

RESTORATION OF RIPARIAN HABITATS ON THE OLD COURSE OF THE RIVER ISE IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE – PARTNERSHIP WORKING

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Abstract

Within the last 100 years much of the course of the River Ise in Northamptonshire has been modified. Most of the cornmills and associated water features have disappeared or, as with the water meadows at Wicksteed, have become disconnected from the main river. Several areas where the old meanders remain next to the river were Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), but in some cases as succession took place these areas lost their botanical interest. The Revital-ISE Project, which started in 2008, has been instrumental in the campaign to restore these features and three sites have been specifically targeted. It is hoped that once restored some of these sites will be managed by the local communities and as such a new community group called ‘Natural-ISE’ has been formed.

The first site was the Wildlife Trust reserve at Tailby Meadows, Desborough, while the second was at the ‘Ise Valley Park’ in Kettering. Just below those sites in Kettering is the third site which is a remnant of the water meadow system which was found down the Ise valley. This site which is approximately 7ha in size is being restored to its former glory.

In a separate initiative a range of training events have been held at a local field centre for groups of local volunteers. These covered many aspects of managing and surveying the countryside. These volunteers will then hopefully be able to manage their own local sites in the future.

Restoration sites

At Tailby Meadows a failed attempt had been made several years ago to force water back through the old meanders. The River Restoration Centre was therefore asked to draw up a plan to properly restore the meanders and close the straightened channel. The meadow at Tailby was a LWS and contained one of the few remaining areas of wet grassland dominated by Great burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) in Northamptonshire. This site had suffered over the last few years from drying out and lack of management but the management has now been improved. During 2010 the meanders were completely re-engineered using a two staged channel while the old straightened channel was filled with the spoil. New cattle drinking points were installed and the river was fenced to stop cattle going in to it. This work was funded by the Environment Agency through the Revital-ISE project. During early 2010

fencing has been provided to divide the field and cattle handling facilities have been installed. This was funded by the local County Councillor from her empowerment fund and was supported by the local Wildlife Trust group.

The five sites in the Ise Valley Park comprised of one area of old meander through a woodland and four sections of cut off old river course. The area is owned by Kettering Borough Council and has just been designated as the 'Ise Valley Park'. Many years ago these areas were managed by the local community but over the years the work became too much for the group. The area then became overgrown and dried out and lost its LWS status. The meander has been restored and will flow in times of flood and then hold water through most of the year. The bankside trees have been coppiced to allow light back in to the site and wetland plants re-introduced. The smaller sections of old river course have been reconnected to the river and will fill up when the river is high and then hold water throughout most of the year. Once again, where required, bankside trees have been coppiced and wetland plants re-introduced. It is hoped that these sites will return to LWS standard over the next few years. This work was funded by the Environment Agency through the Revital-ISE project.

The water meadow site, which has not been used in living memory, is being restored to form part of a new nature reserve at Wicksteed Park. The site is a Local Wildlife Site but has had no appropriate management until being cut in December 2010 to allow restoration work to start. The funding for this restoration is coming from Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship scheme, with the Environment Agency restoring the connection to the river through the Revital-ISE project. A grant from the Big Lottery 'Awards for All' is funding a range of community events and guided walks at the site. The restoration work is being completed by a range of volunteers from groups such as Natural-ISE, Groundwork Northamptonshire, Wildlife Trust, Wicksteed Park, Moulton College, interested locals and local business staff, and groups of Community Service participants. This new nature reserve will be managed by the Wildlife Trust and will help to create a green wedge through the centre of Kettering.

Discussion

As part of the project, and jointly with Kettering Borough Council and Groundwork Northamptonshire, a new volunteer group has been established. This group who call themselves 'Natural-ISE' are going to take on the future management of the areas in the Ise Valley Park and already have plans for further improving biodiversity by sowing areas with wildflower seed and planting wildflower plug plants. They are already helping with the restoration of the water meadow at Wicksteed Park and there may well be a role for them in voluntary site management once this site is restored.

At Tailby Meadows there is already a well supported Wildlife Trust group who have an interest in the site. As it is an ageing group they now do not take an active role in site management and that remains the task of the Wildlife Trust staff and mid week volunteers. It may well be a future role to try to encourage younger, more active volunteers but that may

impinge on recruitment of volunteers for the Pocket Park group and a Borough Council green space development project.

As part of the Revital-ISE project, training for local groups was seen as a priority. To help improve volunteer knowledge a series of free workshops have been run at a local field centre. These 14 training events were funded by a grant from the Big Lottery 'Awards for All' and included coppicing, hedgelaying, fencing, survey work, management plans and plant and tree identification. Partners involved included: Wildlife Trust, Pocket Parks, OPAL surveys, University of Nottingham and Newton Field Centre. These have been well attended and feedback received has been very positive. Funding has now been sought to run more over the next year. The Wildlife Trust also provides a range of very good workshops which are available for volunteer/staff training. These are aimed at a slightly higher level, run mainly at weekends but are not free.

All these sites are either within or on the edge of urban areas and it is important to involve the local community in decision making and implementation where possible. As funding for management of some of these areas is reduced (especially Local Authority funding) replacing that with keen, well trained volunteers may be the only alternative if we want these urban/semi-urban greenspaces managed in the future. This also fits with the Government's localism agenda as part of the 'Big Society'.

Keywords: Revital-ISE; meanders; habitat; local volunteer groups; wet grassland; Tailby meadows; community training events; Ise Valley Park.