Herefordshire Wildlife Trust

Almeley Parish Biodiversity Conservation and Enhancement Plan

Prepared for Almeley Parish Council by Herefordshire Wildlife Trust

June 2018

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Biodiversity Conservation and Enhancement Plan for Almeley Parish Council

1.0 Introduction

The Parish is rural with most of the land managed as farmland with improved grassland and arable predominating. The Parish still has pockets of wildlife rich sites and important habitats, most of which could be enhanced through better management and benefit from greater connectivity in the wider landscape. Climate change is likely to have a detrimental impact on the parish biodiversity and increasing resilience to such change through having high regard to ecological networks is important.

Almeley Parish Council has prepared a Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan. In developing this plan, the quality of the Parish's natural environment was recognised, and it was also felt that there were opportunities for enhancement of specific habitats and also their connectivity such that they might contribute towards a wider ecological network.

The management and enhancement of its habitats needs to be supported through a combination of landowner action, funding from development, fund-raising and voluntary activity. The key to delivery of Almeley's biodiversity aspirations will depend on influencing the way land is managed and used. Many landowners in the Parish are already participating in Environmental Stewardship schemes and this may be extended over the plan period. The development management process can and should also make a valuable contribution to the protection, management and planning of the landscape[1] which accommodates the features that comprise habitats at a range of levels.

Conditions to protect and enhance wildlife must be included within all new development, be it within the Parish's settlements or within the agricultural landscape. Even small-scale developments have the potential to contribute significantly to creating and enhancing wildlife habitats. Those promoting development should ensure that provision for nature is designed within their proposals at the outset and show that this has been within their planning applications.

Almeley Parish falls within the Upper Wye catchment and the River Wye is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) protected under the European Habitats Directive. Although screening indicates proposals within the Neighbourhood Plan would not adversely affect the integrity of this site of European importance, there is the potential to further safeguard it through good catchment management, especially where this would address diffuse pollution entering watercourses.

Almeley Parish Council's Neighbourhood Development Plan is a key document that will provide the framework for biodiversity protection and enhancement in the Parish. In particular policy ALM3, seeks to both protect natural features and the network of sites across the parish as well as adding to natural assets where the opportunities arise. In this regard it complements Herefordshire Local Plan Core Strategy policy LD2.

Part 1 of this document sets out a range of Environmental Priorities that have been identified in the context of the Parish landscape and its characteristic habitats and species. It should be used by those advancing proposals for planning permission to inform their overall proposals and designs. The actions go beyond what will be required through development to show what other measures would contribute towards an

[1] Processes identified within the European Landscape Convention to which the UK Government is a signatory.

integrated approach involving all sections of the community. Part 2 comprises the environmental audit which has informed the identification of priorities and actions set out in Part 1. It will also play a major role in monitoring change, including that resulting from development. In addition to developers and landowners ensuring their proposals contain appropriate protection and enhancement measures, the Parish Council would welcome any assistance, financial and otherwise, that might be given that would enable further surveys, studies and upskilling within the community to enhance knowledge and understanding of the natural environment. Support that would benefit Almeley Primary School would particularly be welcome. If and when Herefordshire Council introduces its Community Infrastructure Levy, resources may be used where possible to assist with this work

The environmental Audit comprises a natural assets map and supporting biodiversity audit that lists the high-quality habitats currently known about within the Parish (annex 1). The audit is key to identifying the areas that need protecting and enhancing and will form the basis for future opportunity mapping to improve habitat connectivity in the landscape. Indeed, all actions and policies listed in Part 1 should be considered in reference to this audit which in itself will be considered a 'live' document to be updated as new information becomes available.

Many local organisations could also support the Parish Council in its aspirations including the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, Herefordshire Meadows, Herefordshire Mammals Group, Herefordshire Tree Forum and Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile team. The establishment of a local wildlife group might also be considered to work with and utilise the expertise of these groups to promote local action, including in relation to its areas of Local Green Space.

PART 1: ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES AND ACTIONS

2.0 Priority to protect and enhance biodiversity in Almeley parish

To achieve the purposes of Almeley Neighbourhood Plan policy ALM3 for the natural environment, the following priorities have been set:

2.1 Designated sites, protected species and ancient or species-rich hedgerows, grasslands, woodlands, traditional orchards and watercourses will be protected.
2.2 Ecological networks, and the migration of flora and fauna, through creating and protecting buffer zones around important wildlife rich sites will be protected and preserved.
2.3 Ancient trees or trees of arboricultural value will be retained and protected
2.4 The mitigation, preservation, restoration and re-creation of wildlife habitats, and the protection and recovery of priority species will be promoted
2.5 Providing a net gain in flora and fauna, particularly in the areas defined on the natural assets Map

3.0 Specific Actions by Habitats

3.1 Woodlands and Trees

Ancient or veteran trees are a key feature within Almeley Parish with many important individual trees identified by the Parish community and included in the biodiversity audit. The audit will not be comprehensive and therefore the general principle that ancient or veteran trees are protected where they occur in the Parish should be adopted. Ancient and veteran trees can be defined as any that conform with national accepted descriptions https://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/infd-5w2g5b . The key actions for woodlands and trees are:

3.1.1 Continue Parish surveys to identify additional high value trees and add them to the audit of natural assets
3.1.2 Ensure that ancient woodlands and trees listed in the biodiversity audit are protected from development.
3.1.3 Where trees are not ancient in nature, and permission is granted to remove them as part of a development, then they should be replaced with three new trees of suitable local and native species.
3.1.4 Future tree planting and woodland creation should focus on buffering, expanding and connecting existing ancient woodland sites.
3.1.5 The Parish Council should pursue purchase or management control of ancient woodland sites e.g. The Batch (see Commons below)
3.1.6 Seek management of important Ancient Woodland sites through development mitigation, particularly where there is public access.

3.2 Hedgerows

Hedgerows are valuable both for wildlife and as a landscape features. Ancient and/or species rich hedgerows (as defined in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan) are particularly important. Almeley parish, like most of the UK, has suffered from hedgerow loss, reducing an important habitat for a wide range of species and impacting negatively on landscape connectivity. Poor management and neglect can further impact on their value for wildlife. Hedgerows are protected through the planning process, but permission is frequently given to remove them for development purposes. Greater protection for hedgerows should be afforded through the Neighbourhood Development Plan and development should be subject to the following principles:

3.2.1 There should be a presumption to protect and retain all hedgerows within development proposals particularly species rich and ancient hedgerows as defined in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan

3.2.2 Where hedgerows are removed a greater meterage of hedgerow must be created (a minimum of an additional 50%).

3.2.3 New hedgerows need to consist of a minimum of 5 different species native to the locality.

3.2.4 New hedgerows should be suitably protected with appropriate aftercare to ensure establishment.

3.2.5 New Hedgerows should be planted in the following areas (in order of priority):

- within the curtilage of the development area or,
- where hedgerows have been historically removed within the Parish (to be identified from old maps and aerial imagery) with a view towards restoring historic landscape and field patterns or,
- on land where hedgerows will enhance habitat connectivity in the countryside, particularly linking ancient woodland sites or,
- where further benefits can be realised e.g. where strategic planting may reduce erosion and overland flow of water and protect water courses

3.3 Species Rich Grassland

Given the substantial losses of species rich grassland within Almeley Parish further losses must be prevented and opportunities for their restoration and creation should be pursued. Many of the Parish's best grassland sites are associated with parcels of Common Land, much of which is soon to come into the control of the Parish Council. Other grassland sites are designated as Local Wildlife Sites. Collectively these sites represent the best opportunities for species rich grassland conservation in the Parish. The following key actions have been identified:

3.3.1 Management of Common Land within the Parish must take account of biodiversity particularly potential for species rich grassland conservation or restoration. Future management of Common Land should follow prescriptions as set out in agreed Management Plans, prepared with biodiversity conservation as a key objective, and following appropriate surveys.

3.3.2 Surveys of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) should be undertaken with follow up advice for landowners on appropriate management. LWS designation of additional high-quality sites should be pursued.

3.3.3 Local Wildlife Sites must be protected from development through the planning process

3.3.4 Support for the conservation and restoration of grassland sites should be delivered through section 106 agreements and other statutory mechanisms where appropriate.

3.3.5 Opportunities for grassland restoration should seek to expand, buffer and/or link existing species rich grassland sites

To support this work further, surveys and mapping needs to be undertaken to locate species rich grasslands as well as priority areas for grassland restoration and creation.

3.4 Commons

Commons are a key feature within Almeley Parish and an important biodiversity resource presenting a range of habitats that include species rich grassland, ancient woodlands, scrub and small waterbodies. In recent years the commons have been largely undermanaged, probably leading to habitat loss, particularly wildlife rich grasslands. This is a problem not unique to Almeley and is occurring across the County. In parallel with this apparent neglect, examples of inappropriate management have occurred, specifically around the management of Hopleys Green Common, where large numbers of trees and scrub were removed to increase agricultural production. This brings into focus the need for appropriate and agreed management prescriptions on Common Land. Many Commons are currently being sold by Herefordshire Council presenting a unique opportunity for Almeley Parish Council to take on management control and acquire the autonomy needed to decide site management activities. Key actions for Commons are:

3.4.1 Pursue opportunities to transfer ownership from Herefordshire Council to Almeley Parish Council

3.4.2 Prepare agreed Management Plans for all Common Land in the Parish that include management prescriptions that protect and enhance biodiversity

3.4.3 Seek funding for management of Commons through development mitigation and section 106 agreements

3.4.4 Create community support for management of Commons through the creation of volunteer work parties.

3.4.5 Seek third party management of Commons through leasing to conservation bodies e.g. Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust etc.

3.4.6 Engage with specialist groups within the County e.g. membership of Herefordshire Meadows

3.5 Watercourses

There are several watercourses within the Parish, none of which are designated. Poor management of watercourses and catchments has become an increasing concern in recent years having resulted in more frequent and severe flooding events; increasing levels of pesticide and nutrient pollution; loss of habitat connectivity and the spread of non-native invasive species. Other external influences are also driving conservation action towards watercourses such as European targets to reduce pollution through the Water Framework Directive, or more severe rainfall and drought events as a result of climate change.

The watercourses in Almeley Parish are tributaries of the River Wye Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and thus protected through EU Habitats Directive. Good watercourse management in Almeley parish will benefit biodiversity locally but also contribute to downstream waterbodies including enhancement of the River Wye SAC.

Most of the land within Almeley parish is intensively farmed (predominantly arable or improved grassland) and this is likely to have had a detrimental impact on water quality and riparian habitats. The increase of poultry units is often a specific concern due to the high levels of phosphates in chicken manure which if not appropriately stored and used can lead to watercourse pollution.

Ongoing development can also impact on water quality through increased phosphates from insufficient treatment of foul water and run off from roads and hard surfaces. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) are an appropriate way to deal with run off from roads, development sites, and other hard surfaces and can also create habitats. The nature of watercourses often makes them more challenging to appropriately manage. Factors such as multiple ownerships or short-lived pollution incidents that are hard trace are problems that other habitats don't usually present. Nevertheless, restoration and enhancement of watercourse habitats has been demonstrated in many sub-catchments in the Wye with activities such as riparian fencing to control stock access, river meadow restoration and buffer strips along watercourses all proving beneficial. Key actions for watercourses in Almeley parish are:

3.5.1 Ensure that all proposed developments incorporate appropriate water treatment facilities including SuDS.

3.5.2 Survey watercourses in the Parish to assess current condition, wildlife value and presence of invasive species

3.5.3 Work with partners already active in the Wye catchment to ensure that landowners get appropriate support and land management advice (including uptake of agri-environment schemes) that results in good watercourse management.

3.5.4 Report pollution incidents to the appropriate authorities as they occur

3.6 Traditional Orchards

Traditional orchards account for 25 hectares of land within Almeley Parish and are likely to have declined in line with the rest of the county. The decline is largely related to a corresponding fall in their economic value through fruit production. The value of orchards to biodiversity is much higher in traditional orchards than bush orchards. This is because of better structural diversity, the presence of old and decaying wood, and typically higher quality ground flora.

Almeley parish's remaining orchards are small making them much more vulnerable to further loss. Development pressure has proven significant in Herefordshire with small orchards often being grubbed up for new housing. Neglect is also a major problem with trees not receiving necessary management, protection from grazing or timely replacement. The loss is not just to biodiversity as orchards are an important landscape and cultural feature within the county and many of the individual trees maybe rare or unusual varieties that are also at risk. Key actions for orchards are:

3.6.1 Protect traditional orchards listed within the biodiversity audit from development

3.6.2 Should traditional orchard trees need to be removed as part of a development then a minimum of three traditional orchard trees should be planted as compensation for the loss. The trees should be of local provenance and traditional Herefordshire varieties.

3.6.3 New Orchards and orchard trees should be suitably protected with appropriate aftercare to ensure establishment

3.6.4 New Hedgerows should be planted in the following areas (in order of priority):

- within the curtilage of the development area provided adequate space allows,
- where orchards have been historically removed within the Parish (to be identified from old maps and aerial imagery) with a view towards restoring historic landscape,
- on land where orchards will enhance habitat connectivity in the countryside, particularly linking woodland and other orchard sites

PART 2: Wildlife Audit of Almeley Parish (January 2018)

1:0 Introduction and Background

Almeley Parish Council are currently preparing the Almeley Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). the Parish Council would 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 NDP's implementation, monitoring and review process.

To support the Parish Council, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust have completed this initial desk-based study that explores and interprets some of the existing datasets relating to habitats and wildlife within the Parish. The assessment also includes a 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

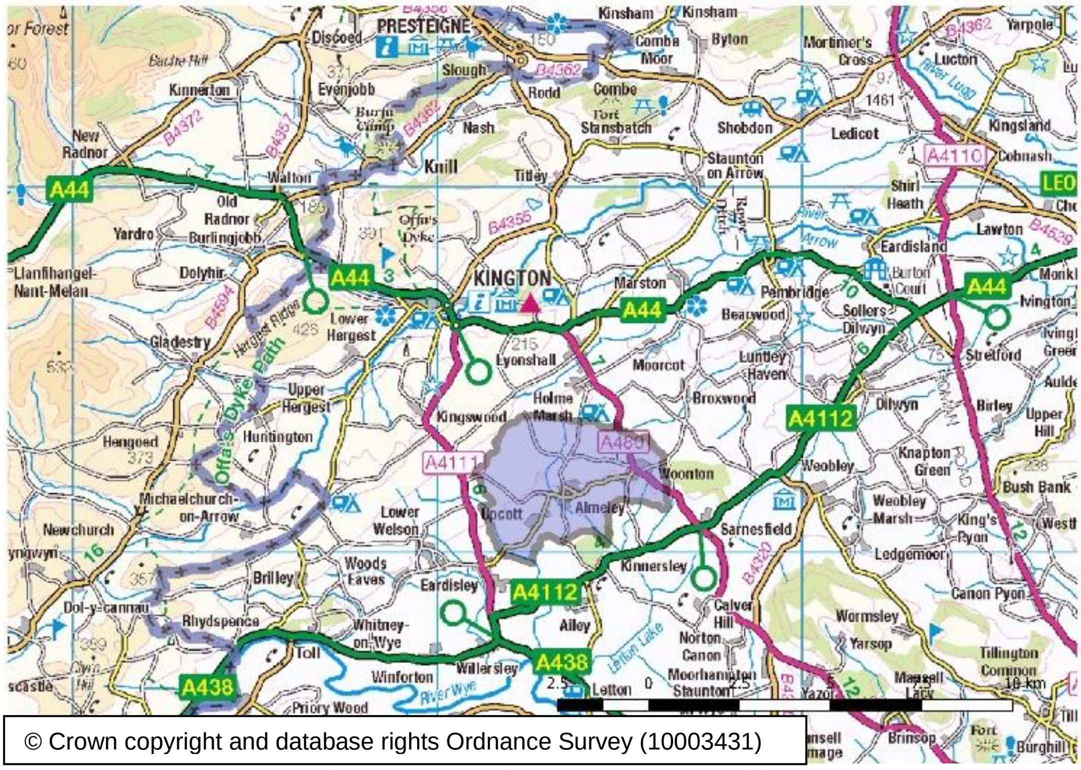


Figure 1. Location of Almeley Parish

2:0 Habitat datasets assessed

The datasets and information interrogated 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.

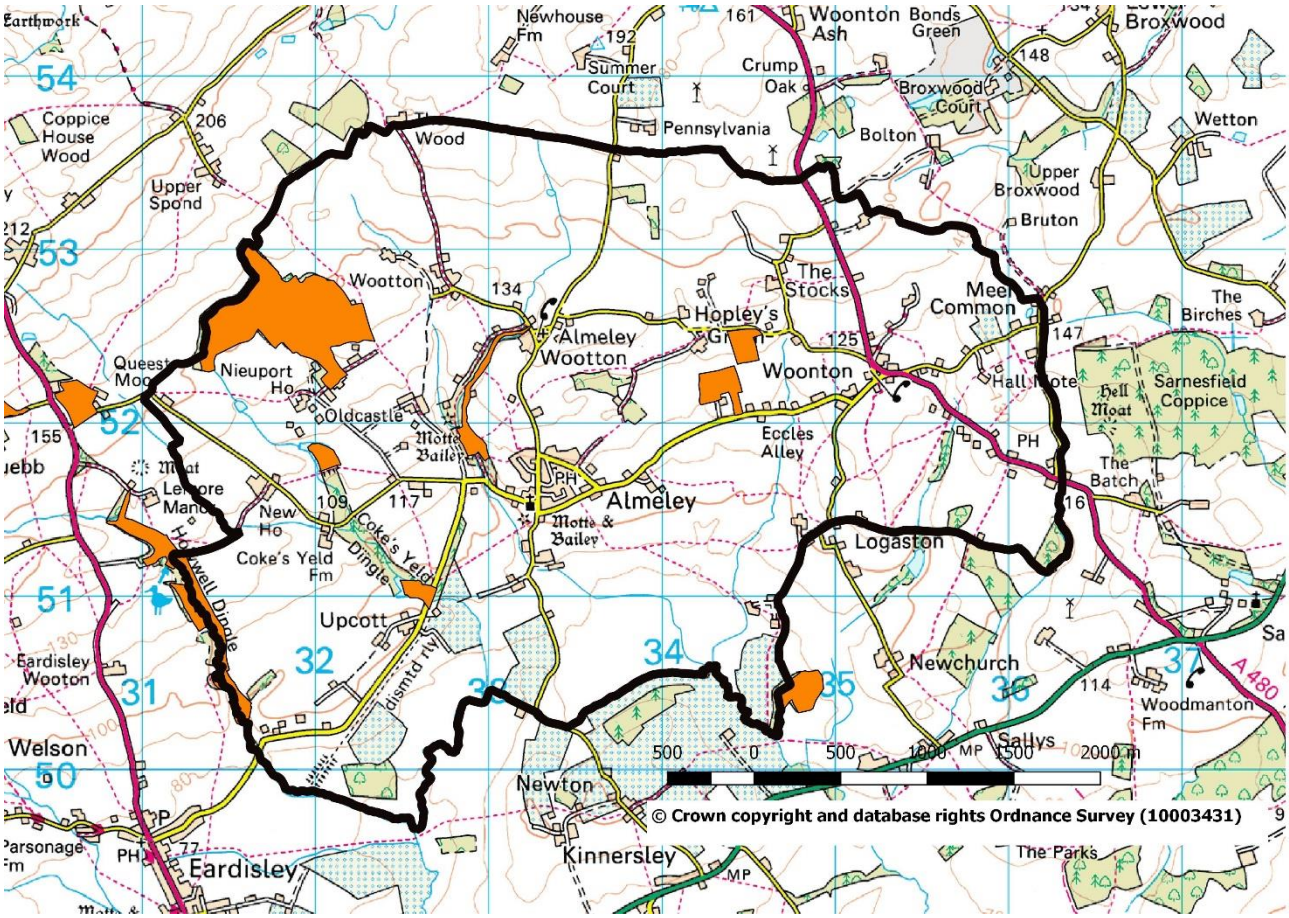
2.1 Local Wildlife Sites

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 its largest 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



2.2 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; Quebb Meadows 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.

2.3 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.

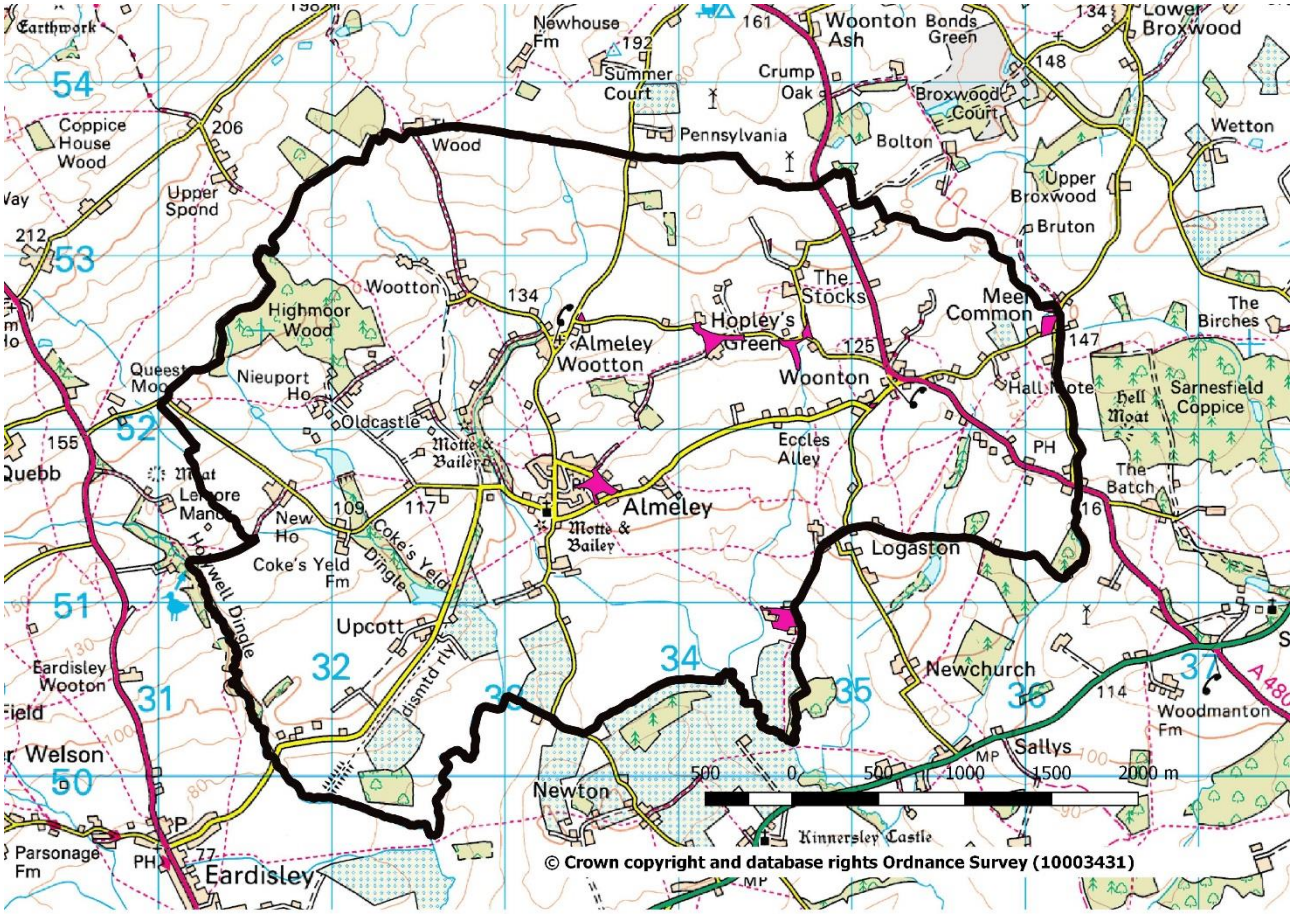
The inventory shows ten distinct areas of ancient woodland within the Parish: Highmoor Wood, Ash Furlong, Pensylvania Wood, Ash Furlong Coppice, Cockshoot Wood, Buttington Wood, Highfield Wood, Rough Moors, Hollywell Dingle and Plantation Wood.

2.4 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.

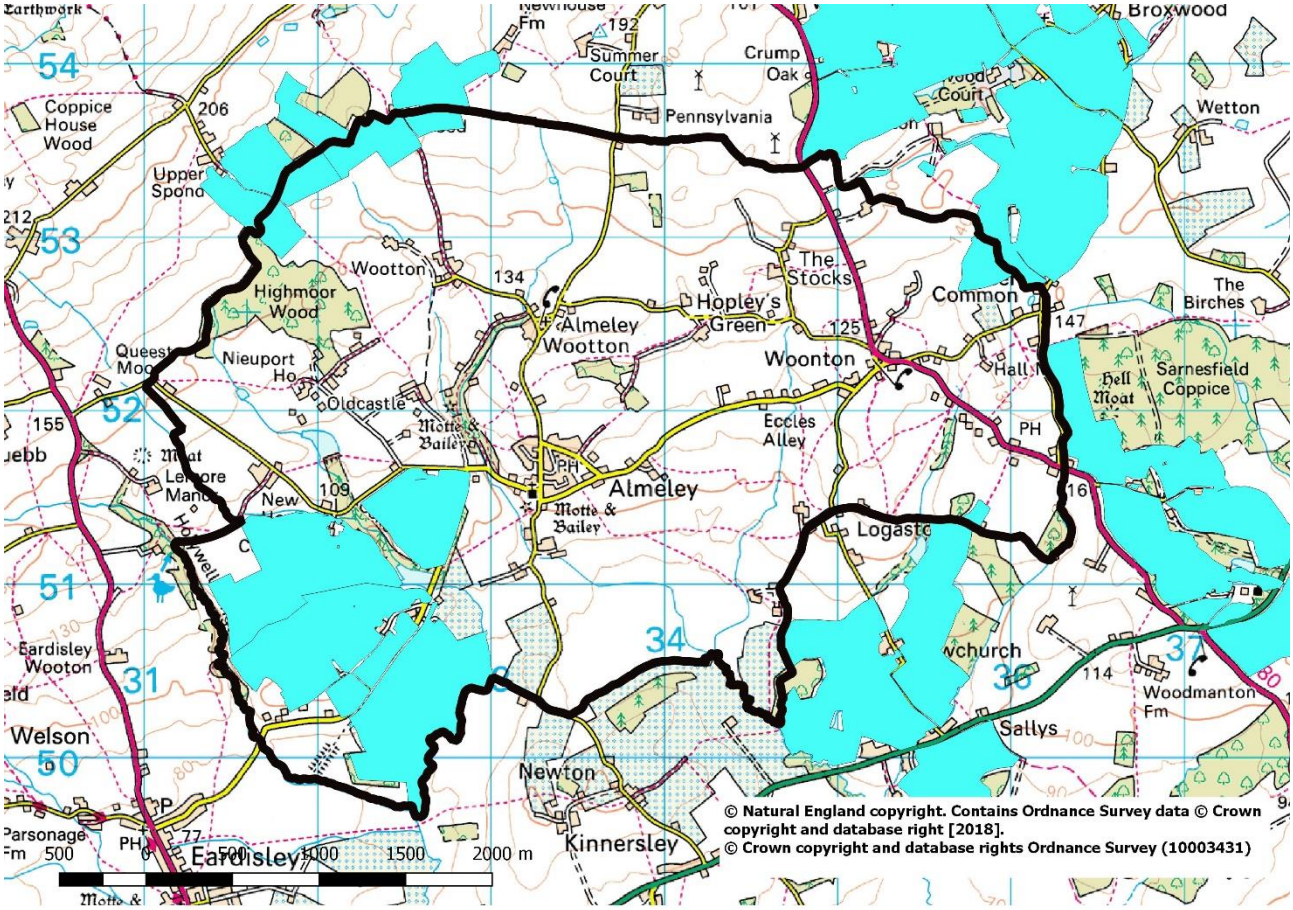
Figure 3. Map of Common Land in Almeley Parish



2.5 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



2.6 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.

2.7 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.

3.0 Almeley Parish Habitats and associated species

3.1 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 approximately 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 within in the Parish. These consist mainly of semi-natural ancient woodland with a further three Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). Four woodlands are Local Wildlife Sites described as ancient 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 Ash and Oak (*Quercus* sp). high canopy with Hazel 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 (*Buteo buteo)* and Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca)* and the site is good for mammals. Highfield Wood includes Oak, Ash*,* Birch (*Betula* sp). And Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna).*

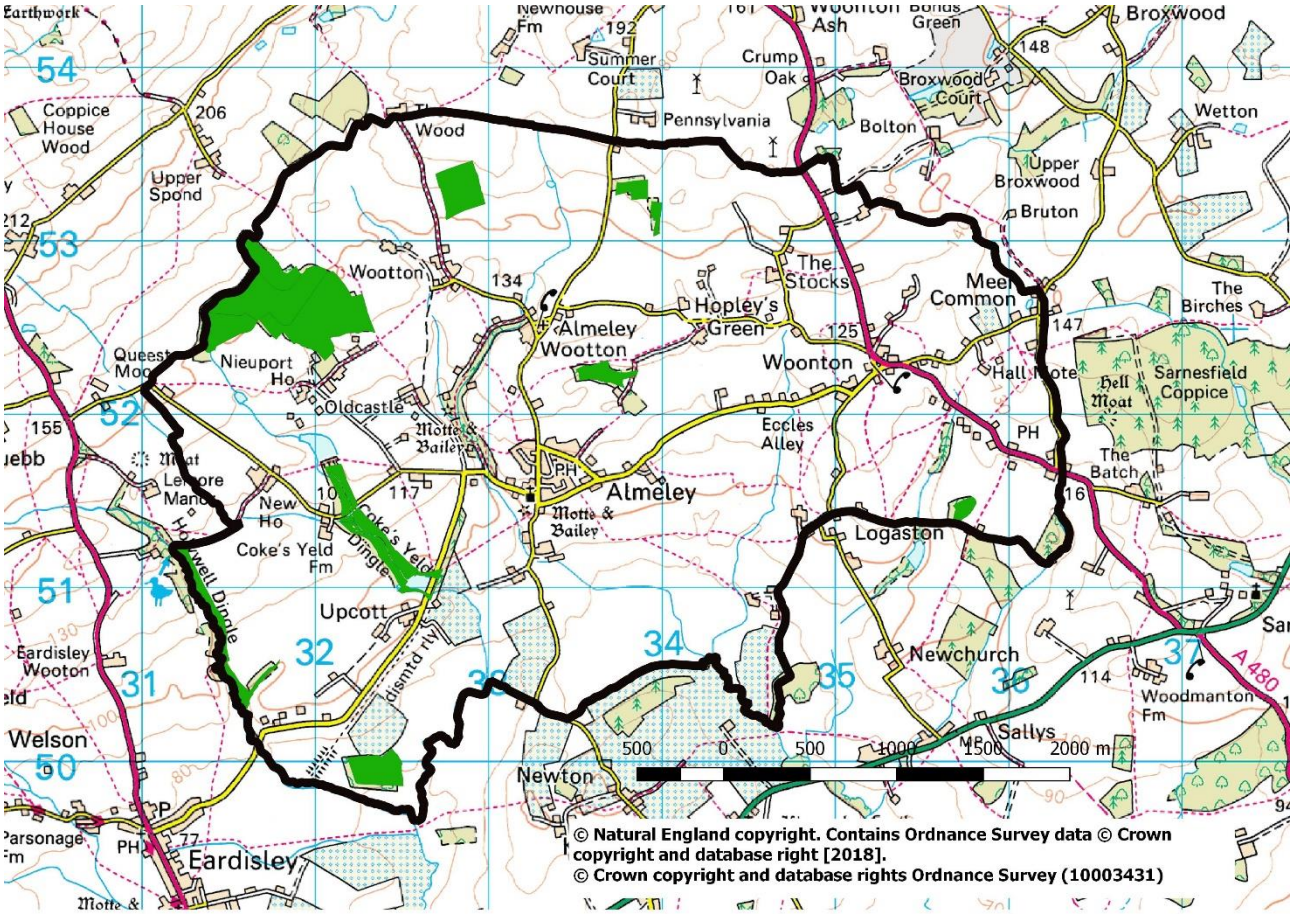
The Batch is another woodland Local Wildlife Site, but it is not described as ancient woodland. It is characterised by a dingle with Yew (*Taxus baccata*), Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysoplenium oppositifolium)* and several species of fern.

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



3.2 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

Upcott Pool containing; Pochard (*Aythya farina)*, Mallard *(Anas platyrhynchos)*, Coot (*Fulica atra)* and Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus)* and Oldcastle pool confirmed 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.

3.3 Traditional Orchards

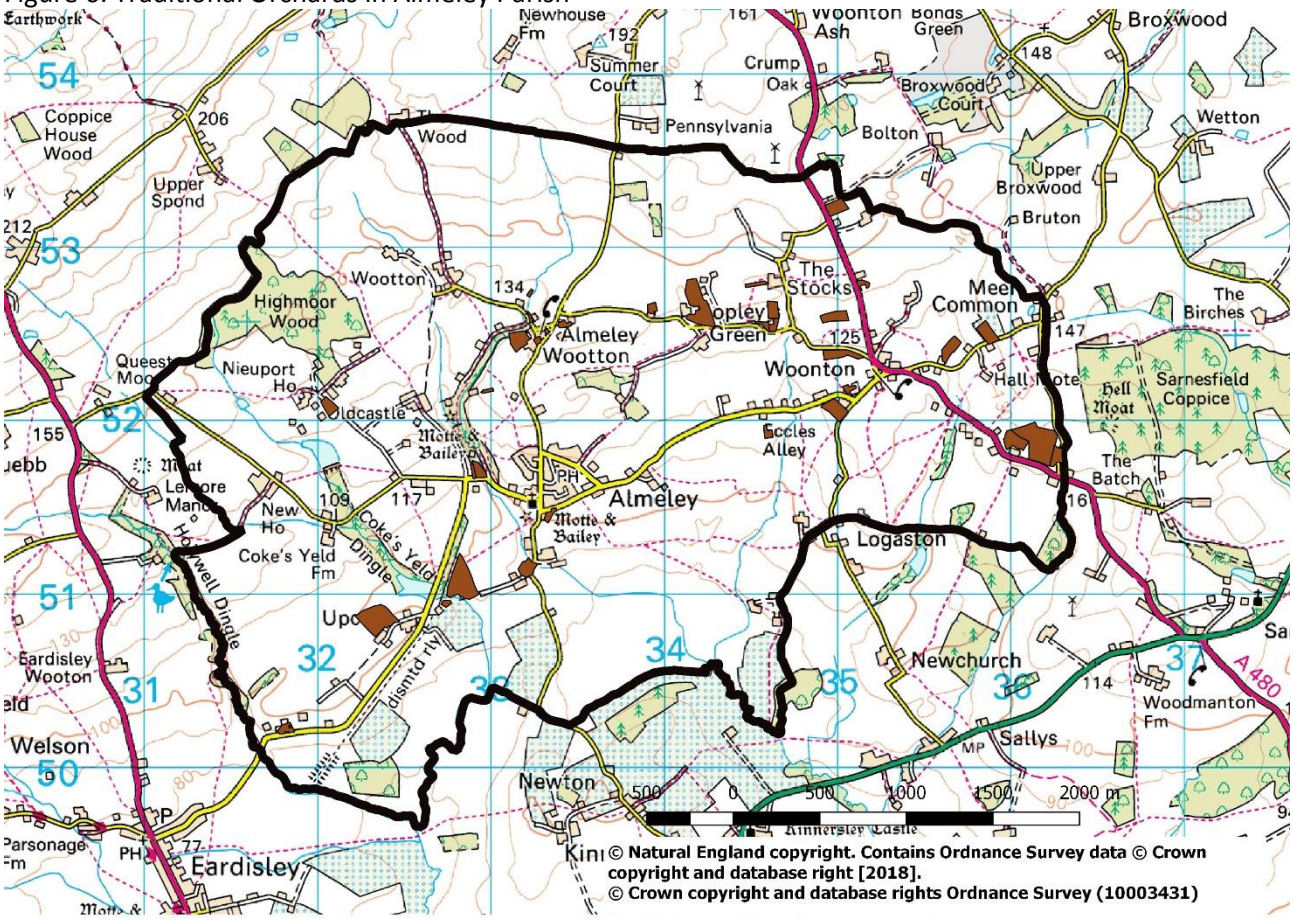
A traditional orchard is defined as a minimum of 5 standard fruit trees in parcel of land, typically managed grassland often grazed by sheep or cattle. Herefordshire is well known as an orchard county and yet many have been lost and others are neglected. Worryingly, the PTES state that "*90% of traditional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



3.4 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 was previously 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 (*Ophioglossum vulgatum)*, Cowslip (*Primula veris)* and Ragged-robin (*Lychnis flos-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.

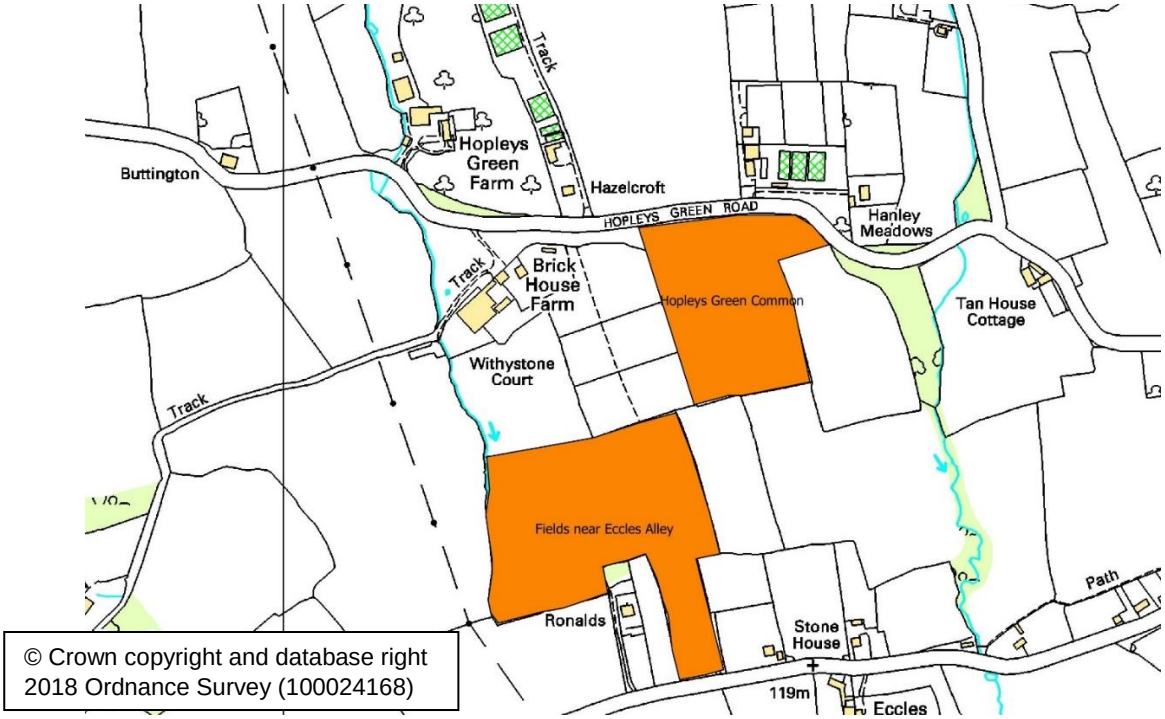


Figure 7. Local Wildlife Site boundaries for Hopleys Green Common and Fields near Eccles Alley

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.

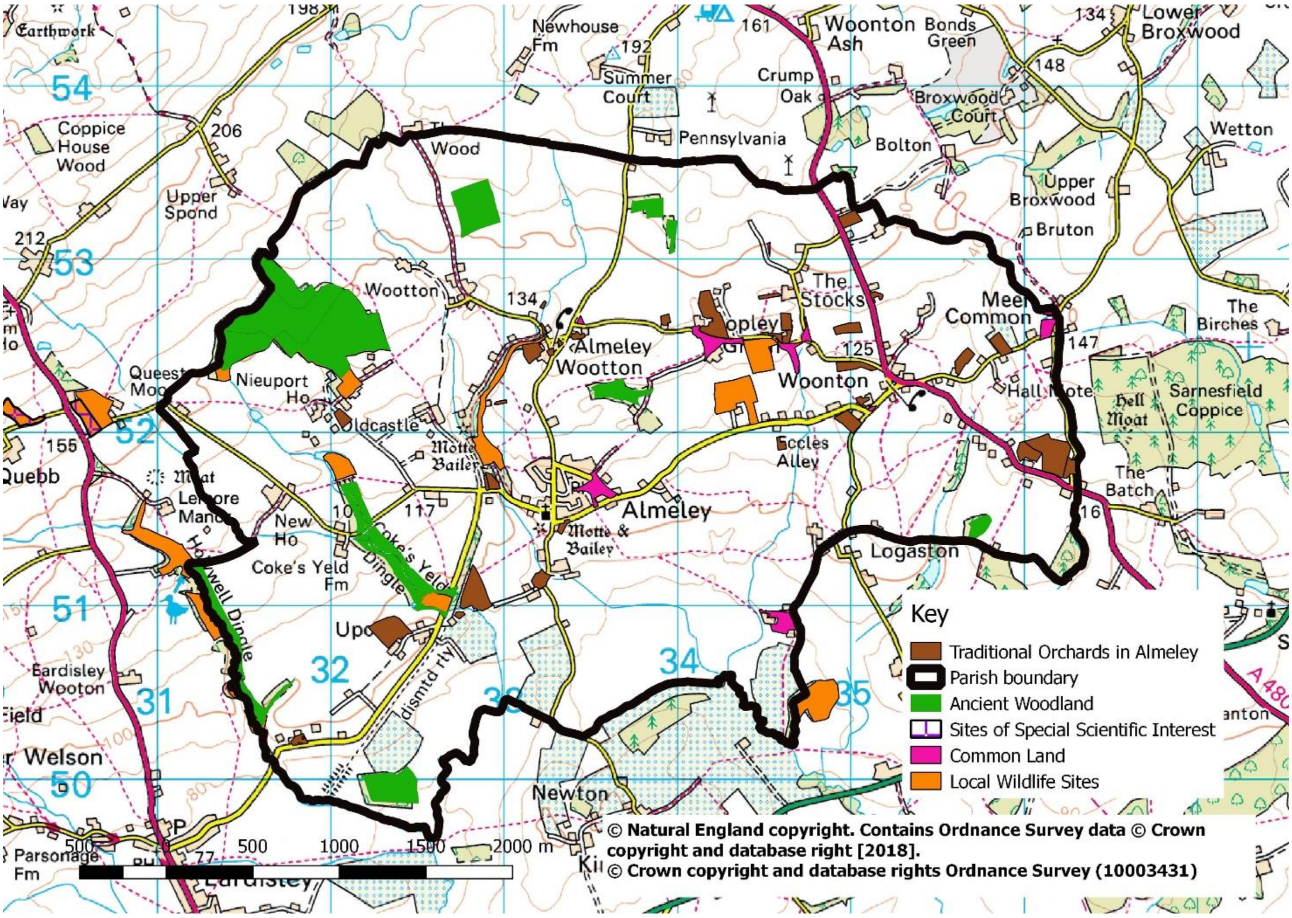
The Triangle at Hopleys Green is another area that could also retain its grassland interest. Although only a small area it is described as having a high biodiversity interest for its size.

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


Key
Traditional Orchards in Almeley
Parish boundary
Ancient Woodland
Sites of Special Scientific Interest
Common Land
Local Wildlife Sites
0 500 1000 1500 2000 m
© Natural England copyright. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right [2018].
© Crown copyright and database rights Ordnance Survey (10003431)
Almeley
Almeley Wootton
Woonton
Logaston
Wootton
Nieuport Ho
Oldcastle
Coke's Yeld Fm
Eccles Alley
The Stocks
Meer Common
Newton
Sarnesfield Coppice

4.0 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 2 Commons	Yes	https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/mixed-deciduous-woodland.pdf https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/woodland.pdf
Species Rich Grasslands	Hopleys Green Common (potentially damaged), Fields near Eccles Alley (potentially damaged), Logaston Common, Hopley Green Common, The Triangle at Hopleys Green (Common), Meer Common	10.91	2 Local Wildlife Sites 4 Commons	Yes	https://herefordshirewildlifelink.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/dry-lowland-meadows-pasture.pdf 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 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

5.0 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.

5.1 Recommendations for future work

5.1.1 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 a 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 imagery to 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

5.1.2 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.

5.1.3 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.

5.1.4 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.

5.1.5 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.

5.1.6 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 Centre to ensure that it feeds into the planning processes.

5.1.7 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 it is not widely available in digital format. However, given the age of the data and the dynamic nature of landscapes and land uses, 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 Cynosurus cristatus, and Common Knapweed Centaurea nigra with a small stream and marshy area dominated with Rushes Juncus spp.. The site is surrounded by species rich hedgerows. The sward contains a number of grasses and herbs including Sweet Vernal Grass Anthoxanthum odoratum, Red Fescue Festuca rubra, Pale Sedge Carex pallescens, Devil's-bit Scabious Succisa pratensis, Betony Stachys offcinalis and Greater Butterfly-orchid Platanthera chlorantha. The marshy area includes Meadowsweet Filipendula ulmaria, Common Spotted-orchid Dactylorhiza fuchsia and Marsh Arrowgrass Triglochin palustris. 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 Cynosurus cristatus, 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 Anthoxanthum odoratum, Red Fescue Festuca rubra, Fairy Flax Linum catharticum, Yellow Rattle Rhinanthus minor, Pepper Saxifrage Silaum silaus, Dyer's Greenweed Genista tinctorial and Moonwort Botrychium lunaria. The stream area includes Meadowsweet Filipendula ulmaria and Hard Rush Juncus inflexus.