Fingringhoe Common, Ballast Quay Road, Fingringhoe, TM041208. Initial thoughts.

Community Ranger, Essex Wildlife Trust, 14th October 2024.

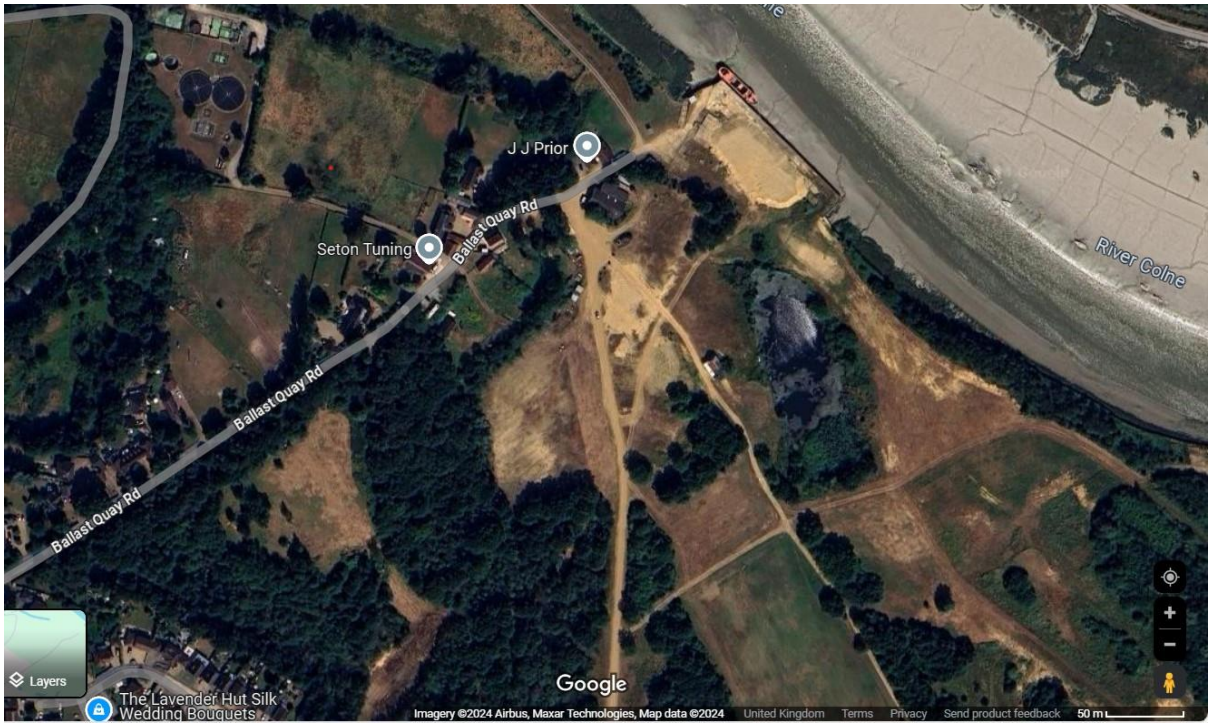

Figure 1 Map showing the common off Ballast Road, Fingringhoe. The common is the wooded area in the centre of the picture. (c) Airbus via Google Maps

Site description.

Beside an informal layby on Ballast Quay Road, close to the River Colne in Fingringhoe, Essex, lies the entrance to a patch of mature oak woodland set in a steep depression in the ground. Measuring just a couple of acres, it is dominated by oak, with a ground flora of which bramble and bracken are most in evidence. Several informal paths have developed, crossing the floor of the depression and leading along its Eastern margin. Its Western Margin is marked by split chestnut fencing, and its southern extent is marked by metal posts. The unique profile of the site is a result of historic use for sand and gravel extraction. This part of Essex has a long history of sand and gravel extraction, the scars of this process in several cases becoming important wildlife sites- perhaps most notably EWT's Fingringhoe Wick. Fingringhoe Common's origins are unique and of historical interest- it was excavated over several decades, circa 1840-1930 by private citizens working to their own needs, and has long been designated as for public use.

Figure 2 Oak Woodland at Fingringhoe Common, Ballast Quay Road

To the South the mature oak woodland gives way to scrub, dominated by pioneer trees such as Birch. The area of common land is bordered by land owned by J J Prior and historically used for sand and gravel extraction. The J J Prior land may also be of ecological interest- it hosts open grassland, and scattered birches, recalling the early years of Fingringhoe Wick Nature Reserve and other key local sites.

Notable Species

Extensive honeysuckle (*Lonicera pericyclamen*) hangs off the low boughs of several of the mature oaks. This is a valuable nectar plant and larval foodplant for several species of Lepidoptera. Among the mature oaks are several mature hollies (*ilex aquifolium*), another ecologically valuable woodland species which provides foraging and nesting opportunities for passerines. Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) covers a lot of the woodland floor, and a beautiful Oak (Quercus spp) covered in Ivy (*Hedera helix*) greets visitors as they arrive in the layby.

Figure 3 Mature Holly (Ilex aquifolum) at Fingringhoe Common, Ballast Quay Road

The weather was not conducive to flying invertebrates, but birds including Robins and Blue Tits were present in the canopy and both Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers were heard calling. Nightingales and Turtle Doves both breed in the surrounding area and there are anecdotal reports of the former species singing on the common land, indicating they may be breeding there too. Conversations with residents of Fingringhoe and a brief visit to the Common earlier in the year with a Community Partner reveal Rose Chafer (*Cetonia aurata*) and Stag Beetle (*Lucanus cervus*) are present.

Badger scat was seen immediately outside the common; and it is likely this species makes good use of foraging opportunities in it. They are reportedly very numerous in the local and immediate area of the site.

Management thoughts.

As the oak woodland is now well established and mature, first thoughts are that it may be best approached on a minimum intervention basis. The Ivy, Honeysuckle and Holly are ecologically

important species, and should be retained.

A Dangerous Tree survey is recommended if one is not already in place. Where standing deadwood occurs but is not unsafe, it should be retained as a vital habitat for priority species such as Stag Beetles, which are recorded at the common frequently

It would be wise to retain and open up some of the existing paths, especially the path which runs along the site's Southern margin, and consider whether it may be cost effective to surface these, to encourage their use and minimize trampling.

Surveying and monitoring into the future will provide further evidence which will inform management. I would suggest botanical surveys of the ground flora, butterfly surveys and bird monitoring are all taken up as a matter of priority, through citizen science, or enthusiastic local amateurs. There is good potential for the site to be used by roosting bats, and a bat emergence survey (using detectors) may prove fruitful. I would encourage engagement between the Council and groups like Essex Field Club and our Urban Wildlife Champions to facilitate surveys.

Interpretative signage may be considered to bring to the attention of visitors the unique history of the site, its industrial origins and the unique role of private citizens in creating its unusual profile, and to introduce some of the common and less common wildlife which uses the Common, to engage visitors with the local history, which is fascinating, and help share the importance of the site.