

COYNE ENVIRONMENTAL LTD

**Former Merchant Taylors School
Rolly Lane
Ashwell
SG7 5LY**



PRELIMINARY ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL SEPTEMBER 2025

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Coyne Environmental Ltd has been instructed by Urban Space Planning to undertake an ecological study of the disused tennis courts, at the former Merchant Taylor School, Rolly Lane, Ashwell, SG7 5LY. This is to establish the potential presence or absence of protected ecological features. It is proposed to undertake a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) and consider a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in accordance with the Environment Act 2021. These will contribute to the submission of an Outline Planning Application to North Herts District Council (NHDC).



1.2 The completed PEA will enable the Local Planning Authority (LPA) to consider the impacts that the proposal will have on the wildlife ecology of the site. The LPA can then set out its legal obligations under the 'Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations' (2018) and 'Outline Mitigation and Compensation Strategy' if required. The PEA was conducted on the 08.09.25 in the daytime in good weather (22°C), no wind and no rain.

LOCATION

2.1 The village of Ashwell, on flat farmland at the base of a chalk escarpment, is in north Hertfordshire, 6 km NE of Baldock. To the SW is Arbury Banks, the remains of an Iron Age hill fort. In 2002, local metal detectorists found a silver Roman figurine of a goddess, Dea Senuna and subsequent archaeological digs revealed 26 more gold and silver objects situated in a major open-air ritual site (all now in the British Museum).

2.2 In 917 Aethelred the Unready is reputed to have given Ashwell a Charter for a weekly market, as one of a line of settlements, on the ancient Icknield Way. This was to help defend his kingdom against the Danes. In the 13thC sheep farming brought prosperity to the area and the village has a wealth of architecture spanning several centuries. Listed buildings include St Marys Church (Grade 1), St. John's Guildhall (1681), Foresters Cottages, Chantry House (15th C window), Ashwell

Museum (16th C), Fordham`s Maltings, Merchant Taylors (1681) . Ashwell Bury (Victorian ,remodelled by Edwin Lutyens), War Memorial (designed by Lutyens) and a Village Lock-up. Since 1850 the area has been served by Ashwell and Morden railway station .

2.3 The parish church of St Mary the Virgin (14thC) is renowned for its ornate church tower (54 m), tallest in the county and its medieval graffiti highlighting the plight of survivors of the Black Death and a graffito of the Old St Pauls Church . Ashwell Springs, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) , is a perennial source of the River Rhee/ Cam. The cool water of this chalk aquifer spring (8C constant) contain a rare species of stenothermic flatworm (*Platyhelminthes; Tricladida*) associated with cold surface waters or subterranean groundwater, that is only known from this location within East Anglia . The village is a "green oasis" with many trees(few oak) and this contrasts with the surrounding landscape, dominated by intense agricultural production, principally of wheat, with rather limited aesthetic or biodiversity interest.

SITE

3.1 The site is the old tennis courts to the former Merchant Taylor School (GR:TL266397), in the centre of Ashwell. It is proposed to develop the site for residential use. The Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors is one of the livery Companies of London founded 1347 as an association of tailors. By the end of the 17thC, this had virtually ceased, and it became a philanthropic and social association. It owns Merchant Taylors' School all over the country, and is associated with St Johns College ,Oxford, and Pembroke College, Cambridge.



3.2 The school in Ashwell was built in 1681 as a bequest by Henry Colbron, a London scrivener, as a Free School for boys and was run by the Company until 1902. This was then taken over by the local school board, then a rural studies centre and local library and finally a private residence with other new houses built in the grounds. It is only the former tennis courts that has been retained by the Henry Colborn Foundation Trust.

AREA DESIGNATIONS

4.1 Biodiversity management and protection within the UK planning system is described through European and UK legislation. The main protection for wildlife is the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), including for bats (European Protected Species). Legislation for specific species is also present such as, Protection of Badgers Act 1992, EU Habitats and Birds Directive and more general guidance, Conservation (Natural Habitats &c) Regulations 1994, which defines "European Protected Species" (EPS) and EU Biodiversity Strategy 2011-2020.



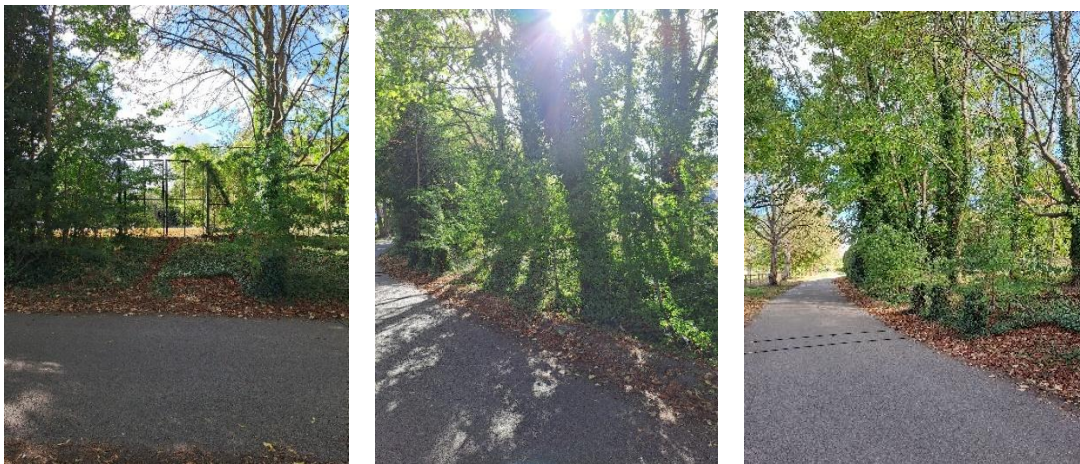
4.2 The Hertfordshire Biodiversity Partnership has developed the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for the county as A 50-year Vision for wildlife and natural habitats of Hertfordshire along with the Hertfordshire Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan 2010. At the local level North Herts District Council (NHDC) there are several environmental initiatives, such as promoting more public tree planting and retaining wildlife verges. This area is on the edge of the Chilterns SSSI. As well as the Aswell Springs SSSI, St Marys church is known for its bat's roosts with both Common Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) and Natterers bats (*Myotis nattereri*). The site is also in the Ashwell Conservation Area (CA). Ashwell Quarry and Quarry Spring known for its chalk flora, is the nearest HMWT Nature Reserve. There are no National Nature Reserves (NNR), or RAMSA sites within the study area. The NHDC Local Plan (2011-31) and the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (2022) have also been taken into consideration. These all are aimed at ensuring the environment of Hertfordshire and its wildlife is adequately protected.

ECOLOGICAL EVALUATION

5.1 A full Phase 1 Habitat Survey was not deemed necessary, due to the nature of the site. An Ecological Walkover Survey was therefore undertaken aligned with the UKHab Handbook (v2.1). However, if the survey identifies any wildlife of significance, measures will be taken as set out in the JNCC guidance Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Surveys (2010) and CIEEM Guidelines (2017).

The Application Site is a disused tarmac tennis court with boundary metal fencing. This is surrounded, by a tree screen of mainly ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) with chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) and scattered thorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). This extends up to Rolly Lane with double gates giving access to the site from the narrow public thoroughfare. There are fine views of St Mary spire from within the site, as well Merchant Taylors residence and the adjacent Deans Cottage.

5.2 As the courts (UKHab **Code: u1b**) have now been used for a longtime, emergent vegetation as started to encroach from the edges of the site. Fallen leaves from the sounding trees have provided a base for pioneer weeds and grasses to spread out from the edges of the courts. This is becoming modified grassland (UKHab **Code: g4**). Of predominately grass species (*Poa spp*, *Festuca spp*, *Molina spp*) with limited pioneer species (*Plantago lanceolata*, *Rumex acetosella*, *Cerastium arvense*) among others .



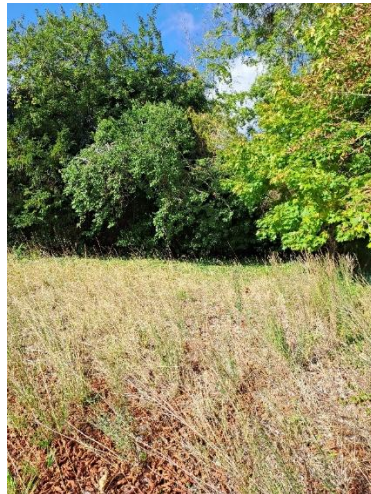
ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

6.1 The whole site was surveyed and assessed for ecology, as well as the surrounding boundary. This includes the tree screen of the new residential properties of the former school ground and along Rolly Lane. As well as examining the habitats on site, particular attention will be given to bats and Great Crested Newts (GCN), both European Protected Species (EPS). As the site has no building, an investigation for bats was not required. Alongside this all trees on the adjacent site, were investigated using binoculars for any openings, including scratching and urine stains. No signs of bats were observed. Therefore, in accordance with the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) guidelines and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations, the site is assessed to have **no** potential as a bat roost. Bats will be foraging along the tree boundary, so that any proposed lighting, needs to take this into consideration in any development proposals.

6.2 The trees and hedges on the surrounding areas offer potential habitats, food sources and nesting sites to birds. The survey, using binoculars, showed no active nests or signs of nest building. However, due to the maturity of the trees, it is likely

for these to be used by birds for shelter or future nests. Bird species noted on the survey included carrion crows (*Corvus corone*), wood pigeon (*Columba palumbus*), magpies (*Pica pica*) and blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*).

6.3 Any work that is required to be undertaken near to the trees, must not be carried out in the normal breeding season March-August. If emergency work is required, the trees are to be inspected. Any bird nests are found, are to have a protection zone of at least 3m diameters and this must be retained, until the fledglings have left the nest.



6.4 The limited vegetation of the site sealed tarmac surface provides limited opportunity for small mammals to find much shelter and up on inspection of the courts, no runs, holes/burrows or tracks were noted. The walkover found no evidence of mammals on site, including badgers or hedgehogs. No trails, passages (footprints), latrine areas (droppings), discarded meals etc were found. The tree line along the boundaries were fully investigated for any presence with no evidence found.

6.5 As the site is predominately a sealed surface, this also provides no opportunities for reptiles and amphibians. This is particularly for Great crested newts (GCN) which are European Protected Species (EPS) under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Inspection under the few possible refugia (stones, fallen timber etc) was carried out but no evidence was found.

BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN

7.1 The Environment Act 2021 has a mandatory requirement for a minimum of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) on most development. As this is an Outline Application, it is assumed the BNG will be undertaken as a later part of this study. Suitable enhancements and mitigation required to meet Statutory Net Gain, can be incorporated into an ecological and landscape design proposal.

7.2 Ecological enhancements may be needed which can be in the form of bird and bat boxes, a landscape design proposal with planting of native trees and wildflower areas with insect hotels for bees and butterflies. Passages through fences can allow connectivity of habitats of hedgehogs and the placement of hedgehog houses in discreet locations will help the species.



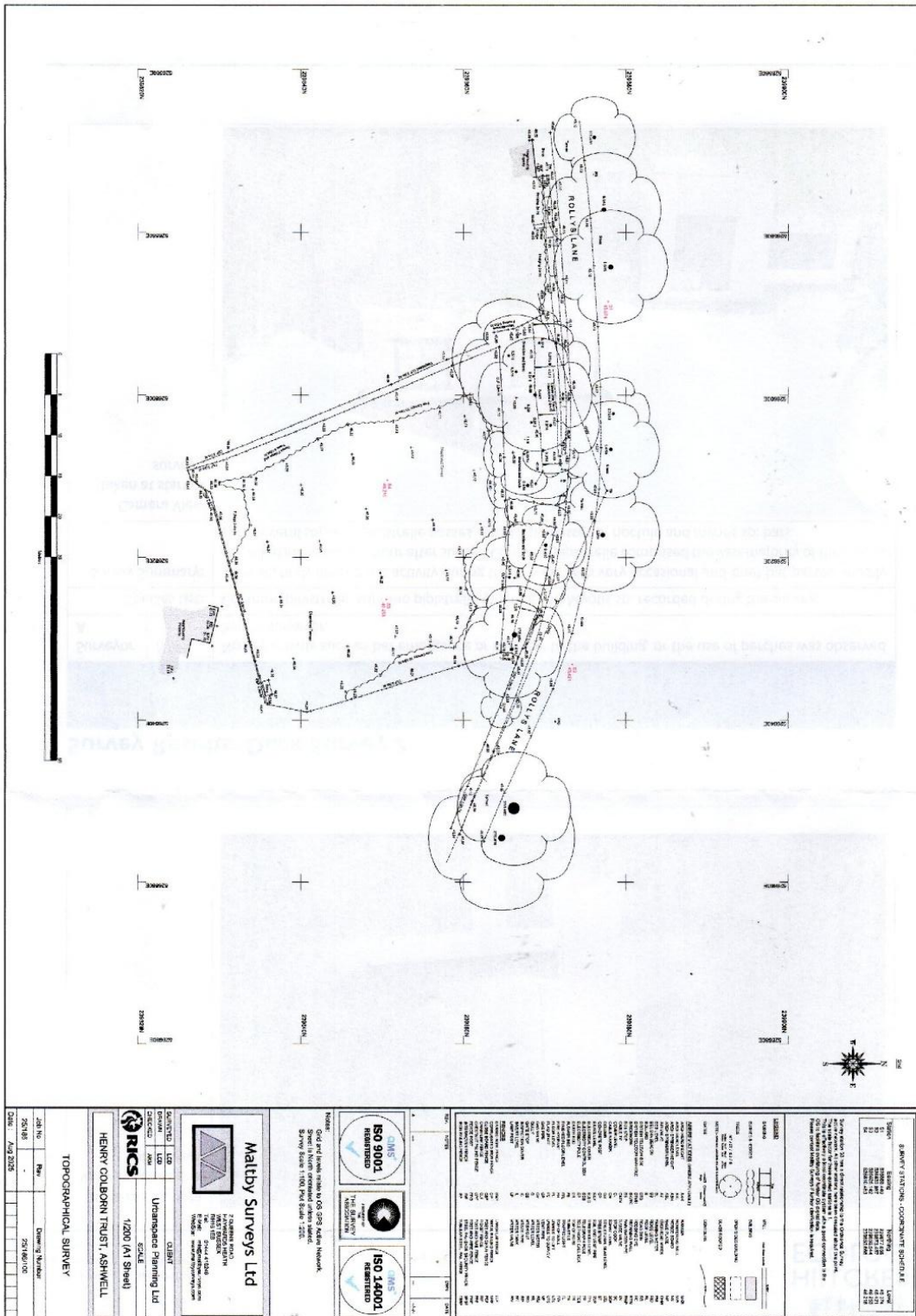
CONCLUSION

8.1 Coyne Environmental Ltd has been instructed by Urban Space Planning, to carry out this ecological survey of the disused tennis courts, at the former Merchant Taylor School, Rolly Lane, Ashwell, SG7 5LY. This PEA Report details the survey findings and from this assessment, the site has only limited ecological value and no significant habitats. When the BNG evaluation is undertaken any required mitigation can provide biodiversity enhancement for the whole site.

8.2 Therefore, in my professional opinion I assess that this proposed development, will have minimal impact on the overall ecology of the area. I conclude that no other studies or surveys would be required on the environment for North Herts District Council to discharge its responsibilities under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations' (2018). On this basis, the proposal can be considered by the Local Planning Authority, when the application is submitted.

REFERENCES

Tree survey Map
Location Map (aerial)
Site Map
Habitat Map
Conservation Area (aerial)
Ashwell Conservation Area Map
Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981)
Environment Act (2021)



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Many thanks
Matt

