



Brightwell cum Sotwell

Hedgerow and Verge Management Plan

Introduction

Our road-side hedges and flower-rich verges are a much cherished feature in Brightwell cum Sotwell. In the recently published Community led Parish Plan the role that our country lanes have in helping to shape the rural character of the village was seen as important by the vast majority of local residents. Much of this character comes from the hedges and wildflowers that grow alongside the routes.

The verges and hedges that line our winding lanes are an established feature and many are of considerable age. Over time, they have become rich in wildlife forming a diverse habitat for a number of species to live in. They are an essential part of the natural cycle that sustains the countryside; providing food for our hungry pollinators and other wildlife such as birds and mammals. Without them, the natural diversity of our village would be very different.

In 2013, Brightwell cum Sotwell Parish Council took over the management of the verges and footpaths within the settlements of Brightwell and Sotwell (including Mackney Lane and Mackney) from Oxfordshire County Council. The Parish Council is now responsible for the cutting of the verges and the vegetation that grows along many of the village footpaths. In addition, the Parish Council also has responsibility to manage those hedges that grow on land owned by the Parish Council.

This leaflet provides a guide to how villagers can expect their roadsides to be managed and also explains why our native verges and hedges are important to wildlife. Whilst the Parish Council is responsible for many areas, each and every resident has a responsibility to manage any hedgerows and verges that grow on their land. As such, this leaflet also provides some tips on how householders can maintain a well managed verge that is in keeping with the character of the village whilst being good for wildlife.



Management of Verges By the Parish Council

Following the recommendations of the Community Led parish Plan, Brightwell cum Sotwell Parish Council has taken the responsibility (from Oxfordshire County Council) for maintaining verges in public ownership within the main village. The map on the proceeding page provides a summary of the areas that now come under this control.

A budget of £1,300 has been allocated by the County for this work that may be topped up by the Parish Council for any works that are felt necessary. Management of the verges is largely to avoid vegetation becoming a nuisance to traffic (blocking sight lines or encroaching onto the highway for instance). The vegetation cut is needed in the late spring and again at the end of the summer if this is to be avoided. The work is carried out by a village gardener rather than an outside contractor. The timing of the cut is flexible to allow for natural indicators to dictate when the cut takes place – rather than being timetabled months in advance to suit the needs of a contractor. The cut is carried out by hand using a strimmer. Only those plants that need cutting will be managed – minimum intervention is key particularly in the spring. In this way, we can expect a wonderful display of plants throughout the season although this may take a number of years to achieve. In September, more vegetation will be removed to tidy the village up ready for the winter months. In the short term it may be necessary to remove some larger areas of invasive plants (such as large stands of nettle) that have been left to grow unchecked in the past.

A parish farmer has been contracted to flail cut some of the larger grassed areas using a tractor and mower. The grassed verge to the bottom of Bell Lane is managed in this way. Cuttings will be removed by local volunteers to encourage a greater diversity of species to grow. The Parish is also responsible for vegetation management along many of the village footpaths. The Community Led Parish Plan demonstrated that encroaching vegetation was a considerable concern to many villagers. Spring growth will be encouraged and then managed over the

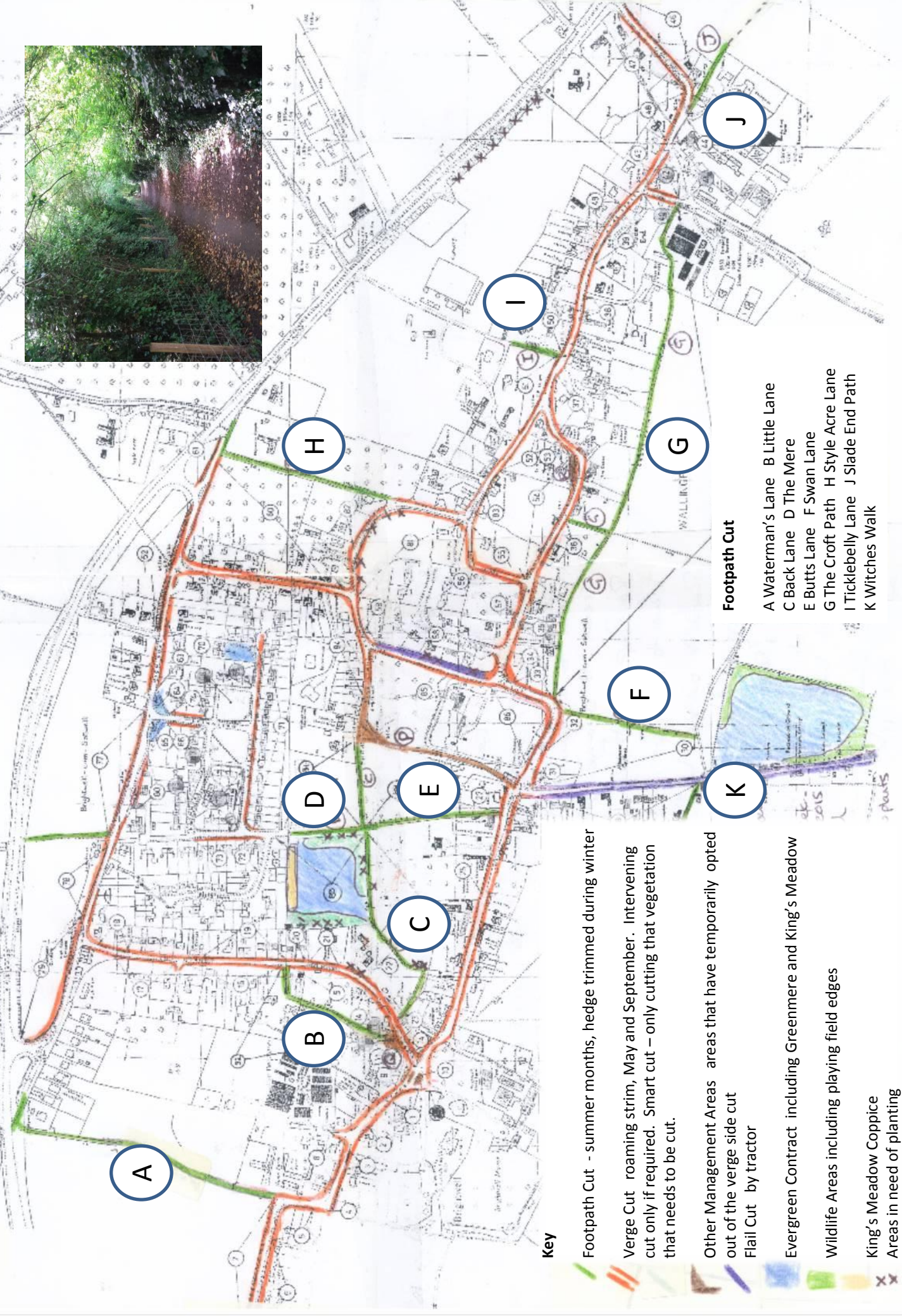




keep the footpaths clear to at least the width of a pram. Leaf debris will be spaded away once a year. A list of those paths included in the Management Plan is shown on the map on the preceding page. During the winter any over hanging branches will be cut back although it may be the householders responsibility to do this if the encroaching plant is growing on your land. External contractors have been appointed to cut the larger areas of grassland at the Recreation Ground and at King's Meadow. These areas will be maintained as amenity grassland with wildlife strips around the edge. In these wildlife strips, native species will be encouraged including native shrubs and fruiting trees. The hazel coppice at King's Meadow is managed by a local craftsman.

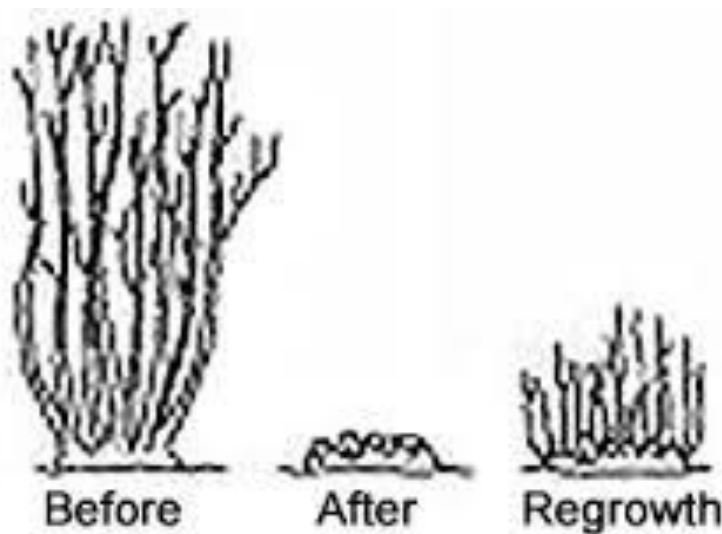
How to Get Involved

There are many ways that the local community can help manage our important roadside hedges and verges. One of the main ways you can help is to let us know if there is a problem – this may be an over hanging branch or some nettles that are blocking a footpath. We can respond quickly. If you have planted a wildflower verge or would like to manage your roadside garden yourself, this is possible under the new regime. Simply contact the Parish Council with your details and we will make certain that your plot is left untouched during the growing season (although the Council will still need to ensure that vegetation does not become a nuisance). This may be a wildflower verge that needs to be left to mature or may include a larger area such as Wellsprings that is managed by a local resident. The advantage of managing things locally is flexibility. You may also want to help manage the hedges and verges through volunteering. This could be planting native trees during the winter, pruning or raking up of vegetation to reduce fertility following the spring hay cut. Simply contact us.



King's Meadow Hazel Coppicing

Coppicing is a traditional method of woodland management which takes advantage of the fact that many trees make new growth from the stump or roots if cut down. In a coppiced tree, young stems (called suckers) are repeatedly cut down to near ground level. In subsequent growth years, many new shoots will emerge, and, after a number of years the coppiced tree, or stool, is ready to be harvested, and the cycle begins again.



Typically a woodland is harvested in sections on a rotation. In this way, a crop is available each year somewhere in the woodland. Coppicing has the effect of providing a rich variety of habitats, as the woodland always has a range of different-aged coppice growing in it, which is beneficial for all sorts of wildlife. The cycle length depends upon the species, custom, the requirements of local people and the use to which the product is put.

At King's Meadow,, the hazel trees around the perimeter have been coppiced for a number of years on a 5 – 7 year rotational coppice by local craftsmen overseen by the Parish Council. This management provides a range of different crops, wildlife habitats whilst maintaining views and screening.

Coppicing keeps trees at a juvenile stage. A regularly coppiced tree will never die of old age — some coppice stools may therefore survive for hundreds of years. The age of a stool may be estimated from its diameter, and some are so large, perhaps as much as 6 metres that they are thought to have been continually coppiced since Saxon times.

The cut suckers of a hazel coppice may be used either in their young state for interweaving in wattle fencing or larger shoots can be used for bean poles. Many of the old timber framed houses in the parish have wattle and daub walls made from local hazel coppice. Smaller shoots also provided a valuable source of firewood.

Why are road verges and native hedges so important?

1. Road verges are the life-giving arteries of the countryside, linking habitats and acting as vital corridors for wildlife to thrive on
2. They act as natural buffers to some of the most impoverished areas such as intensively farmed fields, gardens or playing fields
3. They are the single most viewed habitat in the parish, giving people every day direct contact with the changing seasons and colours of the countryside
4. Hedges and roadside plants provide a distinct local character to the parish – the species that grow in Brightwell cum Sotwell are very different to those found in other regions
5. When managed correctly road verges can support remarkable diverse collections of species. This often involves doing less - good management allows for the verge to develop and plants to set seed before cutting takes place
6. Road verges and native hedges can be genuine community reserves, people form close relationships with them and can get very passionate when they are destroyed
7. Wild fruit trees and flowers provide essential food for our native pollinating insects that in turn go onto pollinate our productive fruit trees and vegetables
8. Native hedges provide an essential habitat for nesting birds
9. Brightwell cum Sotwell has a remarkable legacy of fruit growing. This is reflected by the diverse number of native fruit bearing trees in our hedges including sloe, damson, wild cherry, crab apple and hawthorn. Each fruit can be gathered in the autumn and turned into a variety of different products such as drinks and jam.
10. They represent a remnant of our native wood and grassland which has suffered catastrophic losses over the last century

Hedgerows

Brightwell, Sotwell and Mackney have a diverse variety of hedgerows. These range from self sown areas of scrub to clipped rows of privet. Each type of hedge has its place and the wealth of different hedge types is important – both to the village's character and natural diversity.

Our roadside hedgerows provide a cultural continuity – although the exact plants may have changed over time some hedges may be hundreds of years old. In general, the following native species were traditionally used for hedging in Brightwell cum Sotwell: oak, spindle, dog rose, wayfaring tree, willow, hawthorn, hazel, holly, field maple, sycamore, wild cherry, yew, dogwood, ivy, elder, guelder rose, crab apple, ash, buckthorn, blackthorn, bramble and damson.

These native plants will support many more species than non-native plants such as leylandii - although even these less diverse boundaries are useful for nesting birds and when managed well look fabulous. Different features of a hedgerow are important to different species. As a general rule, the more diverse in composition a hedgerow is, the more wildlife it is likely to support due to variety of flowering and fruiting times.



Fruit trees are a distinctive feature of the village's hedgerows – a reminder of the orchard heritage that once dominated the area. These trees are much loved for jams and to flavour drinks. Another distinctive feature of the village are brick and brick / flint walls. Over time these start to naturalise and support many mosses, lichens and invertebrates.

Hedge Management

A well managed hedge should not obstruct a footpath or highway whilst still allowing for many different species to live in or on it. Good management is crucial to the maintenance of a healthy hedge – usually achieved through pruning. In some instances: hedge laying may be appropriate (such as the hedge along the edge of the Swan Allotments). Coppicing, where stems are cut just above the ground, can provide a new lease of life to seriously damaged hedgerows or maintain the lifespan of certain species.

The timing of management is important to get the best from a hedge and avoid disturbance to animals breeding or over-wintering. It is generally accepted that as little disturbance to a hedgerow during the bird nesting season is good practice. The cutting cycle will determine the availability of fruits and flowers in a hedge; typically a cycle of three to five years is most beneficial for wildlife. In Brightwell cum Sotwell the Environment Group maintains some hedgerows using traditional techniques.

The village has many hedges that grow on publicly owned land. These are on the verges that line our lanes and footpaths often to the rear of a property boundary. A number of these are managed by the Parish Council in order to maintain the highway or footpath for pedestrian use. The Parish Council will carry out works during the winter months to cut back the hedges in their ownership so that they are not obstructing traffic or causing a nuisance along the footpaths. Over the summer, some pruning work may also be needed. This will be carried out by a local gardener. A long term strategy for the re-stocking of hedgerows is proposed. The number of species found is in sharp decline and many of the older hedgerows are held together simply by ivy. Over the winter months, native species, distinctive to the village will be planted including a variety of fruit bearing trees such as crab apple, sloe and wild cherry that once fully grown will provide food for many different animals.

In addition to the publicly owned hedgerows, there are hedges that grow on private property. These are usually planted along the property boundary, growing towards the road. Householders have a duty to maintain these hedges so that they do not obstruct the highway. This is particularly important on bends and corners. The County Council has a duty to inspect these hedges to ensure that they are not encroaching onto the road, but anybody who is concerned about a particular hedge can contact the Parish Clerk, or a Parish Councillor, and the concerns will be passed on to the County Council. When a hedge may be causing a nuisance, the householder will be contacted and asked to cut it back. If this fails a letter will be issued warning that if the hedge is not pruned, the County Council will need to employ a contractor to carry out the work. The householder is responsible for the cost of this work.

Some hedges, such as the boundary alongside the Swan Footpath are managed by other means – in this case by the Stewart Village Hall who have responsibility for the Allotments, Community Orchard and wilderness areas. Many of the hedgerows in the village are protected by legislation – either through tree preservation orders or conservation area policies. Removal of some hedges may be illegal – particularly any larger trees. If in doubt contact South Oxfordshire District Council who can provide you with advice.

Older hedgerows found alongside the village's twisting lanes often contain a large amount of dead wood and plant litter within the structure of the hedge and can provide a valuable habitat for many mini-beasts which in turn will attract predators such as bats, shrews and birds. These un-touched areas provide good cover, creating safe places for wildlife to move through – particularly for small mammals including deer and hedgehogs. Retention of some deadwood in the hedge – either left on the trees or cut and piled in a heap towards the back of the hedge is crucial. Hedge bases are an important feature and provide a buffer zone to protect root systems which can be an important habitat in its own right.

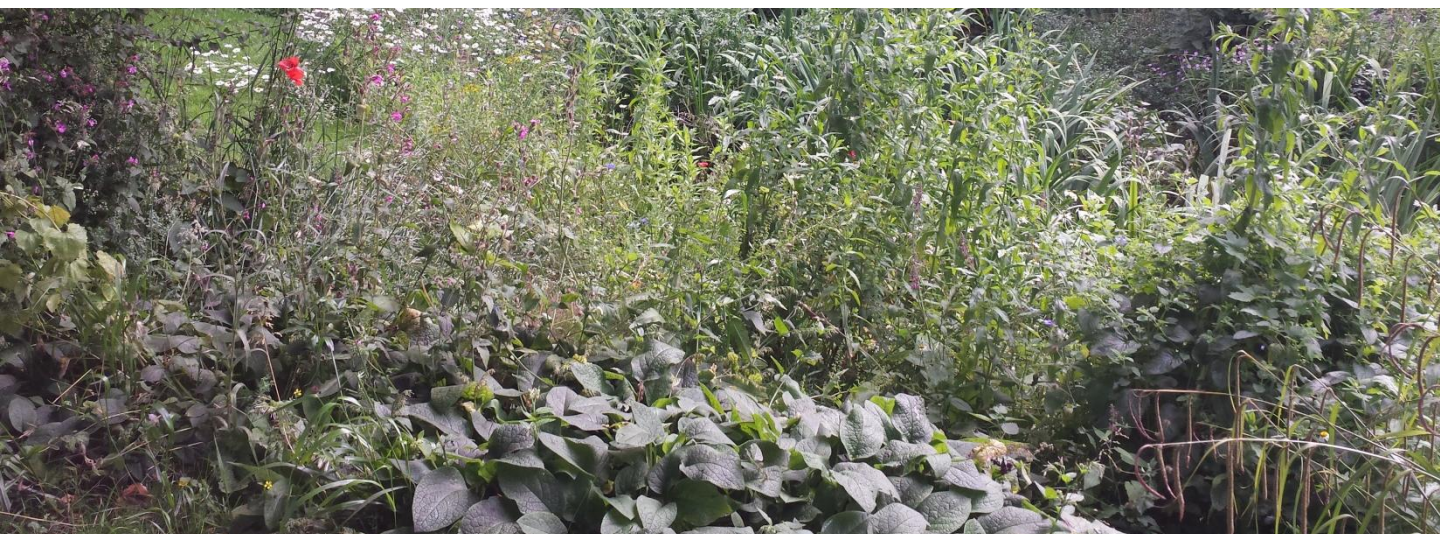
Verge Management

Between the hedge / property boundary and the road is the grassland zone – this is where the flowers and grasses grow. Many of the long narrow strips of grass that line our lanes in Brightwell and Sotwell are the legacy of former road widening schemes that were planned in the 1960s. It was intended to ‘improve’ many of the lanes, although thankfully most of these plans were not fully carried out leaving the legacy of roadside verges we enjoy today. Like our native hedges these verges can support a diverse range of species if managed in the right way. However, many village verges have been reduced to plain strips of grass with barely a dandelion as a result of poorly timed and repeated cutting.

Wild flowers are not appropriate everywhere – many species such as lavender for example are just as good for wildlife and if everyone was to plant the same thing the look of the village would get very boring. What is important is that we maintain a variety of different habitats in our community – both for their contribution to the character and for their wildlife benefit.

Managing A Wildlife Rich Flower Verge

A range of plants that flower at different times will improve the diversity of any verge. Longer grass is essential for egg-laying insects such as butterflies, so leave as much grass untrimmed as possible particularly at the back and margins of the verge. Night-scented plants such as buddleia at the back of the verge and evening primrose are great for moths which in turn are a feast for bats. It is important that the verge has a range of plants at different heights. This could be by allowing taller species to grow from the ground or by planting climbers. The verges are important wildlife corridors. Talk to your neighbour and see whether it is possible to plant up a longer distance than just your own border. As a general rule of thumb, native plants are good for wildlife. This said, many of our introduced garden favourites provide just as good a source of food as any native species and look great too. Any good garden centre will advise you on the best plants to choose for wildlife and most now sell a variety of different native flower seeds.



The most frequently recommended plants to attract the birds, bees, butterflies and more include: sunflowers, foxgloves, thyme, lavender, honeysuckle, rowan, ice plant, firethorn and barberry and purple loosestrife.

There are hundreds of different native wild flower species that would have been traditionally found along our verges. These would have grown in response to very local conditions. Fritillaries for example in wetter places, cow parsley along the back of the verges. Spring bulbs are also an important feature – cowslips were until recently a common feature in Brightwell.

There are many specialist seed companies that can advise you on what species should be sown. For example, *Herbiseed*, uses locally sourced seeds to produce their seed mixes. Products range from butterfly attracting mixtures to hedgerow mixes that contain only species that would have been traditionally found along the verges in this part of the Thames Valley (www.herbiseed.com)

Maintaining a Wild Flower Verge

A good verge will be around 80% grass with 20% flower. This is to avoid areas being bare soil during the winter months. It is often best to remove some of the perennial weeds such as docks, nettles and thistles that thrive on our nutrient rich verges. This said, by no means should all of these species be removed as they have huge ecological benefits – the key is getting a balance between the perennial species with the grasses and flowers.

It is important to reduce the fertility of the soil, so all cuttings should be removed to keep nutrient levels in the soil low. Remember, it is not a race – this can be achieved over several years.

Seeds can be sown in the early autumn or at the start of the spring. It may be appropriate to scarify the soil before any seeds are sown to give them the best chance of germination. This involved scraping off the vegetation layer to reveal bare earth to those places that you would like to introduce wild flowers to. Along the village verges, it may be best to sow wild flower seeds to small areas and allow the seeds to populate wider areas over time.

By following the simple steps below to achieve good verge management this should be easily achieved.

- Where possible, cut the full width of the verge once a year, no earlier than the end of August and no later than the end of March. Be careful not to cut any emerging native hedge plants at the back of the verge and look out for spring flowers! Where a full width cut is not possible, cut the widest possible margin.

- Between the beginning of April and the end of August, do not cut the verge except where absolutely necessary. Cow parsley is an important plant in the village however, and should be cut back after the flowers have seeded (usually around the end of May). If there has been a particularly mild spring and growth has been vigorous, or where sight lines along roads are obscured, or in places where vegetation is encroaching onto footpaths; these places should also be cut back.
- Any late spring cut should not take place until the cow parsley has finished flowering.
- Most wildflowers are biennials, so will produce a low leaf rosette in the first year, flowering in the following season. Mowing should be at a height so not to disturb these leaf rosettes – lifting the cutting blade to around 6” off the ground. Whenever possible use hand tools.
- Weeds can out compete wildflowers. A weed however, is only a plant in the wrong place. Many of the species we think of as weeds are in fact important native species – the key is achieving a balance between the amount of ‘weed’ with other species and aesthetics.
- Gather and remove cuttings wherever possible.
- Small patches of scrub may be retained, as this will benefit birds and other wildlife.
- Always avoid the use of pesticides, except where absolutely necessary to control invasive plants or pest problems where alternative techniques are ineffective.
- Collect as much information on the verge as you can to help inform future management.
- Keep an eye on the weather. Over the past couple of years we have had very late springs – this can push back the timings of any spring cut that may be necessary by anything up to a month.



Brightwell cum Sotwell Parish Council

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