

# The Slade Nature Reserve – Warden’s Report to Bloxham Parish Council about access to the Local Nature Reserve from the Country Park 29/02/20

## Original Decision

When the original plans for the country park were made available in 2015/6, the opportunity for an additional access point to The Slade was carefully considered. Stephen Phipps, David Yates and I looked at both sides of the argument and felt that providing access would increase the visitor numbers to a level that would be detrimental to the habitat and wildlife that we are trying to improve. We discussed it with the ecologist that was commissioned by TOE2 at the time to sign off the grant payment for improvement work around the reserve and he was in agreement.

## Ecological Evidence

The ecological assessment report that was undertaken by Aspect Ecology for Miller Homes in April 2013 was very clear about the steps that must be taken to protect The Slade from the country park:

“3.2.4. Furthermore, a buffer zone of native planting a minimum of 10m in width, will be incorporated within the area of open space adjacent to The Slade. Care will also be taken to ensure that no footpaths are within this buffer, and any lighting associated with the open space will be designed so as to minimise illumination of the off-site woodland.

### Summary

3.2.6. The study area itself is not subject to any statutory or non-statutory nature conservation designation. All ecological designations in the local area are well separated from the study area and will not therefore be affected by the proposals. Subject to the above recommendations, it is also considered that the adjacent un-designated nature reserve; The Slade; will remain unaffected by the proposals.

5.2.18. Any footpaths associated with the proposed open space should be positioned away from these trees, and the woodland edge, so as to minimise disturbance to any bats using these features.

6.4. The Slade Nature Reserve; an un-designated site of ecological interest, which abuts the southern site boundary; will also remain unaffected by the proposals, subject to the recommendations outlined within section 3 of this report.”

The report identified The Slade as a site of ecological interest with bats recorded along the boundary with the country park. The pond itself has improved the habitat for bats but I believe that providing public access will create disturbance and discourage the wildlife.

During 2015 Cherwell District Council and TVERC reviewed The Slade as a possible Local Wildlife Site:

“The site includes priority habitat (wet wood, lowland fen and lowland mixed deciduous woodland). The site was rejected as a LWS but is close to meeting the LWS criteria. The site should be included as a DWS for its wildlife interest.”

Although The Slade did not quite meet the criteria (yet!) as a District Wildlife Site, it is recognised as containing priority habitat. Wet wood and lowland fen are fragile habitats and we only have a small area, so we need to be careful with our management programme. The path from the country park would increase the footfall through both of these fragile areas which will inevitably lead to path widening as boggy areas are avoided. This is detrimental to the habitat.

This can be demonstrated in this photograph where the footpath comes off the end of the boardwalk into the meadow:



This is an example where walkers have created a new path to avoid the boggy area:





## Conclusion / Summary

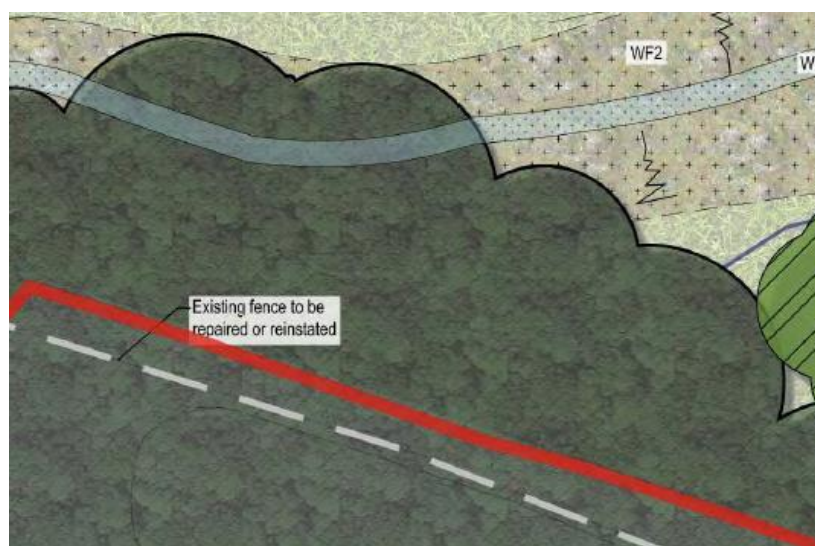
I believe that the current single access from the recreation ground encourages the type of visitor who purposefully wants to visit the nature reserve. Many dog walkers actually stick to the railway line and avoid the wetland habitats, so it really is only the keen wildlife watchers who make the effort to walk through the wetland areas. I can understand why walkers would like to complete a circular route through the reserve to link the country park to the Bloxham circular walk route, logically it makes perfect sense. My concern is that the wetland areas will not withstand the trampling from an exponential increase in visitors, the majority of which are not attracted to it because of the nature but simply passing through to join up with another footpath. Our priority should be to protect and enhance the ecology in this wonderful area of Bloxham.

## Historical Fencing Debate

This was the plan for the fencing in the southern area of the country park:



The plans showed a new post and wire fence on the country park side of the 10m buffer zone of planted trees. The boundary with The Slade has a note on it that states that as part of the development the existing fence was going to be reinstated by Miller Homes.



This would have given The Slade two fences and an area of thick woodland to prevent access from the country park. During a meeting with Geoff Winter from Miller Homes on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2016 Geoff confirmed that he was going to replace the existing fence, but to make it simpler it would be relocated into the country park so as to avoid removing any existing trees:

“It was established to everyone's satisfaction that GW intended to carry out the required replacement and repairs to the fence (as indicated in the layouts for the-Country Park) on the boundary between the Slade and the Country Park.

It was agreed that GW would meet with MJ, possibly at the Slade, to establish where the fence should go, as GW suggested it may be simpler to relocate the fence on the Country Park side to allow a clear area for working, as it did not make sense to remove planting unnecessarily only to have to replant. “

9<sup>th</sup> February 2018 David Yates and I met Geoff Winter to discuss fence. This is an excerpt from the email sent to all parties confirming the conversations had:

“We discussed various fence type options. The old existing fence was examined and noted to be 6 inch stock fencing wire with posts and a single strand of barbed wire on the top. David and I requested that Miller Homes use the same style fence for the new fence line. Geoff expressed that the stock proof fence and post style would be no problem but there may be a health and safety issue with installing barbed wire. He agreed to check this with his company, as it may be possible if it is specifically requested by Bloxham Parish Council. Geoff will get back to us about this.

In terms of locating the fence, it was agreed that it should begin and end at the original corner points where the original fencing line finished. The fence line will then come out diagonally into the Miller Homes site so that the hedgerow trees are on The Slade side. The fence will follow the line of the hedgerow and then diagonally join up with the end point of the old fence line.

Where there are gaps in the hedgerow, it was agreed that the fence line would not "wiggle" in and out but flow in a straight line. The hedgerow gaps on The Slade side will then be planted (by BPC volunteers) to infill.”

During a Cherwell District Council site visit with Tim Screen on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2019 it was discovered that Miller Homes had installed additional post and wire fencing around the north and east of the attenuation pond which was not on the plans at all. As per the plans, the line of fence Miller Homes side of the 10m buffer zone had been installed, but the reinstatement of the original boundary fence on the Slade side of the buffer zone had not been installed. Geoff Winter believed that the additional fence they had installed performed the same function. The approximate additional fencing location is shown by the pink line on the plans below:



Tim Screen recorded this note from the conversations had during the site visit on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2019:

“Protecting the Slade

G W will consider the planting of a thicket of Blackthorn and Brambles, 3 m wide and a planting density of 1/m<sup>2</sup>. This is an alternative to the installation of a new fence, and in the long term will provide an impenetrable barrier\*.”

Warden’s Recommendation

If the decision to maintain a single access point into The Slade from the recreation ground is upheld, I would like Bloxham Parish Council to ensure that the fencing in the country park is robust and strong enough to provide a barrier to people. Gates must be locked. If Miller Homes are not going to reinstate the original fence line, I think Bloxham Parish Council should and this should be constructed of post and wire to make it difficult for people to climb over. We should also consider planting blackthorn and brambles once the fence is complete.

If the Parish Council decide to add a second access point from the country park, the pathway through the country park would need to avoid the pond as this should always be fenced off for health and safety reasons. I would prefer that the point of entry was as far west as possible near to the attenuation pond channel. If people enter here they may be encouraged to walk along the willow walk and then railway line rather than through the wet woodland and meadow.

Marie Jones

The Slade Nature Reserve Warden



29/02/20

## Photographs

For information and to aid discussions, here are a few photographs that were taken on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020:

Route through 10m buffer zone from gate in post and wire fence:



Fragile nature of a wet meadow habitat:





Post and wire fence does not look very robust and already evidence of sagging wire where people may have climbed over:



Wall that people have been walking across (also shows gate on other side of pond):

