The Holtspur Valley and Holtspur Bottom Reserve

Introduction

The Geology of the Holtspur valley is of chalk over clay, giving rise to thin soils of chalk with flint and with some slightly acid gravel on the highest slopes. The stream that must have formed the shape of the valley as it flowed east, has long since gone. Its dry bed is now occupied by the single track road (Riding Lane) that meanders up along its base from the Holtspur Top Road until it turns sharply north between the Holtspur Bank and Holtspur Bottom reserves. This track was never likely to develop into a major route once the embankment of the Marylebone to High Wycombe railway line was built across it, leaving a low narrow bridge as the only access from the north. The poor soils and steep slopes of the valley meant that farming activities were largely confined to grazing by sheep and cattle, though some flatter parts were cornfields during and after WWII. One part of the higher slope above the Holtspur Bottom reserve was an orchard. This low intensity farming helped conserve the rich local flora.

In 1950, Alison Uttley wrote of the botanic diversity still to be found in the Holtspur Valley (which she referred to as Holtspur Bottom), and of the wide variety of butterflies associated with those flowering plants. *'The Chalkhill Blue and Adonis Blue are to be found in the wild gardens of the chalk pits, where there is an abundance of small flowers.'* (The County Books: Buckinghamshire.) There are similar, though less precisely described, references in Sir Eric Ansorge's 'The Macrolepidoptera of Buckinghamshire'. He quotes records for the *Adonis Blue* from the Wycombe area in 1917 but it was said to be '*getting scarcer for many years past'.* The *Chalkhill Blue* he noted as abundant in the same area. Quite possibly the secluded Holtspur Valley escaped the attention of his few correspondents in just the same way as it has been overlooked by developers.

Beaconsfield Town Council took possession of much of the land in the valley in 1915. A further factor in its preservation. In 1993 local people and the local Wildlife Trust group (then BBONT, now BBOWT) asked the Town Council to consider giving special protection and local nature reserve status to the north facing Holtspur Bank. This 6.5 hectare area which directly faces the Holtspur Bottom reserve, was officially designated in 1995.

The railway embankment added to the natural wind break of hills along the west and north of the valley and became a haven for wildlife as the farming pressures intensified from the late 1960s to the present. The Holtspur Bank was rarely grazed becoming increasingly scrub covered and neglected. Land on the opposite face of the valley, adjacent to Holtspur Bottom, was in private hands and never ploughed or treated with any artificial chemicals. But sadly the area now called Holtspur Bottom reserve was 'improved' over its greater area. The turf was removed and reseeded with rye grass. A treatment that might have destroyed its character for ever, except that the soil was so poor that the introduced rye grass never prospered and was rapidly ousted by indigenous species clawing their way back.

History, ecology and management plans of Holtspur Bottom

Previously an area of south–east facing scrubby chalk downland, the majority of the 4.5 hectares of the reserve became an ‘improved’ rye grass field in 1995, when the tenant farmer found that the falling returns from sheep husbandry were making the returns on such poor grazing near worthless. This seriously disturbed the flora in the ‘improved’ area and had an even bigger effect on the fauna of the site. A small portion of the site with an easterly aspect was spared and here the flora remained intact save that it was being lost to rapidly encroaching scrub. Most of this scrub was Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) with Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). There was also a small copse, predominantly of Ash (*Fraginus excelsior*) that has spread across much of the adjacent land as a result of wind-blown seed.

The flora removed during the improvement began to recover almost immediately. During the very warm, dry summers of 1996 and 1997 the rye grass failed in large areas of the field and the sparse turf was penetrated by various opportunist weeds, especially Ragwort *(Senecio jacobaea).* Centaury (*Centaurium erythraea*), Knapweeds (*Centaurea spp*.), Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*) and Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) were all present but thinly scattered by the damper summer of 1998. Then negotiations began to place the field into the hands of Butterfly Conservation for the expressed purpose of returning the field to chalk downland and instigating a future as a nature reserve.

The management plan for the reserve attempts to halt the succession of the land into forest at the open grassland/scrub development stage. The majority of the site will be grassland with small banks of scrub standing as windbreaks and to provide islands of shade. The denser scrub of the northern end of the reserve will be thinned, as will the predominately ash copse. Most of the ash seedlings will be removed before they can set seed of their own. Grazing will be introduced to hold the successional stage. (Grazing animals eat the developing scrub and prevent it overshadowing the turf).

The aspect and slope of the site mean that it will support a rich flora and hopefully an unusual fauna associated with the site’s warm microclimate. Initially, surveys will be undertaken to see what reappears unaided. Later some plant species may be seeded into the turf if they seem to have been completely lost.