



The Gatwick Landscape

By David Bangs

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Foreword

By Tony Whitbread

A second runway at Gatwick would require 577 ha of land for the construction of the runway, terminal, car parks and new on-airport roads. It would mean the demolition of 17 listed buildings, five of them listed grade 2*, and would fill up almost all the land between the present airport and the town of Crawley.

The consequent extra employment would also require the construction of a large number of houses: according to the Airports Commission under 10,000, but according to consultants commissioned by the West Sussex County Council around 40,000. Whatever the actual number, this would be bound to create extensive urbanisation, and loss of natural landscape and wildlife habitats.

This paper concentrates on the land directly affected. Much of it is owned by speculator companies hoping to make a killing if the runway gets the go-ahead. To the casual passer-by it may appear as a rather scruffy and untidy bit of countryside and it is often dismissed by Gatwick Airport as 'only a few fields'. Yet this study shows that it has unrecognised value.

We should not be surprised by this. It is often the undeveloped apparently neglected land which has the greatest value for flora and fauna. We might think of Salisbury Plain and the Purbeck firing ranges as classic examples. But Gatwick lies within a rich part of the Low Weald of Sussex - a complex area with a rich and varied landscape history inevitably reflected in its ecological richness. Not far away are ancient woodlands, with bluebells, wood anemone and rare trees like small-leaved lime and wild service trees. Hedgerows crisscross the area, themselves ancient features dating from well before the enclosures of a couple of centuries ago. And it is even still possible to find flower-rich meadows in forgotten corners of the Low Weald not too far from Gatwick.

The area in this study is therefore a microcosm of a larger Low Wealden landscape. It may be all the more precious because of its closeness to an urban area, indeed this very closeness might have isolated it from the agricultural intensification that has effected much of the countryside.

Rather than dismissing this as "a few fields" Dave Bangs has made a careful study of this area. His emotive account is the perspective of an expert who loves every aspect of nature. He reveals the hidden riches of a place which could be bulldozed into oblivion.

Tony Whitbread



Dr Tony Whitbread is the Chief Executive of Sussex Wildlife Trust and is also the national spokesman on woodland issues for The Wildlife Trusts.

*Cover photo:
North of Charlwood Road: swallows, rooks, martins and skylarks*

The landscape quality

The countryside directly threatened by the proposal for a Gatwick second runway is a patchwork of loved urban fringe green spaces, ancient landscape features, and wildlife sites with great ecological continuity and cultural importance.

The countryside of the upper River Mole is a flat land, a landscape of horizontals. This is the source of its tranquillity, its restfulness. At its core it is punctuated only by curtains of tall trees (shaws) and their verticality brings a feeling of dignity to the land, like the dignity of a civic hall, or an ancient church, mosque, or temple.

Calm restfulness and dignity... these are the feelings which this Low Wealden countryside especially brings to us. And in this vale of the Mole these landscape features – flatness, the freely wandering river, the curtains of tall trees – are at their very best.

Nowhere else in the central Low Weald combines this thoroughgoing flatness with this heavy timbering of ancient shaws to the degree found in Langley Green and Charlwood's countryside. The jewel in the crown of this countryside is the wooded River Mole and the farming and recreational landscape of meadow and shaw that surrounds it, north of Langley Green at Willoughby Fields, Amberley Farm, Bonnet's Lane, and Lowfield Heath.

Both banks of the river Mole between Ifield Avenue Bridge and the Airport perimeter road are graced by an archaic linear wood – over a mile long – which supports many ancient woodland herbs and woody species. In our partial surveys we have counted 23 such species of high indicative value, and this figure rises to 26 with the inclusion of species growing in adjacent shaws. This linear river wood has a scatter of Small Leaved Limes, a rare species of exceptional indicative value.



Wildwood relic – Small Leaved Lime on the Mole bank

SPECIAL ANCIENT WOODLAND SPECIES

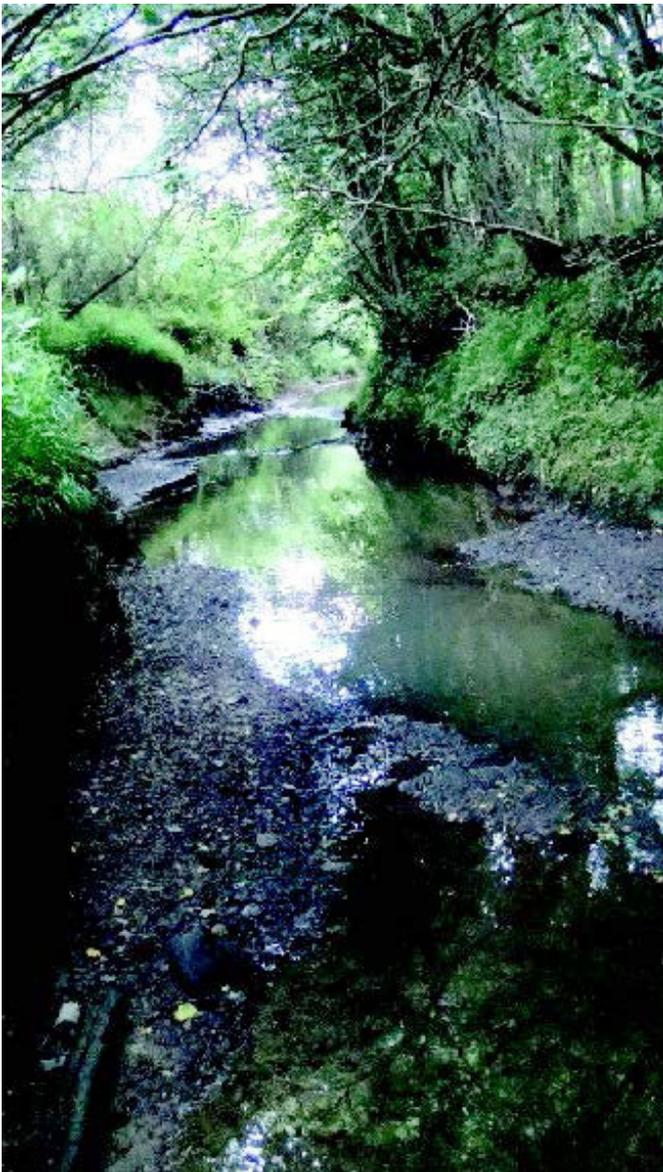
<i>Black Bryony</i>	<i>Hornbeam</i>	<i>Soft Shield Fern</i>
<i>Bluebell</i>	<i>Maple</i>	<i>Small Leaved Lime</i>
<i>Bush Vetch</i>	<i>Midland Thorn</i>	<i>Wood Anemone</i>
<i>Cherry (Gean)</i>	<i>Moschatel (Dutchman's Clock)</i>	<i>(Windflower)</i>
<i>Crab Apple</i>	<i>Pendulous Sedge</i>	<i>Wood Club Rush</i>
<i>Field Rose</i>	<i>Pignut</i>	<i>Yellow Archangel</i>
<i>Guelder Rose</i>	<i>Primrose</i>	<i>Three Veined Sandwort</i>
<i>Hart's Tongue Fern</i>	<i>Ramsons (Wild Garlic)</i>	<i>Wild Service Tree</i>
<i>Holly</i>	<i>Remote Sedge</i>	<i>Wood Melick.</i>

Fossil meanders

This stretch of the Mole retains many of its ancient meanders, and others are 'fossilised' within adjacent fields. The little 'Oxbow Wood' west of Amberley Farmstead, preserves such a 'cut-off' or 'oxbow' meander. There is Ramsons (Wild Garlic) and Midland Thorn on the old banks, and Gipsywort in the mud of the lost meander. The meadow next to (northeast of) the Oxbow Wood also has a 'fossil' meander preserved as a marshy depression.



Part of the Mole bank at Amberley Farm, and the shaw that runs from the bank behind the farmhouse, mark the historic county boundary. In the shaw is a fine veteran Oak pollard that passes muster as a new 'County Oak'. Near to it is the 'Woodpecker Oak', a fine standard with a stack of at least four nest holes, noisily inhabited by a green woodpecker family.



The river-bed runs in a tunnel of trees between lush green banks, hidden from view. Pools and shafts of sunlight make the lush greenery glow and the rippling water twinkle. Beautiful Demoiselles (sort of Dragonflies with blue/violet males and bronze females) flit across these watery glades. You could be in the primeval wildwood, or the jungle. In the summer, when water levels are low, it is possible to walk along large parts of the river bed. If you are lucky a patrolling Kingfisher may flash by – a blue streak of light.

Parts of the river bed are made of hard plates of rock which make sills over which the water trickles. Where the wet rocks are exposed tribes of iridescent green White Tipped Signal Wing Flies hop about, the males waving their wings frantically to attract the females. Elsewhere there is gravel, and you may find an old duck mussel shell. On the damp, shaded banks are primitive plants scarce changed from before the age of the dinosaurs: Greasewort, Great Scented Liverwort, Dotted Thyme Moss, Harts Tongue Thyme Moss.

Archaic meadows

The cluster of unimproved and part-improved meadows north of Langley Green is an extraordinary survival. Judged conservatively, some 11 meadows survive in an archaic state and at least four others have areas of archaic meadow vegetation.

The Amberley Farm meadows are traditional hay meadows, some with great colour and diversity of wild flowers. The rare Southern Marsh Orchid – glowing carmine red – is present, with Spotted Orchid, Grass Vetchling (also carmine red) and much colour from Vetches, Trefoils, Clovers, Knapweed and Buttercups. There are many kinds of grasses, too. Sweet Vernal Grass dominates in springtime, and Yorkshire Fog and Bent Grass in high summer.

The Willoughby Fields meadows are largely wet rush pastures, with much Soft Rush and Compact Rush, Yorkshire Fog, and Creeping Buttercup, as well as Ladies Smock (Milkmaids), Common Spotted Orchid and Oval Sedge. The colours modulate though yellow and coppery greens, browns, dark, almost Prussian greens, fawns and leaf greens, splashed white from Dropwort umbels and yellow from Trefoils and Buttercups.



Southern Marsh Orchid. Photo by Crystal Ray



There is a small and jewel-like fragment of old flower meadow in the crook of a Mole meander, with Yellow Rattle, Crosswort and much Bird's Foot Trefoil. There are Green Veined White butterflies in spring and Common Blues, Browns and Skippers in summer. In the damp winter you may see a ghostly white Egret on watch.

There are old farm ponds in several fields Southern Marsh Orchid. Photo by Crystal Ray Common Spotted Orchid corners, now vegetating up, but with Flote Grass, tadpoles, Water Crowfoot and Marsh Bedstraw still present.

Common Spotted Orchid corners, now vegetating up, but with Flote Grass, tadpoles, Water Crowfoot and Marsh Bedstraw still present.

Shaws and the ancient field pattern

The ancient field pattern of outgrown hedges and shaws around the Mole and the Langley Green Brook has been preserved intact to a very high degree. In the areas of Willoughby Fields and Amberley Farm this field pattern is almost wholly intact, 'preserved in aspic' despite the passing of at least 140 years since the 1870 First Edition Ordnance Survey, and probably much longer.

These shaws support stands of the handsomest maiden Oaks, and much Ash and Maple. Their understory is of Hazel, Blackthorn, Hawthorn, Holly and Sallow. They support, too, scarce Wild Service Tree, Midland Thorn, Crab Apple, Hornbeam, Guelder Rose and

Field Rose. The scarce Brown Hairstreak, whose caterpillars live on the abundant Blackthorn, and Speckled Wood, are their special butterflies. In springtime they have abundant Bluebells and are daisy-white with Greater Stitchwort. Then they are full of the music of Song Thrush and Warblers, Nightingale, too, occasionally. Yellowhammers breed there.

Birds Foot Trefoil meadow

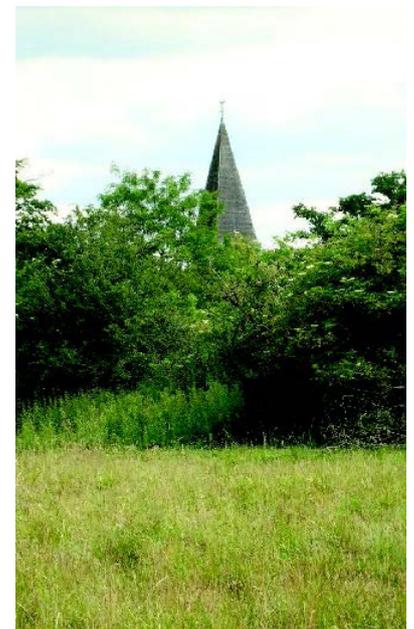


Lowfield Heath: an intact enclosure landscape

Lowfield Heath largely preserves the pattern of field, hedge and shaw laid down at enclosure of the common in 1846. The sub-landscape has escaped all the stripping out of these features which most large scale enclosure landscapes (as in eastern England) have suffered. The field edge trees commonly date from the post-enclosure decades, and strips of post-enclosure mixed woodland have grown up to enrich this picture. Just beyond the south end of Poles Lane is an area of much older tiny fields (crofts). They were probably enclosed from Lowfield Heath Common circa 1700 or earlier – some 150 years before its main enclosure, for County Oak Cottage, there, is dated 1705, and its barn may be even older. Wild Service Tree and Hornbeam are present in the hedgerows and shaws, with fine Oaks. The fields are largely managed for hay and for horse grazing.

The boundaries of the old common can be traced in part from the location of the pre-enclosure farms and cottages, once located on the common's edge, but now set back from the ruler-straight surveyor's roads:

At least one field gives us a flavour of the vegetation of Lowfield Heath common before its 1846 enclosure. Lowfield Heath Rush Pasture lies just west of the A23 and northeast of Little Dell. It has a Sallow fringe, with large patches of Tufted Hair Grass, Soft Rush, and Sweet Grass within a matrix of shorter sward, with Creeping Buttercup and Cinquefoil. It is flat, but with shallow corrugations, and very wet in winter.



*Lowfield Heath church spire from
Crawter's Brook meadows*

Rowley Farm and Crafters Brooks country

Rowley Farm sits on a mountain, for that is how its low hill, 77m/252ft high, feels in all the placid horizontality of the Vale of the Mole. Though it is only some 17m/56ft above the level of the airport runway its winding ascent opens up fine views beyond the Airport to the wooded Weald as far as the scarp of the North Downs... and to nearby Lowfield church spire, otherwise hidden from nearer view by tall airport clutter. The site has been occupied since at least the 12 century but would need to be levelled for the new runway, involving substantial earth moving.

Much that is ancient survives at this place. Both north and east of the Farm the ancient boundaries of Rowley Green can still be traced by fences and trees, and a paddock east of the Lodge retains a smidgeon of the Green's archaic vegetation.

In front of the hovel opposite the Lodge are two fine veteran Oak pollards, both hollow and spilt, but in rude health. There is a further pollard Oak of great character – burry and gnarled – on the hilltop where the farmhouse north drive splits from the bridleway.

The timber framed Farmhouse is Elizabethan and the weatherboarded Great Barn is even older – late medieval.

Huntsgreen Wood, to the northeast is ancient, with fine Oak standards. It is a classic wet Wealden Clay wood, with much Bramble and Nettle, perhaps because of previous grazing.

Rowley Wood, to the south, is also ancient. It is a bluebell wood of Oak, Ash, and Birch, over Hazel coppice, and with some Sweet Chestnut. It is an SNCI (Site of Nature Conservation Importance). West of Crawter's Brook the old pattern of hedges and shaws is almost intact, with views north across the Oaks and Ashes to the spire of Lowfield Church.

In the countryside at risk from a second runway are a cluster of ancient 'ley' place names, which have the meaning of an 'open space within extensive woodland': – Langley, Amberley, Tinsley, Rowley, and Horley. They demonstrate that large scale ancient woodland survived very late in this area.



Pollard oak, Rowley Green with Lowfield Heath church spire

Bonnets Lane's country

Though Bonnet's Lane can be busy with traffic it still retains the character of a winding Low Wealden lane, shaded by shaws, an ancient wood, hedgerows and trees.

At the Lane's southern junction with Charlwood Road is Stafford Green which still, in part, retains its archaic wet pasture vegetation. It is a remarkable survival of the once-continuous roadside 'waste' between the two linked commons of Ifield Wood and Ifield Green. In spring it is decorated with Ladies Smock/Milkmaids and in early summer its western side has a lovely display of Marsh Woundwort and Meadowsweet, Codlins and Cream and Water Dropwort, with much Spiked Sedge.

To the east of Bonnet's Lane are sheep and horse pastures dropping gently down to the Mole. Many of the fine old hedges survive. At the south end of the Lane, just east of Stafford House, is a brook meadow with fine 150-200 year old Oaks on its northern boundary. Just to the north, between the Bonnet's Lane houses and the river is a wooded-over brook meadow and cut-off meander, a fine bird refuge, sheltering an especially secluded length of the Mole.

Bonnets Copse is an ancient Bluebell wood, with many shallow pits, making a wet, irregular surface. There are many young Oak standards and scattered Hornbeam stools, a peppering of Scot's Pine, and a good sub-shrub layer of Bramble, with abundant Blackthorn and Broad Buckler Fern.

At the north end of Bonnet's Lane, just over the old county boundary into Surrey, is an archaic grass pasture. Once probably part of the old Westfield Common, it gives some indication of that common's historic vegetation. Wet and tussocky, it has big Tufted Hair Grass swarms, Spiked Sedge, Compact and Soft Rush, Tall Fescue and Water Dropwort. Water Mint is fragrant underfoot... A lovely wild place.



Stafford Green, Marsh Woundwort

Charlwood road country



Skylarks can be heard singing, joined by flocks of Swallows, Martins and Rooks.

North of the Charlwood Road, between Bonnet's Lane and the Ifield Road, is the site of the late medieval Ifield Deer Park, commemorated by the Little Park Farm place name. The mansion of Ifield Hall is now demolished, but its parkland and outbuildings are partly intact, with some archaic grassland south of the drive, and a fine three span girth veteran Oak to its north, as well as mature shaws along the Charlwood Road and Bonnet's Lane. Just north west of the old Hall is Ifield Hall Wood. Perhaps a century old, this wood has mature mixed plantings of Oak, Lime, Horse Chestnut, Beech, Sycamore and Maple, with small numbers of other species. Plainly much loved, it is used for woodcraft activities.

Bluebells are ingressing from the western footpath, thus showing that that path may once have been linear old woodland. Furze Field is a low wood, thus demonstrating its scrubby origins. It has small Oaks, Ash, Spindle, and Blackthorn, and its boundary ditches have Yellow Flag, Marsh Thistle and Marsh Bedstraw.

Despite the roar of aircraft taking off, this is a place where Skylarks sing, Swallows sweep low over the fields, Martins flock high above our heads, and Rooks rise from the woods in companionable hubbub.

East of the London-Brighton railway

East of the London-Brighton Railway as far as the M23 the landscape's finest features are its lattice of woodlands, both ancient and secondary. Horleyland Wood and Picketts Wood are ancient, and Picketts Wood is close-linked with adjoining secondary woods, such as Upper Pickett's Wood, and old shaws and species-rich hedgerows.

Horleyland Wood is a lovely old Hazel-Oak-Birch wood, carpeted with Bluebells in spring and Bracken in the summer. The golden apples of its Crab tree grove decorate the ground through winter. Its Oaks are fine standards. It is an Site of Nature Conservation Interest. Yet it is surrounded on all sides by airport car parks, balancing ponds, the railway, and the giant sewage works, whose stench hangs in the air through the western wood. It is a 'precious fragment' surrounded by hostile land uses, and its plight only emphasises how unsatisfactory such site preservation is when the supporting landscape context is ripped out.

Fish in the newly constructed pond there swim away to cover whenever loud aircraft thunder overhead... is that the way to live for fish or people?

Picketts Wood is a lovely open, brackeney wood, with Gean (Cherry), Hazel, Hornbeam and Bluebells. To its south, Upper Pickett's Wood's proximity to these ancient woods

has enabled it to acquire a rich old woodland flora with orchids, Wood Sedge, Primroses and Bluebells.

Thanks to conservation efforts, some archaic meadow fragments survive, such as the attractive wet rush meadow east of Rolls Farm Lane and the meadow adjoining Upper Picketts.

There are fine old Oaks on the lane to Horleyland Wood and the site of Old Rolls Farm. There are two good veteran Oak pollards, both with Beefsteak Fungus, on Picketts Lane where it bounds Picketts Wood, and another fine hollow Oak pollard on the green lane to the north.

To the east of the Balcombe Road the post-enclosure field boundaries of old Horley Common are largely intact around Fern Hill and Peeks Brook Lane. Gorse and Sallow in the hedge lines, and the tiny squatters and post-enclosure cottages of Donkey Lane remind us of the area's past as heathy common (as does its original name: Fern Hill).



Pollard oak, Picketts Lane

Impacts of a second runway

Gatwick Airport's runway plan would wholly eliminate the high value landscape between the current airport and the northern edge of Crawley's built-up area. Only a thin strip of urban fringe open space would survive (chiefly, the Cherry Lane Recreation Ground and perhaps 5 horse pasture fields). It would also eliminate the post-enclosure landscape of Fernhill and what remains of the Horleyland and Picketts Lane landscape.

The runway would bring a new housing requirement equivalent to a major new town, and greatly intensified pressures on the existing transport network, water requirements, etc. It would massively erode the tranquillity and integrity of surviving countryside, with increased noise pollution and fragmentation of remaining rural sub-landscapes.

In closest proximity, such wonderful sites as Ifield Wood Common, the Burstow Meadows, the Burstow church hamlet, and the Copthorne Common Meadows would be at greatly added risk. At a wider distance, the outstanding Rusper Ridglands (the parallel ridges along the Sussex county border) with their dense cover of woodlands, gills, shaws and ancient fields) would lose much of their conservation value under the pressure of noise pollution and development. Development pressure would redouble on the lower vale of the Mole, and the upper vale of the River Arun (including Billingshurst).

The author

David Bangs is a well-known naturalist and author, and an expert on the Sussex countryside.

References

⁵ TQ 279 396

⁶ TQ 278 399

⁷ TQ 283 399

⁸ TQ 279 392

⁹ TQ 274 394

¹⁰ TQ 250 384/5

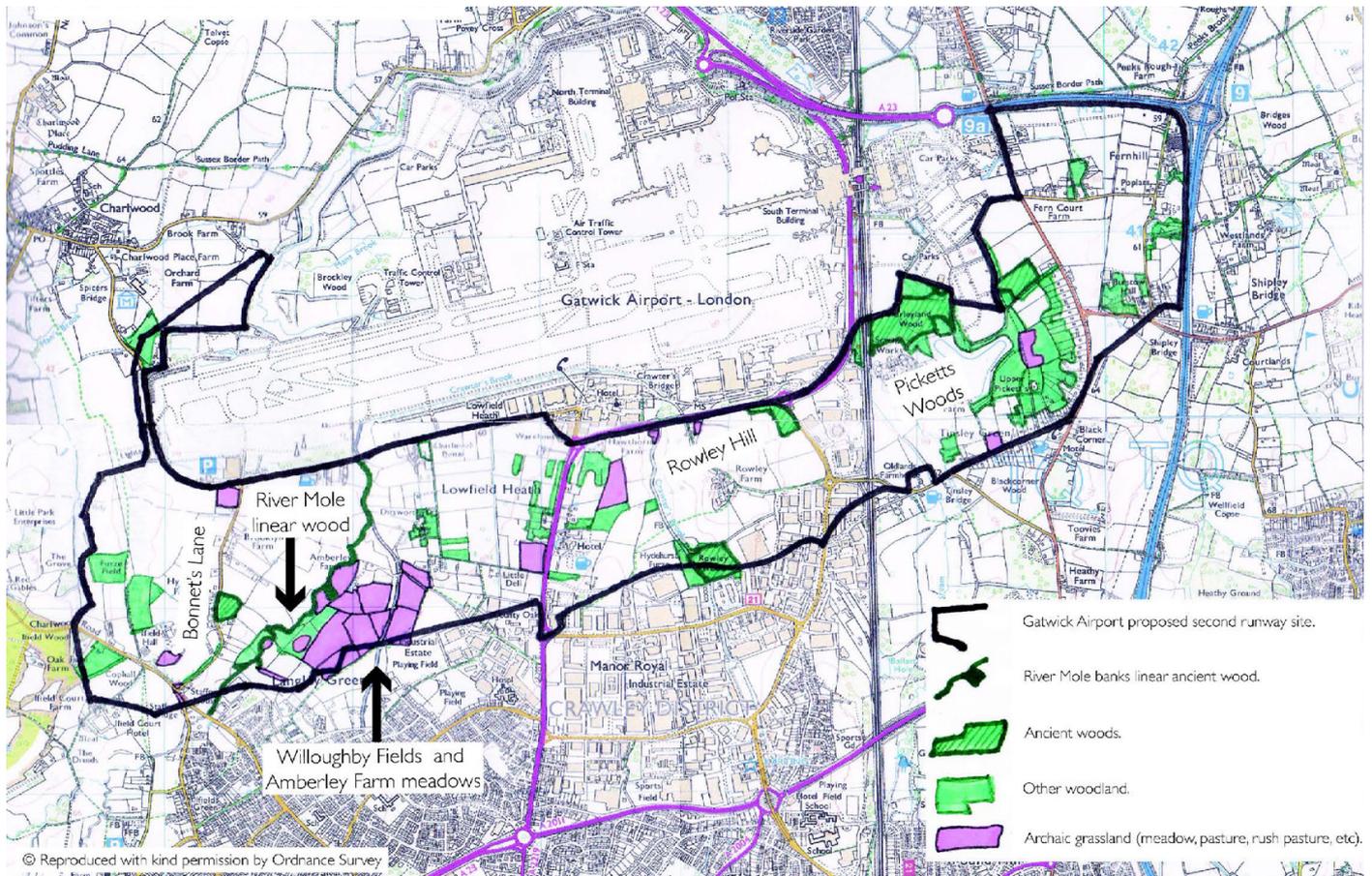
¹¹ TQ 254 387

¹² TQ 253 390,

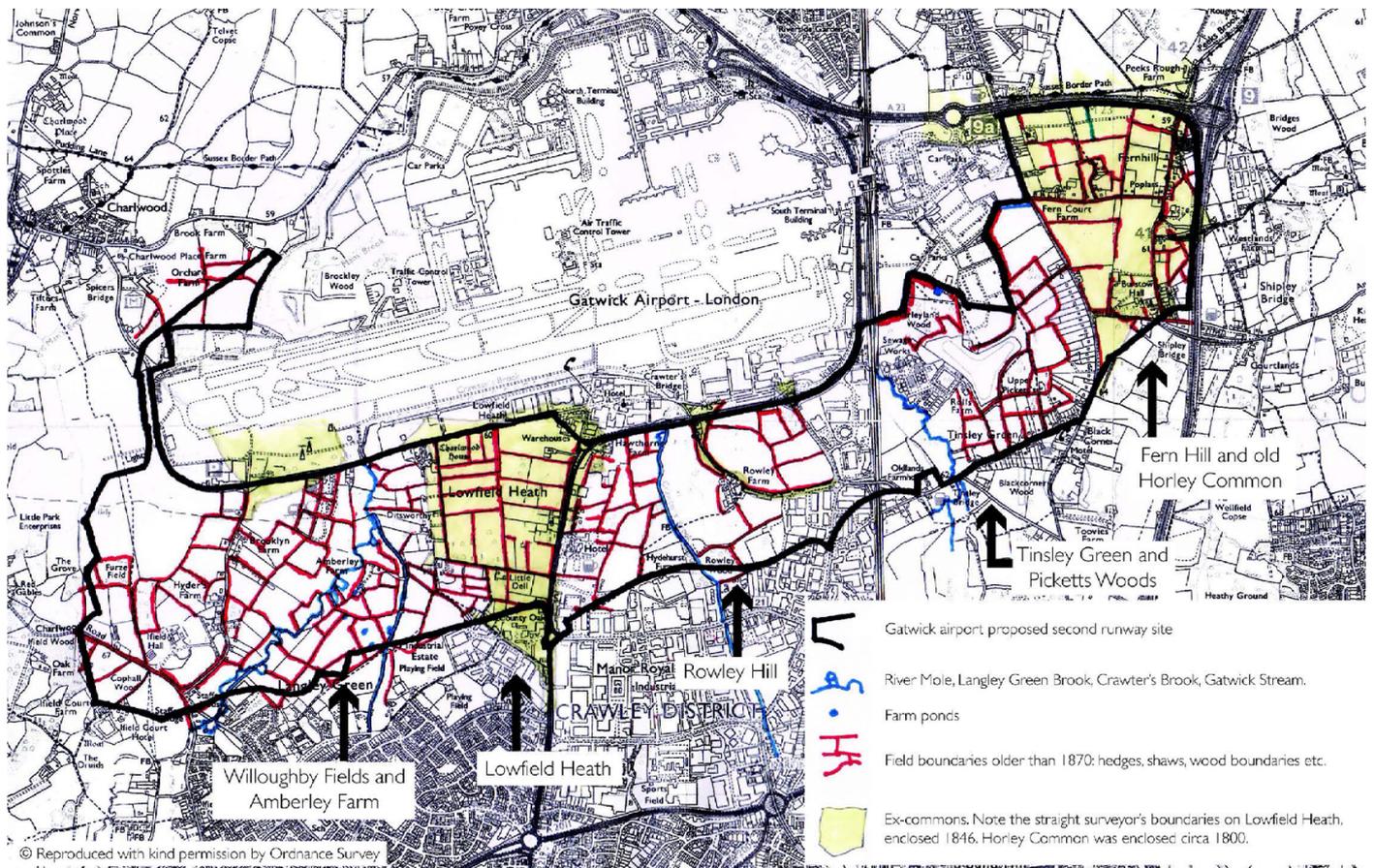
¹³ TQ 250 387

¹⁴ TQ 289 405

Woods and meadows



Ancient field boundaries



ii In this area a copy of the circa 1870 First Edition Ordnance Survey map, six inch to one mile, could be laid over the current Ordnance Survey map and the two would match exactly over large

