

OCKHAM & WISLEY COMMONS & CHATLEY HEATH

SURREY
wildlife
TRUST



Visitor Guide and Self-guided Trail



SURREY
COUNTY COUNCIL

Ockham and Wisley Commons & Chatley Heath

Lowland heathland is an open landscape of heather with scattered scrub and isolated trees and supports many specialist heathland species of wildlife. Today Wisley and Ockham is an important refuge for many of these species due to the widespread loss of heathland in Southern England and English Nature has designated the Commons a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The origins of heathland began about 6,000 years ago as people cleared woodland for farming. This caused the sandy soils of the area to become more acidic, as nutrients were leached away, until only heather plants and coarse grasses could survive. These areas were then used for rough grazing which prevented trees recolonising. This traditional management over thousands of years maintained the heathland landscape and was beneficial for wildlife. Acid-loving plants, numerous species of invertebrates, reptiles and some species of birds depend on heathland for their survival.

Over the last 200 years Surrey has lost 85% of its heathland, both to other land uses, like forestry and road development, and natural reversion to woodland. As grazing stopped the neglected heaths were invaded by trees and open heath quickly disappeared. Unfortunately the heathland wildlife, which had adapted to this specialised environment over thousands of years, could not adapt to such a sudden change in habitat and some species have declined rapidly as a result.

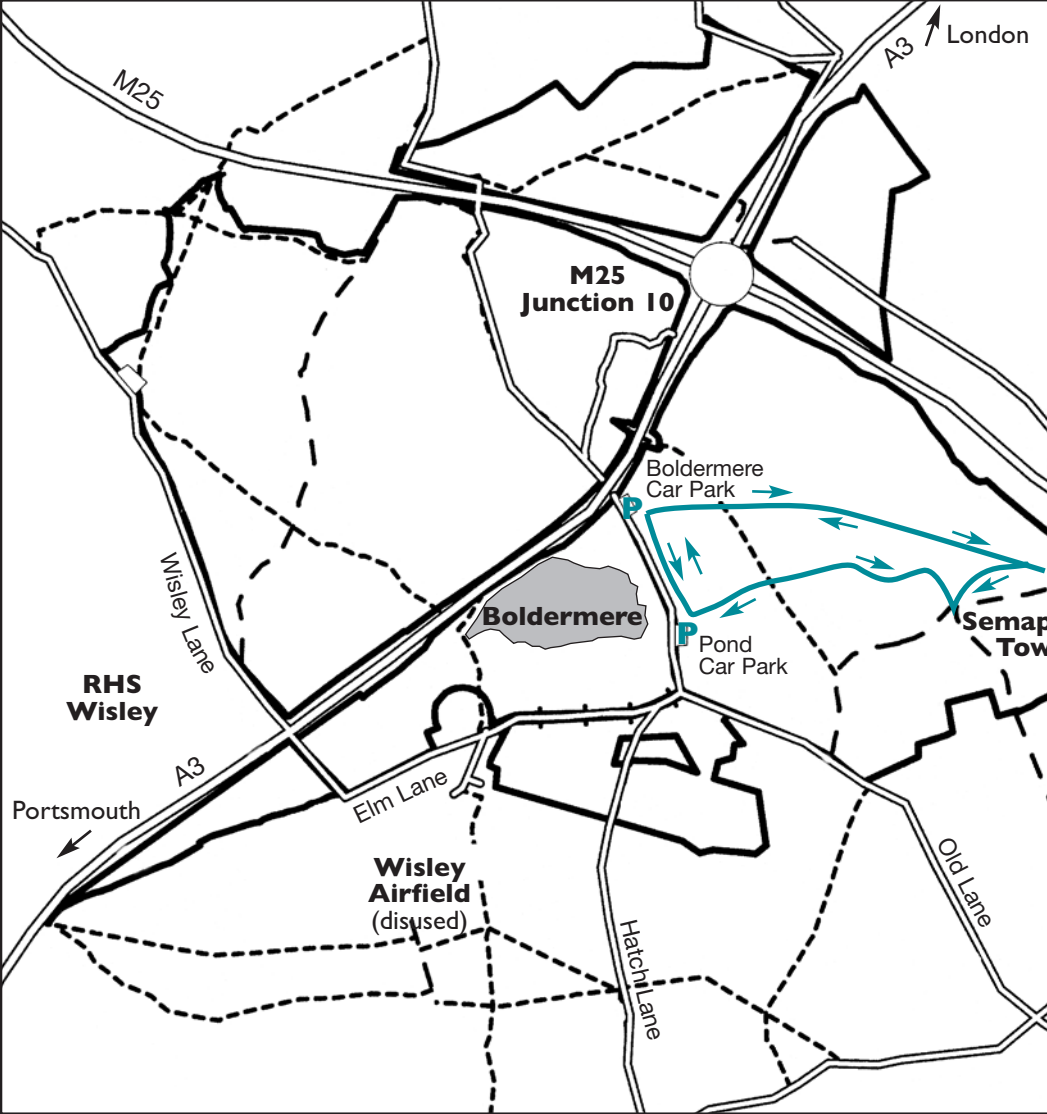
Heathland in the area is managed to enhance its wildlife value, particularly for the rare species found here. Invading scrub is removed, grazing has been reintroduced and former heathland areas previously converted to forestry plantations are being restored back to heathland. This habitat restoration has encouraged many rare heathland bird species to return to the Commons to breed.

In contrast to the open heathland areas there are large areas of magnificent broad-leaved woods on the site, such as Hatchford Woods. Native woodlands support a great variety of wildlife: birds like woodpeckers and warblers, as well as mammals, such as foxes and deer. Again traditional management, such as coppicing, is beneficial to a wide range of species. Coppicing has been introduced to manage the area known as Hunt's Copse. Non-native shrubs like rhododendron are being removed from across the Commons.

Owned by Surrey County Council this area is managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust

for nature conservation and public recreation. Everyone is welcome to explore the Commons via the extensive network of footpaths and horse rides.

Surrey Wildlife Trust is working with volunteers and the local community to maintain and enhance the wildlife value of the area. If you would like to help the area's wildlife please contact the Ranger direct.



For details of public transport in Surrey call Traveline 0870 608 2608 www.traveline.gov.uk

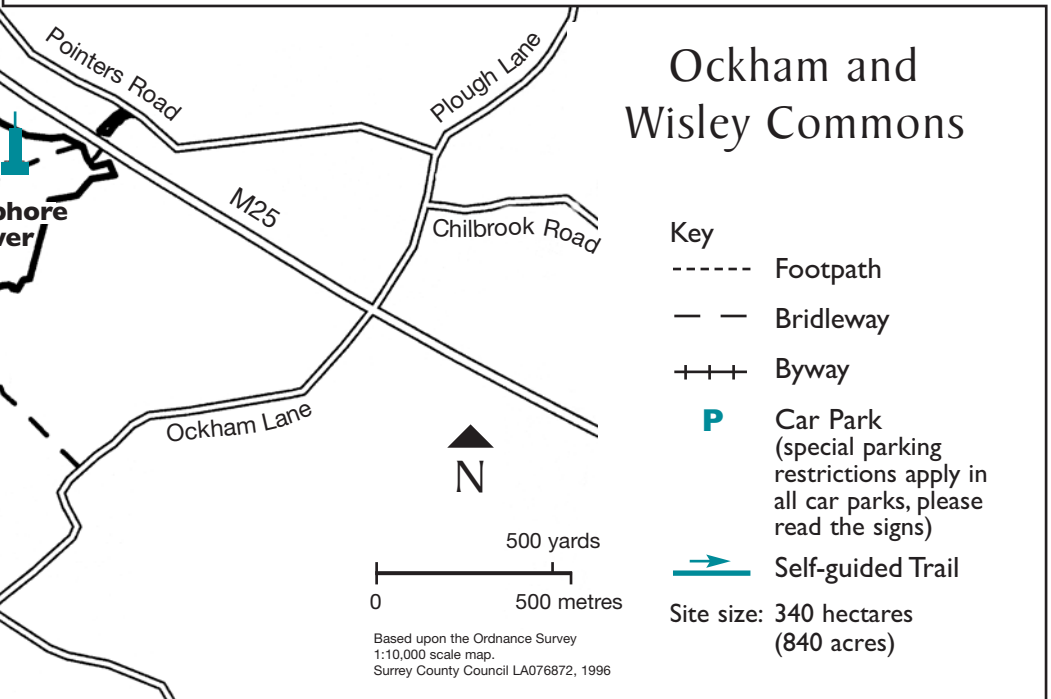
Self-guided Circular Trails

The Semaphore Tower is located on Chatley Heath. Built in 1822, the Tower was one of a line of semaphore stations between the Admiralty in London and Portsmouth naval base. Fully restored in 1989, it is now the only remaining Tower of the line.

Access to the Tower is available to interested groups by appointment only, also on advertised Open Days. For further information or to book a viewing please call 07894 660999.

Self-guided trails are waymarked from both car parks in Old Lane to the Tower. Both are along sandy tracks with no gates or stiles.

Follow the Blue Sailor waymarkers from Boldermere car park or the Red Sailor waymarkers from Pond car park; it will take about 20 minutes to reach the Tower. A path parallel to Old Lane links the red and blue trails to form a circular walk.



On both the BLUE and RED trails look for:

PINE AND BIRCH WOODLANDS

These areas show how much the countryside can change. These woodlands were once open heathland, but the heathland was planted up with Scots pine trees for their timber value. Although Scots pine is a native tree in Northern Britain, it was only introduced to Surrey around 1650. The planting up of heathland began during the time of the enclosures of common land. Ockham Common was subject to an enclosure award, taking it out of common land status in 1871. These woods have limited value for wildlife because they are dominated by one species of tree, the Scots pine, with very few native broad-leaved trees. Watch out for coal tits, the smallest of the tits, which feed on insects and particularly pine seeds. If you are really lucky you may see one of the woodland's most spectacular predators, the sparrowhawk. This bird of prey hunts small birds, like sparrows and tits, and has a preference for nesting in Scots pine.

It is intended to gradually increase the number of broad-leaved trees in the wood to improve its wildlife value. This will be achieved by felling some of the conifers, to allow trees like oak, birch and rowan more light and space, as well as to permit these native trees to set seed. Because old pines and standing dead trees are important habitats for insects and hole-nesting birds, like the great spotted woodpecker, they are retained wherever possible. Some areas of these woods adjacent to heathland maybe restored back to heath.

HEATHLAND

This specialised habitat still survives in the centre of the site, as trees have mainly colonised from the edge. An open landscape of heather with scattered scrubs and isolated trees, it is of immense importance for wildlife.

On the heath in summer watch out for dragonflies hunting small insects.

Dragonflies are fascinating, beautiful insects: they can fly at up to 30 mph and even their names are delightful, like the brilliant emerald. Look out for lizards basking in open, sunny spots amongst the heather.

SCRUB

Birds like the nightjar nest on the ground in mature heather areas and scrubby woodland edge habitats. They nest on the heath because their main food source is nocturnal insects like moths, which the nightjars hunt by sight over the open heath. You will see thick areas of trees on the heath which are deliberately managed for nightjars. Nightjars overwinter in Africa and return to breed on the heath in May, then after raising their young return to Africa at the end of August. While breeding on the Common they mark their territory with their unique eerie and mysterious 'churring' song.

(Please make a special effort to control your dog during the bird-nesting season, February-September, to reduce disturbance to ground-nesting birds.)

HEATHLAND RESTORATION

Heathland restoration is undertaken initially by tree clearance, then the remaining humus material that has built up under the trees is removed. Exposing the bare soil allows heather seedlings to germinate, often from seed that has lain dormant for up to 80 years. Restored heathland, with young heather plants and areas of bare ground, is an ideal habitat for woodlark. This bird, which is similar to a skylark, is an extremely scarce species, it was recorded here in 1960 and did not reappear to breed again at Ockham until 1995. This demonstrates that heathland restoration is vital for rare species as well as adding to a diminishing wildlife habitat.

Surrey Wildlife Trust is restoring this important wildlife habitat in areas where it was found in the past. Areas adjacent to the existing heath have been selected making it easier for species to recolonise. All of the area below the Tower, which was previously pine woodland, has been restored to heathland.

THE SEMAPHORE TOWER GARDEN

The original Tower garden now contains several picnic tables from where you can view the Tower. In this area the first occupant, Lieutenant Harries, planted vegetables and soft fruit trees, and kept pigs and chickens. In this remote location he, like his successors, relied on the garden for much of his food.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit. If you have any comments, the Countryside Ranger for this site can be contacted on 07970 094416.

Surrey Wildlife Trust's mission is to protect and regenerate Surrey's wildlife.

The Trust is a registered charity (No: 208123). In partnership with Surrey County Council we currently manage 80 sites covering over 4,000 hectares of land, for nature conservation and public enjoyment. This includes the Trust's own nature reserves, SCC's countryside estate and land managed under access agreements with private landowners. A further 3,200 hectares are managed under a grazing contract with the MOD, making Surrey Wildlife Trust, in terms of land managed, the largest Wildlife Trust in England.

Surrey Wildlife Trust

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