in Yarlington, as it has for many years. If wood pasture is initiated, the view from the end of the tree avenue for Newt visitors becomes one of a habitat mosaic of bucolic richness leading the eye all the way to Camelot at South Cadbury. The bleak, industrialised alternative needs no clarification.



Wood pasture with marshy area in foreground.



Wood pasture with bison just visible in middle distance.

As mentioned above, the tree avenue is the nearest significant wooded habitat to the copse. I cite this because of what happened to the avenue and concern that the copse might suffer the same fate.

5 More information here: <https://ptes.org/wppn/managing-wood-pasture-parkland/pasture-management-wood-pasture-parkland/>

This avenue was planted over 30 years ago with trees and shrubs (amongst others, these included oak, ash, wild cherry, field maple, guelder rose, wayfaring tree, all whips of around 60cm tall) when Paul Hobhouse owned the estate. For many years interference was minimal. By the time Koos Bekker bought the estate the trees of the avenue had grown to around 12-20m and flourished above a dense understorey of shrub, bramble, grass and flowers – that is, a rich habitat of high biodiversity value. As with all other areas of the estate, the avenue was subjected to an intense tidying under the anachronistic belief that ordering and manicuring the natural environment equates to high aesthetic value. All the trees were pruned, their lower branches removed, not in itself an entirely detrimental management procedure. However, this allowed machine access to cut, flail, strim and mash the entire understorey. It seems likely that many dispossessed creatures, having little choice but to brave the perilous open field crossing, found welcome asylum in the Sleight Lane copse.

Previous and ongoing Newt developments have set precedents. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the copse and surrounding area will be subjected to being similarly tidied, destroying this desperately needed habitat and contravening the Newt's advertised 'reverence for our environment'⁶. And, as with the Avalon development, it also seems clear that the proposed farm will not remain confined to the already enormous area designated by the pegs, but is likely to spread across the green fields far beyond. Anything living in or using the copse will suffer catastrophic disturbance. For example, those animal paths will disappear beneath concrete and be blocked by buildings. As can be seen from the aerial view, alternative accommodation is either at a distance, sparse, or prone to continual disturbance from out-dated, habitat-destroying, ill-considered 'management' techniques; the woodpeckers will seek new homes and sustenance in vain.

6 The Newt's own website, under the title, 'Dig in to something special.' - <https://shop.thenewtinsomerset.com/uk>

The current ecological and climate situation mean it is no longer acceptable to endlessly postpone, defer or delegate caring for the natural world, of which we are part, to others or the future. A reason for optimism is that, given space and time, wildlife returns – life longs to live; Covid lockdown⁷ and the island of biodiversity at re-wilded Knepp⁸ in West Sussex are two examples of this. Additionally, if the vast expanse of fields at Black 8 were repopulated with trees, copses and hedges, with an integral small area of wetland (the proposed farm site might be the ideal location), this would form Natural Flood Management (NFM) and mitigate flood risk for Yarlington residents, especially those living along the lane to the current farm who suffered traumatising damage to their homes in June this year. With the many surrounding hills, slopes and fields either bare or covered only by cropped grass there is little to alleviate flooding – it was simply a matter of time before a major incident occurred. A study by Cooper *et al*⁹ (2021) concluded that, ‘when applied with *due diligence* and *measured consideration*, appropriately planted and managed woodlands can mitigate flood risk and delay flood peaks, both temporally and spatially,’ (my emphasis).

A few years ago at Black 8 Acres it would have been hard to imagine a more ecologically-poor agricultural area – extensive grass monoculture, few if any hedges, tiny isolated copses; the Newt’s singularly unimaginative and destructive farm proposal has found a way.

Therefore, rather than build a new farm and compound the species- and habitat-loss, a sensitive, constructive, ecological philosophy should be cultivated to begin a natural enrichment of the area and so reverse the long decline of biodiversity. Then, instead of being complicit in the ecological degradation of the local area, the Newt will then be able to claim, with some justification, that it

7 <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/nature-liberated-by-lockdown.html>

8 <https://knepp.co.uk/knepp-estate/>

9 Cooper et al, 2021 can be viewed here: <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wat2.1541>

does indeed 'work with nature to look after the land' and 'encourage nature'¹⁰ and, not incidentally, become part of the solution and an example to others.

10 The Newt's own website, under the title, 'Why our meat tastes better.' - <https://shop.thenewtinsomerset.com/uk>