

Some of the bird life that can be seen on the trail



Pochard



Little ringed plover



Meadow pipit

This leaflet was produced by the Kentish Stour Countryside Project (KSCP), August 2008. The KSCP worked with Evegate Business Park to create the Wetland Trail, which was waymarked by KSCP volunteers. For more information or to get involved, contact:

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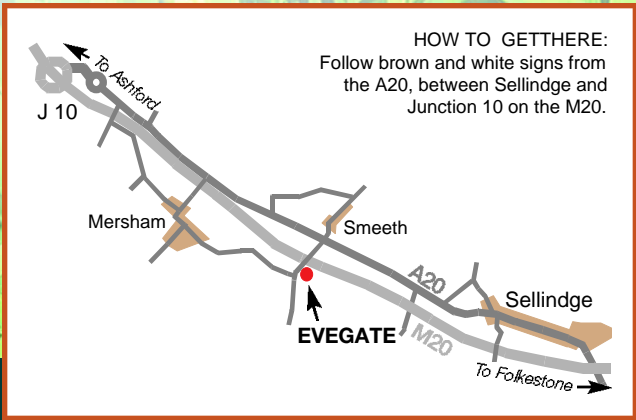
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EVEGATE FARM WETLAND TRAIL

Explore
a landscape
of ponds, woods
and marshland,
rich in
wildlife and
history.

Welcome to the Evegate Farm Wetland Trail.

Use the map overleaf to follow the trail.
The numbered points on the map refer to the text.

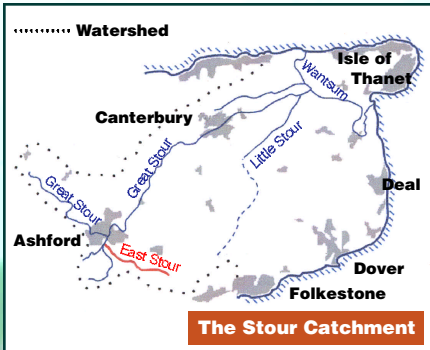
- ◆ The trail is approximately 2 miles long and should take you 45 to 60 minutes to complete.
- ◆ Please wear suitable footwear - terrain tends to be muddy, uneven and wet. Wellingtons are recommended in winter.
- ◆ Caution - ponds are deep.

To reach the start of the trail, follow the way-markers through the Business Park, through the car park and to the left of the large barn.

POINT 1 - TRAIL START

Here at the start of the trail you have a great view of the area you are going to explore.

You are looking down into the valley of the East Stour river. Its source is a few miles east of here, near Postling. The river flows westwards through this valley, and joins the Great Stour in Ashford town centre. It is part of what is known as the 'Kentish Stour Catchment' - a large system of rivers and streams that all flow into the Great Stour, covering most of east Kent.



The Channel Tunnel Rail Link and the mainline railway run along the embankment you can see down in the valley. You might also be able to see one of the large ponds, and

the marshy areas and trees that form the wetland you will explore. You may be wondering why this wetland was created.

The East Stour flows mainly over Weald Clay, so is prone to flooding. In 1989, a flood barrier was built nearby (see map) - land close to the barrier is used to hold water that might otherwise flood South Ashford. When the Rail Link was built through the area, some of this land was lost. To compensate, large ponds and shallow depressions were dug to hold more water, creating the new wetland.

The woodland you can see on high ground to the east is Park Wood. It used to be much larger, stretching right down to the railway and covering most of the area you can see.



Common frog

POINT 2 - OLD POND

Most of the ponds you will see on this trail are new, but this one is well over a hundred years old. It appears on the first Ordnance

Survey maps of the late 1800s. The trees surrounding it are mainly alder and willow - two species you will see a lot of, as they are well adapted to damp conditions. The pond is home to wetland birds, including moorhen and coot, and amphibians such as common frog. As you follow the path around the edge of the pond you will come to a sluice where it feeds a stream.

You have probably noticed that the path is following a wide grassy strip at the edge of the field. Evegate Farm has these 'field margins' in many places. They provide a space for nature in fields that would otherwise be covered by a crop that has little to offer wildlife. A range of insects, mammals, and birds such as skylark and snipe use them for nesting and feeding.



Skylark

POINT 3 - STREAMS AND HISTORY

The small stream you are walking alongside may look insignificant, but it's doing an important job. Like countless other small waterways all over the landscape, it is helping to drain the land, carrying water into a larger river which in turn flows into the sea. Look carefully and you will see pipes that drain water off the fields.

Streams and rivers also provide habitats for wildlife, particularly if they have been left to develop naturally. The stream you are walking along has been altered by man - straightened to carry water more quickly - so is less natural, but still has wild plants like fool's watercress growing in it and is probably used by aquatic insects and amphibians.

This is a good spot to reflect on some of the history of this area. If you had been standing here a hundred years ago, your surroundings would have been very different. You would have been standing in a woodland, as Park Wood was much larger, close to a pheasantry - an area used for rearing game birds. You would have been able to hear steam trains chuffing along the railway and coming to a halt. Smeeth had a station back then, which stood on the other side of the line, close to the house you can see nearby, which is called Park Wood Cottage.

Archeological fieldwork carried out before the construction of the Rail Link revealed a long history of settlement in the vicinity of Park Wood Cottage. The presence of ditches and pits are thought to be evidence of field systems from the late Iron Age. These are probably connected to what seems to be a late Iron Age settlement discovered about 1/2 mile west of here. Mediaeval field systems were also found and it is thought that there was once a medieval settlement at or near Park Wood Cottage.

You can take a short cut at this point - see map.

WE REQUEST THAT ALL DOGS BE KEPT ON LEADS FROM THIS POINT ON.



Fool's watercress

POINT 4 - WATERSIDE WALK



Black-tailed skimmer

This part of the trail takes you alongside the largest of the new ponds here. This is the best place to see wetland birds, particularly between October and March, when many wildfowl congregate on the water. Teal, pochard and tufted duck have all been recorded here, as well as the more familiar mute swan, coot and mallard. You may see a grey heron or a little egret standing in the shallows. Lapwing is the most common wader here, but ringed plover and green sandpiper have also been seen.

If you are walking here in the spring and summer, the scene will be quite different. You may see some birds on the water, but the winter visitors will be long gone. A summer visitor that likes wetlands is the yellow wagtail, which you may see running on the ground or perching on a fence. A variety of wetland plants are in flower through spring and summer, including yellow flag iris and water mint. The best time to see dragonflies and damselflies is June to August, when species such as black-tailed skimmer are on the wing.

Amphibians and reptiles are active from early spring. You may see a grass snake slithering into the undergrowth (they are completely harmless), or hear a plop as a marsh frog jumps out of your way. The marsh frogs perform a chorus of croaking in spring, which can be heard from some distance away. Toads make their way to the large ponds here to spawn - they can be distinguished from frogs because they crawl instead of hopping.



Marsh frog

An archaeological find made in the 1970s gives another glimpse into the distant past of this area. Stone age tools from the Mesolithic period (10,000 to 4,000 BC) were found near here; they included blades, scrapers and an axe.

POINT 5 - MARSH WALK

The next section of the trail takes you through a marshy area, close to two more ponds. In winter, this is a great place to see snipe. They are usually well hidden among the vegetation, and you will probably only see them if they are alarmed, when they let out a rasping call and make a dramatic zig-zagging escape flight. A smaller ground-dwelling species is the meadow pipit. Visit in spring and you may see them perform their 'parachuting' display flights, when they fly high into the air then drop back to earth with a repeating call. At this time skylarks can also be heard singing high overhead. Herons and little egrets also like this marshy area - you may see one gracefully flapping into the air as you approach.

By now you will probably have noticed that a lot of trees were planted in the creation of this wetland. The species chosen were all native, with different mixtures of trees in different places. The new woodland surrounding the marshy area consists of alder, field maple, silver and downy birch, hawthorn, dogwood, hazel, spindle, holly, blackthorn, ash, English oak and five different species of willow!



Grey heron

More Mesolithic artefacts were discovered here, during fieldwork carried out before the construction of the Rail Link, in addition to more signs of Iron Age occupation, and some Roman pottery.

POINT 6 - A LOST WINDMILL

A large mound, 35m (116 ft) across and 3m (10 ft) high, once situated a short distance east of here, was for many years thought to be a Bronze Age burial mound. When it was excavated in the 1960s, material from many different eras, including the Bronze Age, was discovered. However, archaeologists concluded that it was probably the mound on which a mediaeval windmill had once stood - the latest pottery fragments were from the 14th century. But if the site was Mediaeval, where did all the earlier finds come from? The answer was that the mill had been built on a dried up spring that had been a focus of activity from the Palaeolithic period right through to the Roman era.

In a 1967 account of the dig, the mound was described as standing on the northern edge of Park Wood. A 1969

entry in the county archaeological record states that, "No trace of the mound survives, the area is now arable farmland." It seems that, sadly, the mound was levelled at the same time the woodland was cleared. There is nothing to see of the mound now, but a short walk along the public footpath will take you to the spot where it once stood (see map).

POINT 7 - PARK WOOD

This ancient woodland is at its best in spring, when it is a riot of colourful wild flowers - celandines, wood anemones, bluebells, wild garlic, and yellow archangel. Many of these species are 'ancient woodland indicators' - plants that tells us that the woodland is very old. An 'ancient' woodland has existed for at least 400 years and may be much older.

As you've already discovered, Park Wood was once much larger, stretching right down to the railway. The lower parts were probably quite different to this surviving area - boggier, with much alder and willow. The tree planting in the new wetland is intended to re-create some of this lost wet woodland.

You've already walked past the site of a lost windmill; here in Park Wood is the site of a lost water mill. It was powered by the stream running through the wood, but was probably quite small and is thought to have been a back up to the windmill, perhaps used when there was little breeze. In contrast to the windmill, clear signs of the water mill can still be seen. Just before the path leads you out of the woodland, look to your right, and you will see an earthen bank - this is the dam or 'pond bay' that was used to contain the mill pond (it may be harder to see in spring and summer). There is a spill way at the far end and a break in the dam where the water wheel would have been. The stream now flows through a central breach where a sluice gate would have been situated.



Wild garlic

Park Wood is the last point of interest on this trail. The path will now lead you back to Evegate Business Centre. We hope you have enjoyed exploring the Evegate Farm Wetland Trail and will visit again soon!

