

**Lower Stoke Railway and London Road Allotments      SP347772-349788**

**Size: 18.63ha**

**Status: SINC (whole area), CNCS (in part)**

**Date of survey: 30/8/07, 5/9/07**

**Surveyor: J J Bowley**

There are four main components to this large SINC which is situated in the inner south-eastern suburbs of Coventry, with the nearest part being just 1 km from the city centre.

- 1) A 1.5km stretch of the embanked and dismantled former Coventry Loop Railway running between Gosford Green and its junction with the main Coventry-Euston Line near Humber Road.
- 2) A large wedge of disused land behind the Blue Coat School in Terry Road, situated between the two railway embankments referred to in 1).
- 3) The disused portion of the London Road Allotments situated between the Coventry-Euston Line and the River Sherbourne.
- 4) A portion of the old river flood plain situated between the Waste to Energy Plant and Whitley Bridge in the London Road.

1) The old Coventry Loop Railway.

This is a long stretch of dismantled railway line which becomes increasingly embanked from Terry Road southwards. North of Humber Avenue the SINC is very narrow and fairly level with the surrounding land, while the northern tip has been lost to a new roundabout development in Binley Road. It is securely fenced off and is essentially a narrow belt of dense impenetrable scrub dominated by Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and Goat Sallow (*Salix caprea*), with frequent young Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). A thin scatter of other young trees and shrubs are present, including several aliens. The few open patches are dominated by tall herb such as Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), Hedge Bindweed (*Calystegia sepium*), Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*). Apart from a safe nesting place for local birds, the wildlife value of this section appears to be low.

From Humber Avenue south to Terry Road there is a moderate embankment which again is fenced off and fairly inaccessible. The northern half of the embankment consists of mixed tall scrub dominated by Goat Sallow, Sycamore, Hawthorn, Elder and Buddleia (*Buddleia davidii*), with patches of more mature Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*). Further south the scrub gives way to mature Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) woodland, which has a developing shrub layer of young Ash, Sycamore and some Goat Sallow. The few open patches on the edges of the embankment are again dominated by tall herb and rank grass, particularly Bramble, Hedge Bindweed and False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*).

South of Terry Road the embankment becomes much steeper and the top is used as a path by local residents. The east-facing embankment is largely mature closed canopy Ash woodland with a sparse shrub layer of Hawthorn, regenerating Sycamore and Ash, and very locally Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). A few other species such as Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) occur but are rare-occasional. Little light tends to reach the woodland floor giving a sparse field layer dominated by Bramble and Ivy (*Hedera helix*). Herb Bennet (*Geum urbanum*) is rather frequent but other species tend to be of

garden origin, apart from occasional Cuckoo Pint (*Arum maculatum*), Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) and Nipplewort (*Lapsana communis*). This area has suffered from fly-tipping. The grassland on top of the embankment is the most floristically diverse but it has suffered from scrub encroachment in recent years, especially by Goat Sallow, Hawthorn, Elder and Buddleia. Very locally young trees of Ash, Silver Birch and Pedunculate Oak are present, with rare Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). The western embankment is also suffering from patchy scrub invasion, largely from Goat Sallow and Hawthorn, and is everywhere overgrown with Bramble together with locally frequent Rosebay Willowherb (*Chamerion angustifolium*).

The grassland on top has developed on thin soils covering the original clinker substrate of the old line and is dominated by fine-leaved grasses such as Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Creeping Bent (*C. stolonifera*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Rough Meadow-grass (*Poa trivialis*). Herbs are numerous and include frequent Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Leafy and Few-leaved Hawkweeds (*Hieracium spp.*), Imperforate St John's-wort (*Hypericum maculatum*), Autumn Hawkbit (*Leontodon autumnalis*), Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*), Fox-and-Cubs (*Pilosella aurantiaca*), Tansy, Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*) and Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*). Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*) and Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*), both scarce in Coventry, are very locally frequent along the southern stretch of line. Other species noted which are rare-occasional include Rat's-tail Fescue (*Vulpia myuros*), Meadow Vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*), Purple Toadflax (*Linaria purpurea*), Musk Mallow (*Malva moschata*), Common Figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*), Canadian Golden-rod (*Solidago canadensis*), Great Mullein (*Verbascum thapsis*), Hairy Tare (*Vicia hirsuta*), Smooth Tare (*V. tetrasperma*) and Common Dog-violet (*Viola riviniana*).

## 2) Wedge of land behind the Blue Coat School.

This area contains the parts of the SINC north of the Coventry-Euston Line together with a large area of level ground adjacent, formerly the Terry Road Allotments but now long abandoned and returned to nature. Most of the former allotments are now heavily overgrown with Bramble and both Hedge and Great (*Calystegia silvatica*) Bindweed. Any small patches of remaining grassland is now dominated by False Oat-grass, Mugwort, Rosebay Willowherb, Raspberry, Tansy, Common Nettle and similar tall herbs. Extensive areas of impenetrable Hawthorn and Goat Sallow scrub are spreading out from the boundaries, particularly in the western corner where the course of the River Sherbourne is now hidden. Along the north-facing embankment of the Euston Line is a strip of mature woodland, dominated by Ash, Sycamore and Pedunculate Oak. There are also two small plantations of Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) on the western and southern boundaries, while an expanding thicket of the alien Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) is situated near the public footpath which crosses this section in the south-eastern corner.

## 3) The London Road Allotments

The largest section of the SINC, this area of disused overgrown allotments rises moderately steeply from the River Sherbourne on the west side up to the present area of worked allotments adjacent to Humber Road in the east. This remaining block of worked allotments is securely fenced off from the rest of the area. One block of former allotments on the east side has been removed from the original SINC and has now been developed as an extension of the Waste-to Energy Plant which is situated nearby on the west side of the Sherbourne.

This whole area of disused allotments used to have a variety of grassland, tall herb and scrub habitats but has now been almost entirely swamped by Bramble and Hedge Bindweed, with Common Nettle abundant in the shadier areas. Rosebay Willowherb and Raspberry are also frequent in some allotments, with Male Fern on some of the old banks and hard standings. Hawthorn hedges which used to border the allotment tracks are now belts of scrub which are gradually expanding into the tall herb habitat. Goat Sallow is locally frequent as is young self-seeded Ash and Sycamore saplings but other species of tree and shrub are few, although there are some old fruit trees (chiefly Apple) still present in one or two allotments. There are groups of mature Ash, Oak and Sycamore trees along the adjacent railway boundary.

Much of this part of the SINC is now inaccessible through lack of management, and the botanical diversity has probably deteriorated.

The most diverse section is the area bordering the River Sherbourne and between there and the public footpath. Along the riverside is a well-grown border of tall Goat Sallow, Hawthorn, Hazel, Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*) and Sycamore, with rare Field Maple (*Acer campestre*), Osier (*Salix viminalis*) and other shrubs. A good variety of common species are present here in the small areas of open grassland still present, while the presence of rare Blackcurrant (*Ribes nigrum*) and Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*) are both noteworthy as they are rare in Coventry. Two problem species are also present in this area, with Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) frequent along the river and Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) along the boundaries of the Waste to Energy Plant extension.

On some old spoil mounds covering the site of a former mill by the river bridge is a small area of Sycamore woodland. There is a sparse shrub layer of Hawthorn, Elder, Hazel, Holly and Wild Plum (*Prunus domestica*) with a field layer dominated by Ivy. Other plants here include Giant Fescue (*Festuca gigantea*), Hedge Parsley (*Torilis japonica*) and frequent Enchanter's Nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*).

#### 4) Flood Plain along the south side of the River Sherbourne.

This is the most varied part of the SINC with a mosaic of semi-improved grassland, tall herb, extensive areas of scrub and some limited areas of woodland.

The best area of grassland is in the northern part of the river plain near the public footpath. This appears to be a relict damp MG5 grassland with a sward dominated by Creeping Bent, Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*), Yorkshire Fog (*Holcus lanatus*) and Timothy (*Phleum pratense*). In many areas however, tall coarse grasses have taken over with large parts now dominated by False Oat-grass and frequent Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*). Forbs are rather limited in variety but include frequent Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), Common Knapweed, Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Hairy Tare, Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*), while other species present include occasional Smaller Cat's-tail (*Phleum bertolonii*), Hard Rush (*J. inflexus*), Hairy Sedge (*Carex hirta*), Smooth Tare, Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and Ribbed Melilot (*Melilotus officinalis*). Much of this area is rapidly disappearing under dense Bramble and Hawthorn/Sallow scrub, with sapling Ash trees.

At the southern end of the section is a much larger area of semi-improved grassland which is subject to occasional flooding. This area is species-poor and largely dominated by rank False Oat-grass, with frequent patches of Rosebay Willowherb, Creeping Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Himalayan Balsam, Hedge Bindweed, Common Nettle and docks (*Rumex spp*). This area too is becoming encroached upon by extensive areas of Hawthorn, Elder and Sallow scrub and Bramble, with some groups

of more mature Sycamore, Crack Willow and Osier. Along the south side of this grassland is the very steep embankment of the London Road. This is covered with tall dense Ash and Sycamore plantation woodland, with an abundant field layer of Bramble, Nettle and Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*). This embankment is prone to fly-tipping.

### **Fauna**

This large area of little disturbed scrubland is still a local haven for mammals and birds, many of which are unusual so close to the city centre. Mammals present include Muntjac, Fox and frequent Grey Squirrels. Grey Wagtails breed in the river bank within the SINC, while Kingfishers are regularly seen and may also breed. Other birds which are known to breed here include Pheasant (probably the nearest site for this species to the city centre), Kestrel, Stock Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Song and Mistle Thrushes, Dunnock, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, Jay and Bullfinch. Buzzards regularly hunt over the area. No recent known invertebrate survey has been undertaken but the area is presumably still important for these groups.

### **Evaluation**

#### **Diversity**

The SINC still has a diverse range of habitats, including extensive areas of scrub and tall herb, semi-improved grassland and with limited areas of plantation and secondary woodland. The River Sherbourne which flows through the area adds further variety. The spread of scrub into areas of species-rich semi-improved grassland has seen the reduction of this habitat, while large areas of grassland have also become overgrown with Brambles and Bindweed. This has probably led to the loss of many plant and insect species.

#### **Rarity**

Large blocks of scrub are rare within Coventry although at a county level it is not a rare habitat. The grassland area has decreased in size but there is still a remnant area of MG5 grassland which is rare in Coventry and scarce nationally. The site is mainly known for a number of rare insects, including a nationally rare fly *Beckerias pannonica* which was first discovered in Britain at this site in 1996. The present status of these insects is not known. Several plant species were found which are rare in Coventry, including Wood Sage, Zigzag Clover, Blackcurrant and Lady Fern. A number of Amber listed birds still breed but others including Skylark, Grasshopper Warbler and Reed Bunting appear to have been lost through the spread of scrub into previously open habitats. Kingfishers, a Schedule 1 protected species, probably still breed along the River Sherbourne.

#### **Size**

For a site less than 2 km from the city centre the area of semi-natural habitats is impressive.

#### **Naturalness**

Most of the area is developing through natural succession, and if not checked will eventually become secondary Ash/Hawthorn scrub woodland. A number of alien species such as Japanese Knotweed and Red Osier Dogwood are present and spreading and may pose a threat to more natural vegetation.

### **Ecological Position**

The SINC contains the hub of several important wildlife corridors connecting central Coventry with the open countryside. These include the abandoned Coventry Loop Railway, the present Coventry-Euston main line and the Sherbourne valley.

### **Physical Access**

This is less easy now in the former allotments area and in the Sherbourne river corridor through the spread of dense scrub and Brambles, although there are still dens used by local children. The old Loop Line is also not now accessible north of Terry Road through fencing. The public footpath is still well used as a through route.

### **Recommendation**

Much of the SINC area has suffered through lack of management, which is leading to a loss in both habitat and species diversity, and also to the loss of access for local people. A management plan for the area needs to be implemented which will maintain and increase the range of habitats present. Scrub and Bramble control will increase areas of grassland, while a network of footpaths would lead to a greater appreciation and awareness of the area by local residents. Although the total biodiversity has probably declined in recent years the SINC status should be retained, reflecting the importance in a suburban setting of a large area of semi-natural habitat, as well as the importance of the site for invertebrate populations.

### **Adjacent Site**

On the south side of the working allotments is a medium-sized pond which was once part of the demolished Pinley Farm. It appears to have started life as a clay or marl pit and is historically known as the site of the only breeding record of Ring Ouzel in the county (in 1848).

It has a very steep northern bank where the pond has been cut into the south facing hillside overlooking the Sherbourne valley. This bank is covered with a belt of dense overgrown scrub woodland dominated by Ash, Hawthorn, Elder and English Elm, with also one or two Horse Chestnut, Blackthorn and Wild Plum present. The field layer is dominated by Ivy, Bramble and Nettle. The pond still holds water but is badly silted and overgrown with Reed Sweet-grass and Great Willowherb, with Common Duckweed present in the more open areas. Other species noted at the pond are Male Fern, Bittersweet and Pale Willowherb, a species which is rare in Coventry. The scrubby bank provides good cover for several nesting birds, including Long-tailed Tit and Bullfinch.

The pond dates to a period when the area was entirely rural and as an historic feature should be rescued for posterity. Members of the London Road Allotments Society are keen to help restore and care for the pond but they need the funds and equipment to do so.