

Welcome to the Glebe Field and Orwell Clunch Pit

A SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST

Orwell Clunch Pit

The Pit is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) of national importance for its rich chalk grassland flora. It is located on a chalk outcrop called Toot Hill which is at the western end of a ridge where Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements have been found. The well-drained chalk hillside with springs at its foot and fertile heavy clay soil in the valley below made it attractive to early settlers. Archaeological evidence of Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlers has been found in Orwell village.

Two of the 'Four Highways' of medieval England, which granted royal protection to travellers, intersected in the valley. They were the Icknield Way and Ermine Street, which later became the first toll road in Britain.

Chalk streams are rare and of global ecological importance. England has 85% of the world's total, about 225, and eight of these are in this valley.

Toot is a Middle English word meaning lookout and from here five counties can be seen. Standing here in Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex are clearly visible and it is just possible to see the Suffolk border. From here, it is also possible to see the edge of the Eastern and Western hemispheres, defined by the Greenwich Meridian Line. This invisible line which divides the earth into East and West in the same way that the Equator splits it into North and South, runs very close by.

Clunch

Clunch is the local term for hardened sections of chalk that often include fossil fragments, which give it a texture like fine sandstone. It was formed nearly 100 million years ago during the Cretaceous period when this area was covered by a tropical sea. The band of hardened chalk deposits runs from Berkshire to Norfolk varying in thickness from almost nothing to several metres in depth.

Freshly quarried clunch is capable of being easily cut by hand. When it dries it turns from grey to almost completely white and becomes brittle. Being suitable for fine carving, clunch was much valued for decorative work and was used in Orwell Church for sculptures, window tracery and for the base of the font. Clunch was also used in the construction of the church tower and in houses, for chimneys stacks and walls, and for the thatched wall in the High Street.



Medieval font

Quarriehill

The clunch used in the church from the twelfth century almost certainly came from this site. The first formal record of the quarry is on the Chicheley Estate Map of 1686 where it is marked as 'Quarriehill'. The enclosure map of 1837 labelled it as 'quarry hole'. Clunch was still being excavated here as recently as the 1930s for use on farmland to correct soil acidity and to repair roads.

The land surrounding the quarry has never been ploughed. As a result, it has retained chalk grassland flora that has vanished from much of the surrounding area due to intensive farming. By the 1970s, the site had become severely overgrown and in 1977 the Clunch Pit Management Trust (CPMT) was established to restore and maintain the site which resulted in it being designated a SSSI in 1985.

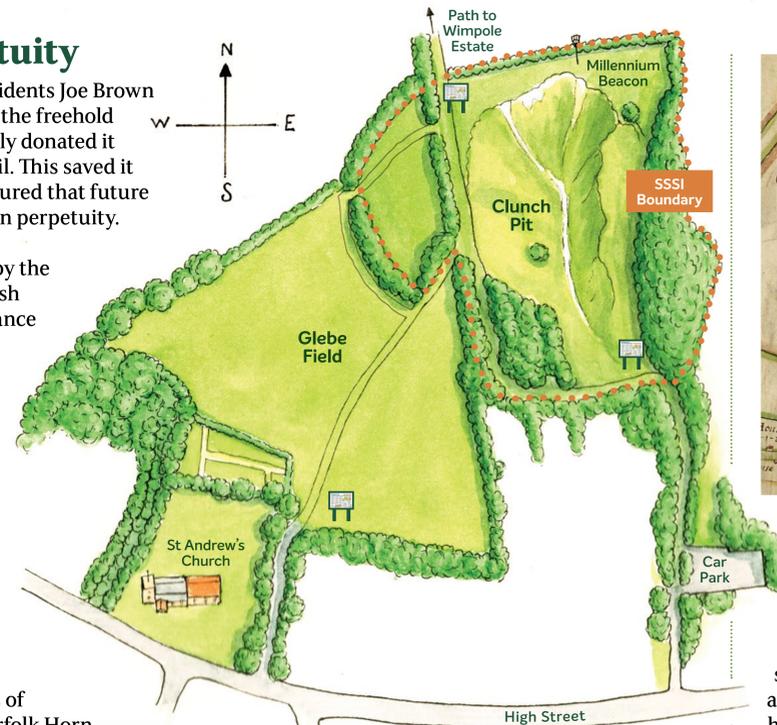
Saved in perpetuity

In the early 1990s, local residents Joe Brown and Alan Miller purchased the freehold of the quarry and generously donated it to the Orwell Parish Council. This saved it from development and ensured that future generations could enjoy it in perpetuity.

Today the site is managed by the CPMT on behalf of the Parish Council. Ongoing maintenance is essential to maintain the wildflowers, grasses and wildlife. A careful balance between grassland and scrub, hedgerows and trees is needed to provide food and shelter for birds. If left unchecked, shrubs, brambles and trees will invade the grassland.

Annual maintenance is needed to prevent this happening.

Grazing by rare breeds of sheep such as the Norfolk Horn plays an important part in this. It helps improve conditions for wildflowers by removing the nutrients that encourage fast-growing grasses. This is all part of a management plan overseen and funded by Natural England.



Chicheley Estate Map, 1686

The Glebe Field

Described on the 1686 map as the 'The Furlong on the backside of the Church', the flora and fauna of the Glebe Field are very similar to that of the SSSI. The Glebe Field is a rare remnant of uncultivated grassland that has been used as common land for at least a century. Wildflowers from the field were used to re-seed the SSSI. Without the Glebe Field, which is owned by the Diocese of Ely, it would not be possible to properly graze and maintain the Clunch Pit in line with SSSI requirements.

From the top of the field it is possible to see the gothic folly at Wimpole Hall. Constructed of clunch, it was designed by architect Sanderson Miller and built under the direction of Capability Brown in 1769. With views over open countryside, the church, churchyard and burial ground, the Glebe Field has provided a special site for contemplation for generations.

Flora and Fauna

The Clunch Pit and Glebe Field are rich in flora and fauna with a wide variety of chalk grassland plants grown here. They attract butterflies, bees, birds and other animals. The steep south-facing slopes provide ideal conditions for the wildflowers of chalk grassland. Kidney Vetch, Horseshoe Vetch, Lesser Calamint, Wild Carrot and Wild Thyme grow here among the fine-leaved grasses. Knapweed and Field Scabious provide nectar for bees and butterflies including the Common Blue, Small Copper, Marbled White, and occasionally the Chalkhill Blue and the Chalk Carpet moth. The caterpillars of the blue butterflies secrete honeydew, which encourages ants to protect them from wasps and other predators.

A floral survey by the Cambridge Natural History Society recorded some 220 species of wildflower including Agrimony, Eyebright, Cowslip, Harebell, Black Horehound, Self-Heal, Hoary Plantain, Bee and Pyramidal Orchids and Bird's Foot Trefoil.



Cowslip



Horseshoe Vetch



Knapweed



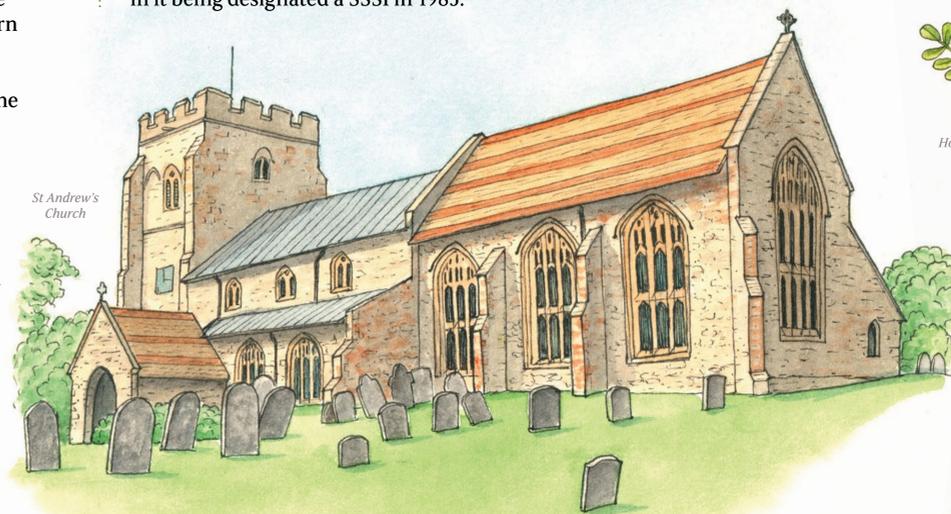
Chalkhill Blue Butterfly



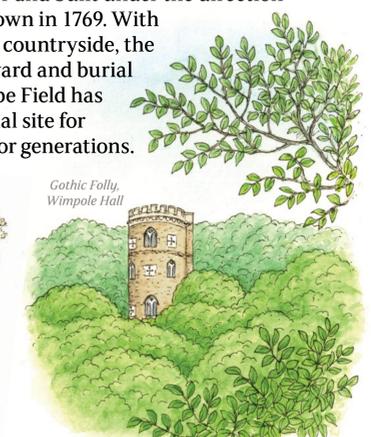
Hoary Plantain



Wild Carrot



St Andrew's Church



Gothic Folly, Wimpole Hall