



Nature Trail . . .



On another part of this web site, there is a description of West Moors based on the 'built environment' and its history. But all around us, there is a 'natural' history – heavily influenced by humans of course – that is of interest for its own sake, as a source of recreation and for the integral part it has played and continues to play in the history of our village.

West Moors is blessed with a variety of natural habitats - either within the boundary of the parish or immediately adjacent to it: this page will attempt to give a brief history & description of these as well as links to any web sites that might be of use.

Where there is a good web site with plenty of detail, I have written a short introduction and linked to the appropriate site(s); otherwise images and a longer description are provided. **Please note:** the majority of sites described can be accessed by the public, but one, the Fuel Depot, is a **closed area** and elsewhere all farmland should be **treated with respect** - keep to marked footpaths & be mindful of warning & other advisory notices.

Broadly the areas are: . . .

FORESTRY PLANTATION

MOORS RIVER, MANNINGTON BROOK & UDDENS WATER

SLOP BOG

HOLT HEATH

FUEL DEPOT

WOOLSLOPE RECREATION AREA

RIVERSIDE WALK / PENNINGTON'S COPSE / ALDER BEDS

CASTLEMAN TRAILWAY / HATCHARD'S COPSE

MANAGED FARMLAND

STREETS, OPEN SPACES & GARDENS

Forestry Plantation:

The total area of the West Moors forestry plantation is around 145 hectares (circa 360 acres) though this includes the plant nursery alongside Three Legged Cross road. The principal wooded areas, and those which are usable by the general public, lie on the eastern side of the parish. Originally planted-up in the 1940s by the Forestry Commission on the relatively poor soils of St. Leonard's Common, it was managed as a commercial & strategic source of timber for several decades. To this end, the woodland is primarily composed of fast-growing coniferous species, principally Corsican & Scots Pine. Birch grows around the margins of the Plantation as well as invading the cleared areas within it, and there are

a variety of shrub species - not all welcome, such as Rhododendron.



These woodlands are now regarded as an important recreational & ecological amenity: there are several open areas within the plantation, especially close to residential development. In time, there will be a change to the uniformity of conifers by selective thinning and / or removal. In some spots, a 'mixed' deciduous / coniferous regime will be established and in others, complete removal of trees. Fire-breaks and some of the wider rides also aid diversity of flora and fauna.

Discrete areas of the plantation form elements of the Holt and West Moors Heath SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) where the special character of the pockets of heathland and boggy ditch habitats allow rare plants to survive, e.g., some orchid species. The heath habitats (which were, until the 1940s, dominant here) are being augmented by steadily removing conifers to allow a natural regeneration of heathland to take place.

Commercial conifer stands are notoriously poor as regards wildlife diversity due to low light levels: the ubiquitous grey squirrel and rabbits around the margins are found, occasional deer passing through - and coal tits and goldcrest might be observed (or heard). However, the open areas, fire-breaks, rides and margins do offer more interest - and with the changes outlined above, this variety will be further enhanced.

Moors river, Mannington brook & Uddens water:

Our local streams provide both ecological & historical interest: on a practical note, the boundaries of the modern parish follow some of these watercourses & they were all at one time important to the scattered farms that pre-date the modern village.

To the west, Mannington brook leaves the higher ground around Woodlands then flows through the settlements of Mannington and Lower Mannington, giving the brook its name; it then comes south through what is still rural countryside south of Newman's Farm, under the old (mostly hidden & private) railway bridge at the end of Farm Lane, joining the Uddens not far from the alder coppice (q.v.). The Uddens itself rises from many tributaries that originate in the land around Holt - then flows through what was once the Uddens House estate, hence its name. Then, in part forming the southern boundary of the modern parish, it flows into the Moors river just below Trickett's Cross. (*The southern parish boundary was re-aligned in 2015 to follow the A31 for a short way rather than the river.*)



To the east, the Moors river (known as the Crane in its upper reaches) rises around Cranborne, the home of the Salisbury family (once major landowners hereabouts), and as it flows south, it forms the eastern boundary of the parish. After merging with the Uddens (south of St. Leonard's Farm), it joins the Stour near Christchurch, thence finding its way to the English Channel. As a matter of historical interest, the Moors until the 1970s, formed the county boundary between Hampshire & Dorset.

Dorset's varied geology dictates the character of the river systems. In the west and north of the county, there are a good number of clean, nutrient-rich rivers flowing off the chalk highlands. However east Dorset has decidedly acidic watercourses, starting from (or largely flowing through) heathland landscapes - draining the nutrient-poor sands, gravels and clays.

The Uddens is highly acidic, particularly in its early stages and few plants or animals thrive in such a hostile environment. Those that do are highly specialised (and consequently uncommon or even rare). However, further down-stream, after it merges with (or is fed by) less acidic sources, it reaches the confluence with the Moors River as a near-neutral habitat and the flora & fauna are more varied. The Moors, for example [imaged here], supports an extremely rich assemblage of invertebrates and this has been recognised by the SSSI structure in place to study and guard the ecology of the river.



All of our local streams tend to be 'fast rise / fast fall' in character, responding rapidly to high rainfall, or extended dry periods. This pattern leads to areas where banks dry out or become flooded within short periods: species in such water-courses don't cope well with such rapid

changes & submerged plants in particular struggle to thrive. Also, in low-speed, low-level flow, silt accumulates, which is rapidly stirred up after heavy rain - this creates murky conditions blocking light to underwater plants. One particular problem for the Uddens as it flows through the Woolslope estate is that little active 'cleaning' of fallen branches, leaf-fall etc., has taken place. Photographs taken early in the twentieth century show the river banks with much less vegetation. Despite these problems, the acid streams of SE Dorset are particularly noted for their rich dragonfly fauna. The rare Southern Damselfly can be found along muddy reaches of the streams. The old railway bridge across the Moors (on the Castleman Trailway - imaged above) is a particularly good place to observe adult breeding species on the wing - and birds feeding on them weaving across the water surface - with luck, and good eyes, you might see a Kingfisher darting above the water's surface.



A walk alongside the various watercourses (where paths exist) is very pleasant - and very popular. The image shown here was taken in March 2018, after an early spring fall of snow. The bridge is on lower Station Road, adjacent to the Woolslope recreation area - with the Uddens flowing underneath. The bridge here is relatively modern. In the 19th century, the river course here was less constrained and crossing the water was effected by means of fords. (Woolslope gains its name from this 'haphazard' nature of the river - see later.)

Slop Bog:

Slop Bog lies just outside the parish near its southern boundary, though its close association with the Uddens and the once extensive Uddens Estate dictates that in the 19th or early 20th century the area would have been regarded as part of the village. For many living in West Moors this feature is nearer than it is from the centre of Ferndown: it is within easy walking reach - once you've negotiated the busy A31 overbridge! The area has at its heart a wet heathland habitat, with pure bog either side of the water-courses in the northern portion of the reserve. Walkways have been laid out so that visitors can get around without sinking into the Bog & these also facilitate disabled access. Although the steady noise of adjacent traffic can be heard, at any time of year the area is full of wildlife - and the managers of the site have placed handy information boards to point out various aspects of this. If you don't want to go around the interior of the Bog, the public footpath close to the southern boundary is a pleasant diversion from the adjacent built-up areas. The site is owned & managed by Dorset County Council. There is much more information [HERE](#). In addition, there is a very active volunteer group - the [Slop Bog Guardians](#) - who perform surveys, raise funds, encourage local participation etc.

Holt Heath:

Running along the western boundary of the parish is Holt Heath which is owned by the National Trust. Together with its areas of woodland, it is designated as one of our National Nature Reserves (NNR) and is managed by English Nature. It is one of the largest of Dorset's ancient lowland heathland to survive, with a wide variety of habitats - giving rise to a rich flora and fauna that must have been familiar to country folk from times well before the modern village appeared. Management of the open heath and the woodland will ensure its survival for future generations. For more on the Heath and recommended access points follow this link [HERE](#). And this site [HERE](#) gives useful amplifying information.

Fuel Depot:

During the Second World War, the US Army took over a large portion of the heathland to the north-east of the village - using the area to supply fuels to support the D-Day operation in 1944. Since that time the site has been further developed as a pivotal facility to supply all UK armed forces with vital fuel supplies. It is of course a **closed area** with no access to the public, but paradoxically this has meant that the entire site has become a haven for wildlife; also, due to its generally undisturbed nature, the site hosts a remarkable variety of fungi.



About 75 per cent of the facility is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and its management is carried out in close consultation with English Nature and a variety of local conservation and environmental groups. The grass on site is kept close-cropped, to minimise fire risk: this may be achieved by using rare white cattle, or latterly small flocks of sheep.

[Image kindly provided by Roy Nicklin]

Woolslope recreation area:

Woolslope farmland originally extended across much of the land lying north of the Uddens up to Pinehurst Road, and from east of Station Road to roughly where Pinehurst Park is now. Given its location (not far from the Ringwood - Poole road), soil type and ready source of water, it was amongst our most productive farms. The farmyard extended across where Spinners Close is now and the farm house - demolished in the 1980s - probably originated (in part) from the latter 17th century and the area must have been farmed since Tudor times or even earlier.



The name 'Woolslope' might suggest a link with sheep. However, analysis of the etymology tells a different story. The 'wool' element is derived from old English, 'wylle' meaning a well, spring, fountain or small stream; the 'slope' doesn't refer to the lie of the land as such, but from 'slaep' (later slap) implying mire, mud, marsh - e.g., a 'slippery' place - and pedestrians trying to cross the Uddens on Station Road after heavy rain can sympathise with that! So, as with modern Welsh, the name is trying to paint the picture of a small stream (or a series of 'streamlets') passing through boggy ground: sheep would of course have been a part of farming in this area, but not on a scale to give the Farm its name.

The upper farmland was given over to residential development in the 1970s, with the remaining fields allowed to lie fallow - though grazed and cropped from time-to-time. In 2012 ownership of the fields was assumed by East Dorset District Council - and they manage the area on behalf of the community. One of the first actions under this new management was the laying out of a network of gravel paths with associated gates - though the paths did take a battering due to excessive rainfall in the winter of 2013/14. However the paths recovered - and as vegetation has now 'softened' the walkway edges, a very pleasant ramble can be enjoyed.



It is worth stating though that after prolonged heavy rainfall at any time, more especially in the autumn and winter, the paths can be covered with water as the Uddens floods - this is perfectly natural and demonstrates how nature distributes nutrients across a flood-plain of a river; with the march of time also, some of the paths will succumb to the return of nature! Conversely, after a light fall of snow on a fine late winter or early spring day (as here in March 2018), the paths are well used and make for a very pleasant ramble.

The area is one of a classic English field system with hedged boundaries. Some magnificent oaks dominate the landscape - some of which are over 150 years old. But there is a splendid variety of other mature trees: some beech, plenty of birch - a few of these well established, isolated pine (probably self-seeded) and ash. Amongst the smaller trees, either individually or clustered in copses, then hazel, holly, blackthorn and sycamore are found - with plenty of gorse and bramble as well. Nearer to the Uddens, then damp-loving species such as alder & willow dominate. Also down here are garden escapes - himalayan balsam being especially invasive.

Having been lightly managed for the past 40-odd years, wildlife has thrived with fox, badger, mole & hedgehog happily resident - none of these often seen, but their presence can be inferred by such as droppings, scrapes & mole-hills with foxes in particular often betraying their presence in winter & early spring by distinctive barking & screaming. And although they are not to be seen, the area must be alive with small mammals such as harvest & field mice, rats, voles etc., because it is a rare day not to find buzzards lazily circling & crying overhead - and on chilly winter's mornings, the call of a kestrel indicates that they too find the old farmland a useful source of food: at night the owls take over and once the traffic noise on the trunk road has eased, their distinctive hunting calls & screams can be heard.

Dotted around you'll come across apparently abandoned piles of timber / recently felled trees etc. This is done to provide natural cover and habitat for all sorts of wildlife to exist - especially small insects upon which other animals & birds will feed: all part of the great cycle of life - and a useful illustration of what we could all do in our own gardens!



Because of the variety of plant life, the area is home to several species of small birds (who in turn are preyed upon by such as sparrowhawk, heron & kestrel) and butterflies and moths are also left largely undisturbed by humans. The variety of bird and insect life makes for a delightful walk in spring or early summer in particular - especially in the more heavily wooded area towards the 'A31' end of the Uddens walk. Although the constant drone of motor traffic is certainly obvious, this is counter-acted by a classic English woodland symphony of bird-song. On a warm, sunny day in late summer or early autumn, the fields that have been left to full-grown grass can be alive with all manner of insects - though the vigorous growth of plant-life alongside some of the sections of the pathways can make progress difficult, especially after rain: best dress accordingly.

And obscured to some extent by vegetation, but obvious on aerial photographs, is a 'tumulus': this is not far from the end of Woolslope Close. No details are known but tumuli are generally regarded as being burial mounds - at the very least it does show that the area has been important for the local human population for more than two thousand years. For wildlife these features are splendid refuges for a host of small animals and birds.

Riverside Walk - Pennington's Copse - Alder Beds:

The Walk follows the north bank of the Uddens then passes across former farmland on the eastern side of Mannington brook. It can be accessed from Station Road (near the roundabout which has exits for Ferndown & the A31), or from several points off the Pennington estate or Farm Road. In spring 2015, an island crossing was installed at the southern end of Station Road, adjacent to Uddens Water which makes for somewhat safer crossing of Station Road from the Woolslope Farm side.

The area of this walk that lies off the end of Farm Road used to be part of the extensive farmland that occupied much of the modern estate prior to development in the 1970s. The farm had various names over the years: Hellies / Helliers Farm, Thornick Farm, New Farm - and in the latter part of its life, simply West Moors Farm. As the village developed from the last decade of the 19th century, the farm provided milk and other dairy products to the local population and was apparently a successful concern until the post-War period, when larger commercial farms took over the provision of most milk in this country.



The land was richly blessed being highly fertile - and this fact can be observed hereabouts in the lushness of early growth in spring - given good moisture; milking cattle would have benefitted. The image (above) shows the pathway as laid-out new in 2013, not far from Mannington Brook - across which is a golf course. The walkway will encourage users to avoid disturbing wildlife elsewhere and a rich variety of bird, insect and plant life will flourish.

The adjacent copse / alder beds are designated as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and administered by East Dorset District Council [see link below]. As wooded areas, they are thought to date from at least the 14th century. Pennington's Copse was probably managed as a water meadow in earlier times - periodic flooding of the riverside land enhancing soil quality, though as described elsewhere, our local streams are not particularly 'rich' in this respect. From the late 18th century, the area was treated as coppiced woodland of hazel, birch, rowan and ash - all 'shepherded' by mature oaks. Close to the streams, alder flourishes: this tree thrives in very wet, poor soil conditions and was useful in stabilising the soil. Alder was also used to make charcoal, and for producing country products such as broom handles & clogs.



This image was taken in spring 2015 about a quarter-of-a-mile in from the access point on Station Road (nr. the Uddens bridge): to the left can be seen the alignment of Uddens Water curling away out of sight - which marks, in part, the boundary of the parish. The path has a gate across it - primarily to prevent any cattle straying when used to graze the vegetation - through the gate and turning sharp right would lead you to Pennington's Copse & the Alder beds (see above).

[More information](#)

Castleman Trailway - Hatchard's Copse:

The Castleman Trailway is about 27 km (17 miles) in length, with end-points at Ringwood and Poole. Walkers & cyclists are encouraged and horse-riders can use certain sections. It is managed jointly by Dorset Countryside (an agency of Dorset County Council), Poole Borough & Hampshire County Councils.

Within the parish, the Trailway divides neatly into two habitat types: although loosely based on the alignment of the old railway line, only the 'eastern' section, from the Moors river to the end of Arnold Close lies on, or close-to the former railway track-bed. West of Station Road, the path follows old parish footpaths and former cart-tracks, but in so doing, it traverses patches of long-standing woodland & cuts the corner of Holt Heath.

To gain access to the *eastern leg*, join the Trailway either at the end of Arnold Close, or from a point close to the Forestry Plantation: old railway tracks often show a considerable variety of vegetation - which in operational days would have been kept cut-back, but which now grow to such an extent that in places it forms an arch over the old track-bed. Nearer to West Moors though, the path runs over MOD land, part of the old railway fuel sidings and as such the aspect is much more open - with mixed-species hedge kept cut back.



The whole of this leg passes over low-nutrient, dry heathland - and gorse is especially able to thrive along with coniferous shrubs / trees & stunted birch. On warm spring days, watch out for basking adders on or near the path - and throughout the spring and summer, a variety of butterflies are seen when the weather is sunny & warm - ideal habitats exist amongst the long grasses along the hedge line.



The *western leg* of the Trailway can be accessed from the gate opposite the school on Station Road - and it is immediately apparent that the soil type is different to that described above. Now we're passing over (or adjacent to) former farmland and in places there are woodland copses - once part of the great estates - used for both sheltering game birds [there is reference to a resident game-keeper in the mid-19th century] and to provide a stock of coppiced timber for fencing / hurdles, cottage wall structures & other rural purposes. One particular such area, administered by East Dorset Countryside Management Service, is [Hatchard's Copse](#) : the name is provided by the 19th century family that used to farm the adjacent land.

Mannington brook is crossed by a sturdy bridge - though you can see signs of the former ford. There are damp meadows & grassed fields adjacent. A little way down towards Amey'sford, the path crosses a corner of Holt Heath [see above] - the vegetation reflecting this as oak is replaced with pine - before returning to richer soil types of the former Dolman's Farm, now hosting the golf course etc.



Much more information, including detailed maps, can be found [HERE](#)

Managed farmland:

Until roughly the middle part of the last century, much of the land astride both watercourses running to the west and south of the village was actively farmed - housing being mainly confined to poorer soil-types found on & around the periphery of St. Leonard's Common. Although large parcels of farmland have now been given over to residential development or other purposes, two areas remain as working farms - being managed in the fashion that has provided us with the 'patchwork field' system so typical of rural England.

North of the village, the combination of Gulliver's and Sturt's farms is now known as the [Sturts Community Trust](#) : covering around 90 acres, it is a working organic farm which provides a community environment for adults with learning disabilities - all aspects of agriculture and horticulture are undertaken. In addition, the enterprise retails its own produce - for example at their weekly [Market Stall](#), just outside Ringwood. In the autumn of 2015, a **Farm Shop** was opened in the old (late 18th century) barn on the Gulliver's Farm site with produce increasingly sourced on the farm. In summer 2016, Sturts Farm also made available facilities for local people to have an allotment - to find out more, contact the [Parish Office](#).

On the southern periphery of the parish, [St. Leonard's Farm](#) can trace its history back several centuries - certainly to 'monastic' times, when the land was in the ownership of the Benedictines: this order lost its property in 1540 on Dissolution. Leonard, who reputedly lived in the late fifth / early sixth century AD, was one of the most venerated saints in the late Middle Ages and a small chapel on this site was probably dedicated to him. Today the farm is home to a camping and touring caravan site, as well as having a well-established static park home community for those over 55 - within easy reach of amenities both at the end of Pinehurst Road and in the Trickett's Cross area. The remainder of the land is still actively run as a working dairy farm having been occupied by the same family since the early 1930s.

Streets, open spaces & gardens:



And it shouldn't be forgotten that the gardens, streets, hedges, grass verges, public open spaces etc., are all an important part of the natural world. In West Moors, because of the history of the development of the village, there is a wide variety of planted & naturally occurring trees to be seen - in the older sections much pine, fir, cedar, spruce and cypress, which have reached maturity after being planted decades ago: there are some particularly fine Douglas Firs for example.

In areas that used to be farmland, large native oaks are plentiful - and together with beech and birch and a good variety of hedge & under-storey types (e.g., hazel, hawthorn, holly)

One open space that was recently saved from development is The Petwyn: lying close to the main shopping area, it is a pleasant spot to sit and relax - it also plays an important part in the life of the village. The village war memorial is at one end, with areas of seating provided. Fryer Field, at the north end of the village, though a sports facility also plays a part in providing another large 'green' space.

And dotted about the community are smaller areas of grass, bushes and trees - all playing a part in the local

natural world. As do our own gardens - birds are obviously visible, smaller wildlife isn't always evident - but it is there all the same and important: hedgehogs might leave tell-tale droppings or you can sometimes hear them 'grunting' at night: hence the country names of "hedgepig" or "furzepig". In damper areas frogs will be found - and butterflies and moths will be abundant at the appropriate time of year. And watch out for dragon / damselflies on the look-out for areas of water to lay eggs.



In recent years, attempts to bring a bit of colour to our roadside verges have seen the planting of clusters of wild flower seeds which make an attractive sight - here on the southern approach to West Moors. These were planted at the entrance to Spinners Close 'walk-through' from Station Road.

There is much we can all do to encourage the natural world to flourish and the sites / organisations listed below have useful guidance. It is possible to get involved in a practical way - and take part in various surveys that are undertaken from time-to-time.

General sources of information:

Butterfly Conservation

This organisation is active in the conservation of butterflies, moths and the environment; it has a useful facility to help you identify the butterflies & moths you might see.

Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT)

Based in Dorset, the Trust is very much the first port of call to help with understanding the natural world in our county and plays an active part in protection of habitats & the wildlife that use them.

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

The Society has long been foremost in the promotion of natural history knowledge and protection of wildlife habitats; it has some very useful guidance on how you can make your garden 'wild-life' friendly. The site has a comprehensive section to help identify birds by sight & call. The RSPB also carry out an annual survey of bird activity very early each year - register via the web site for more details.

Woodland Trust

The Trust has as its primary aim the promotion of interest in woods / forests and the natural world associated with these habitats. It also plays a pivotal role in the phenological survey of Great Britain - the monitoring of how plants, animals, birds & insects respond to the changing climate: you can register to become an observer - full details via the web site.

A useful printed publication which gives a good introduction to the Natural History of Dorset is " **Dorset Wildlife** " by Andrew Mahon, published in 1990 by Dorset Books: this book can usually be ordered-up via the local library. I am particularly grateful for access to this work to help with the details entered above.

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