

## **MOWSBURY HILLFORT VISION 2024 to 2029**

### **Introduction**

1. A vision document was produced by the Friends of Putnoe Wood and Mowsbury Hillfort in 2016 to guide the group's activities in the absence of a management plan for the site. It ran until 2021. A Higher Level Stewardship Agreement (HLS) between English Nature (EN) and Bedford Borough Council (BBC) was in place from 2013 to 2023.

This document reviews the previous Vision and sets out a new vision for 2024 to 2029.

### **Site location, features and characteristics**

2. The site is located to the north-east of Mowsbury Golf and Squash Complex, Cleat Hill, Ravensden (TL06610 53189) and measures approximately 4ha in area. The Hillfort is a scheduled monument (list entry no.1015588) and county wildlife site (CWS) in the ownership of Bedford Borough Council and is managed as a public amenity area. The monument is situated on a spur of chalky boulder clay overlooking the Ouse Valley. It comprises an early Iron Age slight univallate hillfort, within which a Medieval Moated Site was constructed in the Middle Ages. The habitat on site includes lowland wildflower meadow on boulder clay, broadleaf woodland, traditional orchards, scrub areas and ephemeral ponds.
3. The main remaining archaeological features are Iron Age ramparts on the south and the west of the monument; a Medieval ditch some 2 metres deep and 10 metres wide within the Iron Age ramparts which encloses an inner island and partially encloses an outer island; medieval fishponds north of the islands and north of the traditional orchard (east); and a leat stream north of Mowsbury Hill Meadow.
4. A public footpath runs west of Mowsbury Hill Meadow and turns east to run along part of the monument's northern boundary.

### **Habitat and wildlife**

5. The site contains a wide variety of habitats including semi-improved and species rich neutral grassland, traditional orchards, lowland mixed deciduous woodland and a series of moats and ponds. The courtyard meadow especially contains a good diversity of herbs including common spotted orchid, wild liquorice, and yellow rattle. The orchard contains a mix of fruit trees including apple, pear, plum and medlar. There is also a wild service tree. In summer there is a wide variety of butterflies, bumblebees and other invertebrates. Mammals include rabbits, badgers and muntjac deer.

### **Previous Vision**

6. The 2016 Vision divided the area into zones of shared characteristics: archaeology, wildflower meadow, orchard, woodland and scrub. From an archaeological perspective this has limitations as it gives the impression that only the earthworks on site are of archaeological value, rather than the scheduled site as a whole. The annual tasks of clearing have settled into a routine which keep the

site reasonably clear for visitors, whilst retaining its ambience. Wild flowers in the meadows have increased, as has the flora in pond 1.

7. There were periods of lockdown in 2020 and 2021 for corona virus and during that time use of the site increased. Some used it for partying, lit fires and left rubbish, but others appreciated the site for walking and quiet enjoyment. Part of the path round the east moat was re-routed away from the top of the moat because of wear prior to lock down.
8. Ravensden Parish Council proposed that the site be designated a Local Green Space in their Neighbourhood Plan, because local residents identified the site as being the most valued open space in the parish for its history, beauty, tranquillity and wildlife. This has now been approved.
9. The County Wildlife Site's panel approved the expansion of the CWS to include the Mowsbury wildflower meadow and subsequently approved an expansion to cover all the area managed by the Friends.
10. Many objectives from the previous Vision have been achieved:
  - Grass is cut and removed from Mowsbury Hill Meadow annually and as a result, wildflowers have increased, to the extent that the area has met the neutral grassland County Wildlife Site selection criteria. CWS status was approved in October 2021. A further extension to the CWS in 2023 encompasses the whole site.
  - A number of trees were removed under the HLS agreement to let light into pond areas.
  - An interpretation board is now on site.
  - The leat has been included in the Bedford Borough Council Historic Environment Record.
  - A burn site has been established away from the scheduled area to assist in the disposal of cut material. Although the emphasis is on composting arisings or chipping as appropriate.
  - Moats, ponds, leat and ramparts are mainly clear of scrub and remain visible. Wild flowers on the ramparts such as cowslips, yellow rattle and common knapweed have increased.
  - Most fruit trees in the east orchard are thriving. One pear tree fell and one medlar is deteriorating.
  - A view point to the north towards the water tower has been opened up and maintained.
  - As part of the promotion of the site a wassail has been held each year except in 2021 and 22 due to corona virus; a Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) Mark was awarded in 2016 and highly commended award in 2023; Green Flags awarded 2018 to 2023; visits from Scott Lower school and Renhold Lower school were arranged and Mark Rutherford School pupils assisted in some tasks; site walks were arranged for the WI, Wildlife Trust members and CPRE members. The website and facebook page have been maintained.

Some objectives are outstanding:

- Rabbits are not controlled and continue to damage the archaeology.
- The Island has largely been cleared of perimeter dead hedge and views across it restored.
- Bramble in the courtyard wildflower meadow has been reduced but remains fairly widespread. However, the wildflower coverage has not reduced, with additional plants such as field scabious, dropwort and common twayblade making an appearance.
- Work on the management plan, archaeological and hydrological surveys under the HLS were not progressed due to funding uncertainties.

## 2024 Vision

### 11. Objectives

- Preserve archaeological features.
- Maintain the visibility of the archaeological features.
- Encourage diversity of wildlife and habitats.
- Improve awareness of, and accessibility to, the site by improving signage from local footpaths.
- Consider possible extension to the Local Nature Reserve.

## Analysis of key issues

12. A SWOT analysis has been undertaken for the plan area.

### Strengths

- Scheduled Monument incorporating an Iron Age Hillfort and Medieval Moated Site.
- County Wildlife Site and Local Nature Reserve.
- Ravensden Neighbourhood Plan Local Green Space.
- Attractive and atmospheric site.
- Wide variety of habitats and wildlife.
- Accessible by the public.
- Active Friend's group.
- Regular maintenance and monitoring of the site by the Friends and BBC .

### Weaknesses

- Limited analysis of archaeology.
- Limited survey information for wildlife.
- Limited public awareness, although this has increased during and post pandemic.

### Opportunities

- Improve visibility of archaeological features.
- Improve archaeological interpretation of the site.
- Encourage a wider diversity of wildlife.
- Strike an appropriate balance between the archaeology and wildlife requirements.
- Improving links with Ravensden Parish Council.
- Promote public awareness.
- Improve signage to the site.
- Change of site management company for the adjacent golf course complex (pursuing improved driving range fencing and signage to the site).
- Additional bench.

### Threats

- Damage to earthworks by encroaching trees and scrub.
- Damage to earthworks by rabbits and badgers.
- Members of the public leaving rubbish, dog mess, cultivating the site, digging, metal detecting, lighting fires and ripping out the seating.
- Budget limitations.
- Diseases such as Ash dieback
- Encroaching urban development.
- Increased footfall since the pandemic lockdowns.
- Golf balls being fired onto the site from the driving range.
- The ageing profile of the active volunteers. Although recent efforts to address this have had some success.

## Strategic approach

13. A simplified approach is proposed for this Vision:

The scheduled area is regarded as having potential for archaeological interest although it includes lowland mixed deciduous woodland, secondary woodland, two orchards and a wildflower meadow as well as the more prominent earthworks. Therefore digging, dead hedging or piling of deadwood to be avoided where possible.

Areas outside the scheduled area are less sensitive and could be used for piling dead wood or composting. Burning away from the scheduled area remains the preferred option for disposal of cuttings (where these cannot be removed from the site or composted away from the monument). Cut or dead wood could also be chipped, for subsequent use in footpath and other ground repairs.

Essentially the aim will be to maintain the site in its current condition.

### Within scheduled area

Area	Action	Outcome at 2029
Moats, ditches, ponds, island and ramparts.	Keep clear of scrub so that archaeological features can be seen. Ponds with no more than 25% shade on southern banks to encourage wildlife.	Features visible and maintained by annual clearing
Courtyard wildflower meadow	Cut annually and remove cuttings to reduce nutrients and control encroaching scrub.	No degradation in wildflower numbers. No encroachment of scrub
South orchard and secondary woodland	Consider taking forward advice to create a dappled shade habitat by reducing some cherry plums. Consider creating a view point from the raised walkway by reducing the height of some cherry plums and blackthorn. Reduction of cherry plums would also provide additional habitat for birds.	A dappled shade habitat with increased biodiversity
Deciduous woodland (as defined on the BCN Wildlife Trust report of 2012)	Monitor trees for safety and for potential damage to archaeology, allow some fallen and dead wood to remain where not impacting on the archaeology and remove cut wood.	Retained as in 2024
Southern hillside	Keep clear of scrub within the scheduled area.	Area no more overgrown than in 2024
East Orchard	Maintain fruit trees and cut grass annually	90% of fruit trees thriving.

### Outside scheduled area

Area	Action	Outcome in 2029
Western tree belt	Retain and leave uncleared	Area unchanged from 2024
Leat	Keep clear of scrub	Area clear
Mowsbury hill meadow	Cut annually and remove cuttings to reduce nutrients and encourage wildflowers	Wildflowers continue to increase
Public footpath	Keep clear for access	Area clear
Northern viewpoint	Keep viewpoint open	Viewpoint open
Deciduous woodland east of orchards	Monitor trees for safety, allow other dead and fallen wood to remain if it is not interfering with the archaeology. Remove cut wood.	Retained as in 2024

## **General management issues**

14. The Friends and BBC have a memorandum of understanding which sets out the overall management arrangements. BBC will continue to lead in monitoring the health of major trees within the site and take any necessary action to maintain their health, including any work required to make them safe or, where appropriate, their felling.
15. The BBC and Friends will work together to monitor wear on footpaths, where this threatens to damage any archaeological features; filling holes and undertaking minor repairs with materials from site. Also monitor and, where necessary, discourage further expansion of badger sets across the monument. The Friends will continue discussions with Ravensden Parish Council on improved signage to the site.

## **Resources**

16. BBC employees and Friends of Putnoe Woods and Mowsbury Hillfort. The Friends Group has access to a wide range of hand tools. The Borough Council has a range of power tools (including brush cutters), vehicles and equipment (such as mowers). The Council also has a general budget for countryside sites which we may be able to draw upon. Ward funding is periodically available for specific projects or purchasing of materials and equipment. Donor support to specific projects.

## **Monitoring progress**

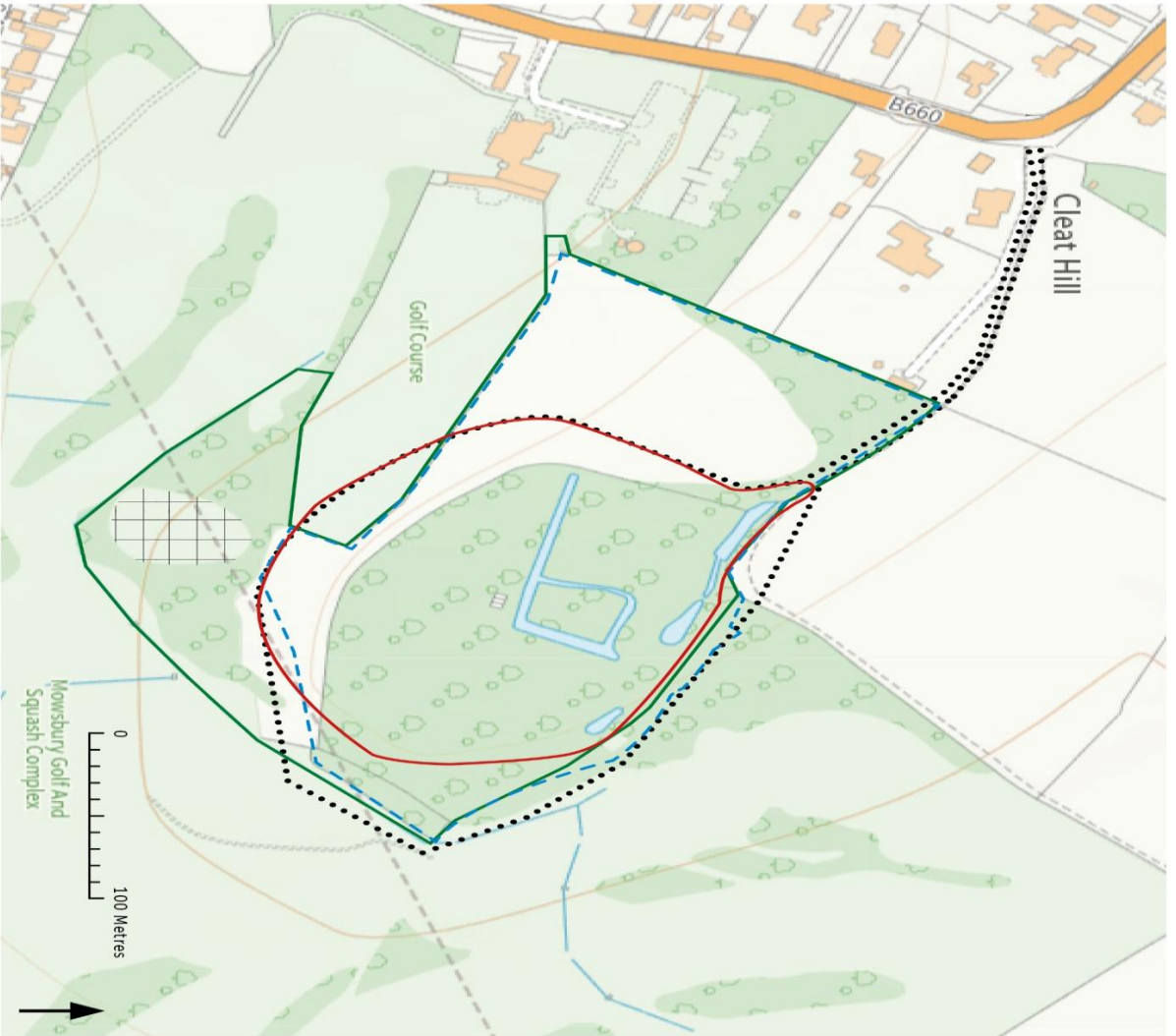
17. Friends bi-monthly meetings with the Borough Council provide an opportunity to review progress. Adhoc meetings with Natural England, Historic England, Bedford BC Archaeology Officer and Borough officers will be arranged to discuss any issues arising which need other approvals. Regular monitoring of newly planted trees on the hillside meadow, wildflowers and wildlife will be undertaken, including summer butterfly surveys.

## **Acknowledgements**

18. This vision draws upon information in the BCN Wildlife Trust survey 2012 for defining the areas of deciduous woodland and secondary woodland, together with the BNC WLT survey of 2022 for advice on maintaining biodiversity. It also draws on advice given at site meetings with Natural England, Historic England, Bedford Borough Archaeology Officer, Borough Council officers and representatives of the Friends on 9 Feb 2016, 4 April 2018 and 9 May 2022.

## Mowsbury Hillfort

Location and site protections



- Key**
- The Ravensden Neighbourhood Plan Local Green Space area
  - The County Wildlife site area
  - The Scheduled Monument area
  - The Historic Environment Record area
  - Old butts area

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