



Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Limited (Community Interest Company)

Purpose of this Paper

Since Fitzgerald Farm came onto the Market, the leaders of the City Council have been actively engaged in discussions with Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Limited (BBNR) as to ways that the two organisations might work together to actively procure the farm known locally as Broken Bridges for benefit of the Salisbury residents and their visitors.

In working together many of the Environmental Strategic aims of Salisbury City Council will be addressed these include

- *Leave the car at home. Ditching the car, especially for short trips, will help reduce pollution locally. Walking and cycling wherever possible is much healthier for you and the planet.*
- *Protect and enhance biodiversity during our activities with no net loss of 'priority' habitat.*
- *Provide a platform that will deliver opportunities for more people to enjoy the wildlife on our sites by increasing access/awareness.*
- *Increasing the number of trees planted and overall canopy.*
- *Environmental climate awareness and education*
- *Improved accessibility to local nature*
- *Delivering on Wellbeing in the SCC Neighbourhood plan*

In order to realise both our objectives and for BBNR to acquire the land we would require a minimum contribution of £50,000

1. Background to the Broken Bridges Nature Reserve

Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Limited (BBNR) is a not for profit Limited Company set up in 2008 to acquire 14.2 hectares of land at Fitzgerald Farm as a nature reserve and public amenity. The Directors are currently registering as a CIC (community Interest Company).

The site lies between the suburbs of Lower Bemerton and Harnham in Salisbury Wiltshire. as outlined in red on the plan below.

The land was first offered for sale by the current owner's family in 2008/9 and Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Ltd Company was then set up and began fund raising to acquire it as a nature reserve and public amenity, gaining local support and no small success in fund raising. But the owners subsequently withdrew it from the market. The Company continued in existence with a reduced number of Directors and has continued to regularly file reports at Companies House.

During the years of low-level activity, there continued to be strong local belief that the land, which includes 2 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, should eventually come into community ownership and should be managed in a Conservation friendly manner. Historically this land has been host to a very rich range of botanical and bird species as recorded in *Footloose in Wiltshire* by Jane Holmes,¹ a diary of a local young woman growing up in Bemerton in the 1930s and 40s who described these water meadows then as Paradise. But returning to visit in the 1990s, Jane saw it as Paradise Lost², after decades of unsympathetic farming and neglect.

The land BBNR Limited plan to purchase is part of what was previously known as Fitzgerald Farm, the remainder of the farm having been sold to two separate private owners. The total acreage is 35 acres or 14.2 hectares of land, approximately 3 acres of pasture, 9 acres of Woodland and 1 acre of river. It includes the true right-hand bank of the river Nadder, two small islands and the river itself as far as the centre, which forms the eastern boundary of the planned reserve. The river is part of the River Avon Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC), two of the highest levels of protection for sites of nature conservation value.

There are no buildings on the land but it is crossed by public footpath NHAM4 and adjoins Byway Open to all Traffic NHAM11. The land is currently listed as an Asset of Community Value by Wiltshire Council, expiry date July 2024, and is currently registered as such on the Land Registry being offered for sale by the owner through Savill's Estate Agents in Winchester.

There is considerable local enthusiasm for bringing the site into community ownership and managing it so as to restore biodiversity and as a source of exercise, enjoyment of wildlife and nature for the people of Salisbury, evidenced in the 220 comments on the application for registration as an Asset of Community Value in December 2023. These are attached as Appendix 1.

Just one such comment from a member of the public, by way of illustration:

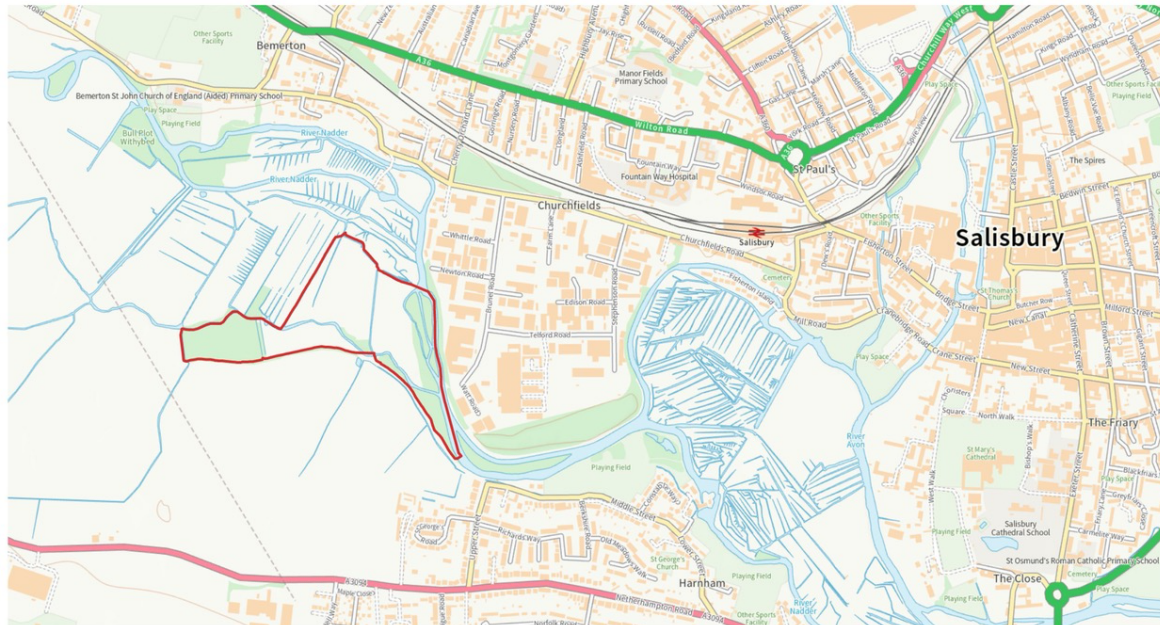
Designation of the site as an Asset of Community Value to preserve (and potentially improve) the ecological diversity in this little area of undeveloped land must surely be not only a positive action but also the most logical one. It is frequently waterlogged and the (Broken Bridges) footpath often flooded making crossing between Bemerton & Harnham wet-footed affair, even in wellies. With some management & maintenance by knowledgeable volunteer groups the flora and fauna could blossom. Some improvement of footpath areas with provision of seating etc would make this area more

¹ HobNob Press, 2008)

² Paradise Lost by Jane Holmes article in Wiltshire Life, July 1996

accessible. With so many areas being developed there are precious few areas of 'natural' habitat left. Please, please keep this one so that it can support many species and local people enjoy it. Thank you.

Land at Fitzgerald Farm, Bemerton, Salisbury



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Land at Fitzgerald Farm, Bemerton, Salisbury, Wilts, SP2 9NG

2. Brief description of project for which we are seeking Community Ownership Funding

Our project is to purchase the land described as Fitzgerald Farm and to manage it in the local community's interest so as to restore and enhance biodiversity, provide access to nature and wildlife for local people, providing access between outlying parts of the City and improving access for people with restricted mobility.

The site lies on the flood plain of the river Nadder and forms part of the green corridor of land extending along the valley from Wilton into the heart of the city. Historically it was managed as a water meadow system and withy bed. The water meadow ditches fell into disuse at the end of the 19th C but remain evident on the ground with relic concrete bridges and structures and typical wetland vegetation marking the former ditches. The woodland is predominantly salix carr, a nationally important species, which has not been managed over recent years, with many fallen trees and natural re-growth having occurred.

Public footpath No 12 which crosses the site is a well-used route between Lower Bemerton and Harnham, though often impassable at times due to flooding. It forms a link between the north and south of the city on the western side and is used for access to employment areas and schools as well as for recreation. It proved a vital lung during the lockdowns of the pandemic.

Travelling from Harnham the path crosses Spring Creek, on a humpback bridge, and then lies between the meadows to Lower Bemerton. At some point the surface of the path would have been tarmac, there are small sections of this surface remaining. It is currently not in a good state of repair, with tree roots, mud and large puddles in wet weather and is subject to flooding from Spring Creek adjacent to the footbridge, making it inaccessible to wheelchair users, difficult for buggies and often impassable for pedestrians unless wearing the right footwear. The section adjacent to the woodland is falling away and needs structural repair.

The site is at risk from a number of factors that can be summarised as the further degradation of the biodiversity and wildlife through unsympathetic ownership and management and consequent lack of investment. It is the belief of BBNR Directors that community ownership, offering the opportunity for investment from a combination of grants and crowd funding is essential to the preservation and enhancement of the site.

Conservation status

- The River Nadder and Spring Creek together with their banks are part of the River Avon System SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and SAC (Special Area of Conservation).
- The meadows to the east of Broken Bridges PROW were designated as a County Wildlife Site in 2002 on account of the diversity of flora. The western meadows were designated as a County Wildlife site in 2002 as a floodplain grazing marsh, which is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat.
- The owner at that time entered into a Countryside Stewardship agreement to enable him to fence the land and introduce light grazing. However recent neglect and under grazing has led to a marked deterioration in plant diversity and in its present state the land is now unlikely to be accepted as County Wildlife Site standard.
- The carr woodland is a rare habitat in Wiltshire but with no current protected status.
- The UK Biodiversity Action Plan identifies species of local, national and international importance including otters, water voles, bats and a number of red book plant and bird species.

The area provides an invaluable opportunity to experience the countryside on the doorstep of the city and is much loved by local people for its unspoilt rural character. Whilst it is possible that a sympathetic farmer might purchase the land and operate it in a much more environmentally friendly way, the Directors of BBNR believe that the opportunities that community ownership offers, allowing us to enhance biodiversity and expand use in a way that protects wildlife and its rural nature, allows local people access to nature and allows the development of a programme with partners in the health and voluntary sectors to enhance health and wellbeing.

In particular we believe that there is a real opportunity for ongoing community engagement initially accessing crowd funding to help with the restoration: in a notable local example a listed Grade 2* church less than a mile from the proposed nature reserve has raised £.75M from a combination of grants and crowd funding and has successfully operated as a much loved community centre since 2016 serving school, church and community, currently with a substantial operating surplus. Once up and running, working with partners BBNR Directors plan to offer opportunities for community engagement in both conservation activities and health and wellbeing programmes.

We know that much more needs to be done to improve access and encourage wide community involvement, and we also know that access must be carefully balanced to ensure protection of the wildlife interest so that the reserve is improved and managed for the benefit of both wildlife and people. The Directors have developed a Conservation Management plan to develop this approach. A phased approach to delivery allows for achievement of the objectives over a period of time.

3. Importance of the site

- An area of rural character immediately adjacent to Salisbury's suburban areas of Harnham and Bemerton.
- An important natural green space traversed by a public right of way close to the local community with potential for enhanced biodiversity and improved public access, with the opportunity to explain the importance of the habitats and wildlife and to involve people in their care.
- An important natural corridor linking outlying suburbs of Salisbury and providing links to schools, employment opportunities and public transport.
- An important example of unimproved, neutral wet meadowland with significant floristic diversity, including early marsh orchid which is uncommon in Wiltshire, the nationally scarce green helleborine, yellow loosestrife, meadow rue and tubular water dropwort, a red list species.
- A rare example of wet woodland and riverine habitat of SSSI quality important for otters, water voles, water crowfoot, bullhead, brook lamprey and kingfisher. The woodland supports 10 species of bat, many resident and summer visiting breeding birds and the Desmoulin's Whorl Snail.
- Mature hedges important for breeding birds such as bullfinch, linnet and yellowhammer.

4. Evidence of Community Support

During the process of registering the land as an Asset of Community Value (ACV), Wiltshire Council undertook a planning consultation over a 2-week period in December 2023. Despite very little publicity this resulted in overwhelming public support with over 220 responses gathered.

(Responses can be seen on the Wiltshire Council Planning portal the link is <https://development.wiltshire.gov.uk/pr/s/planningapplication/a0i3z00001BDqN0AAL/acv202300026l>)

Comments were predominantly about the importance of this land for quiet recreation, the enjoyment of seeing wildlife close to where they live, the benefits of being close to nature for families with children and for those who are unable to travel further afield. Some mentioned that the land had deteriorated through neglect and looked forward to its restoration by better management and improvements to the footpath to allow access for all.

On May 18th 2024 BBNR took part in the well established People in the Park event organised by Salisbury Transition City. This well established event draws together a wide range of community and environmental groups and is well attended by local people. We talked to over 200 people on the stand and around the event Broken Bridges stand, all were enthusiastic in support of the scheme. Comments left at the stand are attached as Appendix 3B). We also received significant indications of financial support, including a private pledge of £10,000 and were told that sympathetic consideration would be given bids for grants from 3 local environmental organisations.

5. Summary

Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Ltd (Community Interest Group) is seeking the support of the Environment and Climate Committee to enable the City council to discuss appropriate funding for this project.