

**PRELIMINARY ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL
DEVELOPMENT SITE AT
WHITEGATES EQUESTRIAN CENTRE
SOUTH HETTON**

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SUMMARY

1. The aim of the study was to survey a parcel of land and a small complex of corrugated iron buildings at the Whitegates Equestrian Centre on the edge of the village of South Hetton.
The objectives were to carry out an extended Phase 1 habitat survey of the site that is to be developed in order to identify any areas of ecological interest, and recommend any further survey work required.
2. The habitats present were mapped using the Phase 1 Habitat Survey methodology. This is a standardised system for classifying and mapping wildlife habitats in Great Britain. They were also classified using the UK Habitats Classification.
In addition, the area was assessed as possible habitat for protected species in particular bats, and breeding birds. The site and adjacent habitats were also assessed for their potential to support mammals, amphibians and invertebrates.
3. The whole site is covered with concrete and corrugated iron and breeze block buildings there is no vegetation. No further surveys have been recommended.
4. A guideline approach for assessing the value of ecological features and sites was adopted, published by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). The assessment is based on assigning a level of geographical importance to ecological features. The habitat within the site is considered as having negligible value in enhancing the biodiversity of the South Hetton area, given the site is covered in concrete and buildings.
5. The only existing habitats are sealed concrete and corrugated iron and breeze block buildings. The whole site has negligible ecological value.
The site provides no suitable habitat for any protected species.
6. The removal of the buildings and the erection of a new dwelling house has negligible risk of having an impact on the biodiversity of the area. Given the buildings are in daily use, there is already a high level of noise and human disturbance during daylight hours. Artificial lighting is used inside the buildings after dusk, when the horses are being fed etc.
7. **BNG Defra Metric** - Given the whole site is presently covered in concrete and buildings and there are no natural habitats, the preparation of a Metric and the associated Management and Monitoring Plan are not appropriate in this instance.
Potential to increase biodiversity and produce Biodiversity Net Gain
Two 'sparrow terrace' bird nest boxes and a swift nest box will be erected on the existing modern prefabricated building and an integrated bat box will be included in the design of the new house.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This appraisal and report were commissioned by the owners of the site, Whitegates Equestrian Centre, in late October 2023.

The aim of the study was to survey a parcel of land and a small complex of corrugated iron buildings at the Equestrian Centre on the edge of the village of South Hetton.

The objectives of the study were as follows-

1. To carry out an extended Phase 1 habitat survey of the site that is to be developed and to identify any areas of ecological interest. Given there are no natural habitats within the site, the assessment concentrated on any possible use by protected species, in particular bats and nesting birds.
2. To outline ways in which the proposed development can maintain and enhance the biodiversity of the area to be developed.

- 1.2 The whole site is presently covered with concrete with a complex of buildings, largely of corrugated iron construction. These buildings are used as stabling and for the storage of equestrian equipment. There is a high level of human disturbance.

The proposal is to erect a new dwelling house and a swimming pool on the site.

Site description (See photos)

- 1.3 The whole development plot is covered with concrete together with a number of corrugated iron and breeze block buildings mainly used as stabling with one brick and corrugated iron building being used for storage of equestrian equipment. The breeze block and brick walls are all in good state of repair with no cracks or crevices.



East elevation



North elevation, the building to the right of the picture will remain.

+



West elevation



West elevation, equipment store

1.4 Surrounding Habitats (See aerial photo below)

The Equestrian Centre is located at the junction of two roads. There are stone houses to the north of the complex of buildings, further houses to the south with open farmland to the east and beyond the road to the west. There are a number of trees around the buildings to the south and on the roadside to the north-east.

Immediately to the west of the buildings to be demolished is a modern prefabricated building that will remain as presently.



2. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

- 2.1 The most pertinent consideration is the legislation laid down in the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) (Amended 1985). This Act allows for the designation by the relevant statutory agency, in this case English Nature, of National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).
These sites are designated because of their special botanical, zoological, geological or physiographic interest. The Act also provides protection to those plant and animal species listed in the Schedules of the Act.
- 2.2 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) (As amended) is also taken into consideration as it gives protection to specific habitat types and species listed as being under threat. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act (2000) gives further protection to protected species.
- 2.3 In addition to statutory designations, a site may be categorised by a local conservation organisation, usually the County Wildlife Trust as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI). This non-statutory designation applies to sites which are too small for SSSI status or fall just below the other ecological criteria used for SSSI designation. The ecological value of such sites is generally recognised by local authorities.
- 2.4 Most local authorities have produced a Biodiversity Action Plan for the county or region which identifies locally significant habitats and species for which action plans have been or will be prepared, these include the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan. Any development should seek to minimise the impact on all habitats and species, with special regard for those identified in this Plan.
- 2.6 Planning legislation is also taken into consideration, in particular the National Planning Policy Framework, Section 15 – Conserving & Enhancing the Environment, Paragraphs 174-182; and the Environment Act 2021, Part 6, Nature & Biodiversity,
These outline the ways habitats and species should be conserved and address the need for an increase in biodiversity.
- 2.7 The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), Section 14 covers the control of non-native invasive species and allowing their spread onto adjacent land. These species include Himalayan Balsam, Giant Hogweed and *Cotoneaster horizontalis*.

3. THE LAW RELATING TO PROTECTED SPECIES

3.1 BATS

3.1.1 All bats in Britain are protected by law. Under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act it is illegal to-

- * catch, injure, kill or sell any bat
- * damage, destroy or obstruct bat roosts (even when bats are not present)
- * disturb bats while they are roosting, for example by entering known roosts or hibernation sites.

A breeding site or resting site of any bat is known as a bat roost. A bat roost is any structure as bat use for shelter or protection. It is an offence to damage or destroy a bat roost at any time of year.

3.1.2 The following activities are those most likely to cause disturbance to bat roosts-

- * Demolition of buildings
- * Restoration, building conversion or remedial work including re-roofing and repointing of stonework or brickwork.
- * Timber treatment.
- * Tree felling or extensive tree surgery.

Some of the disturbance problems may be overcome by avoiding the time of year when the bats are in residence. This is mainly during the breeding season April to late September.

3.2 BADGERS

3.2.1 **Badgers** are protected by a series of legislation - The Badgers Act 1973 and the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, plus amendments to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

3.2.2 These laws legislate that it is illegal to-

- * Wilfully kill, injure, take, possess or cruelly ill-treat a badger, or attempt to do so.
- * Intentionally or recklessly interfere with a badger sett, this includes disturbing badgers in a sett, damaging a sett or obstructing access.

(A sett is defined as 'any structure or place which displays signs indicating current use by a badger').

3.3 BIRDS

3.3.1 Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) it is illegal to-

- * Kill, injure or take any wild bird (unless under licence)
- * Take damage or destroy a bird's nest whilst in use or being built.
- * Take or destroy the egg of any wild bird.
- * Disturb any wild bird listed on Schedule 1 of the Act while it is nest building or at a nest containing eggs or young, or disturb the dependant young of such a bird.

4. METHODOLOGY

Habitat Survey

- 4.1** The habitats present were mapped using the Phase 1 Habitat Survey methodology. This is a standardised system for classifying and mapping wildlife habitats in Great Britain. The full methodology is set out in the 'Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey, JNCC, 2003)
The habitats have also been classified using the UK Habitats Classification.

4.2 Protected Species

The area was assessed as possible habitat for protected species in particular bats and breeding birds plus other terrestrial and aquatic species.

4.3 Bats

There are no buildings on the site that have the potential to support a bat roost. The site was assessed as potential bat foraging habitat and the boundaries as potential bat flight lines,

4.4 Badgers

The area was assessed for its' suitability as badger habitat and surveyed for signs of badger use, including setts, latrine sites, feeding areas and badger paths.

Since badgers are known to use latrine sites, feeding areas and certain routes in a regular basis such signs are easy to identify. Badger setts remain in use for many years and these can be identified as 'active' by the presence of footprints, recently excavated soil and discarded bedding.

4.5 Birds

The area and surrounding habitats were assessed for their suitability as bird nesting and feeding habitat.

4.6 Other Mammals

The area was assessed for its' suitability to support otter, brown hare, hedgehog and small mammals.

4.7 Amphibians/Reptiles

The habitats on the site and habitats adjoining it were assessed as potential refuge for amphibians and/or reptiles

4.8 Invertebrates

The site and adjoining areas were assessed as invertebrate habitat.

5. RESULTS OF SURVEYS

5.1 Desk Study

5.1.1 Sites with statutory or non-statutory designations within 2km of the site

Site Name	Designation	Reason for designation	Distance from site
South Hetton	SSSI	Lowland Fen Lowland Heath Deciduous Woodland	1.5km to east
Easington Lane/Sheriff Moor	Community Forest area	New woodland planting area	0.25km to west and north-west

Source – Natural England ‘MAGIC’ website

5.1.2 Record Search

A record search was commissioned from the North-east Environmental Records Information centre. The following are Durham Bat Group Records for the general area.

NZ3643

2010 Store House Farm, High Haswell 1 common pipistrelle Foraging

NZ3744

2010 Fallowfield, South Hetton
3 common pipistrelle Foraging
2 Natterer's Foraging
1 Whiskered/Brandt's Foraging

NZ3745

No date South Hetton 1 Noctule Grounded
2013 South Hetton Common pipistrelle Flight

NZ3841

2006 Fleming Field Farm 1 Common pipistrelle Foraging
2015 Fleming Field Farm 1, species unknown Foraging

5.2 Field Surveys

5.2.1 Phase I Habitat Survey/Vegetation Classification

Sealed Land

The whole site is covered by concrete plus corrugated iron and breeze block buildings.

Invasive plant species – No invasive species were recorded.

Protected Species

5.2.2 Bats – There are no buildings that have the potential to provide bat roost or hibernation sites. No cracks or crevices were found in the breeze block or brick walls. The interiors are unsuitable given there are corrugated iron roofs that allow a high level of temperature variation, there is a high level of human disturbance and the interiors are lit by artificial light after dusk when staff are attending to the horses.

There is potential feeding habitat to the south of the site where there are some mature trees. No bat flight lines were identified.

5.2.3 Breeding Birds – There is no suitable habitat for nesting birds as there is no access into the buildings plus there is a high level of human disturbance.

5.2.4 Amphibians – There is no suitable habitat for amphibians

5.2.5 Invertebrates – The site provides habitat for a very limited range of invertebrates within the stables.

5.2.6 Small Mammals & Hedgehog – There is no habitat for small mammals or hedgehogs.

6. ECOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF SITE

6.1.1 Approach to Ecological Evaluation

A guideline approach for assessing the value of ecological features and sites has been published by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). This approach has been adopted when assessing the site.

The assessment is based on assigning a level of geographical importance to ecological features. Six levels of geographical importance are included in the CIEEM guidelines and these are summarised as follows-

Table 1

Level of Value	Examples
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Internationally designated sites or candidate sites. (e.g., SPA, pSPA, SAC, pSAC, RAMSAR)* A viable area of habitat listed in Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive.* A site supporting internationally important species, which is threatened or rare in Britain.* A nationally significant population/number of a internationally important species.
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Nationally designated sites (SSSI, NNR, ASSI)* A viable area of priority habitat listed in the UK BAP* A regularly occurring population of a nationally important species which is threatened or rare.* A regularly occurring, regionally significant population/number of a nationally important species.* A feature identified as of critical importance in the UK BAP.
Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Viable areas of key habitat identified in the Regional BAP.* Viable areas of key habitat identified as being of regional value within a SNH Natural Heritage Zone.* A regularly occurring, locally significant population of a nationally scarce species which occurs in 16-100 10km squares in the UK or in a Regional BAP* A regularly occurring, locally significant number of a regionally important species.* Site which just fall short of the SSSI designation criteria but exceed SNCI (county level) designation
County/ Metropolitan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Semi-natural woodland >0.25ha* County/Metropolitan sites and other sites designated by the local authority including Local Nature Reserves.* A viable area of habitat listed in County BAP* Any regularly occurring, locally significant population of a species listed in a County 'red data book'

or BAP on account of its regional rarity or localisation.

- District/Borough**
- * Semi-natural woodland < 0.25ha
 - * SNCI designated sites and sites designated by local authorities.
 - * Sites or features that are scarce in the local area.
 - * Viable areas of the habitats listed in the District/Local BAP.
 - * A regularly occurring population of a species listed in a District/ Local BAP
 - * A diverse and/or ecologically valuable hedgerow network
- Parish/ Neighbourhood**
- * Areas of habitat considered to appreciably enrich the habitat resources within the context of the Parish or Neighbourhood.
 - * Local Nature Reserve selected on Parish ecological criteria

In this instance the Biodiversity Action Plan is the **Durham Biodiversity Action Plan**. This provides information on the local and regional occurrence of habitat types and key species and identifies those that are a priority for conservation in the County Durham area. The function of this document is to ensure that national targets for habitats and species identified in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan are met at a regional level by setting appropriate regional conservation targets.

6.2 Site Status

The ecological importance of the site can be assessed by reviewing the results of the field surveys against the criteria in Table 1.

Criterion	Comment	Level of Importance
Is the land included in a designated nature conservation site?	No	N/A
Does the site support habitats or species listed in the area BAP	No	N/A
Are there habitats present that enrich the habitat resource in the neighbourhood?	No	N/A
Does the site support any species in Schedules 5 or 8 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act.	No	N/A

6.3 Site Evaluation

6.3.1 Habitats

The only existing habitats are sealed concrete and corrugated iron and breeze block buildings. The whole site has negligible ecological value.

Protected Species

6.3.2 The site provides no suitable habitat for any protected species.

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7. IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 The removal of the buildings and the erection of a new dwelling house has negligible risk of having an impact on the biodiversity of the area. Given the buildings are in daily use, there is already a high level of noise and human disturbance during daylight hours. Artificial lighting is used inside the buildings after dusk, when the horses are being fed etc.

7.2 Protected Species

There is negligible risk of a significant negative impact on protected species. No further surveys are recommended.

Breeding Birds

The addition of two 'sparrow terrace' nest boxes and a swift nest box aims to have positive impact on the biodiversity of the South Hetton area.

Bats

An integral bat box will be included in the design of the new house, to be located in either the east or west elevations. (See architect's drawing)

8. MITIGATION

8.1 Further Surveys

Having assessed the potential impacts on protected species as negligible, no further surveys are recommended.

8.2 BNG Defra Metric

Given the whole site is presently covered in concrete and buildings and there are no natural habitats, the preparation of a Metric and the associated Management and Monitoring Plan are not appropriate in this instance

8.3 Habitat Creation – Potential to increase biodiversity and produce Biodiversity Net Gain

a) Two 'sparrow terrace' bird nest boxes will be erected on the eastern elevation of the modern prefabricated building.

b) A swift nest box will be erected at the roof apex on the western elevation of the modern prefabricated building.

c) An integral bat box will be included in the design of the new dwelling house. (See architect's drawing)

9. References

The Durham Biodiversity Action Plan – A summary of objectives, definitions and targets (2007) Ed. A. Lees & L. Campbell

'Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey' JNCC, 2003.

Natural England, MAGIC data base

UK Habitat Classification website

