# Wildlife Audit for Almeley Parish Council

Date: January 2018

Prepared by: Herefordshire Wildlife Trust

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## Background:

Almeley Parish Council are currently preparing the Almeley Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). the Parish Councilwould like to incorporate key policies that will prevent or appropriately mitigate development that could be harmful to important species and habitats. As part of this work the Parish Council would like to increase their knowledge of biodiversity hotspots, determine where good ecological connectivity occurs in the landscape. This will help inform the development of the NDP and its future implementation.

To support the Parish Council, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust have completed this initial desk based study that explores and interprets some of theexisting datasets relating to habitats and wildlife within the Parish. The assessment also includesa number of sites in the immediate vicinity to the Parish, as this will assist with future assessment of habitat connectivity, recognising that the value of habitats within the Parish are in part dependent upon the quality of surrounding sites, particularly for mobile species.

Although the Neighbourhood Plan is the principle driver of this work, the Parish Council are also keen to develop proactive conservation activity within the Parish more generally. This desk based assessment of existing data sources within the Parish the biodiversity resource within the Parish is the first step towards a fuller assessment of the habitats and species that the Parish supports.

As part of this study Herefordshire Wildlife Trust will work with Almeley Parish Council to propose some draft biodiversity policies for the Parish to include in their NDP

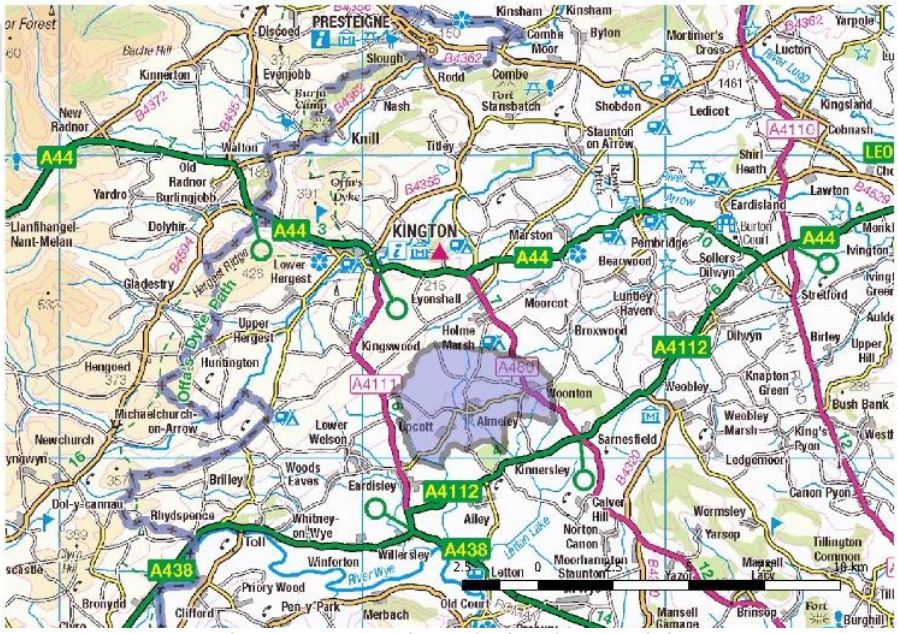


Figure 1. Location of Almeley Parish

## Habitat datasets assessed

The datasets and informationinterrogated in this desk survey included:

- Local Wildlife Sites
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest,
- Ancient Woodland Inventory
- Common Land
- People's Trust for Endangered Species Orchards Data
- Agri-environment scheme land parcels
- Google Earth

This information was mapped with species information extracted and condition stated where known. Aerial photo analysis was undertaken to provide greater confidence in the Local Wildlife Sites and Common Land habitat determinations. Any species data relevant to the Parish has been collated from available documentation and knowledge within the Wildlife Trust staff body.

The maps and report should be considered in conjunction with the accompanying spreadsheet which lists all the land parcels highlighted on the maps and descriptions below. The spreadsheet provides additional detail relating to areas of land parcels and habitat types. It is important to note that many sites have multiple designations, for example some Local Wildlife Sites are also Commons or Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Therefore, care must be taken when totalling areas of certain habitats to prevent double counting.

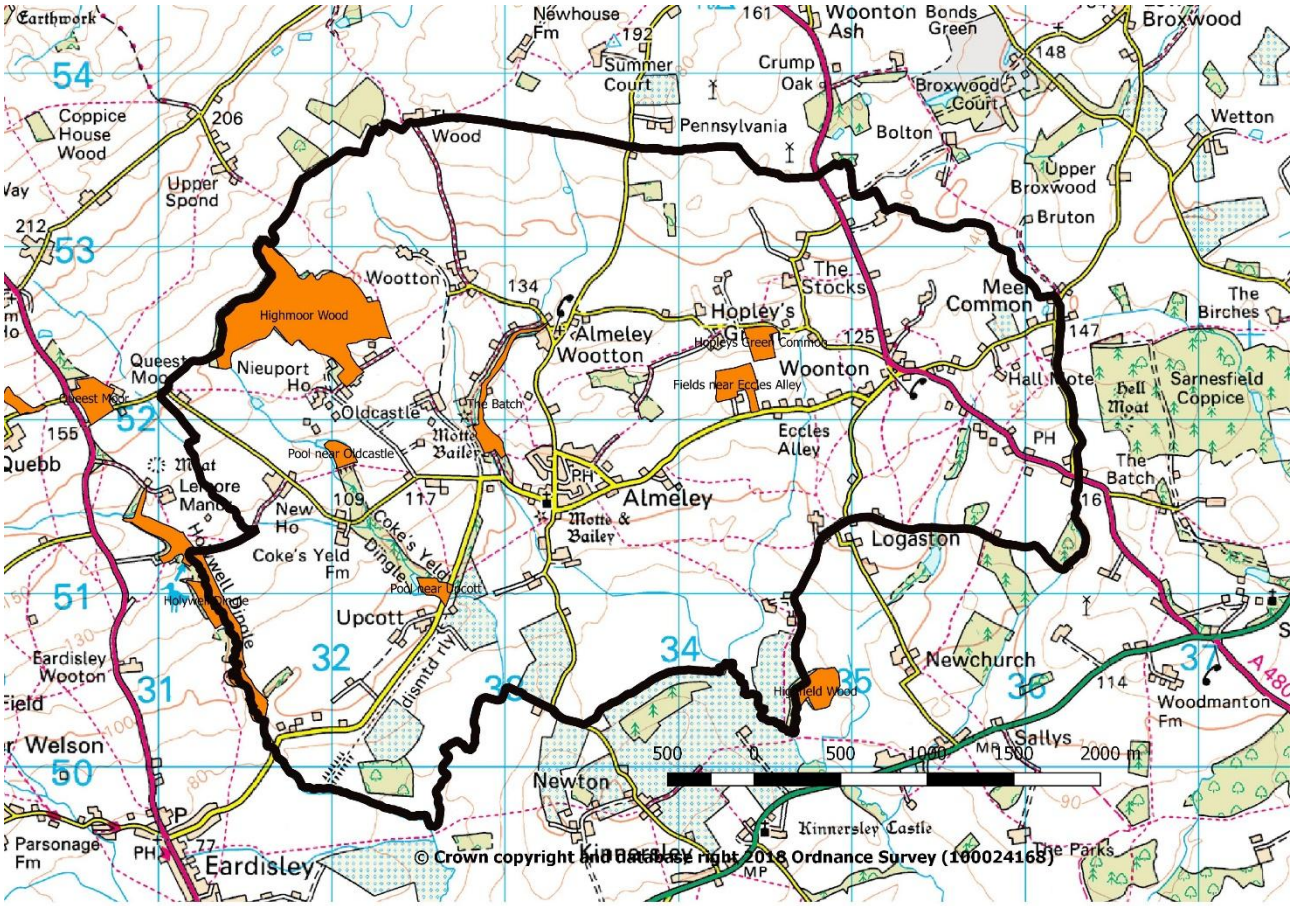
### 1 Local Wildlife Sites:

There are approximately 750 Local wildlife Sites across the County, most of which were designated back in the 1980s. The sites cover a wide range of high quality habitats that in turn support many of our county's rare and protected species. The limitation with Local Wildlife Sites is the age of the data. Many sites have not been revisited since designation and so their status is unknown whilst others have been damaged or destroyed. However, they give a good reference point from which to understand where biodiversity and good quality habitats may persist in the County. Local Wildlife Sites are recognised within the planning system and therefore a constraint on inappropriate development.

**Analysis shows that there are eight Local Wildlife Sites within or partially within Almeley Parish with a further two sites, Quebb and Queestmoor, within 1km of the parish boundary. Aerial imagery suggests that one of the Local Wildlife Sites, Hopley's Green Common, has been agriculturally improved and its wildlife interest lost. Similarly, 'Fields near Eccles Alley' has seen some agricultural improvement in itslargest northern field, also with likely loss of biodiversity interest. Unfortunately, these were the only two LWS within the Parish that were listed as grassland habitats.**

**The remaining six Local Wildlife Sites consist of two ponds/open water and 4 woodland sites all of which appear on the most recent Google Earth imagery.**

Figure 2. Local Wildlife Sites in Almeley Parish




## 2 Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) are protected by law to conserve their wildlife or geology. Natural England are the government agency responsible for ensuring that they are appropriately managed and identify land suitable for designation. Unlike Local Wildlife Sites, SSSIs are condition monitored with a view to obtaining or maintaining 'favourable condition' through appropriate management. These sites are also used to underpin other national and international nature conservation designations such as Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas. Most SSSIs are privately-owned or managed; others are owned or managed by public bodies or non-government organisations.

**There are no Sites of Special Scientific Interest within Almeley Parish but there are two within close proximity;QuebbMeadows and Queestmoor Meadows. Both of these SSSI's are also designated as Local Wildlife Sites. Details relating to designation and wildlife interest are contained in Appendix 1. Quebb Meadow is managed by Herefordshire Wildlife Trust as one of their suit of nature reserves.**

## 3 Ancient Woodland Inventory:

All woodlands within the County, considered ancient and semi-natural in nature have been mapped using the Ancient Woodland Inventory. Where possible this includes woodlands that have been

planted with a timber crop – commonly called Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) woodland.

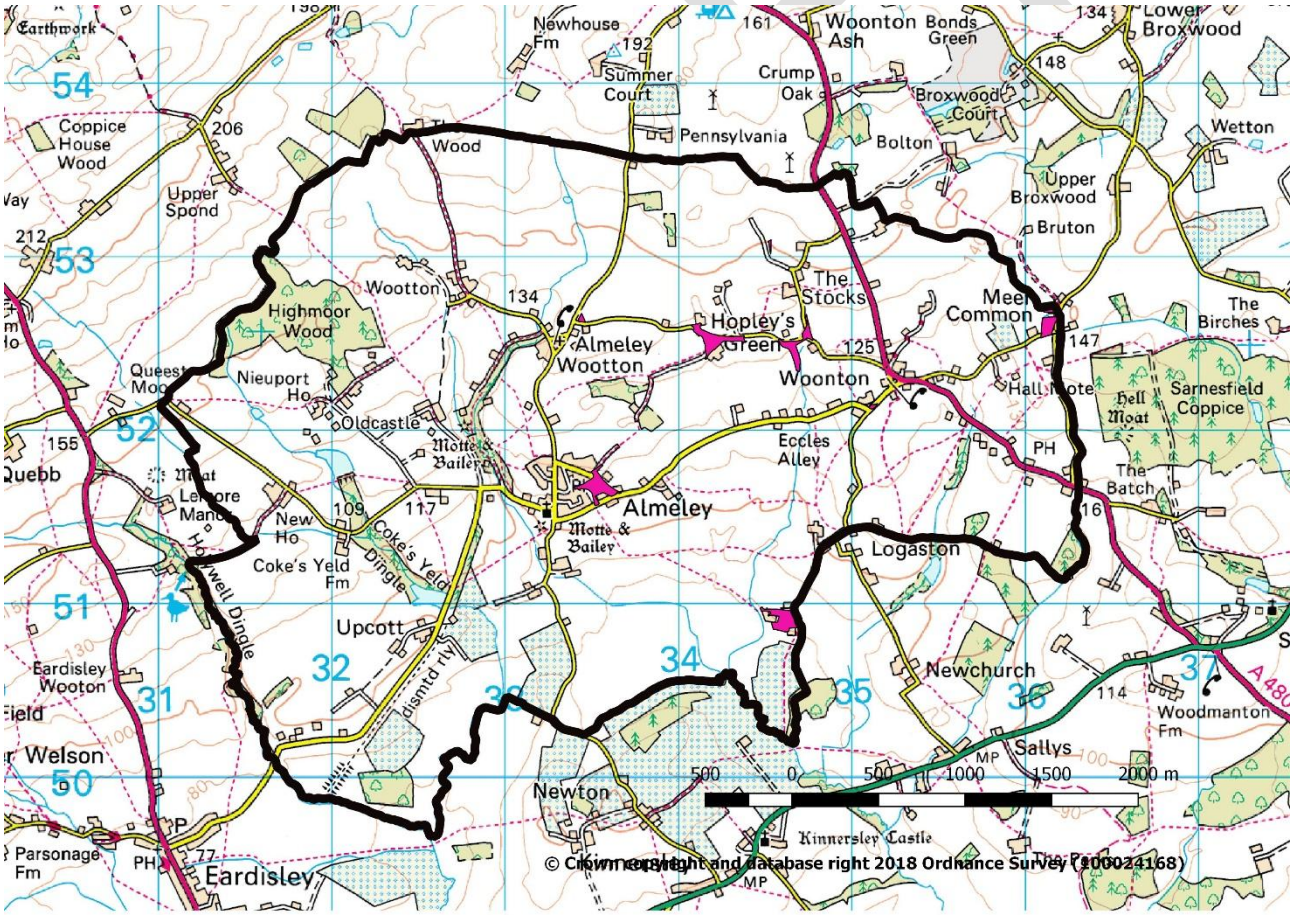
**The inventory shows ten distinct areas of ancient woodland within the Parish: Highmoor Wood, Ash Furlong, Pensylvania Wood, Ash Furlong Coppice, Cockshoot Wood, Buttington Wood, Highfield Wood, Rough Moors, Hollywell Dingle and Plantation Wood.**

## 4 Commons and Access Land:

Herefordshire Wildlife Trust hold file copies of survey information undertaken by the Local Authority on the County's Common Land in 2005. These are probably the most recent surveys of Commons undertaken within the County. The surveys contain brief information relating to site habitats and species and informs on their management. Relevant information has been extracted and digitised where possible (i.e. where there are no confidentiality issues) and compiled into the audit.

**There are eight Registered Commons within Almeley Parish. Two sites, Mere Common and Tompkins Green, do not have registered owners. The remaining six are listed as being within the ownership of Herefordshire Council, although over the past year the Local Authority have been selling some of their common land within the Parish as part of their program of asset transfer, and so we are seeing a transition of Common Land ownership.**

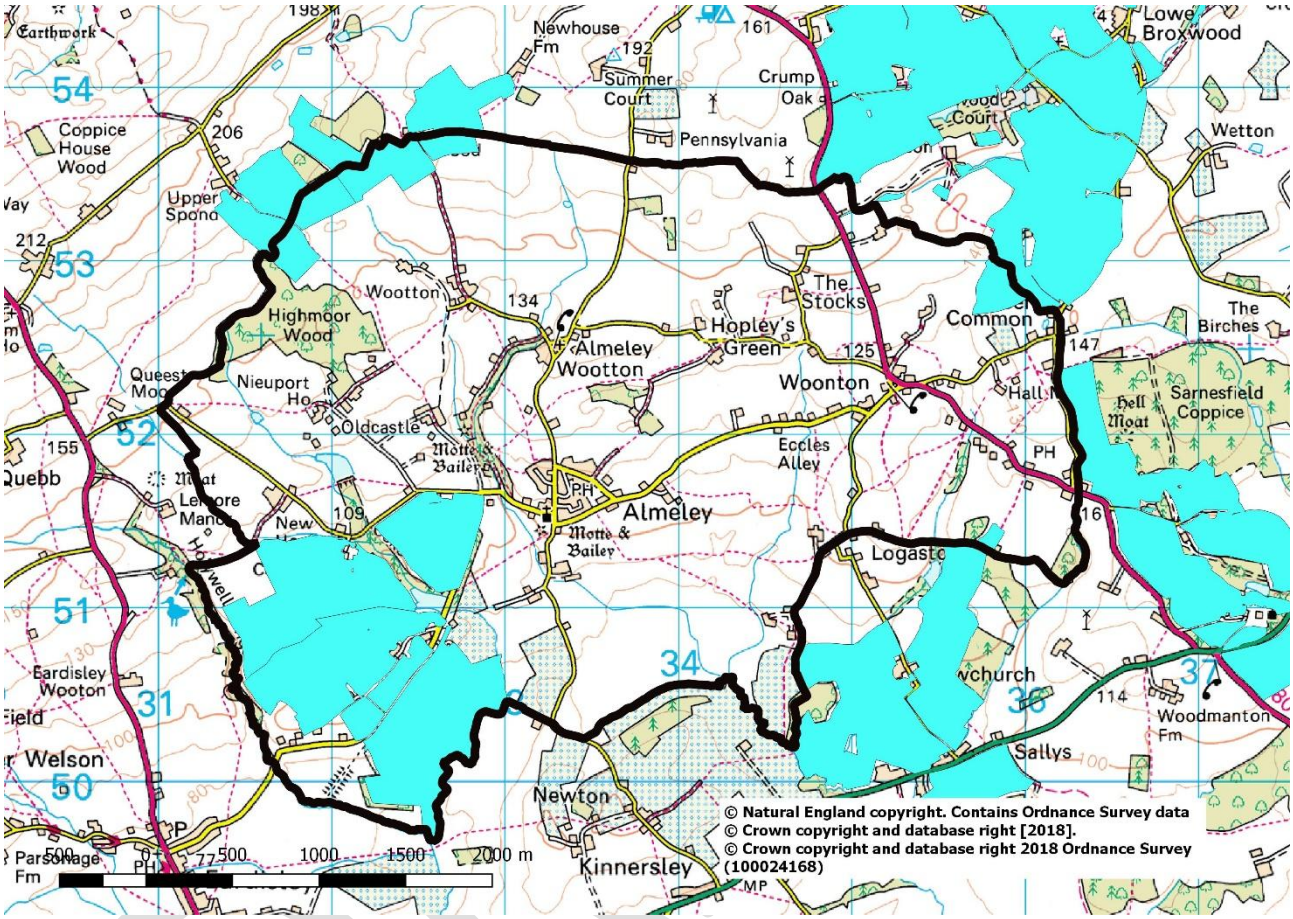
Figure 3. Map of Common Land in Almeley Parish




## 6 Land within agri-environment schemes

Information relating to land within agri-environment schemes can be found on the uk.gov MAGIC website. The MAGIC website provides geographic information about the natural environment from across government. For the purposes of this report we have identified those land parcels within Almeley Parish and neighbouring land that are within agri-environment schemes.

Figure 4. Countryside Stewardship in and around Almeley Parish




## 7 Peoples Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) Orchard Survey

Over the past 10 years the PTES has identified over 35,000 individual orchards in England. The information is available for scrutiny on their website and data available for download via the Natural England Website. Much of the data was gathered remotely from aerial photos with 'ground truthing' required to confirm presence. The data distinguishes those sites that are definitely orchards, those that are probably orchards and those where evidence suggest that an orchard exists but is insufficient to provide good levels of confidence.

**The data shows that there are 34 Traditional orchards within Almeley Parish. 27 of these are considered'definitely' orchards, 2 are probably orchards and the remaining 5 orchards are uncertain.**

## 8 Google Earth

Google Earth provides aerial photography of Almeley Parish as recent as 2013 for part of the Parish and 2009 for the whole of the Parish. Google Earth can be used to determine land use and habitats with varying degrees of accuracy (dependant on the habitat being assessed). For this

report, Google Earth was used to provide verification of whether the Local Wildlife Sites and Common Land were likely to support the habitats described.

## Almeley Parish Habitats and associated species

**Woodland**
Total woodland cover in the datasets amounts to 138Ha. However, the total will be slightly higher due to the presence of small parcels of unmapped woodlands not within the dataset. This amounts to approximatey 10% of the Parish, roughly equal to the England average but lower than the UK national average (current estimates 13%). Ancient woodland amounts to 72.9Ha or 5.2% of the Parish, which is higher than the national average of 2%.

There are ten ancient woodlands within or partly withinin the Parish. These consist mainly of semi-natural ancient woodland with a further three Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). Fourwoodlands are Local Wildlife Sites described asancient woodland including;Highmoor Wood, part of Holywell Dingle and Highfield Wood. All of these sites are ancient semi-natural woodland with a small section of Highmoor Wood described as plantation.

Highmoor Woods is dominated by Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior)* with Hazel coppice (*Corylus avellane)*and ground flora including Herb-paris(*Paris quadrifolia).*Holywell Dingle (a Herefordshire Wildlife Trust reserve) has Ashand Oak (*Quercus* sp). high canopy withHazel coppice and a groud flora including Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta)*,orchids, several species of ferns as well as many mosses and liverworts. Amongst the breeding birds are Buzzard (*Buteobuteo)*and Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedulahypoleuca)* and the site is good for mammals. Highfield Wood includes Oak, Ash, Birch (*Betula* sp). And Hawthorn (*Crataegusmonogyna).*

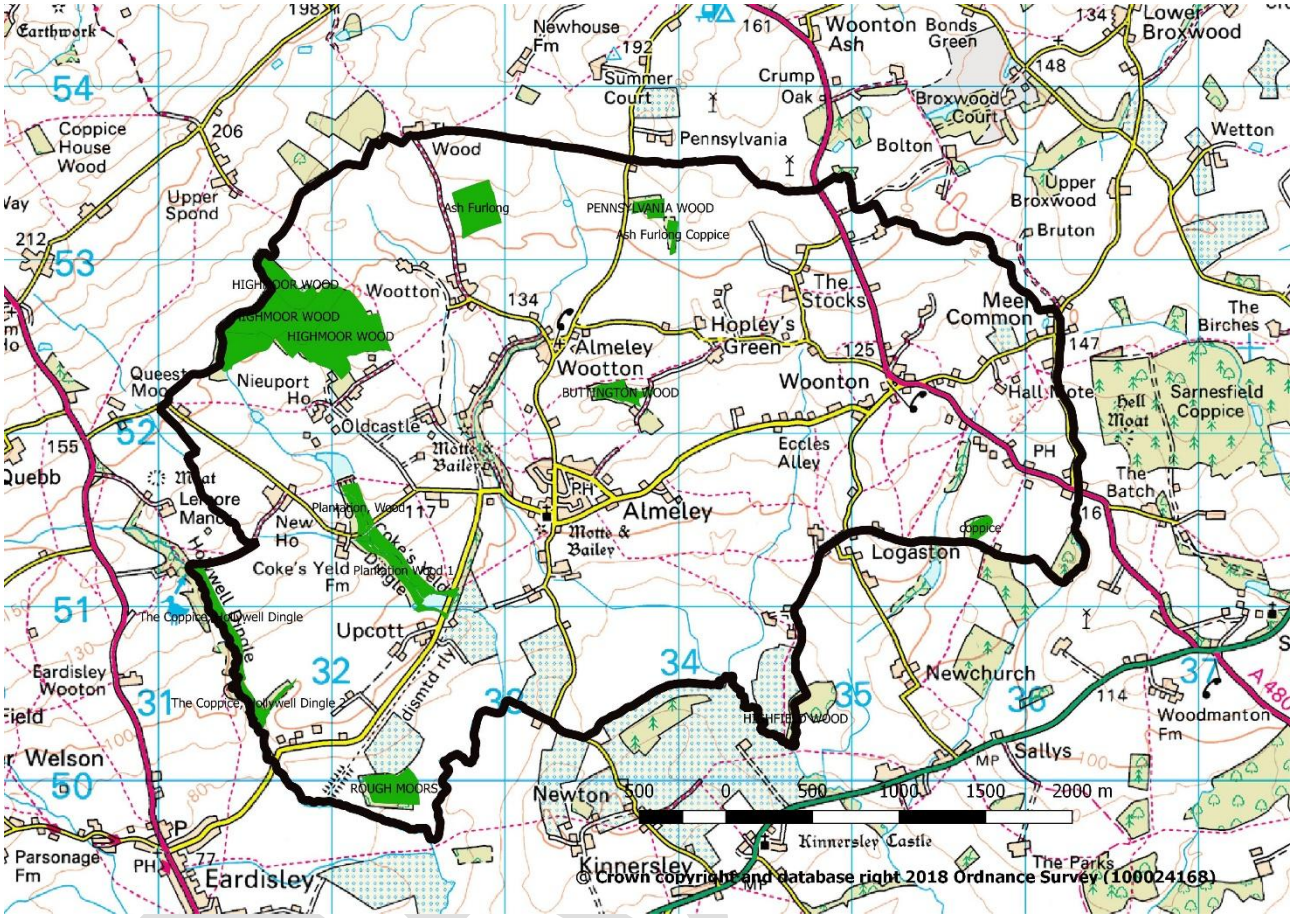
The Batch is another woodland Local Wildlife Site but it is not described as ancient woodland. It is characterised by a dingle with Yew (*Taxus baccata*), Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysopleniumoppositifolium)* and several species of fern.

Other ancient woodland sites within the parish include Plantation Wood, Buttington Wood, Rough Moors, Ash Furlong, Ash Furlong Coppice, Pennsylvania Wood and a woodland simply labelled 'Coppice'. There are further newer woodlands located near Upcott, a ribbon between Upper Wootton and Almeley as well as an extension to Highfield Wood.

The surveys of Common Land identify two further areas of woodland in the Parish. The most interesting appears to be Tan House Green which is described as a small pocket of mature woodland with a stream divided in two by a road. Species include Oak, Ash, Sycamore and Willow with understorey of Hawthorn and coppiced Hazel. It appears to support reasonably biodiversity interest and is described as having '*good ground flora including several ASNW indicator species; Bluebell, Dogs Mercury, Wood Avens, Yellow Archangel and Wild Currant. Evidence of Dormice (BAP species)*.' Interestingly it is not within the Ancient Woodland Inventory.

In the surrounding area there are a further six ancient woodlands and larger extensive woodlands to the south next to Kinnersley as well as two woodlands to the east split by Meer Common.

Figure 5. Ancient Woodlands in Almeley Parish




## Ponds

Information relating to Open Water in the Parish is limited. Two Local Wildlife Sites are described as containing open water, Upcott Pool and Oldcastle Pool. Both pools are located at either end of Plantation Wood. Information relating in the designation listing is brief with both described as large pools with margins of trees. The only species listed are birds

UpcottPool containing; Pochard (*Aythyafarina)*, Mallard*(Anas platyrhynchos)*, Coot (*Fulicaatra)* and Moorhen (*Gallinulachloropus)* and Oldcastle poolcofirmed as containing reedbed with Mallards*(Anas platyrhynchos)* inhabiting the site.

The Common Land information provides further scant information on wetland habitats with Hopley's Green described as pasture fringed by Alder and Willow with a pond and stream… and notes that the 'pond is also worthy of investigation' but with little additional data.

## Traditional Orchards

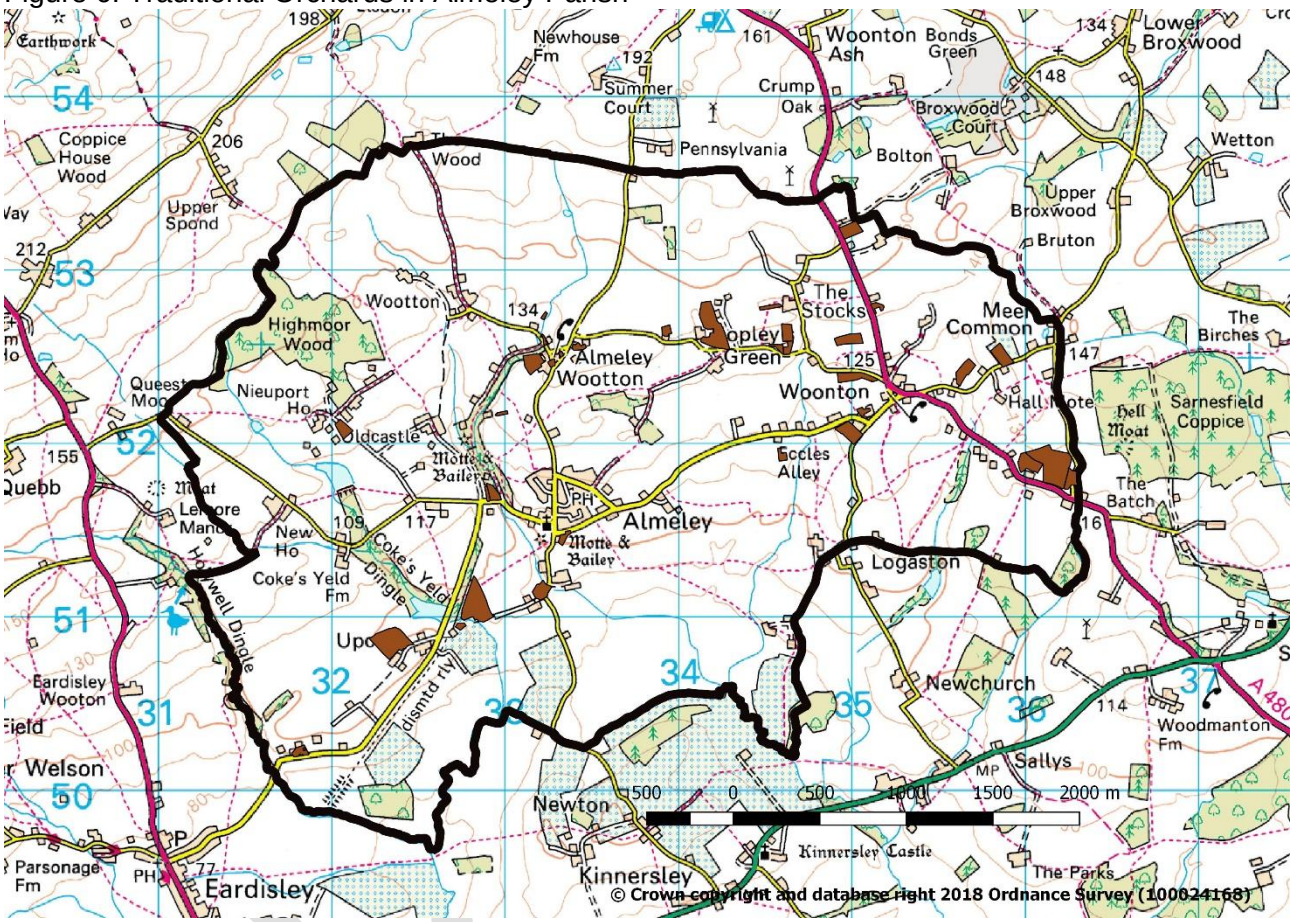
A traditional orchard is defined as a minimum of 5 standard fruit trees in parcel of land, typically managed grassland often grazed by sheep or cattle. Herefordshire is well known as an orchard county and yet many have been lost and others are neglected. Worryingly, the PTES state that "*90% of traditional orchards have been lost since the 1950s, with the majority of the loss attributed*

*to neglect and development. Furthermore, 45% of the remaining orchards surveyed in England and 35% of orchards in Wales were found to be in declining condition as a habitat*"

According to the PTES dataset there are 24.94 hectares of traditional orchards across 34 sites. Many are small with the median sized orchard only 0.44 hectares. Seven of the sites have been ground truthed and all of those checked are considered to be in 'good' condition. With additional information describing them as sheep grazed with a pond.

Traditional orchards tend to be good for biodiversity but further assessment from a habitat/species perspective is necessary

Figure 6. Traditional Orchards in Almeley Parish




**Species Rich Grassland**

There appears to be very little species rich grassland within the Parish. As part of this assessment we were able to review Millenium Map information for the western portion of the Parish (approximately 30% of the Parish). This shows that extensive areas of grassland are present but that it is all agriculturally improved and likely to have limited biodiversity value.

Only two of the Local Wildlife Sites are described as containing grassland;'Hopleys Green Common' and 'Fields near Eccles Alley'. However, Google Earth imagery shows that both have suffered from agricultural improvement (see figures 3 & 4) below. Hopleys Green Common waspreviously a damp unimproved hay meadow with good flora including Wild Daffodil (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus)*and Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra).* Sadly this wildlife interest will almost certainly have been destroyed as a result of agricultural improvement.

The ‘Fields near Eccles Alley’ are described as hay meadows with good flora including Adder’s-tongue (*Ophioglossumvulgatum)*, Cowslip (*Primula veris)*and Ragged-robin (*Lychnisflos-cuculi)*. This site too has suffered, with Google Earth imagery suggesting that the larger northern field has been agriculturally improved. The remainder of the site should be reassessed for its biodiversity interest as it is possibly an important remaining fragment of good grassland.

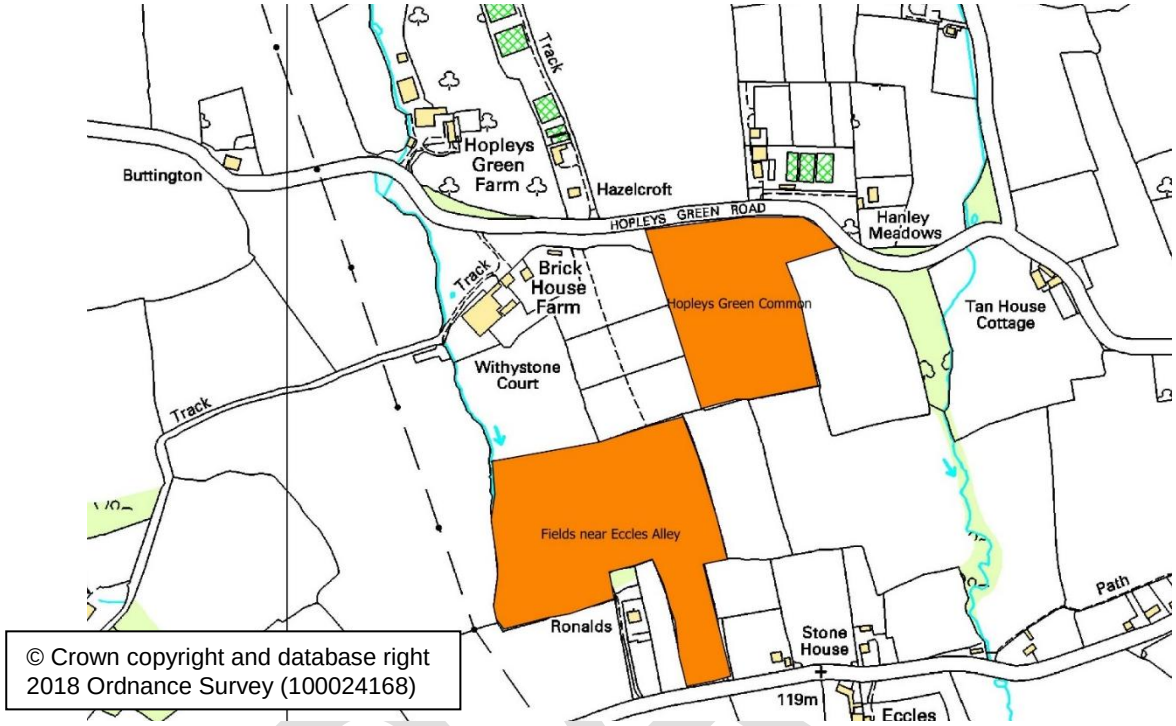



Figure 7. Local Wildlife Site boundaries for Hopleys Green Common and Fields near Eccles Alley


Figure 8. Google Earth aerial imagery dating back to 2009. Hopleys Green and Fields Near Eccles Alley Local Wildlife Sites are outlined in red. Both appear to have been subject to agricultural improvement.

File information suggests that some of the Parish's Common Land may retain areas of good species rich grassland. Logaston Common is described as containing an area of semi-improved neutral grassland but it does not describe species or quality. Similarly, the area of Hopley Green (confusingly a different but neighbouring site to Hopley's Green Common LWS) is described as pasture cut and grazed for hay containing species rich (unimproved) neutral grassland with interesting hedgerows.

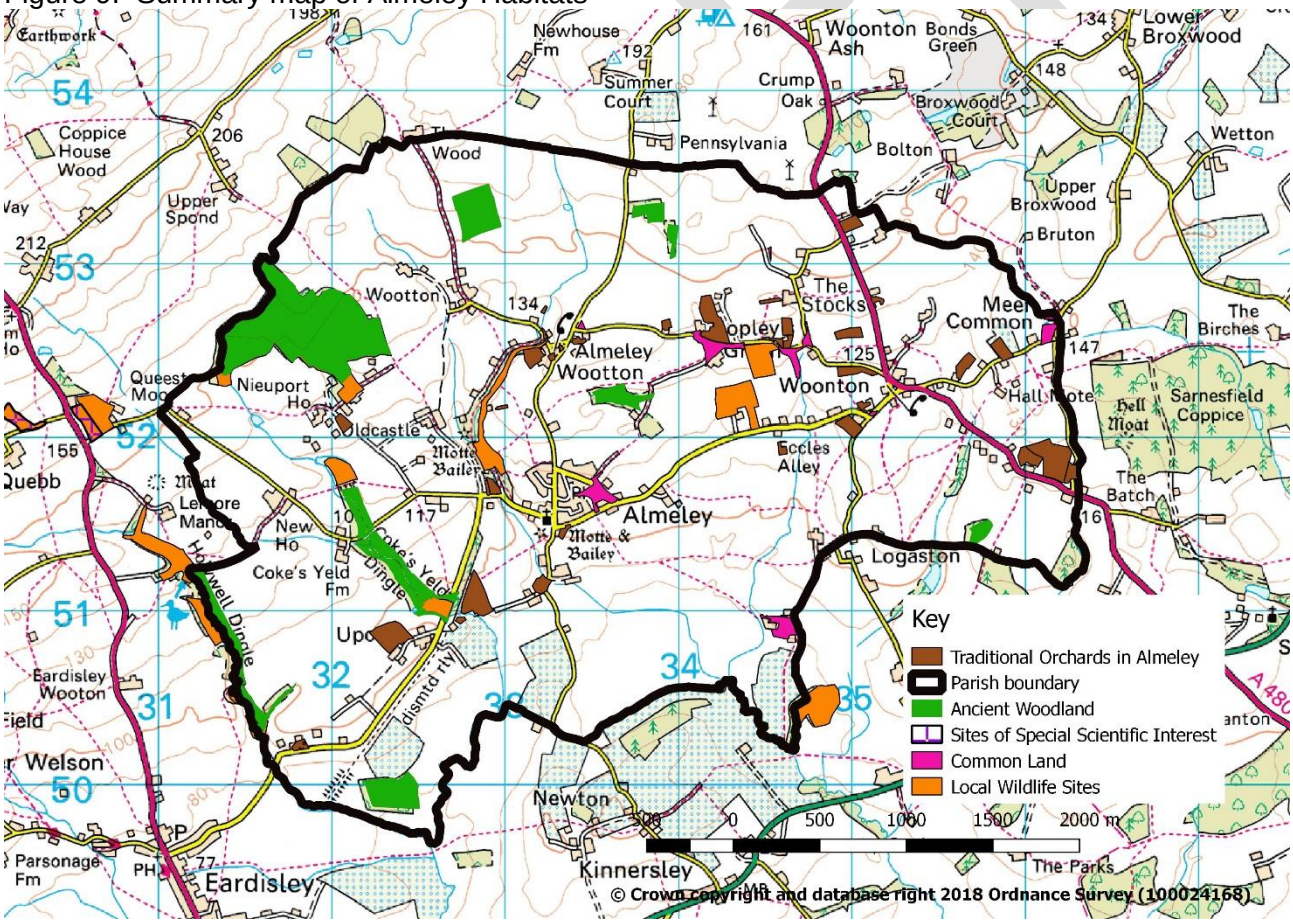
The Triangle at Hopleys Green is another area that could also retain its grassland interest. Although only a small area it is described as having a high biodiversity interest for its size.

Meer Common is also described as a 'largely unmanaged grassland' but at the time of survey also stated that *'records suggest that management/biodiversity have deteriorated in recent years'*

Other areas of Common tend to be more intensively managed for amenity green space, particularly Spearmarsh and Land at Woonton.

Outside of the Parish are two significant high quality grassland sites, Queestmoor Meadow and Quebb Meadow. Both are designated as SSSI and LWS. Details relating to their designated features and species is contained in Appendix 1.

Figure 9. Summary map of Almeley Habitats



| Summary of main habitat types recorded in datasets | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Habitat** | **Known Sites** | **Total area (Ha) or length (m) recorded in datasets** | **Designations** | **Priority BAP habitat?** | **Relevant links** |
| Ancient Woodland | Highmoor Wood, Ash Furlong, Pensylvania Wood, Ash Furlong Coppice, Cockshoot Wood, Buttington Wood, Highfield Wood, Rough Moors, Hollywell Dingle and Plantation Wood | 72.9 | 3 Local Wildlife Sites<br>2 Commons | Yes | https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/mixed-deciduous-woodland.pdf<br>https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/woodland.pdf |
| Species Rich Grasslands | Hopleys Green Common (potentially damaged), Fields near Eccles Alley (potentially damaged),<br>Logaston Common, Hopley Green Common, The Triangle at Hopleys Green (Common), Meer Common | 10.91 | 2 Local Wildlife Sites<br>4 Commons | Yes | https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/dry-lowland-meadows-pasture.pdf<br><br>https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/grassland.pdf |
| Ponds | Pool at Upcott, Pool at Oldcastle | 3.54 | 2 Local wildlife Sites | Yes | https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/ponds2.pdf |
| Scrub | Meer Common | 1.04 | Common | No | |
| Rivers and Streams | Status unknown more information required | ? | None | Yes | https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/rivers-streams2.pdf |
| Orchards | 34 sites listed within Almeley | 24.94 | Traditional Orchard | Yes* | https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/traditional-orchards.pdf<br><br>https://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/countryside-2/traditional-orchard-survey/orchard-maps/ |

- Traditional Orchards are listed as a Priority BAP habitat within Herefordshire County Biodiversity Action Plan in the County BAP. However, they are no longer recognised as a UKBAP habitat, although are currently listed as a Habitat of Principal Importance in Section 41 of the NERC Act

## Findings and Next Steps

It appears from this initial scoping work that:

Species rich grasslands have suffered a decline and continue to be vulnerable. It is no coincidence that the two Local Wildlife Sites, out of the total of eight, that have been damaged are grassland habitats. The decline is consistent with trends both locally and nationally where low input species rich grasslands have fallen out of agricultural systems. The grasslands that remain are those that exist outside the farm systems, particularly on Common Land. Any grassland that remains within the Common Land could still be under threat, particularly from neglect, where a lack of consistent management results in and enriched sward, thatched coarse grasses and ultimately scrub and secondary woodland. The threat is changing management regimes is most acute during a transition in land ownership. Good species rich grassland can be created over time with the correct approach to management. Good quality green hay or seed could be sourced from nearby species rich grassland sites e.g. Quebb Meadow or Queest Meadow to ensure local provenance.

Woodland sites appear to have fared better but the quality of the habitats and the extent to which they are managed is unknown. Orchards are clearly a feature within the County but again their status and quality are unknown. It is also unclear whether much of these habitats have been historically lost.

Recommendations for future work:

1 Assessment of Farmland Habitats

The Parish is largely rural in nature and has a high proportion of agricultural land. Aerial imagery would suggest that it has a high proportion of improved grassland and arable land uses. There is little existing data on the quality of the farmland habitats such as hedgerows, water courses and in-field trees. A high proportion of the land is within Countryside Stewardship and there is likely to be interesting, wildlife friendly farming going on within the Parish. Land management can have significant impacts on water quality and quantity in neighbouring watercourses, particularly in terms of nutrient and sediment loading. The watercourses within Almeley drain into the Wye, which is an Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and so actions undertaken within the Parish will support the Wye Nutrient Management Plan. Proposed future actions include:

a) Further scrutiny of aerial imageryto assess hedgerow condition, identification of significant in-field and hedgerow trees, farm ponds etc. Identify priority areas for field surveys.

b) Field surveys at targeted sites including farmland bird surveys, surveys of water courses

2 Surveys of waterbodies.

Linked to (1) above, a survey of waterbodies within the catchment would inform on the quality of these habitats and associated species. Watercourses are important habitats and act as corridors through the landscape providing connectivity between sites.

3 Ground truth Orchard site data.

The PTES data for orchards has been largely based on remote mapping and aerial photography. Only a small proportion of the Parish orchards have been visited as part of the survey. Where visits have occurred only limited information has been captured. Traditional orchards trees are very good for wildlife and are often associated with other habitats such as species rich grassland and hedgerows. Site visits to the orchards would help ascertain the quality of the habitats and help complete the data needs for the PTES survey. Furthermore, an assessment of old Ordnance Survey maps would also show where orchards have been lost, showing the extent of habitat loss and potentially identifying areas where orchards could be re-created.

4 Re-surveys of the County Local Wildlife Sites and areas of Common Land. Collectively these two categories represent a good proportion of the Parish's good habitat. We believe that some are now degraded or destroyed with much of their wildlife interest lost. This should be confirmed through site visits, followed up with management recommendations, where habitats can be restored.

5 Further analysis of habitat connectivity. Once further detailed survey has been undertaken it would be possible to do further analysis of habitat connectivity in the Parish. This would show those areas where there is already reasonable connectivity within the Parish but crucially those areas where connectivity could be enhanced or restored, targeting the right correct habitat creation/restoration techniques in the appropriate places to link habitats together. This exercise has been undertaken at different locations and at different scales and could be applied at a Parish level.

6 Upskilling within the community. A major limiting factor with delivering nature conservation activity is resource need. It is likely that within the Parish community there will be people with skills in surveys and species identification that could help assist with ongoing surveys. Additionally, training and events could be provided to enable people with more limited expertise to recognise and record key features of interest and enthuse the community to get more involved and interested in the wildlife on their doorstep. Information that is gathered could be provided to County Recorders and the Biological Records Center to ensure that it feeds into the planning processes.

7 Phase 1 habitat survey. http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2468

The last comprehensive Phase 1 habitat survey of the County (commonly known as the Millenium Map) was completed at least 15 years ago. Only some of the Millenium Map data was available to support this current analysis of Almeley as itis not widely available in digital format. However, given the age of the data and the dynamic nature of landscapes and landuses, it would be preferable to re-survey the entire Parish at Phase 1 level to support much of the actions above and provide a comprehensive update on the state of the Parish's habitats.

**Appendix 1 SSSI Features for Quebb Meadow and Queestmoor Meadow (extracted from SSSI notification information)**

**Quebb Meadow** is a herb-rich neutral to mildly acidic grassland characterised by Crested Dog's-tail Cynosuruscristatus, and Common Knapweed Centaurea nigra with a a small stream and marshy area dominated with Rushes Juncusspp.. The site is surrounded by species rich hedgerows. The sward contains a number of grasses and herbs including Sweet Vernal Grass Anthoxanthumodoratum, Red Fescue Festuca rubra, Pale Sedge Carexpallescens, Devil's-bit Scabious Succisa pratensis, Betony Stachysoffcinalis and Greater Butterfly-orchid Platantherachlorantha. The marshy area includes Meadowsweet Filipendulaulmaria, Common Spotted-orchid Dactylorhiza fuchsia and Marsh Arrowgrass Triglochinpalustris. The current condition of Quebb Meadow is unfavourable recovering.

**Queestmoor Meadow** is a herb-rich neutral to mildly acidic grassland characterised by Crested Dog's-tail Cynosuruscristatus, and Common Knapweed Centaurea nigra with a small stream at the south-west corner. The site is bordered by species rich hedgerows on two sides. The herb-rich grassland includes Sweet Vernal Grass Anthoxanthumodoratum, Red Fescue Festuca rubra, Fairy Flax Linumcatharticum, Yellow Rattle Rhinanthus minor, Pepper Saxifrage Silaumsilaus, Dyer's GreenweedGenista tinctorial and Moonwort Botrychiumlunaria. The stream area includes Meadowsweet Filipendulaulmaria and Hard Rush Juncusinflexus.