

CHEARSLEY PARISH ASSETS – NATURAL AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

1. Introduction

The parish of Chearsley is in Buckinghamshire near to the Oxfordshire border and is in the Aylesbury Vale District. It is a relatively small parish of some 960 acres (390 ha). The parish has a population of about 580 persons and a housing stock of some 220 houses. The village of Chearsley dates back to Saxon times and has medieval church dating from the 14th century (St. Nicholas). Chearsley is an Anglo-Saxon place-name (Cerdeslai or Cerdicesleah) and, according to Ted Hooton (1994), a minor Roman road may have come through what is now the village of Chearsley.

2. Landscape

The landscape of Chearsley is based on ancient limestone, a fossilized vertebra was discovered in Sam's hole, a popular swimming spot in the river Thame. This was discovered in the 1960s and is possibly a dinosaur or an ichthysaur vertebra from the Kimmeridge clay layer. This ancient limestone and its associated sands, loams and clays give rise to the beautiful rolling countryside that we know today and its farmland and woodland that make up such a wonderful landscape.

The current field system is based on the open field system as in 1763 (Hooton, 1989) and these open field boundaries can still be seen today even though the modern field system is based on the changes following the Enclosures Act of 1805. Today, the majority of the land is farmed by four principal farmers who maintain the current field boundaries, ditches and drainage systems. A few fields in the parish still exhibit the old, traditional ridge and furrow system, for example the lower end of Bury (or Berry) field on Manor Farm.

The eastern and southern boundary of the parish is the river Thame and the western and northern boundary is the Chearsley brook which joins the river Thame at the point at which it leaves the parish in Home Copse near Notley Abbey. These principal waterways add value to the landscape and the nature diversity of the parish.

There is a piece of woodland to the north of the parish known as Chearsley Furze which extends to 22 acres (9ha). The only other significant piece of woodland is Long Mead copse on Manor farm at the western boundary of the parish.

In the Aylesbury Vale Landscape Character Assessment specific mention is made of the Chearsley Ridge (LCA 9.7) which is in the Landscape Character Type: LCT 9 Low Hills and Ridges. This describes the Chearsley Ridge as “an attractive well-defined small ridge with an open, agricultural landscape with good views in all directions”. The key characteristics are the narrow ridge top, mixed agriculture with slightly more arable, small scattered woodlands, a road along the ridge top, half the area retains the pattern of early enclosures, large areas of prairie farming and an open character. The distinctive features noted are the historic settlement of Chearsley with sunken lanes on ridge sides, farms along the ridge sides, small historic farm buildings in fields, the railway line in a cutting and the withchert walls. The Chearsley Ridge is considered to be an area of high sensitivity with guidelines for “conserve and restore”.

3. Cultural heritage

As stated above, Chearsley is a medieval village dating back to Anglo-Saxon times and the lower part of the village has sunken lanes dating back to those times. These lanes are narrow and easily damaged by heavy traffic. The name Cerdicesleah is thought to have arisen as the site at which Cerdic and Cynric fought with the Britons in 527AD (Anglo-Saxon Chronicles). Chearsley is mentioned in the Domesday book as a hamlet of Crendon but in 1458 it was given full parish status by the Bishop of Lincoln. Six thegns held a manor in Chearsley before the Norman Conquest and in 1086 it formed part of Sir Walter Giffard's lands. The overlordship passed to the Earls of Pembroke and descended with the manor of Pollicot in Ashendon. The lords of the manor retained rights in Chearsley as late as 1739. In 1353 Sir John de Moleyns obtained full possession and it remained in his family until Sir Charles Cottrell-Dormer took over the parish in 1745. Between 1844 and 1854 the manor appears to have passed to Captain Wyndham who was still lord in 1864. Then in 1865 the manor passed to Mr. Richard Roadnight and his family who became the principal landowners in the parish at that time.

The church of Chearsley, anciently a chapel to Crendon, formed part of the original endowment of the abbey of Nutley (Notley), founded in the early 12th century by Sir Walter Giffard. The abbey held the deeds until the dissolution. Henry VIII granted the rectory to the Deans and Canons of Christ Church, Oxford in 1542. The nave of St. Nicholas church dates from about 1300 and the tower from the early part of the 15th century. The font has an early 13th century bowl and in the churchyard, there is an octagonal base and part of the stem of a medieval churchyard cross. The original ring of three bells in the tower date from, 1500, 1616 and 1741. The church now has six bells. The remains of a moat exist near the church.

The village contains a good number of 17th century timber framed houses many of which have been altered and added to in later times. Many of the older houses were constructed with traditional witchert walls which, whilst very attractive, are difficult to maintain and very susceptible to damage from the vibrations caused by passing heavy goods vehicles.

In years gone by Chearsley was well known for its orchards, borne out by the fact that many place names in the village have the word 'orchard' in them. A few small orchards still exist today. It was also well known for needle making, nail making and lace making and again the place names bear witness to this.

These days the village has a thriving pub, the Bell, which dates to 1603 and is also mainly a witchert structure. It also has a modern village hall, a shop, a very active cricket club with 2 league XIs and more than 100 juniors in 2019. The village also has several other clubs and societies, which, together with a very active church community, all make for a thriving village life.

The village of Chearsley has a Conservation area which was designated on 16th October 1991 which covers over half of the village area, mainly to the south and east of the Crendon-Aylesbury road (AVDC, 2008). The Conservation Area document sets out in great detail the views, history, nature and cultural aspects of the village.

4. Nature conservation

The nature of Chearsley is extremely diverse and rich, especially in terms of birds, animals, insects and plants. The parish community as a whole is very aware of the need to conserve our nature and to protect it as much as possible. The Manor farm has, in recent years, taken part in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and has decided now to move to full organic status. A list of bird species found on Manor farm by three surveys in April and May 2019 can be found at Appendix A covering 52 species. Other species are to be found in other parts of the parish and these are listed in Appendix B (10 species). Ten species are on the “red list”, i.e. in serious danger of disappearing from our landscape and two are on the amber list.

The parish of Chearsley has a fairly typical range of animals for this part of the UK. The largest mammals are deer of which there are two types, roe deer, which are native to the UK and muntjac deer which have bred in the wild since escaping from zoos and private collections. Other animals include foxes, badgers, hares, rabbits, hedgehogs, squirrels, weasels and smaller vertebrates such as rats, field mice, dormice, voles, shrews, glis glis, moles, frogs, toads and newts. There also bats in the village, including the small pipistrelle bat and it is thought that there are snakes in the parish (possibly grass snakes, slow worms and adders).

The river Thames is an important habitat on the eastern boundary of the parish and is a valuable ecosystem in its own right with various waterfowl, insect life and, occasional sightings of otter. One of the most important insects is the damselfly for which the river Thames is a key habitat. The damselfly is regarded as a key indicator as to the health of a river, especially in terms of pollution. Many different species of fish can be found in the river Thames including chub, perch, bream, roach, dace, pike, rudd, gudgeon and minnows. A major issue in the river Thames is the presence of signal crayfish, this invader, which was introduced from America, has destroyed the population of native crayfish. Freshwater mussels can also be found in the river.

The parish has a wide variety of trees growing in it, of which probably the most iconic is the horse chestnut tree. Sadly, in recent years, the horse chestnuts of the parish have been ravaged by the leaf mining larva of a moth which arrived in the UK a few years ago. It is hoped that some measures to control the moth e.g. pheromone traps, will reduce the level of infestation. Other significant trees in the village include ash, hornbeam, lime, sycamore, cherry, crab apple, rose, various conifers and also of local significance, walnut trees, of which there are several within the village. Other trees are mainly in hedgerows and gardens and include hazel, silver birch, mountain ash, blackthorn, fig, rose and hawthorn plus various ornamental trees and fruit trees (mainly apple and pear).

5. Geology and soils

The soils of Chearsley are largely loams, silts and clays of varying depths over limestone and are therefore mainly free draining. The Agricultural Land Classification of Chearsley shows that the parish has no Grade 1 soils, but it does have some soils of Grade 2 and 3a which are to be protected from development under the AVDC structure plan. The main arable crops in the parish are wheat, barley, oil seed rape, beans and other combinable crops but the arable soils are also able to grow potatoes and other root crops. The soils of the village allotment which are mainly

silts, grow a wide range of vegetables including potatoes, beans, peas, brassicas, parsnips, leeks, herbs, tomatoes, rhubarb and support a number of fruit trees.

The other soils in the parish are of Classification 3b and 4 supporting grassland and meadows including some important water meadows along the banks of the river Thames. The value of these water meadows for summer grazing of cattle has long been recognized since medieval times. They have remained as meadows for many centuries and are important flood overflow areas for the river Thames.

The geology of the village dates from the upper (or later) Jurassic period hence the limestone and the fossilized vertebra mentioned above. The Kimmeridge clay formation in the Chearsley area may have a thickness of 40 to 50 m and other soils were exposed during the construction of the Great Western and Great Central joint railway in 1904. These included buff sands (Thame Sand), chiefly clay (Swindon Clay), a phosphatic layer (Lower Lydite Bed), sandy clay (Elmhurst Silt), calcareous sandstone with lydites and phosphates (sand in Elmhurst Silt), sandy blue clay (Elmhurst Silt) and kimmeridge clay with fossilised remains and bones. The calcareous sandstones also contain the fossils of marine reptiles and large cementstones.

The Jurassic geology also gives rise to the Portland and Purbeck Formations with creamy limestone with compacted shell brash, Crendon sand and Aylesbury limestone of varying depths. Thin remains of the Purbeck Formation, up to 2 m thick, are preserved below the Whitchurch Sand on the hills between Chearsley and Waddesdon. This in turn leads to white porcellanous limestones with subordinate marls and clays. Also associated with the Ashendon, Chearsley, Waddesdon and Upper Winchenden area is the Lower Greensand which is the earliest deposit of a marine transgression which gradually overwhelmed the earlier Cretaceous period. It is estimated that, locally, up to 20 m of underlying strata were eroded prior to the deposition of the Lower Greensand.

There are various structures in the Mesozoic rocks in the area of which the major structure is the Wheatley Fault Zone. However, Chearsley has two minor linked structures, the Chearsley Fault and the Chearsley Church Fault probably with displacements of less than 5 m.

Marl (calcareous clay) has been used to make walls for houses, farm buildings and boundary walls from early times. The material is known locally as witchert, a term probably derived from 'white earth'. The main source of the marl was from the Portland and Purbeck formations but chalk-rich head and calcareous tufa have also been used. The raw material was puddled with water and chopped straw and horse dung were added to give strength. The mixture was placed into position, compacted and allowed to dry. The walls were then protected from the weather by being coated with an impermeable substance such as tar and capped with stones or tiles. In Chearsley witchert was also used as a weak mortar to bind stone.

6. Road drainage and the water environment

The parish of Chearsley slopes from West to East from a height of 405 feet down to 250 feet and the two main roads that travel in this direction are the Winchenden and Chilton roads. These roads meet the Crendon and Aylesbury roads in the centre of the village and a partial consequence of this is that the rainwater drains down School Lane entering the various drains in

the Lane. These drains take the water down through the village eventually to emerge near the river Thame. Road drainage on the Crendon road exits at the railway bridge and the lower part of the road into the Chearsley brook. The Aylesbury road drains down towards the river Thame. Increasing volumes of traffic, especially heavy goods vehicles have, on occasions compromised the road drainage system. This particularly noticeable at the bus stop on the Crendon/Aylesbury road. Also, the many grips which used to take water from the roads into the roadside ditches are rarely maintained and suffer damage from the heavy traffic burden. This in turn leads to a degradation of the road edges.

Large scale urban developments can take many acres of ground and few realise the impact this can have on existing road drainage systems. One inch of rain on one acre (an acre-inch) produces a volume of 22,610 gallons of water. The average rainfall in Chearsley is about 30 inches which means that an acre of development would produce 678,300 gallons per annum.

The value of the water meadows has already been mentioned and there are two water mills upstream and downstream on the river Thame (Cuddington and Holton) which rely on the capacity of flood meadows to regulate the flow of water. In addition, when the Thames river is very full the river Thame and others are used to store water enabling the flow and flood potential of the Thames to be controlled. The flood meadows play a vital role in this process, especially during the winter months.

The river Thame and Chearsly brook are also recipients of water from the many ditches and drains in the parish and the parish is well served by this network which is maintained by the farmers in the parish.

REFERENCES

- AVDC; 2008, Chearsley Conservation Area
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- British Geological Survey, NERC; 1994, Geology of the country around Thame (HMSO, London)
- British History Online; 2019, Parishes: Chearsley. Originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1927
- Heybrook, M; 2019, Private Communication
- Hooton, E; 1994, Chearsley - Living Through History (Chearsley News, Chearsley)
- Hooton, E; 1986, Chearsley History Pamphlet

Appendix A – Manor Farm, Chearsley - Bird Surveys 2019

Species

Little Egret

Grey Heron

Mute Swan

Greylag Goose

Canada Goose

Goosander

Mallard

Red Kite

Kestrel

Grey Partridge

Pheasant

Moorhen

Lapwing

Snipe

Curlew

Black-headed Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Feral Pigeon

Stock Dove

Woodpigeon

Collared Dove

Little Owl

Green Woodpecker

Skylark

Swift

Swallow

House Martin

Pied Wagtail

Wren

Dunnock

Robin

Blackbird

Song Thrush

Whitethroat

Blackcap

Chiff Chaff

Blue Tit

Great Tit

Long-tailed Tit

Magpie

Jackdaw

Rook

Carrion Crow
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Bullfinch*
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting *

Total - 52 species

N.B. Species in red are on the RSPB red list, * - on the Amber list

Appendix B – Bird Species found in other areas of the parish

Coot
Kingfisher
Greater Spotted Woodpecker
Coal Tit
Cuckoo
Jay
Barn Owl
Tawny Owl
Buzzard
Sparrowhawk

Total - 10 species