

## Welcome to Abbots Hall

On this 700-acre coastal farm we have shown how sustainable coastal defences can lead to the creation of coastal marshes which are vital for the future of both wildlife and people. This is a working farm where we aim to show how wildlife can flourish alongside profitable farming. We hope you enjoy your visit and will keep returning to see how the project develops.



## Introduction

Abbots Hall Farm is owned and managed by Essex Wildlife Trust and supported by WWF-UK, Environment Agency, Natural England, Heritage Lottery Fund and The Wildlife Trusts. The whole project would not have been possible without the legacy left by Joan Elliot from Braintree who wanted a site where we would tackle major conservation issues and where people could see this work.

We have been working together at Abbots Hall on the problems caused by rising sea levels which result in coastal marshes being squeezed out of existence against the hard sea walls which are found in many parts of the world and particularly in a county like Essex.

We are also very concerned by the desperate decline of wildlife on arable farms throughout the country and particularly in Essex where arable land forms over 80% of the countryside.

Your walk will take you through areas of the arable farm where you can see what we are doing to encourage farmland wildlife on a working farm. When you reach the coastal strip you will be able to see our success in recreating marshes and encouraging coastal wildlife.

## 1 Abbots Hall and Farm Buildings

From the car park you will see the main Abbots Hall buildings which are Grade II listed and have been carefully refurbished to provide the main offices for Essex Wildlife Trust. The oldest part of the house foundations date back to the Domesday Survey of 1086 and then 'Abess Hall in Wigheberga' was held by Barking Abbey until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. The oldest part of the house you see is about 1780 and it was sold under the Will of John Bullock MP in 1810 for £23,500. Sir Leonard Crossland, former Chairman of Ford, overhauled the buildings to their present form in 1970 and after his death they were purchased by Essex Wildlife Trust in 2000.

There is no visitor access to the buildings within the farmyard. The tall buildings and silos are for the storage of crops and the lower buildings for machinery and workshops.

## 2 The Arable Farm

From the car park and buildings there are several footpaths which run through the arable farm and down to the coastal strip. As this is a working farm, just which routes are open will vary from day to day depending on farming operations. Some routes may therefore be closed for safety reasons. There will always be an interesting route to follow. The interpretation boards will point out the routes and show you which crop is being grown in each field as well as other points of interest and there is information about recent wildlife sightings.



When Abbots Hall was purchased, most of the farm was arable giving a cropped area of 217 hectares (520 acres). Many of the hedges had been retained, although they had been closely managed. Field sizes were between 3.6 hectares (9 acres) Lower Pound Field to 13.5 hectares (32.5 acres) Wick Field. The main crops were Winter Wheat on about two thirds of the land and a break crop grown on the other third using a mixture of Barley, Rape and Marrow Fat Peas. Flax was often grown on New Field. This cropping pattern was retained until 2003 to enable us to understand the land and monitor both the crop production and the

wildlife which the conventional arable system supported before making any changes. This period produced our baseline data.

You will see the changes being made to the farm are indicated on the map and the interpretation boards. We are farming the land ourselves with an experienced Farm Manager.

The main changes we have introduced to benefit wildlife are:

### Changes round the edge of the crops

- Restoration of hedgerows and the creation of new hedgerows
- Rotational coppicing of existing hedgerows
- Grassland margins of six metres
- Restoring or creating new ponds and a lake
- Putting in beetlebank strips through arable fields
- Planting woodland on edges and corners of fields
- Pollen and nectar mixes benefit insects.

### Changes in the cropped area

- Choice of crop species as some crops support more wildlife
- Choice of crop varieties as some are more resistant to pests
- Growing a variety of crops for the production of Essex Wildlife Trust bird seed
- Change time and amount of ploughing and cultivation, e.g. spring sown crops leaving winter stubble for wildlife
- Only use pesticide where it is necessary to control a pest
- Careful pesticide choice and application level so it is well targeted
- Leaving Skylark patches for Skylarks and wild bird cover
- Establishing grazing fields as an additional habitat.

We have also tried farming part of the farm organically for five years. However, we found that the weed burden on the heavy clays could not be controlled mechanically and we believe Conservation Grade with minimal use of chemicals is a better balance between wildlife gain and profitable farming. For each change we carefully consider the benefit to wildlife on the one hand and on the other the loss or gain in profitability as our aim is that the farm must make a profit.



ABBOTTS HALL FARM

### 3 Coastal Defence & Managed Realignment

Along the coastal strip you will come to one or more of the coastal bird watching hides and further interpretation about the recreation of coastal marshes.



In Essex before the seawalls were built there were 40,000ha of saltmarsh. Thirty years ago there were 4500ha but today only 2500ha are left. It has eroded due to 'coastal squeeze', the tell tale sign of which is bare mud appearing in the saltmarsh. This is a major problem for coastal wildlife like Wigeon and Redshank which depend on saltmarsh habitat. It is also a major sea defence issue because building higher and stronger sea walls to keep out a steadily rising sea level is becoming prohibitively expensive. The funds for sea walls need to be spent protecting towns and villages and a less costly option needs to be found for some of the long sections of rural coastline in a county like Essex.

Abbotts Hall is a practical demonstration of a more sustainable approach to coastal defences. The 3.5km sea wall along the farm's southern boundary was breached or dug away in five places in 2002, an approach called Managed Retreat or Coastal Realignment. This allowed the tide in and out and has encouraged coastal marshes to grow on the strip of arable land behind the sea wall.



These marshes developed quickly giving immediate benefit to wildlife. Intensive monitoring of water movements and water quality as well as wildlife in the estuary have been and continue to be undertaken to study the project. The new marshes are very important as fish nurseries with large numbers of bass, herring and other species of fish.

This sustainable approach will benefit the estuary as a whole including the people who use it, live by it and enjoy its great interest and beauty. Coastal Realignment is one of a series of measures which are being trialled on the Essex coast to investigate more sustainable coastline management.

Many coastal landowners may resist the prospect of Coastal Realignment on their own land, partly because of the understandable human fear of flooding and partly because of the loss of income from crops. It is important therefore that trials like this gain information on how flooding can be controlled and what levels of grant and compensation are available.

The benefits to birds and other wildlife were immediately apparent as arable land was turned to marshland. Up to eighteen different species of wader have been recorded on the site as well as Little Egret, Goosander, Little Grebe and Shelduck.

This project has proved to be an internationally important demonstration site showing what can be achieved by carefully planned and executed coastal defence and realignment.

### 4 New Grassland & Freshwater Areas

The high tides will normally come up to about the three metre contour and the coastal path you walk on to get between hides is at about the five metre contour. The strip of land between will not therefore become saltmarsh but has been seeded as grassland and will be cut for hay or grazed by sheep, just as they would have been in the times of Barking Abbey and when the Essex coast was a massive sheep grazing area producing wool, sheep's milk and cheese.

These grassland areas have greatly improved the diversity of the farm for such species as Skylark, and Lapwing as well as wild plants, insects and Hares.



Not everyone will reach the new lake on their walk but this is an interesting feature because we have effectively moved back the freshwater area, which used to be nearer the sea wall. The new lake ensures that freshwater habitat remains and has provided some of the material for

the counter walls at the east and west of the farm to ensure that our neighbours' land cannot be flooded. A reed bed has established in the new lake providing a natural filter for the stream that contains treated effluent from Great Wigborough Sewerage Works. Nesting and roosting islands have also been included.

### 5 Historical Interest

There are several points on your walk where you can get a vision of the historical landscape. The Great Wigborough Henge is on a slightly raised area and reputed to be the site of a wooden henge or round house. There are at least eight Red Hills on site where the red earth marks the site of Iron Age/Roman salt production and you can imagine the smokey scene as brine was evaporated to crystallise salt in clay vessels over charcoal fires. The Ship Lock probably dates from the same period as a landing point but historians think it may have originally been a Dane encampment. More recently it was a point where farm produce was taken from here by boat - a use that we know was continued right up to the 1950s before the roads were improved.

### 6 Abbotts Hall Gardens

When you return from your walk, please take time to enjoy the beautiful Abbotts Hall Gardens, which are lovingly and carefully tended by our volunteers. They offer you the opportunity to relax and enjoy the wildlife that thrives on them. Specific plants have been planted for specific species. For example there is a butterfly garden, as butterflies are dependent on a limited number of plants.

The butterfly garden at Abbotts Hall Farm provides a continuous supply of nectar. Plants that have been planted include Buddleia, Lavender, Thyme, Ivy, Hebe and Sedum.



## Why Not Join Essex Wildlife Trust?



Every membership contributes towards our vital conservation work and helps Protect Wildlife for the Future and for the People of Essex

Essex Wildlife Trust is the county's leading conservation charity. It has over 33,600 members and 465 corporate members who enable the Trust to conserve and manage over 7,250 acres of land on 87 nature reserves and 2 nature parks. There are 7 visitor centres to welcome visitors and the Trust engages over 52,000 children every year about the wildlife of Essex.

It is supported financially by members, local businesses and grant making organisations. All of the members of Essex Wildlife Trust contribute towards Protecting Wildlife for the Future.

#### Subscription rates as follows:

|                |        |
|----------------|--------|
| Single         | £27.00 |
| Joint          | £34.00 |
| Wildlife Watch | £15.00 |
| Family         | £49.00 |

For more details about membership, please do not hesitate to contact our membership department on 01621 862964.



### Location on the Essex Coast

Abbotts Hall Farm is seven miles south of Colchester just off the B1026, south of Abberton Reservoir and west of the village of Great Wigborough. The farm is in the centre of a 25km section of the Essex coast between the Colne Estuary and the Blackwater Estuary, a large area of international importance for conservation.

### Arranging your visit

At present the farm is open Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm. You need to book weekend visits but not weekdays.

The following fact sheets are available from the website or by post from the address below:

|                                       |                                      |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>History of Abbotts Hall</i>      | 7 <i>Farming</i>                     |
| 2 <i>Archaeology</i>                  | 8 <i>Farm Economics</i>              |
| 3 <i>Communities and Livelihoods</i>  | 9 <i>Coastal Realignment Lessons</i> |
| 4 <i>Coastal Realignment Consents</i> | 10 <i>The Farm Business</i>          |
| 5 <i>Coastal Squeeze</i>              | 11 <i>Farm Wildlife</i>              |
| 6 <i>Farming at Abbotts Hall</i>      |                                      |



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Little Egret

Welcome to

# Abbotts Hall Farm



Protecting Wildlife for the Future and for the People of Essex