



Burwell Parish Council

# Spring Close

## Management Group Vision Plan

*( Revision 2A)*



Chalk Grassland \*\*

# 1) Overview

(The Overview sections 1-5 have been written by Martin O'Leary)

## ***(1) Introduction***

Spring Close meadow was purchased by Burwell Parish Council in the early 1980's as a public open space. The meadow contains the extensive earthworks of Burwell castle, consisting of a mound, surrounded by a dry moat on 3 sides and a stream on the fourth, and banks of chalk spoil from the excavated moat. There are also a couple of small, dry pits and a trench which were probably excavated at the time of the abortive construction of the castle. The meadow had been previously grazed. The Parish Council introduced summer grazing by cattle. This continued until the early 1990's until conflicts with dog walkers led to the cessation of cattle grazing and the replacement by a mowing regime. The meadow contains several different zones of vegetation.

In 2020, the Site was granted a County S.S.I. (Geology) status, which sits alongside the already achieved County Wildlife and County Historical Site Awards.

## ***(2) Main Part of Meadow***

The main part of the meadow in the 1990s contained a dense sward of grassland, dominated by cow parsley and coarse grasses. Following a suggestion by local resident, Colin Smith, this part of the meadow was not cut until late summer until a hay crop was taken and the arisings removed on the basis that this would lower soil fertility and allow a more herb-rich sward to develop. This has been the practise for about the last 20 years. Cow parsley plants were less robust than previously in 2019, the sward appeared to be less dense and lower in height than before and bulbous buttercup was abundant. Several colourful herb species had spread from the chalk banks. There is a caveat here in that the summer of 2019 was hot and dry and may have led to reduced plant growth.





### ***(3) The Chalk Banks***

The chalk banks contain areas of calcareous grassland, bright with cowslips in the spring and colourful in the summer with lesser knapweed, lady's bedstraw and other species. Botanical surveys of the chalk banks were carried out in 1990 and 1991 and have been repeated at intervals, including in 2019, by M O'Leary. Several banks that had been surveyed previously were not surveyed in 2019 as they were now covered in low scrub. Results from the 2019 survey show that there has been a one-third loss of wild flower species from the chalk banks since 1996. In 1996 14 species of wild flower were recorded as present in 8 out of 10 chalk bank sites surveyed. In 2019, half of those species continued to be recorded as widespread, 4 were much reduced in frequency and 3 were not recorded. This suggests that the loss of species is not restricted to infrequent species but includes once widespread species. This is a matter of concern.

A key species to focus on is wild clary, a member of the sage family with a spike of blue flowers. This was recorded from 4 chalk bank sites in 1996, but only in one location in 2019.

The loss of species diversity can be attributed to scrub encroachment but other factors also contribute to the loss. Contractors have cut the vegetation on the chalk banks too early in the summer in the past with the result that many plants were unable to set seed. Arisings from mowing were not always removed. This perhaps allowed coarse grasses which can shade and outcompete shorter herb species to colonise the banks.

One species that did thrive in the summer of 2019 was cowslip, recorded from 5 out of 6 chalk bank sites surveyed.





#### **(4) The Moat and Stream**

The western arm of the moat fills with shallow water in wet winters, encouraging the development of freshwater marsh vegetation, notably bulrush and reed sweet-grass. The moat has dried out in recent years. Areas have been colonised by stands of nettles and great willow herb.

The stream is fed by springs which are in turn maintained by water piped from Stetchworth. There are watercress beds just downstream from the springs. Much of the length of the stream is shaded by trees and hedges, including trees from neighbouring properties. There is little riparian or aquatic vegetation.



A full spring bubbling its way through the Close \*\*



Hawthorn berries offer a treat for the birds. \*\*

#### **(5) Trees and Shrubs**

Scrub has developed on the chalk banks, along the field boundaries and parts of the stream banks. There are thickets of bramble, blackthorn and hawthorn. Other hedgerow and scrub species include elder, ash and dog rose. Ivy is both abundant both as ground cover and on tree trunks and branches. C Smith identified a hawthorn bush on the chalk banks as the less common midland hawthorn.

Woodland has developed above the springs and on some of the chalk banks, mostly ash and field maple. There is a line of elms along the eastern boundary above the springs. Many of the elms have suffered over the years from dutch elm disease. Trees were planted in the late 1980's and 1990's mostly in the north-west corner of the site. Here suckers from a mature white poplar have been allowed to grow into trees.



## ***(6) Archaeological Overview***

Spring Close also contains the earthworks of Burwell Castle. The walls of the castle are no longer standing. The area was purchased by the Parish Council for the village in 1983 to protect it from inappropriate use and is maintained as an amenity site for local residents. The area has many access points with easily accessible gates in Mandeville, behind the church, and Spring Close, the road which runs alongside the open land. The land comprises of chalky grassland, with a spring-filled stream flowing through it, and trees. A large area of the land is taken up with the remains of a castle on the site of Roman building and is of great historical interest.

The village is the site of an unfinished castle, situated in Spring Close. The final wall was knocked down by the Fire Brigade testing a fire hose in the 1930s, but the dry moat is still clearly visible. The castle was built during "The Anarchy", the internal conflict of the mid-12th century in the reign of King Stephen. Although a settlement had been reached such that the throne would pass to Henry II on Stephen's death, the Barons of the time took the opportunity to fight their own battles.

Among these Geoffrey de Mandeville was particularly troublesome and, after turning against Stephen, had set up an impregnable base around Ely. From his base he would attack local towns, such as Cambridge, and so the king ordered castles be built to surround Geoffrey. The few sites at which it is known such castles were to be constructed include Rampton (Giant's Hill), Ramsey (Booth's Hill), Burwell, and possibly Knapwell.

At Burwell, a moat had been constructed and the stone keep partially built when Geoffrey attacked and was mortally wounded. His revolt thus collapsed and the castle was left unfinished. The narrow lane running along the side of the church next to Spring Close, where the Castle is located, is named "Mandeville".



Ivy and honey bee. \*\*

## **2) Management Group**

Spring Close originally had a formal management committee, from 1986 until 1999, superseded on obtaining a Countryside Stewardship ten year grant. When this terminated, Spring Close had no formal management in place for ten years until late 2019, when a new committee was set up. Some of the group are members of Burwell Parish Council, others are volunteers who have taken an interest in the site for many years already.

### **Parish Council:**

**Mike Swift** (Chair)

**Jenny Moss** (secretary)

**Liz Swift**

**Paul Webb**

**Helen McMenamin-Smith**

**Michael Geary**

### **Residents:**

**Caroline Smith** (Head of previous Countryside Stewardship)

**Colin Smith**

**Martin O'Leary**

**Rachel O'Leary**

**Malcolm Busby**

### ***Terms of Reference 2019***

Under the Terms of Reference document first drawn up in 1996 and revised in 2019, Burwell Parish Council is committed to :

Protect the historical relevance of the area

Provide an amenity for use by the Parishioners of Burwell

Protect and sustain the natural habitats within the area of natural beauty

On their behalf the Management group will maintain the area by:

- organising grass cutting
- maintaining the habitat
- monitoring contractor performance
- organising/undertaking minor unforeseen maintenance and repairs