

Welcome to the Great Stour Meadow wildlife trail

Wildlife and factories don't mix, do they? Well, Givaudan and the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) believe they can. They have been working together since 1999 to create and enhance habitats for wildlife in the shadow of one of Ashford's largest factory complexes.

Old maps of this area show open pasture where the factory now stands – a rural riverside setting close to Conningbrook Manor. By the time the factory was built in the early 1960s, the site had become the urban fringe of an expanding Ashford. The grounds of the factory were well kept and tidy, and didn't offer much in the way of wildlife habitat, but the site was special because the Great Stour flowed past. The river was set to become the foundation of efforts to manufacture a wildlife haven.

Under the guidance of the KSCP, and through the efforts of their volunteers and company staff, enhancements began with tree and meadow planting and the creation of the pond north of the car park. The large field next door, which had been leased to a farmer, was used to establish the Great Stour Meadow. This was followed by hedge planting, the provision of artificial homes for wildlife and the second pond, complete with dipping platform. The result is an award winning wildlife haven.

This leaflet will guide you through the habitats and tell you about the wildlife they support.

Start at the information panel and follow the trail map around the numbered points of interest. Please take care near the river.

PLEASE NOTE: The Great Stour Meadow is privately owned - access by arrangement with Givaudan only. See back cover for contact details.

'Manufacturing' and managing a wildlife haven

Otter hole construction



Pond creation



Tree planting



Removing invasive Himalayan balsam

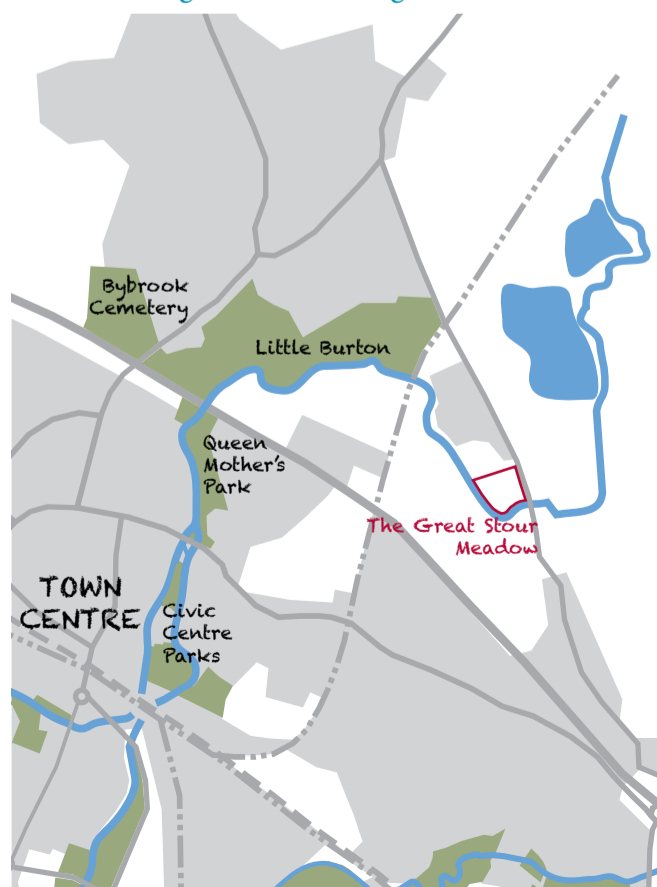


Meadow cutting

The Bigger Picture

The Great Stour Meadow is a great piece of habitat creation in its own right, but it is also the last link of a chain of riverside wildlife sites that stretches right through urban Ashford, linking the town to the countryside.

The Ashford Green Corridor is made up of parks, recreation grounds and other green spaces alongside the rivers that flow through Ashford. Parts of it are designated as a Local Nature Reserve. To find out more, visit the Virtual Visitor Centre at www.ashfordgreencorridor.org.uk.



Useful Contacts

To arrange a visit to the Great Stour Meadow, please contact Givaudan:

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The Great Stour Meadow wildlife trail



1 The Meadow

The Great Stour Meadow was established in April 2002. So it's just a youngster, barely finding its feet - traditional hay meadows can be centuries old. But when so many of them have disappeared from the countryside, every new meadow is precious. The Stour would once have been lined by dozens of fields like this, brimming with wild flowers. This is habitat restoration in action.

Bring back meadow flowers and you also bring back the rich folklore that goes with them. Many of the plants growing in this meadow have long histories of superstition and medicinal use.



In days gone by young girls played a game using **black knapweed**: they wore the flower with its petals pulled out, thought about a boy they liked and, if the petals grew back, that meant the boy liked them too.



Goat's-beard is also traditionally known as 'Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon' because its flowers close up during the day.



In the Weald of Kent, **self-heal** combined with lard was used for treating wounds as recently as the 1940s.



Bird's foot trefoil used to be known by over 70 traditional, local names, including 'eggs and bacon', 'granny's toenails' and 'Dutchman's clogs'.

7 The Owl Boxes

Imagine you're a barn owl, flying around the countryside looking for a home. There are two things you really need. One is a food supply - preferably a good-sized meadow or rough pasture with lots of unsuspecting field voles living in it. The other is a safe place to rear your young - an old hollow tree or a maybe a cosy hay loft in an old barn. Sadly, all these things are in much shorter supply in the countryside than they used to be.

Then you fly over the Givaudan factory. Well, there's a big meadow, so that's dinner taken care of. But all the trees are recently planted and none of those buildings look much like a traditional barn. However, some considerate people have provided two barn owl boxes on poles. They're spacious, with an entrance near the top so the chicks can't fall out and a shelf for them to perch on when they fledge. They're up high, out of reach of predators, in an undisturbed location. Any rain will run right off their triangular shape. And there are two, so you and your partner can get away from the kids as they grow bigger!

6 The River Bays

One of the lovely things about walking along the Great Stour is watching the water flow by - the sight and sound of rushing water is the very essence of a river. But some wildlife like things a little calmer. Some plants and animals thrive in the parts of a river where there is little or no flow - shallow margins and lazy backwaters are perfect for fish to spawn in, or for the larvae of insects like dragonflies. This is one of two small bays we've dug in the river bank to help them. With its still water and dense vegetation it offers a refuge from the 'fast lane' of the main river channel.

5 The Reptile Hibernaculum

You may be wondering why this pile of soil and rubble has been dumped here next to the river. It may not look very inviting but to a viviparous lizard or a grass snake it's a perfect winter residence. The many sheltered nooks and crannies deep inside the pile are ideal places for reptiles to hibernate. In wilder places, reptiles will sit out the winter in rocky crevices, old tree stumps or abandoned mammal burrows. As there is a lack of such natural refuges here, we thought we'd give them a helping hand. They don't seem to care that it's artificial. And it's not just for hibernating - reptiles will shelter here at other times of year and sunbathe on the mound to warm themselves up - a necessity if you're cold blooded.



Viviparous lizard

2 The Hedgerows

What's the point of hedges? Put simply, they keep livestock in fields, and they did that job very well for hundreds of years. But when affordable wire fencing came along in the 20th century, it made sense to use that instead. Around the same time, farms were becoming more mechanised, and it made sense to make fields bigger by taking out hedges - it was more efficient. As agriculture modernised, farms specialised and farmers who only grew cereals removed or neglected hedges they now had no use for.

All very sensible, but a disaster for wildlife. In a farmed landscape, hedges provide food, shelter and breeding sites for a host of birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates too numerous to list. They also act as corridors, linking up the countryside and enabling wildlife to move between large areas of habitat such as patches of woodland.

The rate of hedgerow loss has now slowed, and conservation organisations like the KSCP are starting to put them back into the countryside. The hedges planted here at Givaudan mimic the ancient hedgerows that were lost, in that they contain a rich mix of tree species, including hawthorn, hazel, hornbeam, dog rose, wayfaring tree, spindle and holly.



Hedge planting



3 The River

What could be more natural than a river? Unfortunately, there are few waterways that have escaped the hand of man over the years. Pollution has taken its toll - it

was chemical pesticides like DDT getting into rivers that led to the disappearance of the otter from many British waterways. Some rivers have gradually lost their natural shapes and features - their channels straightened and deepened, their waters constricted by walls and embankments. In the countryside, bankside vegetation has been lost as fields have been cultivated right up to the water's edge.

But it's a different story along this stretch of the Great Stour. The riverside has been planted with aquatic flora and native trees, offering vital habitats to river species like the water vole that need vegetation cover to survive. Work by the KSCP and the Environment Agency has restored some of its natural characteristics such as pools, bays, riffles and meanders. Rivers across Britain are much cleaner now, and this has led to a comeback by otters in recent years. There have not been any sightings of this charismatic river mammal on the Stour for a while, but they could be present in very low numbers. We have built an artificial otter holt here at Givaudan, ready for the moment when one passes by.



Environment Agency work to enhance river habitats

4 The Ponds

Everyone knows that ponds are good for wildlife, and that is partly because so many different species use them in a variety of ways.

Some insects, such as pond skaters, water boatman and whirligig beetles, live out their whole lives in the water.

Dragonflies and damselflies are insects that spend part of their lives in water. Their larvae, or 'nymphs', are aquatic but upon reaching adulthood emerge from the water and metamorphose into the spectacular airborne creatures we love to see. In some cases dragonflies spend years as a nymph and only a few weeks as an adult. The purpose of this brief life stage is to mate. Mated females return to ponds to lay their eggs in water.

We associate amphibians such as frogs and newts with water, but in fact they spend much of the year on dry land. You may have noticed the frogs in your garden suddenly disappear from the pond only to reappear the following spring - that is how they got their Latin name *Rana temporaria*. Newts spend most of the year out of water, dispersing some distance from ponds, foraging in open terrestrial habitats for juicy invertebrates.

The grass snake is an example of an animal that does not live in water, but is very much associated with wetlands. They have specialised in preying on amphibians, so ponds and rivers are favourite hunting grounds. They are good swimmers and can hunt in the water as well as on dry land.

One of our ponds has a dipping platform, used regularly by local youth groups to learn first hand about some of these pond dwelling species.



Pond skater

Whirligig beetle

Water boatman

Damselfly laying eggs



Damselfly nymph



Common frog

Smooth newt



Grass snake