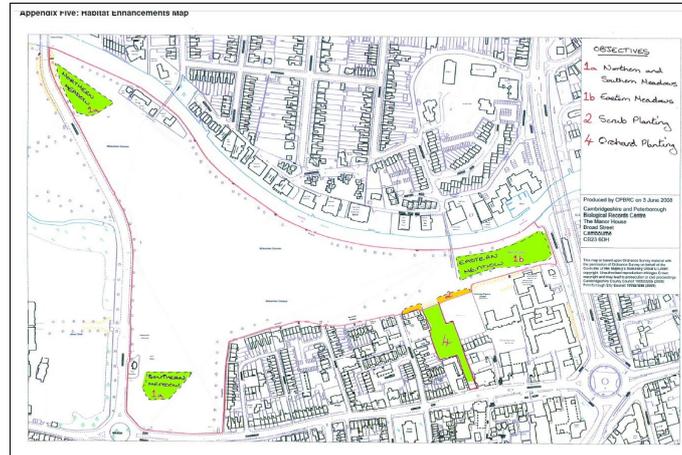


## Biodiversity on Midsummer Common

In their 2009 Management Plan for Midsummer Common, the Wildlife Trust set a number of objectives. One of these was to "enhance the species richness of the grassland to achieve a more natural floodplain grassland habitat". It went on to say that "the presence of wildflowers would improve the aesthetic appeal of the grassland and enhance visitors' experience" and suggested 3 'meadow' areas where wildflowers might best be grown on the Common.



The Council set about creating the wildflower meadow 1a on Butt Green with the help of volunteers from *Friends of Midsummer Common* ("FoMC") and the *Brunswick and North Kite* residents group.



Wildflowers appeared in the first year but dwindled thereafter and there is nothing to show now. This failure was put down to the mowing regime which was scheduled to meet the needs of events on the Common which clashed with the growth requirements of the wildflowers. Until this was resolved, it was decided not to proceed with the other two wildflower meadows. The Management Plan called for the scrub habitat adjacent to the Fort St George to "be managed in a way to encourage species diversity" but the Council chose to cut it all down to make way for vehicle movements! To compensate, FoMC agreed to take responsibility for the Orchard plantings and the scrub plantings on the adjacent bank.



FoMC's creation and management of the Community Orchard has been a great success story over the last decade. But the planting of shrubs along the bank had to be abandoned. The brambles in front of the Orchard were cleared but further removal did not find public favour so there was no room to plant the shrubs.



## Mowing the Common

Improving the biodiversity on the Common goes hand-in-hand with mowing the grass. The Wildlife Trust laid down a strict mowing schedule for the first 2 years after planting wildflower. The Council's failure to follow this schedule resulted in the death of the wildflower meadow planted by volunteers.

The Wildlife Trust went on to prescribe a more general mowing regime when wildflowers became established on the Common:

"the meadows will be managed as part of the common as a whole. They will be mown in April, July and September with grazing from April – September as appropriate. The sward height should be no less than 5cm. To avoid build up of nutrients in the soil, the arisings should be removed."

But this has not happened. It is difficult to see how wildflowers might be established on the Common when the Council chooses to ignore professional advice presented in its own Management Plan for the area.

The updated 2014 Management Plan for the Common paints a more realistic picture:

"Midsummer Common is unlike other green spaces in Cambridge that receive regular grass mowing for sports and family usage. Midsummer Common is a flood plain with coarser grasses and grazing cattle. Mowing is necessary before the big events on the Common. Mowing would also help control the growing incidence of chickweed, barley grass, nettles, thistles and brambles on the Common. The main Common is mown infrequently and rarely completely."

And arisings are never removed.

Anybody viewing the Common in 2020 would find it hard to see any attempt to "control the growing incidence of chickweed, barley grass, nettles, thistles and brambles". The grassland was mowed once in September, with large patches of nettles and thistles left uncut for the caterpillars to enjoy. One is left wondering whether wildflowers and dog walkers should go elsewhere in future. Before passing on, it is worth citing another paragraph from this 'current' Management Plan:

"The increasingly unpredictable weather in recent years has made the possibility of flooding on Midsummer Common more likely. Large pools of water adjacent to the river have become more frequent sights and this standing water often remains for long periods as the ground can become saturated over time in long bouts of rain."

## So where do we go from here?

The 'current' Management Plan expired in 2019 and the Council has yet to agree a new one for the period 2019 - 2024. The draft contains two interesting paragraphs. The first deals with the grass mowing saga:

"The Common is predominately grassland and the encouragement of other plants to bolster biodiversity might not find universal favour. Areas of nettle are a valuable resource for a cohort of insects, including butterfly species. Thistles provide a late summer nectar source for bees. However, their presence is traditionally viewed as a sign of poor grassland management. They must not be allowed to dominate the grassland but must be recognised as necessary to maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the Common. They need to be controlled in some way."

It should be possible to restrict nettles and thistles to distinct areas of the Common as shown in red on the adjacent map; this would keep them away from events, play areas, footpaths, pinch points along railings, and in front of houses. An early cutting in March or April would be before the majority of butterfly eggs are laid on the



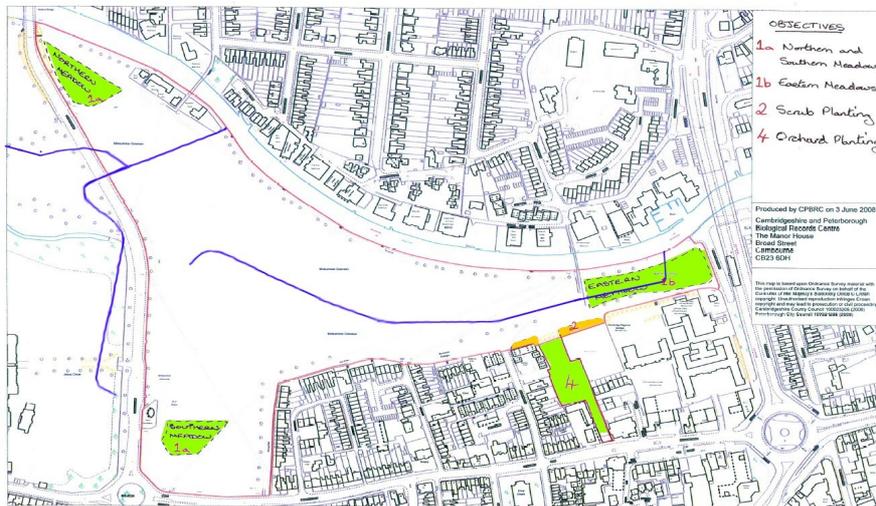
nettles. The Creeping and Spear thistle are best controlled through an early July cut to reduce flowers and subsequent seed load; any earlier, they will bounce back. Bramble on the Common should be controlled through more regular cutting to prevent new stands establishing.

The second paragraph in the Plan refers to Baker's 1830 map of Cambridge that shows drainage ditches crossing Jesus Green and Midsummer Common. Baker was a professional surveyor so there is no good reason to question their original location. These ditches were covered over at a later date and, after Victoria Avenue was built and Jesus College appropriated part of the Common land, those originating on Jesus Green were probably relocated (this needs checking). The Plan picks on one ditch and goes on to say:

"the water from this ditch flows under the road and Midsummer Common ending up in the river Cam somewhere below the Fort St George pub. It should be possible to re-expose this ditch, in whole or part, by breaking into the pipe and grading a naturalistic ditch following the historic lines to the existing engineered outfalls."

The Council's proposal to open up part of this ditch would create a more natural habitat. It would enhance the biodiversity within the Common and increase its amenity value. But it could have adverse effects, particularly on events taking place on the western end of the Common.

Appendix Five: Habitat Enhancements map



### A new nature reserve on Midsummer Common?



It might be better to look at the eastern end of the Common which is free from events and less populated by family gatherings. If the ditch were opened up from below the Community Orchard until it enters the river close to Walnut Tree Avenue, it would go through an area that was earmarked back in 2009 as a wildflower meadow and is now seen as an area with patches of nettles and thistles (see map to right). It could have all the potential to be developed as a nature reserve.

