

The Brede Valley



In our densely populated southeast corner of England, a few areas of peace and tranquillity still survive.

One of the loveliest and most tranquil of these few, the Brede Valley, reaches westwards like a finger of Romney Marsh between two steep-sided ridges of the rolling High Weald countryside.

On the boundary between marsh and weald, the valley combines some of the landscape qualities of both, the expanse of level green pastures below, laced with winding drainage channels, the undulating shapes of orchard, woodland and hedgerow on the hillsides above. On a sunny afternoon from one of the ridges all this can be taken in at a glance, glimpses of the sparkling sea beyond. But by the river bank early on a summer morning, or towards dusk on a winter evening, when a mist blurs both the valley floor and the outline of the hills beyond, and the sounds of lapwing and marsh frog seem to come from miles around, the same landscape seems infinitely mysterious.

The valley's unique character today owes much to its past, its geology, its geography and the way it has been shaped by human settlement. During the Ice Age, when sea levels were sometimes 400ft lower than they are today, the original Brede River cut a channel into bedrock some 60ft below its present level. Later, as the climate grew warmer and sea levels rose, the valley bottom was gradually filled with sediments,

Barry Yates

producing the present level valley floor, bounded on either side by the steep slopes of the Udimore and Icklesham ridges, a surprisingly wide valley for such a modest river!

From the twelfth century onwards, the marshy valley floor began to be reclaimed for farming, starting with the parts nearer the valley walls and gradually extending closer to the river. However,



Little owl



Colin Page

Kingfisher



Melvin Smith

Frogbit



Barry Yates

Ruddy darter



Colin Page

severe storms during the latter part of the thirteenth century breached the natural shingle barrier across Rye Bay (destroying old Winchelsea in the process) and created a large tidal area extending at high tide as far up the Brede Valley as the present Brede Bridge. Besides flooding much of the newly reclaimed farmland, this inundation also opened up the river for trade between the

hinterland and the towns of Rye and the new Winchelsea, reestablished on its prominent hilltop site in 1280 by order of Edward I.

Initially new Winchelsea prospered, but the town soon faced a severe problem: its newly constructed harbour began to silt up. Traces can still be seen of a 1,000 yard bund (the "Damme") that was built right across the valley, probably with the intention of



Tony Whitaker

impounding water at high tide and releasing it at low tide, to scour out the new harbour. As this seems to have proved ineffective, an even more ambitious scheme was undertaken: for some four miles upstream of Float Farm the river was diverted into an entirely new channel, with a flooded tract some 165 yards wide, to increase the force of ebbing tides. Even this did not achieve the desired effect, and Winchelsea's spasmodic economic decline continued.

The new channel did, however, make the river much easier for boats to navigate. Timber and iron products for shipbuilding were among the cargoes carried downstream by sailing barge to Winchelsea and Rye, and much later coal was shipped upstream from Rye to Brede Bridge, for onward transport to the Brede Pumping Station by light railway. The layby beside the A28 at the foot of Brede Hill continued as a coalyard well into the 20th century.

Easy access by water favoured the siting of great houses along both sides of the valley: William de Etchingham's moated Court Lodge at Udimore, a moated manor house at Snailham, Crowham Manor, Westfield, and the gracious stone-built Brede Place.

Wildlife Riches

The Brede Valley supports many species and habitats which are scarce and declining in Britain. These include many of the wildlife interest features of the Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest), of which the Rye Harbour Nature Reserve is an important part.

Coastal grazing marsh habitats support nationally rare invertebrates, important wintering waterfowl populations and one of the largest breeding populations of lapwing in Sussex. The reedbeds support scarce moths and a nationally important population of reed warblers.

The richness of the Brede Valley's wildlife depends to a great extent on the high water quality of its many drainage ditches, fed as they are by the many springs which flow from the sandstone slopes on either side of the valley. Although the wetland habitat of the valley was impoverished by drainage during the 20th Century, there is now an opportunity for landowners to reverse this decline, with help from new Environmental Stewardship Schemes. These offer scope for the restoration of extensive wetland areas.

These new wetlands would soon be colonised by the abundant plant and animal life of the ditches. Continued grazing by cattle and sheep will help conserve the value and quality of this habitat. In turn, these wetland areas would provide us with drinking water, spaces to store floodwater and natural systems which filter pollution from our water.

Pockets of recent wetland restoration have demonstrated how quickly wetland wildlife can return if it is given the opportunity.

A local landowner describes the dramatic effects of restoring his land in the valley to its former natural condition.

Flooded grassland at Doleham



Cliff Dean



Cliff Dean

Amphibious bistort



Neil Fletcher

Marsh marigold



David Plummer

"Otters, water voles, harriers, numerous wildfowl, buzzards, tranquillity, minimal light pollution, glowworms... the list is endless. Where? Maybe the wilds of Scotland, the Yorkshire Moors, the Norfolk Broads? The answer is none of these - in fact this wonderful wildlife area is right on your doorstep... the Brede Valley!"

This river valley is now in the process of being slowly restored to become, in due course, an environment where people and wildlife can continue to live in harmony. Already land in several areas is being allowed to revert to floodplain and wetlands, after years of intensive farming."

Along the way...



Brede Valley wildlife highlights

The following is a selection of wildlife highlights you may see or hear on a walk through the Brede Valley. Some of these species are scarce or declining, some are more obvious than others, but all help to give the valley its distinctive character.

Little owl

The whooping and hissing calls of this small owl are often heard in the valley at dusk.

Wildfowl

After decades of absence, several species of duck, including teal, wigeon and pintail, have returned in good numbers to winter on the new wetlands.

Southern marsh orchid

There are several locations in the valley where this orchid was traditionally recorded. Since apparently disappearing in the 1980s, reduced grazing pressure has helped this spectacular plant regain a foothold.

Sea trout

These threatened fish migrate up the River Brede, penetrating far inland to breed in small gravelly streams.

Water vole

A small mammal that has suffered dramatic national declines mainly due to the loss and fragmentation of wetland habitats, but has been recolonising the Brede Valley thanks to recent habitat creation.

Water plants

The ditches and rivers support many species of aquatic plants. Resembling a miniature white water lily, the frogbit is perhaps the most characteristic ditch plant in the valley, often growing so close the ditch resembles a cobbled street. It has a very restricted distribution in Britain. More difficult to see is the rootless duckweed, which is less than 1mm across, looks like a minute green bead and is Britain's smallest flowering plant.

Marsh mallow



Barry Yates

Yellow water lily



John Bewster

Otter



Stephen Bray

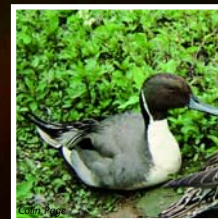
Evidence has been found indicating otters are exploring the Brede Valley as a potential habitat.

Southern marsh orchid



Melvin Smith

Pintail



Barry Yates

...if you look closely...

Banded demoiselle



Variable damselfly



Spotted flycatcher



Yellow wagtail



Dragonflies

The valley has an important assemblage of dragonflies and damselflies with twenty species recorded, most of which breed regularly. Of particular importance are the nationally notable ruddy darter and variable damselfly. The banded demoiselle is a feature of the faster running River Brede where the dark wing patches of the males can give the impression of dancing over the water.

Whimbrel

The valley is filled with the piping calls (seven repeated notes) of the whimbrel in April, May, July and August, during their spring and autumn migrations between Africa and the Arctic.

Little egret

This species first bred in Britain in 1996 and has quickly established itself as a frequent visitor to the valley. These elegant white herons can be seen fishing in the shallow pools created by the recent wetland restoration.

Yellow wagtail

This bright yellow migrant arrives from Africa in April. It is a rapidly declining wetland species, but several pairs still breed in the valley. It is to be hoped that wetland restoration will help to increase its numbers.

Lapwing

This ground-nesting, farmland bird is declining nationally, partly because of land drainage. In the Brede Valley, however, breeding numbers have increased recently thanks to habitat creation, and the breeding population is now one of the largest in Sussex.

Buzzard

This large bird of prey has recently recolonized the Brede Valley. Listen out for its 'mewing' call as it soars in search of carrion.

Green sandpiper

This wader feeds on ditch-side mud in the valley in the autumn and winter. It is most likely to be seen flying away from you like a giant house martin, calling a far-carrying 'tu-lui'.

Reed warbler

The churring song of this brown warbler can be heard throughout the summer from deep within the reedbeds that run along the ditches. A survey in 1994 estimated a total valley population of 350 pairs.

...you can also see:

- Old Saxon shoreline sea cliffs, now forming slopes at the entrance to the valley.
- Ancient meandering drainage channels, home to the freshwater mussel.
- Windswept hawthorns, ancient oaks and chestnut coppice, excellent wildlife habitat.
- Romney sheep and Sussex cattle.
- Thickets of willow, blackthorn and reed along the railway, great nesting sites for small birds and an important wildlife dispersal corridor.
- The patchwork of arable, hay meadows, orchards and pasture.
- Windbreaks of poplar and alder.
- White-cowled oast-houses where hops were once dried.
- Weather-boarded and tile-hung farmhouses, with unusual catslide roofs.

Tree sparrow

This tree-nesting, farmland bird has suffered widespread decline across Britain. The Brede Valley remains the last persistent breeding colony in Sussex and one of its strongholds in southeast England. The Sussex Ornithological Society is assisting landholders in the Brede Valley to maintain this population by funding provision of nestboxes and winter seed crops. Recent research by the RSPB suggests that breeding tree sparrows do best when nesting near wetland. Therefore further wetland creation in the Brede Valley should help conserve this species.



Oast-house



Parasol mushroom



Greenshank



Brown long-eared bat



Reed warbler

The Friends of the Brede Valley

If you've read this far, it's because you love tranquil places like the Brede Valley... not far from the busy modern world, but not of it.

A few years ago the Friends of the Brede Valley group was formed with the aim of helping to protect this beautiful place from the proposals for road-building, land drainage and development which threatened its tranquillity. In 1993 a major road running through the valley was proposed. After long consultation it was rejected. However, although studies show that new roads don't reduce congestion, but simply encourage traffic growth, this threat never goes away.

The Friends seek to achieve their aim by two main methods: 1) by formally responding wherever any new development or plan poses a threat, and 2) by promoting wildlife surveys and habitat restoration schemes, with a view to strengthening the valley's legal protection against damaging development.

Please help us in this task by becoming a Friend of the Brede Valley.

For further reading:

If you would like to find out more about the area, its history, and its wildlife, we recommend the following publications and websites:

Romney Marsh - Survival on a Frontier, by Jill Eddison (Tempus 2000).

Winchelsea - The Tale of a Medieval Town, by Malcolm Pratt (Pratt 2005).

The Illustrated History of the Countryside, by Oliver Rackham (Phoenix Paperback).

Understanding Wetlands, by Sylvia Harlam (Taylor & Francis).

The Wet Grassland Guide, by P. Benstead & Others (RSPB).

The Ornithological Status of the Brede Valley, by M.J. Denny (Sussex Bird Report 1994 No.47).

- www.bredevalley.info
- www.rxwildlife.org.uk
- www.yates.clara.net/changes.html
- www.wildrye.info
- www.highweald.org
- www.1066country.com

Barn owl



Colin Page

Grass snake



Colin Page

Dormouse



Colin Page

Lapwing



Barry Yates

Green sandpiper



Barry Yates

Little egret



Barry Yates

Branched bur-reed - David Plummer

What's next?

The Brede Valley enjoys a limited measure of protection from development by lying within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It is also protected by its designation as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest, following a survey by the Sussex Wildlife Trust, which assessed it as one of the richest wildlife sites in the whole county. In due course we should like to see the Brede Valley given even stronger protection by inclusion within the Dungeness, Romney Marsh and Rye Bay Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Meanwhile we will continue to support local landowners and promote further wildlife habitat restoration and creation wherever possible.

You can keep up to date with these and other developments by going to the Brede Valley website www.bredevalley.info.