

## Hildersham Nature Recovery Plan

### Verges Survey April/May 2023

#### 4: Proposed Verge Management Programme

(Contents Index: See end)

### Problems on the ground

Many contractors would agree that dealing with village verges would be simple if only they had clear instructions, and all it involved was cutting straightforward areas of grass on set dates a set number of times a year.

Trouble starts when the verges in question contain not only rough grasses (largely couch grass, fescues and *poa annua*), and vegetation that would probably benefit from being removed, but also flora – not always growing in the same locations each year – that is rare and/or should ideally be left for pollinating insects.

However, following the findings of the April and May 2023 survey, Hildersham Nature Recovery Plan would like to suggest to the Parish Council that they follow the example of Mepal PC. [Mepal's verge cutting](#) is scheduled for:

- late March/early April (weather allowing); and
- September/ October.

In Hildersham, attempts have been made in previous years to cut back on strimming the verges with a view to allowing flora to complete their flowering seasons. And, from the point of view of foraging bees and other insects, it clearly makes little sense to remove potential food sources during the critical time between early spring and the end of the summer when they are actively foraging for nectar and pollen.

But problems can arise with such a schedule: not only with village residents who fail to understand the purpose of this management régime, but also with plants whose tough stems, if left, become problematic to later cut, strim or mow.

### Tackling the problems: a general approach

During her visit to Hildersham on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2023, the Cambridgeshire County Council Ecologist (Ms. Deborah Ahmad) <sup>1</sup> explained that, generally, plants on chalk soil (as is mostly the case in Hildersham) <sup>2</sup> were best off with a spring cut (while plants on clay soil were best cut at end of summer).

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<sup>1</sup> She was aware that contractors were due to cut the verges a week later, on 30<sup>th</sup> May, and her remarks during the visit took into account this pending visit.

She suggested tackling the problem of dealing with flora with tough stalks that were difficult to manage by combining restraint in the cutting schedule with a rotational approach; that is,

(a) Instead of leaving all verges completely untouched during “[No Mow May](#),” it might be advisable to consider cutting some patches or margins only, as exemplified in the images below:



*Town Green (Blench Lane/High Street side) - Credit: Tom Barton-Owen*



*Verge opposite Village Hall - Credit: Rob Clay*

(b) Raking up<sup>3</sup> (and removing) the cut grass and other vegetation (sometimes useful for feeding village livestock, and/or for lessening any fire risk);<sup>4</sup>

(c) But, because of road safety considerations, continuing to cut in areas with bends in the road, or where visibility splays might be limited.

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2 "Except for the strip of alluvium and gravel along the river, Hildersham lies mostly upon chalk, overlaid on parts of the higher ground to north and south by boulder clay and glacial gravels." ('Parishes: Hildersham' Vol. 6 (1978), pp. 59-69. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=66708>. 21.9.08.).

3 This question will be discussed further below.

4 See pg. 6.

## Frequency of Cuts

Because of biodiversity concerns, we originally suggested (as mentioned earlier) no more than two cuts a year, in late March/early April, and September/October).

But the County Ecologist's recommendations, together with Cambridge County Council guidelines, might add in a third cut: that is, two complete cuts in the early spring and autumn, and a third cut some time in May on a rotating patch basis. Otherwise, the vegetation in certain parts of the village will be too difficult to deal with.<sup>5</sup>

This should enable HPC to demonstrate compliance with its legal obligations under the [Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006](#),<sup>6</sup> amended by the Environmental Act 2021; and the new extended biodiversity duty for public authorities that came into force on 1 January 2023.

## Individual Locations

### Beech Row bank/verge (end of village nearest A1307)<sup>7</sup>

DA commented that this location could probably do with the cutting that was due to take place a few days hence. She identified periwinkle (*Vinca major*, CPERC 343) and elder (*Sambucus nigra*, CPERC 279).

Immediately opposite the South Holding, she identified:

- tufted vetch ([Vicia cracca](#))
- forget-me-not, pink to blue ([Myosotis arvensis](#))

### Forge Green<sup>8</sup> (High Street; opposite Pear and Olive) [NEZ 2]

DA noted:

- creeping cinquefoil;
- ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*, CPERC 192) (just visible);
- vetches ([Lotus corniculatus](#));
- spotted medick ([Medicago arabica](#)).

She suggested that, certainly in the case of the ox-eye daisies (now something of a local landmark), they were best left for the summer until they have set seed. However, this was one of the locations that might benefit from some cuttings being removed.

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<sup>5</sup> There is specialised equipment, such as [wheeled trimmers](#), that can deal more easily with tough vegetation: but, clearly, few contractors would have access to such machinery.

<sup>6</sup> Sec.40 of the NERC Act 2006 deals with biodiversity.

<sup>7</sup> See [survey 21 4 23 \[1\]](#).

<sup>8</sup> See [survey 22 4 23 \[2\]](#),

## Outside Village Hall (centre of village) [NEZ 2]

DA stated that the meadowsweet ([Filipendula ulmaria](#)) should ideally be left until the end of the season, when it has finished flowering.<sup>9</sup>

## Town Green<sup>10</sup> [NEZ 1]

DA identified:

- yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*, CPERC 60);
- a variety of crane's-bill; and
- nutrient-rich broadleaved grasses.<sup>11</sup>

Here, it was noted that, because of cars, there might be a need for visibility lines to be observed.

DA also suggested that:

- a) the edges of the green could be tidied (as practised in recent years on the verge opposite the Village Hall [image above]);
- b) in season, the grass in the middle of Town Green - together with any areas unlikely to grow too long - could be left to grow longer, and then eventually cut and raked;
- c) the same treatment could be applied to a patch underneath the tree in the northern part of the site;
- d) patches could be left elsewhere as well; it was noted that, where the area is quite open, there are more flowers.
- e) A rotational approach could be applied to the patches:

## Blench Lane<sup>12</sup> [NEZ 1]

Whilst observing visibility splays outside some residences, the grass-cutting regime could be adjusted to allow parts of the verge (including the cow parsley that many residents find so attractive) to continue flowering at the bottom of the lane (nearest the High Street). Some of the rougher grass could be left; and care should be taken to avoid the rare Wild Clary ([Salvia verbenaca](#), CPERC 278) found mainly in locations in the northern part of the village.

## High Street (outside Church Cottages)<sup>13</sup> [NEZ 1]

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<sup>9</sup> As previously noted in [2015 Verges Survey, p. 2, n. 9.](#)

<sup>10</sup> (See also survey [18 5 23 \[5\]](#)).

<sup>11</sup> Such grasses often provide a diverse range of nutrients that can attract insects and other wildlife. Insects, including pollinators like bees and butterflies, as well as herbivores like caterpillars, may feed on these grasses for their nutritional needs. The higher nutrient content can support the growth and development of insect larvae and provide a food source for other animals higher up the food chain [Source: Online comment]

<sup>12</sup> See [survey 22 4 23](#) (6a).

<sup>13</sup> See survey [23 4 23](#) [3].

DA identified:

- wild basil (?) *Clinopodium vulgare* (CPERC 126)
- grasses, probably Couch grass and rye grass

### **High Street: Old Rectory Verge (Back Road Crossroads end of village) <sup>14</sup> [NEZ 1]**

DA noted areas of short-mown grass, and identified:

- [white campion](#) (*Silene latifolia*, CPERC 292);
- [wild clary](#), which she recommended be left;
- [creeping cinquefoil](#) (*Potentilla reptans*, CPERC 250).;
- Honesty ([Lunaria annua](#));
- Jack in the hedge/garlic mustard ([Alliaria petiolata](#), CPERC 67);
- [white campion](#) (*Silene latifolia*, CPERC 292);
- cleavers ([Galium aparine](#), CPERC 156) which she suggested should be cut back;
- greater celandine ([Chelidonium majus](#)), which could be cut.

### **High Street; Opposite verge (outside Pine Crest) (Back Road Crossroads end of village) <sup>15</sup> [NEZ 1]**

DA identified:

- [wild clary](#),
- a variety of crane's-bill.

## **Raking up cut or strimmed grass and vegetation**

In the past, concerns have been raised about the perceived expense of raking up grass.

However, the expense could of course be offset – even if only partially - by savings from the reduced frequency of verge-cutting.

Moreover, reduced frequency of cutting, combined with the removal of grass-cuttings, could also be of help in periods of very high temperatures accompanied by hot and dry condition, such as those seen here in South Cambridgeshire during the summer of 2022.

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<sup>14</sup> See [survey 22 4 23](#) [4a],

<sup>15</sup> See [survey 22 4 23](#) [4b].

## Reducing fire risks <sup>16</sup>

Given the potential for increased fire risk in the very high temperatures of recent times, it is important for the parish council - while still having regard to the needs of wild plants and creatures - to adopt a flexible approach to their verge-cutting rotas.

If extreme heat is expected or forecast for later on in the year, the first cut of the year in early spring should probably go ahead as planned. This can help reduce the accumulation of dry grass that could pose a fire risk later in the year.

Cut grass should be collected and removed, rather than being left on the ground where it might act as fuel for fires.

Instead of the proposed cut during the summer, safety could be prioritised by allowing the grass to remain longer during the hotter months, and by postponing any cutting until the weather cools down. Dry grass is more flammable; avoiding cutting during high-risk periods can reduce fire risk.

When cutting in very hot weather, it might be best to concentrate on strimming around important areas such as buildings, roadsides, and areas close to properties. This creates a buffer zone that can help prevent fires from spreading quickly.

In extreme conditions, human safety would have to take priority.

## Table of Contents

Problems on the ground.....	1
Tackling the problems: a general approach.....	1
Frequency of Cuts.....	2
Individual Locations.....	3
Beech Row bank/verge (end of village nearest A1307).....	3
Forge Green (High Street; opposite Pear and Olive) [NEZ 2].....	3
Outside Village Hall (centre of village) [NEZ 2].....	4
Town Green [NEZ 1].....	4
Blench Lane [NEZ 1].....	4
High Street (outside Church Cottages) [NEZ 1].....	4
High Street: Old Rectory Verge (Back Road Crossroads end of village) [NEZ 1].....	5
High Street; Opposite verge (outside Pine Crest) (Back Road Crossroads end of village) [NEZ 1].....	5
.....	5
Raking up cut or strimmed grass and vegetation.....	5
Reducing fire risks.....	6

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<sup>16</sup> Further fire safety information: <https://www.cambsfire.gov.uk/community-safety/outdoor-safety/>;  
<https://www.cambsfire.gov.uk/community-safety/outdoor-safety/in-the-countryside/>.