

## THE PROJECT

"Wymeswold" is a long term project aimed at the restoration of at least part of some 460 acres of N. Leics Wolds landscape to accord with the natural environment of the area. Our work undertaken during European Year of the Environment is an "awareness raising exercise" timed to parallel development proposals currently being made for this site.

A former Airfield, and at present used for agriculture between the runways, it is the subject of an application for outline planning permission for a new Village of ultimately some 8,000 population. As this development is contrary to the Leics Structure Plan, a Public Inquiry is expected to take place, possibly late in 1988.

The volume housebuilders are increasingly optimistic that the concept of new independent villages will be accepted. We are concerned that whatever the outcome in this particular case, the character of the Wolds landscape will be appreciated and as far as possible restored. We have therefore made surveys of the site, attended public meetings, and prepared an Exhibition which puts forward ideas for a Nature Reserve and Picnic Sites, and indeed also for a Country Park to emphasise the capabilities of the site.

## WOLD COUNTRY

Wymeswold Airfield lies on the edge of the N. Leics Wolds, looking westwards over the Soar Valley to the craggy hills of Charnwood beyond. The Wolds fan out into long flat hills, a soft but exhilarating landscape catching the fresh winds. The red brick villages are very small and tucked into rounded valleys beside little streams. Agriculture is the dominant land use, originally pasture but now turning to arable with some loss of hedges.

The site pre-war had small fields enclosed by hedgerows with many trees and frequent ponds. There was a block of woodland known as Gorse Covert, and a farmhouse, also several field paths. These all disappeared when the Airfield was made.

The high density of plants and animals formerly supported by such a system included wildflowers such as cowslip, lady's smock, bird's foot trefoil, red clover, great burnet, yellow rattle and pignut in the fields. The hedgerows supported plenty of hawthorn, blackthorn, dogwood, crab apple, field maple, purging buckthorn and wild rose, and herbaceous species included red campion, herb robert, hedge woundwort, tufted vetch, germander speedwell, sweet violet, keck and many others.

Butterflies such as the brimstone, orange-tip, common blue, small heath, small copper, meadow brown, and the peacock flew in the fields and along the roadsides in greater numbers than they do today.

Many bird species bred in the hedgerows and in the permanent grassland: thrushes, warblers, finches, buntings, turtle dove, skylark and lapwing whilst the old hedgerow trees and spinneys provided nesting sites for stock dove, kestrel, tawny and little owl. In the winter months the many miles of hedge with their abundance of wild fruits provided a valuable source of food for immigrant winter birds such as redwing and field-fare and numerous small mammals.

## THE AIRFIELD

The Airfield has now passed from the Ministry of Defence back to private ownership, and is under cultivation in between the run-ways. These are very wide, crossing in three directions and various perimeter roads and standings also survive.

A miscellany of large and small buildings stands on the skyline at the SE corner of the site including some former hangers and a large water tower. There is an established use for light industry here, but the Local Authority decided in 1978 on a policy of no extension and that the area should be rationalized and screened with trees. Nevertheless, little has been done, and the appearance is one of neglect.

Very large hedges of shrubs with ash trees surround the site, and the mixed woodland of Prestwold Park forms a screen to the SW. The three neighbouring red-brick villages of Hoton, Wymeswold, and Burton-on-the-Wolds are almost hidden in the dipping ground to the N and S. Little of the old grassland remains, except along the road margins.

This extensive windswept area now supports an interesting open ground fauna with frequent hares, and breeding skylark, corn bunting, grey and red legged partridge. Both kestrel and sparrow hawk hunt regularly over the airfield and probably nest nearby. Stock dove nest in the airfield buildings.

The whitethroat, formerly a characteristic Wolds roadside bird but now greatly reduced, still nests in small numbers in scrubby areas adjacent to the Prestwold Estate, and wheatear and whinchat pause here to feed on passage to and from breeding areas further afield.

The site has become an important wintering ground for lapwing and golden plover and up to 500 of the former and 400 of the latter have been noted here in recent winters. Some of the largest winter flocks of corn bunting seen in Leics comprising up to 60 birds have been recorded recently, and impressive flocks of linnet, goldfinch, greenfinch, meadow pipit and skylark occur during the winter months. Two short eared owls hunted over the airfield last winter suggesting that regular watching would produce much more of note.

Photo.I Tall hedgerows on the north perimeter

Photo.II Looking towards the Airfield from Burton

Map 3. The Airfield at present

## A NEW VILLAGE

The proposals published in October 1987 by Costain Homes Ltd are for a new free standing self contained village on the site of the former Wymeswold Airfield, Leicestershire. In an area of 458 acres, provision is made as follows - Housing 270 acres, Village Centre 22 acres, a Business Park 50 acres, Roads etc 20 acres, together with landscaping and parkland and refurbishing of the existing industrial area.

Road proposals include a by-pass to the village of Hoton, and a new east/west route which will effectively link the A60 and the A46 at the same time providing access to the new village, and relieving Burton.

The basic plan is good, supposing that the need for housing on this scale and in this situation can be justified. There is however no provision in the Leics Structure Plan for such development, and local people are voicing considerable concern. The proposals will be considered by Charnwood Borough Council probably early in 1988 - but the matter is expected to go to Public Inquiry. This can hardly take place before late in 1988.

Loughborough & District Civic Trust as a voluntary body interested in the environment in its broadest aspects, is particularly concerned about the effect of developing such an exposed site in an otherwise rural area. The proposals are out of character with the Wolds landscape, cannot fail to have a profound effect on the adjacent villages, and will without doubt cause the loss of a valuable wildlife habitat.

## A COUNTRY PARK

The idea of using Wymeswold Airfield as a Country Park is put forward for these reasons -

- 1) To show that there is an alternative beneficial use for the site
- 2) Because of the intrinsic quality and situation of the site
- 3) Because a Wolds Country Park would help to relieve the severe pressure on Charnwood Forest produced by over 1 m. visitors a year
- 4) And would provide Leics with a "Wolds" experience in addition to a "Forest" experience for recreation and education, a facility lacking at present.

The Wymeswold site is accessible from Leicester, Loughborough, Nottingham, and Melton, all within a 10 mile radius. The adjacent Prestwold Park is open once a year under the Gardens Scheme and is much enjoyed, the Hall has a nice late Classical facade and the Church is known for its monuments. Much of the charming village of Wymeswold is a Conservation Area with  
 \* very varied buildings in an informal street pattern, Hoton and Burton are equally pleasant.

Wymeswold Country Park could be used for walking, exercising dogs, horse riding, nature study, picnicking, country fairs, horse events, and also grazing for sheep, horses, etc. It could also support a riding school, a camping/caravan site for tourers, and a nature reserve.

The main triangle of existing runways on the site might be preserved in the form of low banks, partly to vary the landscape but also to commemorate the wartime Airfield. A long term planting programme for shelter belts and spinneys would be needed, much of this could be undertaken by the many amenity groups in the County, schools and other volunteers, including the management of a Nature Reserve. Most importantly the planting would need to be of native and local species to maintain and encourage the wildlife potential of the site.

\* early 14th C church restored by Pugin

## A NATURE RESERVE

During the past half century many of our best wildlife sites have been destroyed or greatly damaged, and it is essential that no opportunity be lost to improve sites such as this one, with great wildlife potential, by judicious landscaping and planting. The creation of a Wolds Nature Reserve on even part of the area would help to reinforce populations of a large number of plants and animals which have declined markedly during recent decades, and would also provide the means of education in local natural history and ecology.

A Wolds Nature Reserve on the airfield site would require -

- 1) Retention of existing trees and hedges wherever possible
- 2) Planting of shelter belts and copses and especially the extension of existing spinneys to allow colonization of fauna and flora from old to new woodland
- 3) Grouping of small tree and shrub species to create sheltered glades intersown with local species of wildflower seed, to encourage many of those typical Wolds birds and insects now less common than formerly
- 4) Substantial areas returned to grass and wildflowers, all locally appropriate, for sheep grazing etc.
- 5) A large pool of varied depths to provide suitable conditions for a great wealth of aquatic organisms, to encourage waterfowl, aquatic plants, and insects, and to supply a bathing and drinking site for local birds and mammals. It would also benefit amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts which have suffered drastic reductions in this part of the county with the loss of many field ponds.

Native tree and shrub species recommended for planting -

Woodland: Pendunculate Oak, Aspen, Ash, Wild Cherry, Crab Apple, Hazel, Midland Hawthorn, Ivy, Honeysuckle  
 Hedgerows: Blackthorn, Crab Apple, Field Maple, Common Hawthorn, Purging Buckthorn, Dogwood, Dog Rose, Field Rose  
 Shelter Belts, corner planting etc: Pendunculate Oak, Ash, Aspen, Crab Apple, Purging Buckthorn, Blackthorn, Dogwood, Hazel, Hawthorn spp., Dog Rose, Field Rose  
 Pool margins: Alder, Great Sallow, Common Sallow, Dewberry, Guelder Rose

Most of the above species are especially important in providing food and/or conditions essential to a large variety of other organisms.

We conclude that our objective should be the restoration and planting with native species of a substantial part of Wymeswold Airfield and its subsequent maintenance as a Wolds Nature Reserve.

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