



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Traditional Orchards

Update September 2015



Foreword

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have a fantastic range of habitats and species within a relatively small geographical area. It is a county of marked contrasts, with the chalk habitats of the North Chilterns, the heathland and acid grassland of the Greensand Ridge and the woodlands and rolling countryside of the Ouse Valley. The fact that species such as adders, dormice and otters are all now expanding their ranges to varying degrees is something we should be proud of and testament to the work of the organisations and individuals involved, but we should not be complacent. There is much to be done, and these Biodiversity Action Plans set out the scale of that challenge very clearly. Only by continuing to work in partnership, putting the case for nature ever more strongly and clearly, can we hope to build on recent progress, bring the natural environment to the fore of the thinking of key decision-makers and reverse long-term declines.

Jon Balaam, Chair of Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership



Biodiversity Action Plans Overview

The **UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)** was created in response to a commitment at the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. It summarises the status of the most threatened habitats and species in the UK and then sets out a series of actions to halt their decline and then reverse it. There are National Action Plans for 1150 species and 65 habitats. The last meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity took place in Nagoya, Japan during October 2010. During the convention the BAP was replaced by the **Aichi Targets**, which were signed by 192 governments. These 20 Targets aim to halt the loss in biodiversity worldwide by 2020. Within the targets there are a range of challenges, from protecting our best habitats and rarest species, to restoring the services our natural environment provides and tackling climate change. The *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* (July 2012) describes how the Aichi Targets will be implemented across the UK and is underpinned by a Biodiversity Strategy for each Country. In England this is *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services* (August 2011).

Although the Aichi Targets are the focus from the most recent Convention on Biological Diversity, the BAP is still a very valuable reference nationally and locally. It has been used to draw up statutory lists in some of the more recent Acts of Parliament which aim to protect and enhance biodiversity. In 2006 the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC)** came into effect. In Section 41 of the Act there is a list of habitats and species which are “*of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity*”. This lists all the BAP habitats and species which are still regarded as priorities for conservation under the *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*. The list includes 56 habitats and 943 species. It was included to assist public bodies with the statutory duty placed on them by Section 40 of the Act. This is often referred to as the ‘Biodiversity Duty’ and states that public bodies have to:

“In exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.”

The aim of the Act is to embed nature conservation within all the relevant policies and decisions that public bodies make. Public bodies include a range of organisations from the Borough and Ward Councils to bodies carrying out functions of a public character under a statutory power. There is a Guidance Document that accompanies this Act to assist local authorities to implement the Biodiversity Duty.

Priority species and habitats are also recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, which came into effect in early 2012. The NPPF replaced most of the planning guidance which was previously available. It promotes the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats and ecological networks as well as the protection and recovery of priority species (paragraph 117).

Although the BAP is no longer promoted nationally it is written into legislation and policies which are being currently used. To support this locally, the BAP is still in use to inform and guide many projects and is kept relevant.



Traditional orchards

National lead organisation(s):
Forestry Commission

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire and Luton Orchard Group (BLOG)

This habitat includes a range of fruit and nut orchards with a low density of open-grown trees set in semi-natural mainly herbaceous vegetation, managed in a low-intensity fashion. The trees are generally planted less densely than in intensively-managed orchards. Traditional orchards in Eastern England tend to be more densely planted with geese or chickens as the livestock element, rather than sheep or pigs.

Current status

National status

Traditional orchards are poorly represented in SSSIs and yet are generally rarer than many other UK BAP priority habitats. Since 1950, 57% of England's orchards have disappeared; this includes both commercial and traditionally managed sites, although declines have been most severe amongst traditional orchards (BRIG 2007). There are currently 47,000 ha of orchards in England (BRIG 2007).

Local status

In Bedfordshire, agricultural census data shows a decline in the orchard area of 95% since the peak decade of the 1950's (Brown 2008).

An England-wide inventory, carried out by the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) during 2008 to 2012, found 322 traditional orchards in Bedfordshire covering a total area of 126.6 ha. 11% of these individual orchards were verified by survey and seven orchard owner questionnaires supplied additional information revealing that 4% of traditional orchards in Bedfordshire are in excellent condition, 32% in good condition and 64% in poor condition. 3 traditional orchards were in Environmental Stewardship comprising 0.92 ha (be aware that these figures are based on a very small number of surveys).

Current factors affecting traditional orchards

- Lack of protection under the current planning system, making orchards susceptible to residential and business development and conversion to other land uses.
- Economic changes and the absence of local niche markets for diverse orchard produce (although potential opportunities are increasing).
- Neglect through lack of management and loss of traditional skills such as pruning and cultivation management skills.



Current action

Site protection

There is little protection afforded to traditional orchards. Only a few are included in SSSIs or are protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs). Current Environmental Impact Assessments regulations for agricultural intensification do not cover orchards. However, traditional orchards are specifically eligible for Single Payment under the Common Agricultural Policy whilst intensive orchards are not. Approximately 3000 ha of orchards are in agri-environment schemes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (BRIG 2007).

TPOs can be used by Local Authorities to protect fruit trees where it is in the interest of amenity to do so. Amenity can also include scarcity and wildlife value. There are no known orchard sites protected by TPOs in Bedfordshire.

Orchard sites are afforded some protection by planning policies in a number of Districts or through generic policies covering the Local Biodiversity Action Plan and its habitats and species. Sites can also be protected (or new sites created) through conditions and Section 106 agreements as part of the planning process.

Traditional Orchards are included on the Section 41 (S41) List of Habitats of Principal Importance in England used to guide decision-makers such as public bodies in implementing their duty under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

Management, research and guidance

- The East of England Apples and Orchards Project (EEAOP) provides advice and information on the region's local fruit varieties, sells heritage fruit trees, promotes the conservation and heritage of fruit trees and conducts training on various aspects of orchard management.
- The Bedfordshire and Luton Orchard Group (BLOG) now exist to actively survey, conserve and promote the fruit varieties and orchards in Bedfordshire. BLOG consists of a range of local organisations (see below).
- A range of conservation organisations in Bedfordshire are active in promoting and supporting community orchards in the county, examples include; Parkhill Community Orchard in Brickhill, Whipnade Community Orchard and Fairfield Park Community. A new website, Fruit ID (<http://www.fruitid.com/>) provides a thorough online resource to the identification of UK apple cultivars (pears and cobnuts to follow).



Advisory services

Advice on orchard management and potential sources of funding is available from the following organisations:

- Bedford and Luton Orchard Group <https://www.facebook.com/BedfordshireOrchards/>
- East of England Apples and Orchards Project <http://www.applesandorchards.org.uk/>
- Central Bedfordshire Council <http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/>
- Bedford Borough Council <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/>
- Natural England <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>
- The Wildlife Trust <http://www.wildlifebcn.org/>
- People's Trust for Endangered Species <http://www.ptes.org/>

In addition, the organisation Common Ground provides advice on the culture, history, arts and heritage of orchards and fruit varieties – <http://commonground.org.uk>

Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

- Setting up of BLOG with steering group, members and Facebook page.
- Survey of Bedfordshire's orchards both through PTES national survey and local surveys using local people. (There is a need for a more detailed and thorough survey of Bedfordshire's traditional orchards).
- Publication of County Wildlife Site survey guidelines for Traditional Orchards.
- Promotion of orchards at various Bedfordshire Apple Days.
- Greater awareness of orchards and fruit varieties as part of the planning process and through planning applications.
- Active support of the setting up of Community Orchards throughout Bedfordshire.
- The County Wildlife Site (CWS) Panel ratified and adopted new traditional orchard CWS criteria resulting in two traditional orchards being recognised as CWS.
- 3 ha of traditional orchard were restored and 2 ha were created through environmental stewardship.



Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Increase knowledge of the status and condition of Bedfordshire and Luton's orchard resource.

Improve the ecological and genetic condition of degraded orchards in the county through good practice and conservation.

Expand the orchard habitat resource by creating new traditionally managed orchards.

Increase and improve the species and genetic diversity associated with Bedfordshire's traditional orchards.

Raise awareness of the biodiversity value and heritage of Bedfordshire and Luton's orchards.

Targets

- A. Prepare by 2020 an inventory of orchards and important fruit trees in Bedfordshire and Luton.
- B. Achieve by 2020 favourable or recovering condition of 30% of Bedfordshire and Luton orchards.
- C. Restore by 2020 10% of traditional orchard sites in Bedfordshire and Luton.
- D. Create by 2020 at least 1 ha annually of new orchards in Bedfordshire, including at least one in Luton.

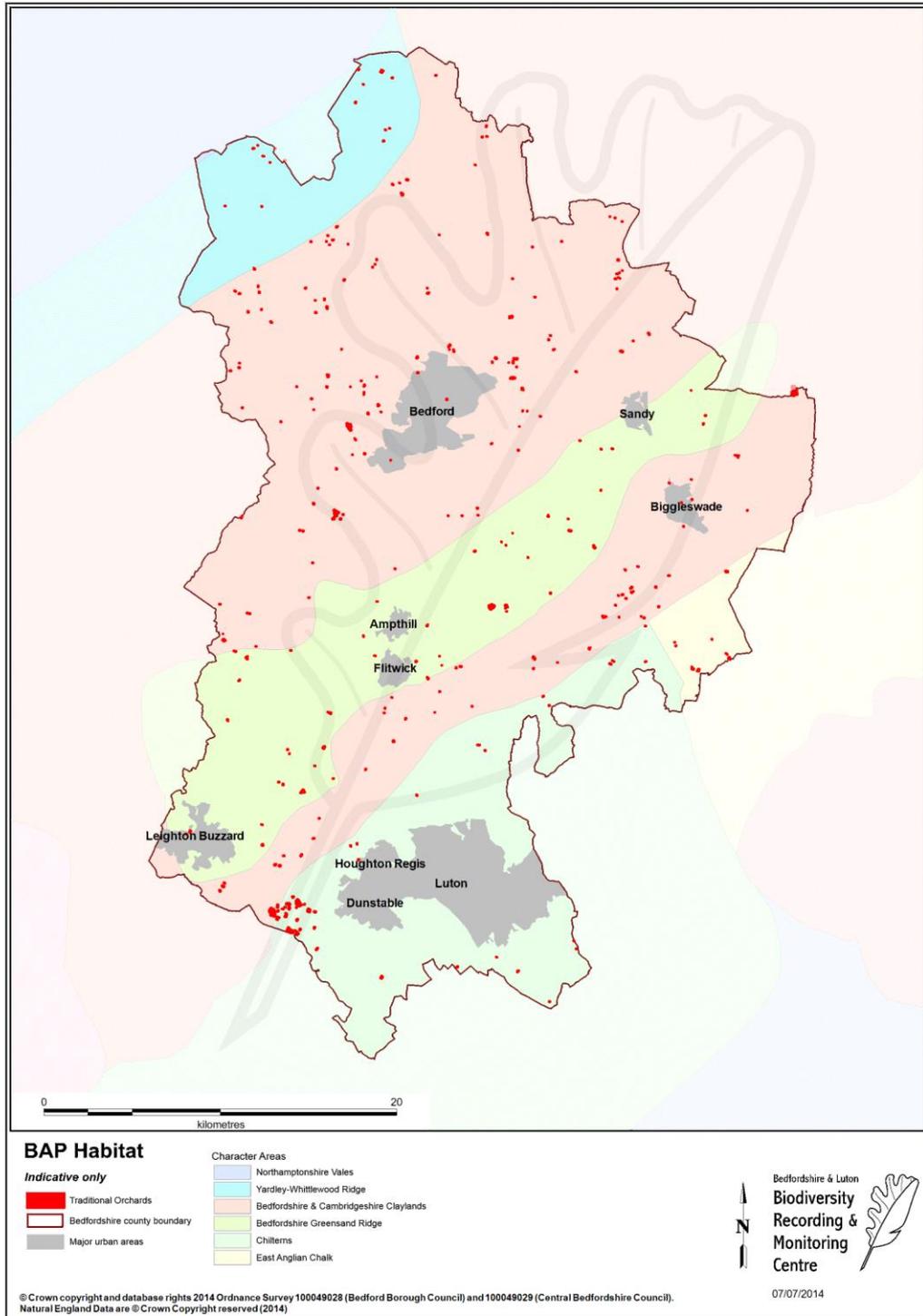


Figure 1: Distribution of traditional orchards across Bedfordshire.

Proposed action

Partners

Bedford Borough Council
Bedfordshire and Luton Orchard Group
Bedfordshire Natural History Society
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre
Bedfordshire and Luton County Wildlife Site Panel

Central Bedfordshire Council
East of England Apples and Orchards Project
Greensand Trust
Luton Borough Council
Wildlife Trust BCN

Action

Policy and legislation

1. Establish by 2020 the meaning of orchard 'restoration', including a distinction of trees as habitat and trees as specimens.
2. Produce a briefing note by 2014 on Traditional Orchards/Heritage Orchard Trees and the Planning System.

Site safeguard and management

3. Establish on average at least 1 ha of community orchard per year until 2020.
4. Restore orchards through traditional planting and other management i.e. Steppingley Orchard, Mowsbury Park
5. Establish by 2020 a Bedfordshire and Luton 'reference orchard' to provide a gene bank of local fruit varieties and a location for traditional orchard management skills training (consider BBC Parkhill Orchard).

Advisory

6. Prepare by 2020 a guide to fruit tree management and decision-making for various management aims
7. Run an ongoing series of training and Orchard Awareness Training Days, on average at least one per year aimed at the following subjects:
 - Local communities wishing to set up community orchards
 - Local businesses/communities wishing to use orchard produce
 - Management and biodiversity conservation of orchards
 - Orchard heritage, local fruit varieties, history research and folklore.

Future research and monitoring

8. Conduct by 2020 a survey of the orchards of Bedfordshire and Luton, using the existing PTES methodology.
9. Prepare by 2020 a genetic map of extant orchard fruit varieties in Bedfordshire and Luton.
10. Conduct by 2020 a survey of Bedfordshire orchard and fruit tree bryophytes and lichens.
11. Establish by 2020 criteria for assessing orchard condition.

Communication and publicity

12. Maintain a viable population of local fruit varieties by distributing local variety fruit trees per annum.
13. Promotion of local fruit varieties commercially through appropriate outlets.
14. Prepare and distribute a leaflet on Bedfordshire fruit varieties and where to find them.
15. Continue promotion of Bedfordshire's traditional orchards through BLOG, Facebook, at Apple Days and other, appropriate, events.
16. By 2020, develop a website, through BLOG to promote Bedfordshire's traditional orchards.



Monitoring the Action Plan

The Bedfordshire and Luton Orchard Group will keep implementation of this plan under review and individuals or organisations signed up to specific actions will report via the national Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).

This action plan will be reviewed every five years.

Complementary plans

Hertfordshire Traditional Orchards Action Plan: <http://www.hef.org.uk/nature/>

Buckinghamshire Traditional Orchards Action Plan:
<http://www.buckinghamshirepartnership.co.uk/media/1022743/Traditional%20Orchards.pdf>

Acknowledgements

This plan has been compiled by the current Chairman of BLOG with help from the East of England Apples and Orchards Project, Central Bedfordshire Council, Luton Borough Council and the Chilterns Conservation Board.

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