



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Traditional Orchards

September 2008



Traditional orchards

National lead organisation(s):
Forestry Commission

County lead organisation(s):
[Bedfordshire Woodland Forum](#)

This habitat includes a range of fruit and nut orchards with a low density of open-grown trees set in semi-natural mainly herbaceous vegetation, managed in a low-intensity fashion. The trees are generally planted less densely than in intensively-managed orchards. Traditional orchards in Eastern England tend to be more densely planted with geese or chickens as the livestock element, rather than sheep or pigs.

Current status

National status

Traditional orchards are poorly represented in SSSIs and yet are rarer than many other UK BAP priority habitats. Since 1950 57% of England's orchards have disappeared; this includes both commercial and traditionally managed sites, although declines have been most severe among traditional orchards (BRIG 2007). There are currently 47,000 ha of orchards in England (BRIG 2007).

Local status

In Bedfordshire, agricultural census data show a decline in orchard area of 95% since the peak decade of the 1950s (Brown 2008).



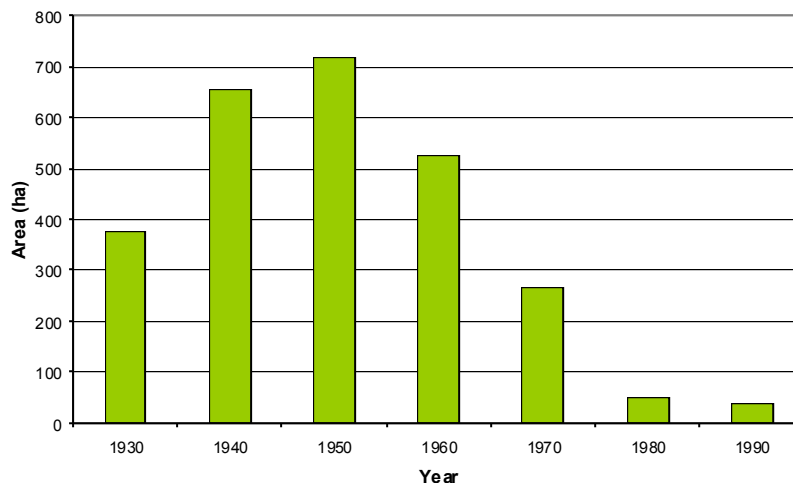


Figure 1 Area of orchards in Bedfordshire from 1930 to 1990 (Brown 2008)

Ordinance Survey MasterMap data indicate the presence of 195 orchards covering 154 ha currently in the county. However, preliminary comparisons of these orchards with aerial photographs and Phase I habitat surveys suggest that only 116 (120 ha) of these are possible BAP (i.e. traditional) orchards.

Although possible BAP orchards are found in all of Bedfordshire’s districts, 59% of their area is found in Mid Bedfordshire (Figure 2). On a parish scale over 50% of parishes had no possible orchards and of the parishes where a possible orchard was present, 75% of sites were smaller than 1 ha. Larger possible orchards are focused around a few parishes, not all of which are in Mid Bedfordshire.

Current factors affecting traditional orchards

- Lack of protection under the current planning system, making them susceptible to residential development and conversion to pony paddocks
- Economic changes and the absence of local niche markets for diverse orchard produce
- Neglect through loss of pruning and cultivation management skills

Current action

Site protection

There is very little protection afforded to traditional orchards. Only a few are included in SSSIs or are protected by Tree Preservation Orders. Current Environmental Impact Assessment regulations for agricultural intensification do not cover orchards. However traditional orchards are specifically eligible for Single Payment under the Common Agricultural Policy while intensive orchards are not. Approximately 3000 ha of orchards are in agri-environment schemes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (BRIG 2007).





Management, research and guidance

- The East of England Apples and Orchards Project (EEAOP) provides advice and information on the region's local fruit varieties, sells heritage variety fruit trees and conducts training on various aspects of orchard management
- District councils in Bedfordshire have been active in promoting and supporting community orchards; examples include Parkhill Community Orchard in Brickhill
- Local countryside projects like the Greensand Trust and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity are also working with communities to create and manage local orchards
- The Damsons in Distress project is a collaborative effort of local P3 groups, the Greensand Trust, South Bedfordshire District Council and local parish councils.

Advisory services

Advice on orchard management and potential sources of funding is available from the following organisations:

- East of England Apples and Orchards Project
- Local authorities
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
- Natural England
- The Wildlife Trust

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Increase knowledge of the status and condition of Bedfordshire and Luton's orchard resource

Improve the ecological and genetic condition of degraded orchards in the county

Expand the orchard habitat resource by creating new traditionally managed orchards

Increase and improve the species and genetic diversity associated with Bedfordshire's traditional orchards

Improve the management and habitat quality of existing orchards in the county

Targets

- A. Prepare by 2015 an inventory of orchards and important fruit trees in Bedfordshire and Luton
- B. Achieve by 2020 favourable or recovering condition of 30% of Bedfordshire and Luton orchards
- C. Restore by 2020 20% of traditional orchard sites in Bedfordshire and Luton



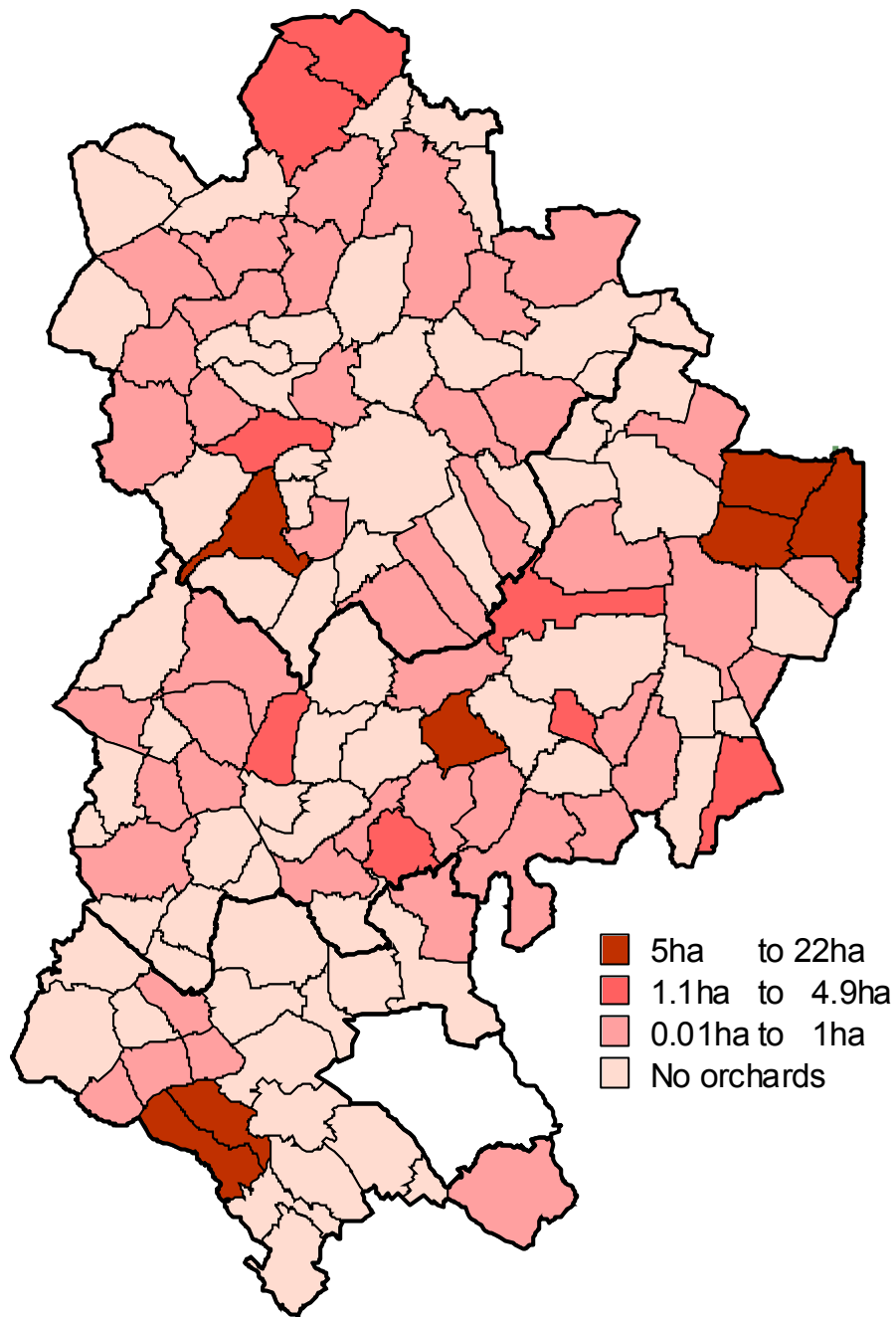


D. Create by 2015 at least 1 ha annually of new orchards in Bedfordshire, including at least one in Luton





Figure 2 Orchard area in the parishes of Bedfordshire (Brown 2008)



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Proposed action

Abbreviations

BBC	Bedford Borough Council	GST	Greensand Trust
BNHS	Bedfordshire Natural History Society	LA	Local authorities
BRCC	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity	LBC	Luton Borough Council
BRMC	Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre	P3	Parish Paths Partnership groups
CWS	Bedfordshire and Luton County Wildlife Site Panel		
EAAOP	East of England Apples and Orchards Project		

Action	Implemented by
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Policy and legislation

1. Establish by 2012 a set of criteria for designating County Wildlife Site orchards	CWS
2. Establish by 2009 the meaning of orchard 'restoration', including a distinction of trees as habitat and trees as specimens	

Site safeguard and management

3. Establish on average at least 1 ha of community pome and/or Damson orchard per year until 2015	LA, P3, GST
4. Identify by 2012 a suite of sites to be restored through traditional planting and other management. Begin restoration works by 2015	
5. Establish by 2020 a Bedfordshire and Luton 'reference orchard' to provide a gene bank of local fruit varieties and a location for traditional orchard management skills training	
6. Provide as needed and requested Damson orchard management advice through the Damsons in Distress project	LA, P3, GST

Advisory

7. Prepare by 2015 a guide to fruit tree management and decision-making for various management aims	
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8. Conduct on average each year at least one training day related to orchard creation, restoration or management. Two of these training events will be related specifically to Damson orchards	LA, P3, GST
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Future research and monitoring

9. Conduct by 2012 a survey of the orchards of Bedfordshire and Luton, using the existing EEAOP methodology	BRMC,
10. Prepare by 2015 a genetic map of extant orchard fruit varieties in Bedfordshire and Luton	BRMC,
11. Conduct by 2015 a survey of Bedfordshire orchard and fruit tree bryophytes	BNHS,
12. Establish by 2009 criteria for assessing orchard condition	

Communication and publicity

13. Maintain a viable population of local fruit varieties by distributing XXX local variety fruit trees per annum	EEAOP
14. Prepare and distribute a colourful leaflet on Bedfordshire fruit varieties and where to find them	
15. Prepare and distribute an information leaflet on Damson biodiversity, heritage and management	LA, P3, GST





Monitoring the Action Plan

The Bedfordshire Woodland Forum will keep implementation of this plan under review and individuals or organisations signed up to specific actions will report via the national Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).

Complementary plans

No national action plan currently exists for traditional orchards.

Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire have also written action plans for traditional orchards.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for lowland mixed deciduous woodland, hedgerows and wood-pasture and parkland.

Acknowledgements

This plan has been compiled by the BAP Coordinator with a great deal of help from the East of England Apples and Orchards Project, Bedfordshire County Council, Luton Borough Council and the Chilterns Conservation Board.

References

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