

Growing Baldock

Environmental Statement Volume 2: Figures & Appendices

Chapter 11: Ecology

Appendix 11.5 Verification of Habitat Condition and Botanical Interest



LAND TO THE EAST AND SOUTH OF BALDOCK

Ecological Verification Assessment 2023

BMD.21.0045.RPE-TN.807.A.Verification Assessment
DATE: AUGUST 2025

Ecological Verification Assessment 2023:

Land to the east and south of Baldock

Technical Note

Project: 21.0045 **Ref:** BMD.21.0045.RPE-TN.807.A.Verification Assessment

Subject: Verification Assessment **Date:** August 2025

Status: FOR INFORMATION

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SUMMARY

This Technical Note has been produced to identify habitats in relation to a Verification Assessment associated with Land to the east and south of Baldock, Hertfordshire (hereafter referred to as 'the Site').

In order to determine habitats on site and their conditions, a walkover, review of the Landscape Plans and professional judgement has been undertaken to provide up to date baseline data.

This Verification Assessment aims to:

- Baseline data: classify the type and condition of habitats present prior to and post-development using UK HAB or Phase I and translate.
- Ensure that baseline habitat conditions are classified in a robust and consistent manner, and that classification is based on the best data available data at the time of assessment.
- Assess hedgerows on site against the Hedgerow Regulations.

The verification assessment drew the following conclusions concerning ecology on the Site from a walkover conducted in July 2023:

- No significant changes to the baseline ecology of the Site were identified with reference to the findings of BMD's Baseline surveys undertaken in 2022.

Declaration of compliance with professional code of ethics or conduct

The information which we have prepared and provided is true and has been prepared and provided in accordance with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management's Code of Professional Conduct. We confirm that the opinions expressed are our true and professional bonafide opinions.

All reasonable efforts have been made to comply with current legislation and best practice, including BS 42020:2013, the Environment Act 2021 (Schedule 7A: Biodiversity Gain), the National Planning Policy Framework (2025), CIEEM EcIA Guidelines (2018, updated 2022), and relevant Natural England guidance.

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Landscape

- 1.1.1 The Site is approximately 220 ha in total however is largely dissected by a railway running east west through the middle of the Site effectively creating a northern and southern portion of the Site. The northern area comprises approximately 144 ha. The southern area comprises approximately 76 ha.
- 1.1.2 The northern area of the Site is located within the north of Hertfordshire, approximately 7.6 km north of the borough of Stevenage, at the north-eastern extent of the market town of Baldock. The Site is dissected by the Cambridge Train Line which splits the Site into a northern and southern area. Two small sections of the railway line, however, fall within the northern section of the Site, partially connecting to the southern area of the Site.
- 1.1.3 The train line running through the centre of the Site borders the northern area of the Site to the south, with two small sections of the railway line falling within the northern section of the Site; North Road to the west and chiefly agricultural land to the north and east. Several residential avenues, pathways, gardens and homes are also present within the vicinity of the Site boundaries, particularly along the southwest border of the Site.
- 1.1.4 The Bygrave Road runs southwest-northeast within the centre of the northern area of the Site, dividing arable farmland. Multiple footpaths run within the north Site's boundaries, connecting to North Road, Bygrave Road and multiple residential pathways. There are also some urban features within the Site, such as the roundabout connecting the B656 and A505 to the northeast of the Site. The surrounding landscape, with the exception of the town of Baldock to the southwest, has a commensurate character to that within the Site: agricultural land, chiefly arable, interspersed by residential pockets, roads and hedgerows. The residential areas surrounding the Site are all primarily associated to the town of Baldock situated to the southwest of the Site and the village of Bygrave approximately 1 km northeast of the Site.
- 1.1.5 In the southern area of the Site the A505 (Royston Road) borders the Site from the south to the northeast; the Cambridge Train Line to the north; Wallington Road to the west and the Ashville Trading estate at the northwest border—several residential avenues, gardens and homes are also present within the vicinity of the Site boundaries.
- 1.1.6 The A507 (Clothall Road) runs southwest-southeast along the southern section of the Site, dividing arable farmland within the Site. Multiple footpaths run within the southern areas boundaries, connecting to the B656, Wallington Road and multiple residential areas. There are also some urban features within the Site, such as the roundabout connecting the B656 and A505 to the northeast of the southern area. The surrounding landscape, with the exception of the town of Baldock to the southwest, has a commensurate character to that within the Site: agricultural land, chiefly arable, interspersed by residential pockets, roads and hedgerows. The residential areas surrounding the Site are all primarily associated to the town of Baldock situated to the southwest of the Site and the village of Bygrave approximately 1.3km northeast of the Site.

- 1.1.7 Considering the outlined above contextual features regarding the Site and its surrounding landscape, while there is some overland connectivity of the Site to its adjacent habitats, particularly from the north, the presence of multiple dispersal barriers within the vicinity, including highways and rail lines, is deemed to leave dispersal capacity of terrestrial fauna to/from the Site as moderate. It is further estimated that more mobile species, such as bats, birds, and insects, would be more readily able to commute to the Site from surrounding habitats.

1.2 Proposed development

- 1.2.1 Outline planning application with all matters reserved except for means of highway access into the development from the A505/Royston Road, North Road and Clothall Road ;, for up to 3,200 homes, up to 16ha of employment, waste and leisure infrastructure, a mixed use local centre, up to 1 secondary school, up to 2 x primary schools, up to 1 SEND school, health hub, green infrastructure (including parks, formal sports provision, play, habitat areas, informal open space and structural planting), internal street network, access junctions and railway crossing, public transport infrastructure, pedestrian/cycle network (including PRow diversions, active travel routes, mobility hubs and crossing of the railway), utilities and drainage infrastructure (including diversions of existing and provision of new infrastructure, pumping stations, sustainable drainage, primary substations, rising main/strategic sewer and renewable energy infrastructure), ground remodelling/earthworks and any necessary demolitions.

1.3 Ecological Context

- 1.3.1 An ecological appraisal was undertaken at the Site in 2015 (Ecus, 2016), which included a badger survey, great crested newt assessment and reptile survey. The principal habitats recorded were arable, improved grassland, hedgerows, scattered trees, scrub, semi-improved grassland, tall ruderal, amenity grassland, buildings and hardstanding. The survey identified the potential for the following protected species/species groups: great crested newt, badger, bats, breeding birds, common reptiles.
- 1.3.2 WYG carried out a suite of breeding bird surveys in 2017 (WYG, 2017a & WYG 2017b). The Site was found to support a population of corn bunting considered to be of County importance. Other farmland birds were also recorded and this assemblage was also considered to be of County level importance. Subsequently, an ES was prepared and an outline planning permission submitted in January 2018. However, the application was subsequently withdrawn.
- 1.3.3 In 2019 the ecological appraisal was updated along with a series of species specific assessments including corn bunting and reptile reports which were produced between 2019-2020. These reports are as follows:
- Baldock North - Updated Ecological Appraisal (2019a);
 - Baldock Southeast - Updated Ecological Appraisal (2019b);
 - Baldock Reptile Survey Report (2019c);
 - Baldock Southeast - Bat Activity Report (2020a);
 - Baldock North - Bat Activity Report (2020b);

- Baldock North and Southeast - Corn Bunting Report (2020c); and
- Baldock Mitigation Sites – 2019 Corn Bunting Survey Report (2020d)

1.3.4 The most recent baseline was undertaken by BMD in March and July 2022. The details of this assessment are shown in BMD.21.0045.RPE/P1.801.A.-.Ecology and has informed this further survey report. No further previous ecological surveys or assessments are known for the Site or adjacent land.

Habitats:

1.3.5 A site visit was undertaken on 26th July 2023 and a detailed walkover survey carried out of the Site and the local environment. The following habitats were recorded on Site:

- Allotment
- Arable
- Amenity grassland
- Bygrave Road LWS
- Buildings and hardstanding
- Dense scrub
- Hedgerows
- Improved grassland
- Mixed scattered trees
- Poor semi-improved grassland
- Semi-improved neutral grassland
- Tall ruderal
- Woodland

1.3.6 For the purpose of this verification, the survey focused on verifying and assessing habitats of botanical value within the Site, including all grassland, woodland and hedgerows within the Site, results of these can be seen in section 2.3. Full results of all habitats within the Site can be seen within the Ecological Assessment (BMD,2022).

2. RESULTS

2.1.1 The results of the Verification Assessment, in relation to the condition of the Site in 2023, are set out below with supporting photographs appended to this report.

2.1 Habitats

2.1.2 Table 2.1 provides a summary of the nature conservation importance of habitats within the Site and also habitat condition.

Table 2.1 provides a summary of the nature conservation importance of habitats within the Site and condition.

Habitat	Meets UK Priority/Local BAP habitat criteria	Condition ¹	Geographical context ²
Arable	No	n/a	Site
Bare ground (& hardstanding)	No	n/a	Site
Buildings	No	n/a	Site
Dense scrub	No	Poor-moderate	Local
Modified Grassland – amenity	No	Poor	Site
Modified Grassland – improved	No	Poor	Site
Grassland – neutral semi-improved	No	Moderate	Local
Modified Grassland – poor semi-improved	No	Moderate	Site
Hedgerows	Yes	Poor-good	Local
Woodland – semi-natural broadleaf	Yes	Poor	Site
Notes: 1. As determined using the Biodiversity Metric 4.0 guidance. Where it is considered that the condition outcome is inappropriate justification is given in the text. See Appendix E for detailed habitat assessments across. 2. Geographic level at which the habitat is considered important			

2.2 Area Habitats

2.2.1 Overall, there has been little change in terms of habitats on Site compared with the 2022 assessments. An overview is provided below:

Arable

2.2.2 The arable fields dominate the Site and are subject to intensive management, with frequent cultivation and applications of agro-chemicals considered likely. Such measures significantly reduce plant and invertebrate species diversity and hence the ecological value of such habitats for these species. The arable fields provide suitable habitat for farmland birds such as corn bunting and other Priority species such as brown hare, however the fields lack floral diversity. No change noted within the arable fields during the 2023 verification survey.

Modified Grassland

- 2.2.3 Areas of modified grassland were recorded throughout Site within residential gardens and grazed pastures. Modified grassland is a common habitat both locally and nationally. This habitat at the Site has very low botanical species diversity and low structural diversity and provides only very limited opportunities to faunal species. The areas of modified grassland are similar to when recorded in 2022.

Other Neutral Grassland

- 2.2.4 Areas of grassland have been assessed in 2022 and 2023, the main floristic interest within the Site are the neutral and calcareous rough grassland patches to the east of Clothall Commons, the more diverse roadside/field margins such as the Bygrave Road Verge LWS and sections of connective vegetation such as the dense scrub and high-value hedgerows onsite.
- 2.2.5 The interest within the grassland parcel east of Clothall Common arises from localised patches of species characteristic of calcareous soil, alongside evidencing some species diversity throughout. Of particular note some orchid diversity is present within this parcel, including frequent pyramidal orchid, common spotted orchid and an additional single Schedule 8 lizard orchid individual. As an extremely rare orchid listed under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), consultation with Natural England will be required if works are to occur within this area in order for the successful translocation of the species to be undertaken prior to works commencing. This area is to be retained within the development. I Connectivity between these habitats and those within the surrounding landscape is further expected to be improved by the proposals for the Site.
- 2.2.6 A number of the road verges along Bygrave Road also supported thin strips of species-poor semi-improved neutral grassland with a diverse range of grasses and herbaceous species recorded within these areas. Generally, the Bygrave Road LWS had a higher level of ruderal species such as mugwort and common nettle. Some areas of calcareous tendency are present along these verges, such as lady's bedstraw and greater knapweed, however generally neutral indicators largely dominant these grassland areas. The verges appear to be infrequently managed, which has caused the habitat to decline in quality. Fertiliser enrichment from adjacent arable had allowed coarse grasses and ruderals to flourish and crowded out all but the tallest of the more notable species. Therefore, the neutral semi-improved grassland present along Bygrave Road is considered to be of moderate ecological value at a local level. The roadside verges are to be wholly retained and further enhanced through the current proposals to further boost the floristic diversity along the calcareous soils throughout the Site.

Mixed Broadleaved Woodland

- 2.2.7 The mixed broadleaved woodland within the Site does not meet the criteria of Priority Habitat and is considered to be of poor condition owing to the relatively single age-class of the wood, the narrow and linear nature and limited ground flora due to dense ivy/shading. A lack of species diversity and ground flora within the woodland was recorded in 2022. This is still the case from the 2023 updated survey.

2.3 Linear Habitats

Hedgerows

- 2.3.1 All native hedgerows on Site meet UK Priority Habitat criteria. There are no changes within the hedgerows since the 2022 survey. All species-rich hedgerows were assessed against the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 criteria. Results are presented below.
- 2.3.2 The ditches present within the Site are small and have botanically limited ecological value. However, these features in association with the hedgerows do provide opportunities for certain faunal species and groups to disperse across an agricultural landscape, particularly amphibians.
- 2.3.3 There were occasional high value trees within the hedgerows. This habitat feature is common and widespread in the local landscape but is still considered to be of Local value.
- All hedgerows within the Site, with the exception of H6a, contain 80% or more native woody species and therefore qualify as UK Priority Habitats;
 - Hedgerows H3, H3a, H8, H9, H10, H11, H27 and H28 all contain 5 or more native woody species and therefore qualify as species-rich hedgerows. The remainder of the hedgerows present at the Site contain 4 or less native woody species and therefore do not qualify as species-rich hedgerows;
 - Hedgerow H28 was considered to qualify as an 'Important' hedgerow under the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 owing to supporting nine woody species; an associated public right of way and at least one tree per 50m of the hedgerow;
 - The remaining species-rich hedgerows onsite (H3, H3a, H8, H9 H10, H11, and H27) were fully assessed against the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 criteria. Only low/very low abundances of some of the qualifying native woody species listed under the Wildlife and Landscape criteria of the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 were recorded along these hedgerows and they failed a number of criteria to qualify as an 'Important' hedgerow.

Railway Corridor (predominantly offsite)

- 2.3.4 Although mostly offsite, the railway corridor which runs through the centre of the Site has had significant maintenance and management work done this year (2023). The majority of trees and scrub have been removed on both sides of the track, leaving the majority of the corridor as bare ground.

2.4 Invasive species

- 2.4.1 No invasive species were recorded on Site. It is possible that invasive species are present in the locality.

3. CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1.1 The verification assessment drew the following conclusions concerning ecology on the Site in September 2023:
- No significant changes to the baseline ecology of the Site were identified with reference to the findings of BMD's Baseline update in 2022.

4. REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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WYG, (2020b), Bat Activity Report, Baldock North, Report on behalf of Hertfordshire County Council, Project number A090700-171-2

WYG, (2020d), Baldock Mitigation Sites, Report on behalf of Hertfordshire County Council, Project number A090700-171-2

5. GLOSSARY

5.1 Scientific Terms and Acronyms

CIEEM Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, the professional organisation and provider of professional codes of conduct for ecological consultancy.

Non-native invasive species For the purposes of this report: species listed on Schedule 9 of the wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Widely naturalised species, such as grey squirrel, are excluded.

UK Priority Habitat and species A habitat or species identified as a priority for conservation in accordance with Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006). Section 40 of the Act places a duty on public authorities to have regard for the conservation objectives of these habitats and species.

SECT 41 NERC Section 41 (S41) of the 2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act.

APPENDICES

A. SITE PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph 1: Area of arable with other neutral grassland field margin.



Photograph 2: area of other neutral grassland within Clothall Common.



Photograph 4: Native species rich hedgerow on PRow.



Photograph 4: Arable field parcel.



Photograph 5: Arable parcel bounded by species rich hedgerow with trees.



Photograph 6: Species rich hedgerow with modified grassland field margin.



Photograph 7: Hedgerow dissecting arable parcels.



Photograph 8: Area of modified grassland.



Photograph 9: The edge of the woodland block located in the north west of the Site.



Photograph 10: Area of modified grassland within residential garden.

B. METADATA, SURVEY CONDITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

B.1 Metadata

Factor	Detail
Data	Ecological verification of habitats to inform verification assessment
Reason for collection	To identify habitats in relation to a Verification Assessment
Location	Land to the east and south of Baldock, Hertfordshire. Approx. centre: TL 25319 34539
Date	26 th July 2023
Method of collection	Ecological verification assessment based on JNCC Phase 1 Habitat assessments.
Who collected	Katie Dalton MRSB ACIEEM

B.2 Survey Conditions

Date	Start Time	Cloud (%)	Sun	Precipitation
26/07/2023	12:40-14:30	40	Sunny	None

B.3 Limitations Review

Consideration	Comment
Survey & data	
Personal competence, i.e. qualifications, training, skills, understanding, experience	All survey works were undertaken by or directly supervised by personnel experienced in ecological surveying (see meta data). <u>Katie Dalton MRSB</u> has over 5 years' experience in ecological consultancy, including an experience of performing the survey work and assessments undertaken at Site, along with technical reporting. <u>Jonathan Wood BSc (Hons) MCIEEM</u> has over 9 years' experience in ecological consultancy, including an experience of performing and coordinating the survey work and assessments undertaken at Site. <u>James Patmore CEng CEnv MCIEEM</u> has over 21 years' experience in ecological consultancy, including an extensive amount of experience performing and directing the survey work and assessments undertaken at the Site.
Resources (equipment and/or personnel)	Appropriate resources and suitably qualified personnel were used.
Time spent surveying	Sufficient time was spent on site to undertake all surveys. No surveys were 'cut short'.
Data (e.g. arising from incomplete or inappropriate surveys)	The data collected were sufficient for the purpose of the works.
Lack of statistical robustness and higher uncertainties	Statistical analysis of data was not deemed necessary for the purpose of the current works.
Old and out of date data	The data used to complete this Verification Assessment were current and up to date.
Timing or seasonal constraints and suboptimal survey periods	The survey was conducted in July 2023. This is an optimal survey period for flora and fauna.
Partial use of and/or departures from good practice guidelines	All surveys accorded with the relevant best practice guidelines.
Site conditions & other factors	
Adverse weather conditions	No significantly adverse weather conditions were encountered during the survey work undertaken at the Site that would be considered to have significantly adversely impacted the reliability and/or accuracy of data collected.

Consideration	Comment
Restricted access to site or part of site	All areas of the Site were accessed with no restrictions.
Unrealistic deadlines	No restrictions on survey data collected or analysed to date are as a result of unrealistic deadlines.
Unproven or untested measures for mitigation and compensation	N/A
Evaluation of conservation value and impacts	The evaluation of the conservation value of habitats and species associated (or potentially associated) with the Site and impacts of the development, are based on the current information available. This evaluation will need to be reviewed and updated as necessary should a considerable period of time (24 months) elapse and/or more data from other survey work (on and within 1 km of the Site) becomes available.

C. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

National Planning Policy Framework 2025

- C.1.1 The NPPF places strong emphasis on achieving net gain in all developments (not just ‘no net loss’) through the planning systems purpose of achieving sustainable development (HM Government 2025). The NPPF notes three overarching objectives to achieve sustainable development and opportunities to be taken to secure net gain in each. The environmental objective relates to biodiversity:

“to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy” (HM Government 2023b).

The Environment Act 2021

- C.1.2 As of November 2021, The Environment Act 2021 states under Schedule 14 that provision are to be made *“for biodiversity gain to be a condition of planning permission in England.”* (HM Government 2021a). Proposals indicate a minimum 10% net gain will become mandate by Autumn 2023.

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