

# **Nettlebed Common Claypits, Pond Management**

## **Interim Report, 18 November 2015**

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### **Introduction**

This brief report summarises the management work to date in the Nettlebed Common Claypits on the pond creation / restoration project, funded by TOE2. The work can broadly be categorised into two types – tree clearing to create open sunny ponds and the (first) major digging task to restore / improve one of the specific pond complexes (the Lower or Overflow Basin). The summary below is split into two sections along these lines with a third section summarising the work to be done. The project was made possible by the grants from TOE2 and other grant giving bodies, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. The current project dramatically expands on the pond work on this important wetland site, which began more than 20 years ago.

### **Tree Clearing**

Tree clearing began in the north part of the target area on the bank below Mill House and in the Mill House Pond itself. Work began as soon as possible after the funding was agreed, while work conditions were at their best. Many of the basins in the targeted work area are seasonal in nature and the early autumn date, after a prolonged period of dry weather meant many of them were either dry or held only very shallow water and were more easily accessible. (At the time of writing the same basins have started to fill and are not easily accessible for management purposes.) The felling work continued south and east through the system ending up at the Lower (or Overflow) Basin in mid-November. Small scale felling work has been undertaken around two ponds adjacent to the Overflow Basin – including further opening up of the Stadwell Pond the subject of a recent major restoration project, also funded by TOE2.

In total 221.5 (paid) man hours have been spent, supported by an additional c. 110 man hours by volunteers. The volunteer work includes regular weekend tasks by local (Nettlebed) residents and help during the (main) week day sessions from additional volunteers from the wider but still local area. (Many of the latter volunteers have a long standing association with / commitment to the site.) Approximately three quarters of the tree felling has been done, with the work on budget. The remaining felling tasks are described below.

The tree felling is required to create open sunny conditions (different types of ponds from the remaining unmanaged basins in the rest of the Claypits) and creates access for later pond improvement works (including access for diggers). Even though not complete the felling

work has transformed this part of the clay pits into an open sunny landscape with scattered trees and long distance views. The work has re-created a landscape of several decades ago.

### **Lower (Overflow) Basin Restoration**

The Lower (or Overflow) Basin was a series of linked more or less temporary ponds normally only wet in the winter and in some (wet) years into the spring. The upper parts of the geology of the basin was free draining and thus water drained away, the rate of loss depending on the depth and location of the upper (well drained) and lower impermeable (clay) seams.

The improvement work included the felling of most of the trees in the basin followed by the general deepening and sealing of the basin (puddling / sealing where necessary with clay excavated from the site). Three shallow stand alone sealed basins were created during the work (at the time of writing starting to fill after recent rain) and what should be a new temporary bare substrate pool. The creation of bare substrates is an important component of the work – bare open ponds are currently not present on site, but an important successional phase of ponds which supports different types of species.

The water levels in these four basins will be monitored over the winter and spring and if required adjustments made to them next year during the second phase of digging.

Sealing the Lower Basin from the rest of the system above means that (deliberately) water will be held in these higher parts of the clay pits. Higher water levels should create shallow margins in some of the existing basins and perhaps create extra ponds in previously dry and/or barely seasonally damp hollows. An important element of the next phase of work will be to monitor the effect of holding water in the clay pits and the changes in the various ponds uphill of and at the same level as the Lower Basin. (See below.)

### **Ongoing And Future Work**

The ongoing and future work can be divided into three types i.e. tree felling, pond creation and other pond improvements. The various task types are listed separately below.

There are two areas of the site that still require significant tree (and scrub) felling. One of these is the eastern end of the bank below Mill House. Some of this is the subject of ongoing work but some will probably need to wait until 2016 and will be done as part of the proposed pond improvement / creation tasks to be carried out when access conditions (for diggers) improve. The delay will also allow the management work to be informed by the results of monitoring of water levels in the cleared open ponds. Non-native shrubs including Rhododendron need to be cleared from the section of bank between the Mill House boundary and upper ponds.

The other main felling task is the removal of most of the Willow from the “Long Pond” in the south part of the site. This work has been started and will be continue in the autumn / winter

of 2015/16. (If not complete by the spring of 2016 it will be completed in autumn 2016.) Some of the Willows in the pond will be retained to maintain a diversity of pond habitats.

There are also a number of single and/or small groups of trees “missed” while moving through the site that are known targets and/or may be targets for felling. These will be removed either in the autumn / winter 2015/16 or autumn 2016.

One of the most important tasks in improving / creating the variety of wetland habitats in the whole of the site, either in complete basins (with their complexes of ponds) or for individual ponds (of all sizes) is the control of water levels within the clay pits on both a large and small scale. A system of dams (large and small) has been maintained (some new ones created) over many years for this purpose, and this process will continue throughout the rest of the active period of this project (and no doubt beyond). Some work is small scale and can be carried out with hand tools. Other work is on a larger scale and will be carried out later in 2016 when conditions are better for digger access. The latter work will be informed by monitoring the site, identifying any problems such as large leaks (e.g. through main supporting banks), or other situations where larger scale work will be needed. Using a digger will also enable the creation of larger areas of early successional bare substrate habitats in more of the existing basins (where appropriate) - currently a rare but important pond habitat on site (see above).

New pond creation (and/or major pond extension) will be concentrated in the area below Mill House at the north end of the site. Again, this work will be informed by the site monitoring to be carried out between now and next year. Other possible creation sites may be identified by the monitoring. The TOE2 grant includes sufficient funds for at least another weeks work with a digger.

One of the most important tasks (already mentioned above) during and after this project will be the monitoring of the habitats on site and recording of the species present. The pre-work survey of the site, which continues to inform the management carried out, will be repeated. Its scope will be expanded to include other species groups including for example amphibians. Nettlebed Common is an important site for many species groups including the latter (there is probably no better site for amphibians in the county) and the (re)creation of a suite of open sunny ponds including more permanent ponds should be a major boost for these animals and other species groups.