

Witney U3A Nature Group

Visit to Gibbets Hill Nature Reserve

Wednesday 18th March 2026

On the hottest day of the year so far and with blue sky and sunshine, 8 members of the group visited Gibbets Hill Nature Reserve on the south-eastern edge of Witney. This 20 hectare site has been owned by the **Wychwood Forest Trust (WFT)** since 2000 and is normally closed to the public. We were very fortunate to be taken around by WFT CEO Neil Clennell who explained the 'passive rewilding' approach being taken on the site which promotes natural regeneration of vegetation and ecosystem without direct intervention. This is a long-term project with active scientific studies being undertaken by Oxford University and others.

Have a look at the WFT website for information about their sites and activities

<https://www.wychwoodforesttrust.co.uk>

The site has magnificent and unexpected views across the landscape with Witney to the west, towards the remnants of ancient woodland at Eynsham Park to the north and eastwards across the clay low ground to Wytham and Boars Hill.



A number of springs issue around the perimeter but when the site was taken over by WFT there were no ponds or water bodies available for wildlife. This was partly because of land drains which artificially took water off the site. The lack of water on the site was corrected when a series of ponds were dug in 2024 at low points on the northern and eastern boundaries to collect rain water and spring water.

These are gradually being vegetated and colonised. Some of the ponds contained frogspawn and newly hatched tadpoles which we examined.



Frog spawn and newly hatched tadpoles



One of the ponds created in 2024. Fed largely by surface water but also some seepages.

One of the first and most obvious results of leaving the site to regenerate is the encroachment of blackthorn from the hedges of into the fields.



Blackthorn scrub encroaching on former arable field

Blackthorn spreads with underground suckers and is considered invasive but it is very important for wildlife in particular the rare black hairstreak butterfly which lays its eggs in blackthorn hedges where they overwinter.

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/black-hairstreak>

In spring the caterpillars exclusively feed on blackthorn, so Gibbets Hill will be watched very closely for signs that the black hairstreak can establish itself here.

Thank you again to Neil for his time and for a very interesting visit. .

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