

Joanne Capper

From: Hunter, Tasha <Tasha.Hunter@richmondandwandsworth.gov.uk>
Sent: 10 October 2017 11:23
To: Andrea Kitzberger-Smith; Joanne Capper
Subject: Ecology Officer position on LBRT proposal to designate St Michael' Convent as an OSNI

Dear Andrea, Joanne

Please find below my position on Richmond Borough Council's proposal to designate St Michaels Convent, Ham Common, Ham, TW10 7JH as a potential OSNI.

I have been the Ecology officer for Richmond Council for 10 years now and I have had the privilege to visit the Convent grounds on a couple of occasions (Ham Open Gardens, giving wildlife advice and the original pre-application planning application(14/P0307/PREAPP meetings in 2014) over the years. In my opinion it is a wonderful quiet 'reserve' and was beautifully kept by the nuns while they could. I first muted that the site should be designated as an OSNI in 2013 but at that time we were not in position to start the designation process, which eventually started in April 2016. I commissioned Salix Ecology in July 2016 to look at this site (along with other sites) and determine whether it should be designated (and if so at what level) as an OSNI, at that time we were given permission to access the site and therefore Salix reviewed the available desk based information and locally gathered species records. Their opinion was

Salix Ecology recommendation for St Michaels Convent August 2016

No access for habitat survey was possible to this site; however a significant amount of information was supplied.

This historic site is an important part of the River Thames to Richmond Park Green Corridor. It contains a wide variety of native and non-native tree species. Most notable is a 300 year old black mulberry which evidently is in relatively good condition. Forty five species of birds have been recorded using the site including species such as song thrush, house sparrow, tawny owl, sparrowhawk, kestrel and cuckoo (some of which are Red List species). A number of bats also commute across the site including Daubenton's. There is a risk this site will be sold off by the nuns for future development. If this happens the green corridor will be seriously fragmented. It is strongly suggested that the site is surveyed and if of sufficient quality, designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation. A Borough Grade 2 designation is most likely given the current information.

Since that time the site has been subject to an Ecological Assessment (EA) carried out by Ecology Solutions Ltd in August 2016 as part of the planning applications 16/3552/FUL & 16/3553/LBC. Please note I did not comment on the planning applications as I felt it may be construed as a conflict of interest and therefore my colleague Steve Marshall dealt with the applications. However I will be dealing with the discharge of conditions for the applications as Steve has now moved onto other projects and the conditions were set by him leaving me only to check their completeness.

I personally feel that the Convent gardens should be designated as an OSNI and I believe that the Ecological Assessment (EA) carried out by Ecology Solutions Ltd for the planning applications 16/3552/FUL and 16/3553/LBC support this and I state my reasons below

Habitats - The EA states that the site has a variety of habitats found within it (page 20) consisting mainly of amenity grass, orchard, mature trees and shrubs, hedgerows, ponds and an allotment area all of which complement each other providing habitats (nesting and foraging) for different species (especially birds and bats). The report also goes on to state that northern section of the garden is already designated a priority habitat traditional orchard which is a priority habitat under the UK priority habitats (replacing the Biodiversity Actions plans) see <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5706>

Birds - The wildlife list that has been collated by residents (attached) is, although mainly common birds, impressive and contains a number of red data book birds (for example house sparrows, starlings and song thrushes) which Ecology Solutions also consider the site to provide suitable habitat for them although not seen during their survey (page 13).

Trees, bats and birds - The black mulberry is undoubtedly a tree of great importance and there are also a number of other mature trees which all provide excellent habitat for birds and bats and will continue to do so. One tree has already be identified as having features to support roosting bats, although not formally identified (page 10) and there are over 10 other mature trees (and numerous semi mature trees) which will only become better for bats the older they get (this is from Appendix 2 of the ACD Environmental tree survey 2013 revised 2016 to support the planning application). 4 species of bats were seen during the emergent surveys; common pipistrelles, soprano pipistrelles, noctule and serotine bats, with a maximum 24 passes in one night and regular activity on each night the static detectors was used. This to me indicates a good and **regular** use of the gardens for bat activity which will be helped by the presence of trees (providing cover and insects) the ponds (attracting insects) hedgerows (providing connectivity). The one thing that was missing from the EA was the times that the bats were seen which would indicate how close their roosts are.

Badgers – the site has 4 setts (the report doesn't indicate whether they are outliers or main setts) and that 4 badgers were seen during a bat emergent survey (page 11) but that shows how good the habitat is and that there is plenty of food available. If this piece of land is not protected the badgers will be forced into nearby private gardens which then causes conflict with the badgers.

Wildlife corridor – the map attached (and the site location plan ECO 1 in the EA) shows how significant the site is in the context of Ham, it is an important part of the wildlife corridor running from Richmond Park to the River Thames and this has been names in in the past as bat superhighway.

There is room for improvement – allowing some areas of grass to grow longer, a larger pond with marginal vegetation and a sympathetic management regime (including specialist pruning for the orchard), however as this site stands within this semi-rural environment It acts as a wildlife reserve and should be allowed to continue this.

Update since site visit on 5th October 2017

I visited the site along with Paul Losse from Salix Ecology (an addendum to his previous report is attached) and spent an hour looking over the site and I am still of the opinion it is a site worthy of an OSNI (specifically a Site of Importance Borough Grade II) designation. In addition to what I have written above the site visit also showed that the rear lawn (0.14ha) was actually lowland acid grassland, managed by regular mowing not amenity grass. Acid grassland is a UK priority habitat and one of the habitats covered by the Richmond Biodiversity Action plan <http://swlen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/RuT-Acid-Grassland-HAP.pdf>. This is a significant find as it links in with the other patches of acid grassland in the area; Ham Common formal is also acid grassland (managed as amenity grass) and there is another patch within Ham Common Woods which is managed as acid grassland. Richmond Borough has over 50% of all the acid grassland found in London because of the gravels found within the Thames terraces, link to the London acid grassland habitat suitability map <http://www.gigl.org.uk/habitat-data/bap-habitat-suitability-data/>. A green woodpecker was observed flying within the site and is a key bird species associated with acid grassland as it forages on the yellow meadow ants. We also noted 2 of the 4 badger setts as being active.

This site should have a carefully thought out management plan to ensure the continued provision of wildlife habitat.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best wishes

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