

Landscape and Nature Conservation Designations along the River Thames, Hurst Park and Meadows

Overview:

The River Thames - forms the northern boundary of the Borough of Elmbridge, which is characterised by attractive, historic and natural environments, with distinctive local communities. The entire length of the Thames through Elmbridge has the designation of a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (including Duck's Eyot and the riverbank margins).

Habitat at the water's edge and on the eyots supports nesting and resident mallard, diving ducks, mandarin ducks, pochard, grebe, moorhen, coot, swans, Egyptian geese, Canada geese; visiting heron, barnacle geese, cormorant, tern, black-headed gull, hobby, summer migrants and kingfisher. The vegetation that overhangs the river margins and the relative tranquillity of the Thames here is essential for these water birds to thrive.

Hurst Meadows - a rare traditional Thames wild flower and grassland flood meadow, also an SNCI by virtue of its exceptionally rich and diverse habitat and its rare and unusual flora, which include autumn squill, great burnet, and bee orchid. In the course of a year it is possible to see butterflies, moths, crickets, pollinating insects and many others. In high summer the long grass and wild flowers are alive and buzzing. In autumn there are many species of fungus. Birds include starling and thrush, now on the red list, and the tawny owl. The area also supports seven or eight species of bats, which use the river for foraging and as a fly-way. Summer migrants and bats feed on insects over the parkland. On a warm twilight there are pipistrelles and summer migrants visible darting after insects. Hurst Meadows and the River Thames in the vicinity is relatively dark, away from street and security lighting and houses. Light pollution is habitat loss for nocturnal birds and mammals.

Hurst Park - the area is about 80 acres in all, including the Meadows; it has an undeveloped river frontage of about 1.5km which is a mix of woodland, lower growing vegetation and open riverbank grassland and wild flowers, all lightly managed. The mown grass areas are popular with families and sometimes used for informal sport. Picnics, kite-flying, jogging, walking, dog-walking, kick-about, etc., all go on here and the Thames Path is accessible from the car park for disabled people. This open space also hosts charity events and regattas. The entire area of Hurst Park is marked as an area of special landscape value on Surrey County Council's map. The slipway at the car park is used for launching small boats and it is the loading bay for islanders. Hurst Park lies within the multi-functional flood plain.

From Elmbridge Borough Council Local Plan:

4.6 The River Thames will be protected through a co-ordinated policy framework which enhances its landscape and heritage assets and protects its multi-functional role for tourism, recreation and nature conservation.

CS7 All new development will be expected to enhance the local character of the area, and specific attention will need to be given to areas of high heritage value including ... the River Thames... Open space improvements will be supported along the River Thames as part of the Thames Landscape Strategy. The Green Belt and the wealth of natural assets within the area will continue to be protected.

CS12 Maintain and enhance the landscape and waterscape. Conserve and enhance biodiversity (see CS15-Biodiversity) and improve water quality, in accordance with appropriate river basin management plans.

Reduce flood risk and maintain open areas as potential flood storage.

Detailed planning guidance for the need for new development, to take account of all aspects relating to the waterside setting, will be included in future DPDs.

6.60 The River Thames forms the North, and part of the West, boundary of the Borough, and is one of the Borough's key environmental, recreational and natural assets. It is of national importance and is highly valued by residents and visitors for its outstanding landscape and its multifunctional role. The Thames Path offers full public access to the riverside through urban and more rural reaches of Elmbridge.

6.61 The diversity of the Borough's waterways and the multi-functional role they perform make a major contribution to the quality of the environment and quality of life for residents.

6.63 The setting of the individual waterways is very diverse, and all new development needs to take account of local character and distinctiveness. Particular attention should be given to any development that would have a significant influence on the character and environment.

CS13 A zone of influence set at 5km linear distance from the Special Protection Area (West London Waterbodies is one such) boundary will be established where measures must be taken to ensure that the integrity of the SPA is protected.

7.2 The River Thames corridor and its tributaries act as spinal routes providing opportunities for linking with the rest of the network to form wildlife corridors and are a significant recreational and amenity asset. The network defines the Borough's landscape character which is distinctive and highly valued. It contributes to local identity and sense of place, and includes the Thames Floodplain and River Thames

CS14 Green Infrastructure - Ensuring new development protects and enhances local landscape ... and takes account of the setting, intrinsic character and amenity value

Improving the biodiversity value and function of the network in accordance with CS15

Developing green links within and across borough boundaries

Safeguarding important trees, woodlands and hedgerows

CS15 Maximising the contribution of other green spaces and features where appropriate to the area's biodiversity resources, including identifying and developing wildlife corridors to provide ecological 'stepping stones' and form a coherent local and regional biodiversity network in accordance with CS12-The River Thames and its tributaries, and CS14-Green Infrastructure; Ensuring new development does not result in a net loss of biodiversity.

7.8 There are a number of sites which provide important supporting habitats for the South West London Waterbodies SPA and Ramsar Site including Queen Elizabeth II, Island Barn, Molesey East and West reservoirs.

7.9 The Council's approach to protect and strengthen the Borough's biodiversity resources, whilst planning for spatial change, is to focus development on previously developed land within urban areas and to maximise the protection of biodiversity habitats. In addition, the role of other greenspaces and features in providing a wider framework for supporting biodiversity will be recognised and enhanced. Steps will be taken to identify and develop

wildlife corridors, such as watercourses, hedgerows, woodlands, road and railway verges, which provide essential links between habitats, strengthening the network and improving species resilience to climate change.

Development Management Plan, Elmbridge

DM6 Development proposals

Does not result in loss of, or damage to, trees and hedgerows that are, or are capable of, making a significant contribution to the character or amenity of the area....

Would not result in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats including ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees....

DM13 Riverside development

Sympathetically reflect their riverside location and respect the riverside outlook and orientation, protecting and enhancing the individuality and character of the river and its landscape in accordance with the Thames Landscape Strategy, including views and vistas. This is particularly relevant to development proposals that are within or conspicuous from the Thames Policy Area or fall within or adjacent to conservation areas. In all riverside locations, it will be appropriate for a strip of land to be retained free of development to maintain the open character of the riverside as well as providing important maintenance space and public access, where present, in the interests of biodiversity and alleviating flood risk.

DM20 Open Spaces

The open space within Elmbridge is essential to its character and contributes to the quality of the landscape and the network of green infrastructure. It is very important to local people, who enjoy the visual benefits, wildlife habitats and the recreation function it provides. In addition, open spaces are also beneficial in helping to minimise flood risk.

The Borough's natural and manmade landscape is distinctive and highly valued. This, together with the network of green spaces, provides a setting for strategic views and landmarks that contribute to the character of the landscape.

DM21 Biodiversity

In accordance with Core Strategy policy CS15 – Biodiversity, all new development will be expected to preserve, manage and where possible enhance existing habitats, protected species and biodiversity features. The Council will work in partnership to explore new opportunities for habitat creation and restoration.

Development affecting national sites of biodiversity importance will not be permitted if it will have an adverse effect, directly or indirectly, individually or in combination, on the site or its features.

Development affecting locally designated sites of biodiversity importance or sites falling outside these that support national priority habitats or priority species will not be permitted if it will result in significant harm to the nature conservation value of the site or feature.

Strengthen and protect the Borough's natural resources, working in partnership to achieve the aims of the Surrey Nature Partnership Task Group, in reference to Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services (Defra 2011) and improve the network of habitats such as wildlife corridors, rivers, woodlands and hedgerows.

Other considerations relating to borough planning policy:

There is no guidance for good design on the riverside itself at Hurst Park and Meadows, only for the different character areas of the built environment. The borough states that consideration needs to be given to the impact of development on long views from the north side of the River Thames where the roof-scape is consistent and non-intrusive. Development should have regard to general advice, particularly its impact on the wider riverside setting.

Open Space and Environmental Improvements**Indicators:**

Amount of open space accessible to the public

Number of environmental improvement schemes

Opportunities

Increase protection to areas of high nature conservation value.

A co-ordinated approach will be adopted to the use and management of the area's open spaces, with the aim of balancing the needs of the community with the imperative to protect the sites of European and national nature conservation value located in the north of the area including the Knight and Bessborough, Queen Elizabeth II and Island Barn reservoirs and the Molesey East and West reserves.

The reservoirs and the rivers have high biodiversity value which needs to be protected and improved wherever possible.

The Green Belt and the wealth of natural assets within the area will continue to be protected. The Council will work with partners to increase and improve public access to open spaces, and protect and improve areas of high biodiversity value as appropriate.

Rivers

To take part in a co-ordinated approach to the management of the Borough's waterways in a way that protects and enhances their distinct role and character and minimises their potential to flood.

Indicators

Number of environmental management and improvement schemes delivered along the Borough's riparian landscape and waterways.

Areas with designations relevant to the River Thames and Hurst Meadows (Middlesex and Surrey Banks)

- **River Thames and islands through Elmbridge borough:** Site of Nature Conservation Importance - an important habitat for migratory fish, birds and macroinvertebrates. Semi-natural habitat associated with tow paths at the top of the river banks provides suitable habitat for a number of species. Duck's Eyot is included in the SNCI because it provides nesting opportunities for various species as well as a safe haven for roosting, preening and young. The river is designated as wildlife corridor, linking the network of nature conservation areas. These important habitats are at risk of degradation and fragmentation due to constant pressure of

development, with increased lighting being a particular problem for all species, whether nocturnal or diurnal. It is a particular issue along this major waterway, used for foraging and commuting by seven or eight different bat species. Intervals of lighting and light spill into this dark corridor lead to it becoming more and more fragmented and inhibit movement of nocturnal mammals. It poses a major threat to the survival of bats. Protecting and establishing tree networks and river corridors may improve the resilience of some bat populations to urbanisation.

The SNCI boundary includes the river to the top of the bank and semi-natural habitats associated with the towpath.

- **Hurst Meadows SNCI** - within the Thames Policy Area, a rare Thames flood meadow. Comments from Natural England: This area is both a haven for wildlife and a valuable asset for the local community to be able to enjoy tranquil recreation and to connect with nature. It can form an important role in outdoor learning for all concerned within the local community. There is a very impressive list of wild flowers present on this area. Protecting this site and its habitats will allow it to continue to be used and valued by local people for access and enjoyment of the natural environment.
- **Knight and Bessborough Reservoirs**, Hurst Road, Molesey (2.3km from Hurst Meadows):
Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
Part of the South West London Waterbodies Special Protection Area (SPA, EU designation);
Ramsar Site, recognised for its global importance in supporting wintering populations of Gadwall and Shoveler.
- **Molesey Reservoirs** (1.5km from Hurst Meadows): SNCI. Following a period of mineral extraction, habitat restoration includes several hectares of reedbeds, wet grassland, exposed mud and shallow water with gravel islands surrounded by and bisected by ridges and banks of drier grassland, with specific management objectives for the different habitat areas of the site.
- **Queen Elizabeth II Reservoir** (3km from Hurst Meadows): SNCI, important for birds.
- **Stain Hill and Sunnyside Reservoirs** (1.5-2km from Hurst Meadows): SNCI and partly in the South West London Water Bodies SPA, support waterfowl throughout the year. Stain Hill has significant populations of moulting and wintering waterfowl, particularly where the water is shallow and marginal vegetation has developed. There are nationally significant numbers of shoveler and gadwall in late winter. The dry concrete banks support one of the UK's largest populations of the nationally scarce plant tower mustard (*arabis glabra*), a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority species. Other locally uncommon plants include field mouse-ear (*cerastium arvense*), vervain (*verbena officinalis*) and wild clary (*salvia verbenaca*).
- **Platt's Eyot** (1km from Hurst Meadows): SNCI The entire island is listed within the River Thames site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation, with special reference to the tumulus and river margins at the western end of the island. This designation covers the Thames through London and its islands.

- **Bushy Park and Home Park** (0.5km from Hurst Meadows): SSSI. Support a range of semi-natural habitats including acid and neutral grassland, scrub, wood pasture, veteran trees and woodland. It is of special nature conservation interest by reason of nationally important features that occur within the site and are supported by the wider habitat mosaic. The mosaic of veteran tree, grassland, and scrub habitats provide a home to internationally important assemblages of invertebrates.
- **Molesey and Hersham Biodiversity Opportunity Area:** designated due to the presence of standing open water and floodplain grassland which are priority habitats in the UK; considered to provide good opportunities for enhancement.
- **South West London Waterbodies Special Protection Area:** South West London Waterbodies was classified as a Special Protection Area on 22 September 2000. The site is comprised of a series of discrete waterbodies in the Thames Valley between Windsor and Hampton Court that support a range of man-made and semi-natural open-water habitats through a series of reservoirs and former gravel pits with internationally important numbers of wintering gadwall and shoveler.

Ramsar Sites: buffer zones and general remarks:

Ramsar, an international treaty signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, for the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands, recognizing their fundamental ecological functions and their economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value. The buffer zone should be that area surrounding the wetland within which land use activities may directly affect the ecological character of the wetland itself, and the objective for land use within the buffer zone should be one of sustainable use through ecosystem management, consistent with the maintenance of the ecological character of the wetland.

The maintenance of biological diversity is usually regarded as one of the most important aims of nature conservation and the sustainable use of biological resources. This is largely because one of the most obvious, and serious, effects of human intervention on the environment has been the destruction of habitats and extinction of species.

Naturalness is one of the most important criteria applied to ecological character features. In general, the more natural a feature is, the greater the value of its ecological character.

The importance of buffer zones, and ecological corridors - measures relating to both species and habitat - should be adopted in the surrounding areas.

SSSI impact risk zones - would apply in relation to Bushy Park, which is a Site of Scientific Importance within 500m.

Observations from Surrey Nature Partnership

Just 5 minutes of exercise in a green space can boost mental health.

Over the last 20 years alone there has been a relentless decline in the numbers of species and extent of habitats they rely on across the globe, reflected by our local experience in Surrey; over 40% of priority habitats and 30% of priority species are declining nationally.

In recent times there has been recognition of the need for a landscape scale approach; to truly manage our natural resources effectively we need to take a holistic approach....

National Planning Policy Statement 12: a network of multi-functional greenspace...both new and existing...both rural and urban...which supports the natural and ecological processes...and is integral to the health and quality of life of sustainable communities...”

Other national considerations - water sports activity and the natural environment

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Policy outlined in a paper (2000), and in summary it stated that water-based sport and recreation should be accommodated wherever possible, though not to the extent that it damages the natural environment.

Natural England: the vision is for countryside recreation ‘which contributes to sustainable development and environmentally sustainable practices. This means that it needs to avoid damage to important and irreplaceable wildlife assets, minimise and compensate fully for other unavoidable effects, and should contribute to the delivery of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan targets and objectives.’

Mapping areas where sensitive bird species occur is often a useful first step. This should indicate the location of possible nesting, roosting and feeding sites for species and, where possible, the minimum areas required by a species. The zoning system can grade human usage in terms of noise and activity levels, for example, water-based recreation areas. Limiting numbers, education and codes of practice may be an approach.