

Old Town Cemetery Extension – extended Phase I ecological survey report

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Purpose

On behalf of The Council of the Isles of Scilly, the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust has undertaken an extended Phase I habitat survey of the site proposed for an extension of the Old Town Cemetery. The field proposed for this extension is located adjacent to the Old Town Church and Cemetery, Old Town, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, TR21 0NA at National Grid Reference SV 91060 10176.

1.2 Site location and description

The site is situated in the Isles of Scilly which has been designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The islands contain 26 sites of Special Scientific Interest, one Special Area of Conservation, one Special Protection Area and one Ramsar site.

The proposed site is located to the north of Old Town Church, with the cemetery bordering the site to the south side, and Old Town Road bordering the site to the north. To the east of the site there is a relatively species-rich semi-improved grassland which shows signs of having been used for recent grazing. To the north-west of the site is a cattle pasture, whilst due west of the site is an area of grassland which could not be viewed, beyond the elm-lined drive from the road to Old Town Church.

The wider landscape includes the settlement of Old Town, a patchwork of small fields used for flower farming or pasture, and the coast. The nearest SSSIs are of contrastingly different habitats to the site being surveyed, comprising the wetland of Lower Moors SSSI to the north of the site, and the coastal heathland of Peninnis Head to the south of the site.



Figure 1. Site Location - Aerial Photograph

1.3 Aim

The aim of this extended Phase I survey is to provide a description of the habitat types on site, identifying any features of particular ecological value and to make any recommendations for further surveys which may be merited.

2 **Methods**

A desk study was carried out to identify any sites designated for nature or of scientific interest within 2km of the site using the tool Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC). In addition. Reference was made to the New Flora of the Isles of Scilly (Parslow & Benallick 2017) and a conversation was held with Rosemary Parslow (botanical recorder for Scilly) about the field. The Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly was not consulted for a data search.

The survey was undertaken by Julian Branscombe, supported by Lydia Bunn, on 15th June 2023. During the survey the temperature was 18°C, light breeze, 50% cloud cover and good visibility. The methodology for habitat survey followed the JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) Guidelines (JNCC, 2010). This included a walkover survey while mapping habitat types and identifying all species and habitats found on the site.

In addition to a list of vascular plant species, incidental records were made of other species which could be identified on site during the survey. The potential of the site for any species of specially protected wildlife was also considered.

3 **Results**

3.1 Desk Study

There are three statutory designated sites of conservation within a 2km radius of the proposed site, namely:

- Lower Moors SSSI, a wetland site situated approximately 280m north-east of the proposed site.
- Higher Moors and Porth Hellick Pool SSSI, a wetland site situated approximately 1.2km north-east of the site.
- Peninnis Head SSSI, a coastal heathland situated approximately 370m south of the site.
- Porthloo SSSI, a geological site situated approximately 1.2km north of the site.

3.2 Phase 1 Habitat Survey

A list of plant species identified on site, along with their recorded frequency, is included as an Appendix. The taxonomy used follows that of the New Flora by Stace, 4th Edition. Figure 2 (below) provides a simple map of the site and the habitats present. The habitats within the site are detailed below.



Figure 2. Phase 1 Habitat Map of Site.

Semi-improved grassland with scattered scrub

Most of the site composed of semi-improved grassland, which has had no recent management. The most frequent species were Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*). Other grass species which were found included Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), Yorkshire-fog (*Holcus lanatus*), False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*) and Rough Meadow-grass (*Poa trivialis*). In more open parts of the field the species present included a relatively low frequency of Cat's-ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*), Common Vetch (*Vicia sativa*) and Hairy Tare (*Vicia hirsuta*). The field included a number of garden escapes or relics from cultivation which included Blue-Eyed-Grass (*Sisyrinchium bermudiana*), Daffodil (*Narcissus* sp.) and Tutsan (*Hypericum androsaenum*).

Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) was frequent, particularly towards the edges of the field. Other scrub was represented by suckering Elm (*Ulmus procera* agg.) at the edge of the field, with a seedling of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) spotted at one point.

Overall, there were few species associated with relatively unimproved grasslands. Yellow Bartsia (*Parentucellia viscosa*) and Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*) were both present, but rare (one or two individual plants noted in one location within the field apiece), in marked contrast to their relatively high frequency in the more flower-rich field outside the site to the east.

Boundary features

A Cornish hedge marked the boundary of the site to the road to the north. This style of boundary is largely restricted to Cornwall, and comprises stone-facing with an inner fill of soil and frequently topped with trees or vegetation. This boundary was lined with mature Elms with much Atlantic Ivy

(*Hedera hibernica*). Other species along the hedge included White Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria capreolata*), Smooth Sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*).

On the east and south side of the site, the boundaries appeared to represent remnant Cornish hedges, of low height and of limited remaining structure, largely representing a low, uneven earthy bank with some stones apparent. These were dominated by mature Elm trees and Pittosporum (*Pittosporum crassifolium*), with the southern boundary having considerable gaps between some of the trees and bushes.

On the west side the boundary comprised a line of Elm trees on level ground (with no bank present), and an understorey including Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), Soft Shield-fern (*Polystichum setiferum*), Lady Fern (*Athyrium felix-femina*) and Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicus*).

There was a small section of dry-stone wall on the northern corner of the site, by the entrance to the field.

Incidental Records

The bird species recorded using the site during the survey were Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), Robin (*Turdus philomelos*), Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). The invertebrates noted were Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*), Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*), Buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) and Rose Chafer (*Cetonia aurata*).

4 Evaluation

The grassland present on site is considered to have relatively low ecological value. This is as a result of the very limited range and abundance of the species found in agriculturally unimproved grassland, the lack of recent grassland management and the field's past use for bulb cultivation.

The field was of considerable interest for arable wildflowers when under bulb cultivation, and was the last site in Scilly for the Purple Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria purpurea*) (R Parslow pers. comm.). This fumitory is now extinct in Scilly and is considered Vulnerable on the England Red List for plants. It is possible that Purple Ramping-fumitory could reappear from the seedbank when soil is disturbed as part of the cemetery preparation or operation, in which case a priority conservation action would be seed collection so this species could be maintained in cultivation in Scilly, and/or introduced to another field on the island where the management includes regular tillage.

A range of widespread plant species were recorded from the field and its boundaries. A range of birds and invertebrates of wide distribution within Scilly were also recorded. The field is likely to have a relatively high biomass of invertebrates due to lack of recent disturbance, and the volume of vegetation, including encroaching Bramble and suckering Elms, however the site conditions do not include any conditions which indicate a high likelihood of presence of any locally or nationally uncommon invertebrates.

The boundary features are considered to be of at least moderate ecological value, particularly the Cornish hedge at the north of the site, and the mature elms. The elms and the hedgebank and its stones could all be of interest for lichens and bryophytes, with the most significant potential feature being the possible presence of the Sap-groove Lichen *Bacidia incompta*. Elm trunks in the Isles of Scilly are a national stronghold for this much declined species which is on the Red List. This species was not noted, but it can be a difficult species to survey for when Elm trees are in leaf.

The Elm trees may have cavities or cracks suitable for roosting bats, whilst the thick Atlantic Ivy cover on some of the trees may also support roosting bats. The combination of the overgrown field and tree-lined boundaries are likely to be of value for foraging bats.

5 Potential Impacts

The potential impacts of use of this field for a cemetery would depend on the nature of the works proposed. No details of the works have been provided. However, the impacts could be low if the provision of an extended cemetery facility involves no damage to Cornish hedges or mature Elm trees. It should be possible to develop the site as a cemetery extension without damage to Cornish hedges or mature trees.

6 Recommendations for further survey

It is considered that no further ecological survey is required for the proposed cemetery proposal, providing there is no impact on the Cornish hedges and mature elm trees. Should there be disturbance of these features, then work would be required to investigate the potential for bat roosts in the trees in particular. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the potential for important lichens (particularly Sap-groove Lichen where water and/or sap runs down the tree trunks, particularly below trunk or bough damage on the Elms).

Recommendations for habitat enhancements as part of the proposed cemetery are outwith the scope of this survey.

7 Appendix

A table giving the full list of plant species recorded in the grassland, and in the surrounding boundary habitats, is provided as an Appendix to this report.