

# Limefield Pit Nature Reserve – Restoration Project

Organic Countryside CIC (trading as Walden  
Countryside)



-  Limefield Pit NR
-  Close-mown amenity grassland
-  Unofficial countryside (informal access)

## Who are Walden Countryside?

Walden Countryside is the trading name of a not-for-profit community interest company: Organic Countryside CIC. The company, run entirely by volunteers, was formed in 2009 to own and manage Noakes Grove Nature Reserve (Sewards End). Since then it has also taken on the management of Kings Field (Hempstead) and Scotch Patch (Ellis Green, Wimbish).

Its aim for all its nature reserves is to combine traditional (no chemical input) small-scale farming with wildlife conservation and making the land as accessible as possible for free public enjoyment of the countryside.

Walden Countryside is concerned only with the wildlife and countryside of the northern half of Uttlesford.

## The origin of Limefield Pit Nature Reserve

The land which became the reserve was a section 106 agreement transfer from the builder of the Limefield housing development to Uttlesford District Council, with a view to the land being managed as a nature reserve protecting a rich chalk grassland flora and safeguarding the valuable geological chalk cliff exposure.

The land came with a sum of money said to be sufficient to maintain the site for 20 years (that was over 20 years ago).

Unfortunately, the developer dumped building waste on the floor of the pit which destroyed all but a small area of the chalk grassland. UDC did not force clearance of the dumped waste as it could have done.

Uttlesford DC transferred the land ownership (and at least some of the money) to the Essex Wildlife Trust.

## Essex Wildlife Trust management 1997 - present

Open access to the land was impossible because of dangers to the public (especially children) connected with the chalk cliff. Thus EWT spent a large sum installing a high chain-link fence and locked gates to prevent unauthorised access.

The only public access was to individuals or small groups that requested a visit to view the chalk cliff. These visits were guided by a local geologist.

The floor of the pit has become completely covered by a dense stand of bramble so, until autumn/winter bramble clearance, any public access is essentially impossible.

From the outset, it was known that the botanical importance of the site could be restored by removal of the dumped building waste but EWT were unable to afford to do this.

## PLoWS 11 Limefield Pit (0.4 ha) TL 541395

*The land was designated as a "Potential Local Wildlife Site" in the Uttlesford Local Wildlife Sites review (2007) but EWT was unable to carry out the recommended management :-*

This SINC [site of nature conservation interest] was called Little Walden Road quarry, but the remaining land, now an Essex Wildlife Trust reserve, is now called Limefield Pit. This old quarry supported a very varied flora and fauna, with a relict chalk grassland vegetation which included Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*\*) and Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*\*).

The exposed cliff face is of geological interest. This site was formerly larger and designated prior to the construction of the adjacent houses. The remaining fragment does not support any of the key chalk grassland species formerly present. It may have invertebrate interest, but this requires further

survey work.

**Action:** Invertebrate surveys should be a high priority. More dynamic measures would include removing much of the dumped soil material from the floor of the quarry, to try and regain its original landform.

## **Proposed EWT transfer of management to Walden Countryside**

EWT wishes to concentrate its resources on its large nature reserves elsewhere in the county and has approached Walden Countryside with a view to them taking over management (and eventually ownership) of Limefield Pit.

## **How would Walden Countryside manage the site ?**

The priorities would be the same as for our existing reserves:

- Conserving the wildlife and improving biodiversity
- Allowing public access (in this case, under supervision for safety reasons) for countryside enjoyment by individuals, families and children's groups
- Producing some local food produce

## **Wildlife Conservation:**

Two major pieces of work are essential at the outset:

- Clearance of most of the bramble thicket so that access is possible, if only for other habitat management work. Volunteer effort should be enough to maintain this but the initial clearance will probably require professional help .
- Removing the dumped building material: this would be a professional operation (or a donation by a sympathetic company or MOD Carver Barracks). It would also need an acceptable site to dump the removed material. UDC has agreed to help find suitable contractors.

## **Public access**

Free public access at all times is impossible: it would be a danger to the public and would not be an insurable risk.

What Walden Countryside plans is to recruit a team of volunteers who would each agree to spend a couple of half-day sessions a month at the reserve doing light management tasks on their own (or as a family group). While these volunteer wardens were on site, public access could be permitted.

We would aim to have the reserve open every week at least on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. More frequently if volunteer wardens are available.

Group visits by local clubs, schools or other children's groups will be encouraged

Walden Countryside uses this volunteer team system to ensure daily visits to both of its sheep flocks. There is no difficulty finding volunteers and this suggests the system proposed for Limefield wardening will work.

## **Food production**

The site is right next to an Saffron Walden Town Council allotment used by the charity DIG-IT and

many other plot-holders. Walden Countryside hopes they may help with with planting a small community orchard on part of the pit floor . Using local, traditional apple varieties, this would be good for biodiversity and not interfere with the restoration of the chalk grassland flora.

## **The surrounding area**

Limefield pit is surrounded on two sides by housing and planning permission has been granted on an adjacent field to the north. While this will separate the nature reserve from links with open countryside habitats there is a clear opportunity to extend the reserve using areas that are now informal rough access land already used by dog-walkers and others but with no legal right of access. See the map above.

If UDC and the housing developers can negotiate agreements for this informal access land to be dedicated (by the developers) as public access countryside it would add to the wildlife value of Limefield Pit and provide an area at least equal in size to the reserve. The new land would be safe for full time public access.

If this proved possible, the area of close-mown grassland, managed by Uttlesford District Council we think, might be allowed to be a bit less “close-mown” and link with the new countryside access area.

New housing development risks cutting the reserve off from the wider countryside: it will be very important to maintain (and improve?) habitat links via the allotment lands to the ancient green lane (Byrds Farm Lane).

## **Funding the Project**

The project outlined above would require significant levels of funding and practical assistance from local organisations. It is probable that help could be obtained from at least one major source.

- We are submitting a funding application to Essex County Council (Community Interest Fund)
- We will launch a fund-raising campaign amongst our supporters and Saffron Walden residents generally during September 2020
- We will seek help in kind from local business and military organisations for help in kind with the major preparatory habitat work in the autumn months