



# *History & Heritage*

## *Little Chalfont Nature Park*

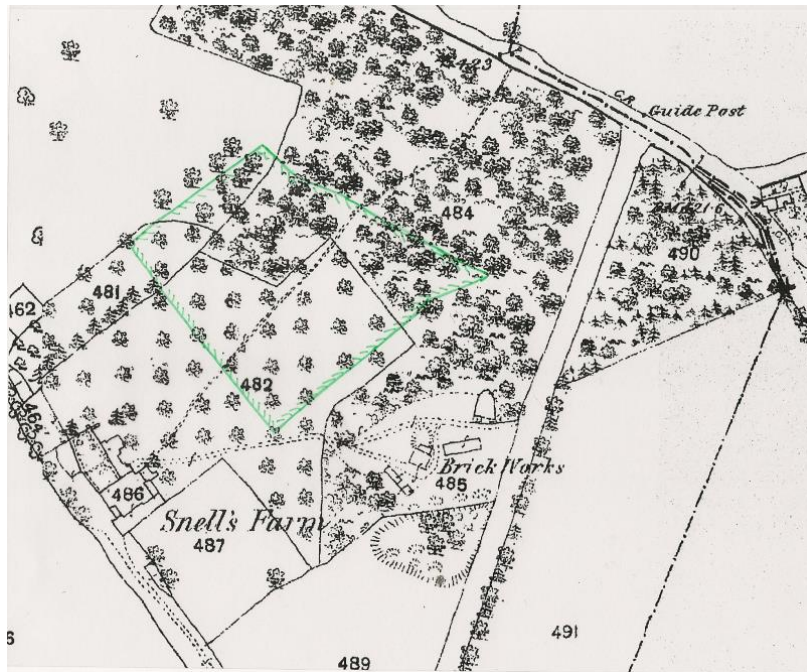


I was asked by the Little Chalfont Charitable Trust, to research the history and heritage of the site and to establish its significance in terms of its unique value as an area of conservation and special place in the history of Little Chalfont.

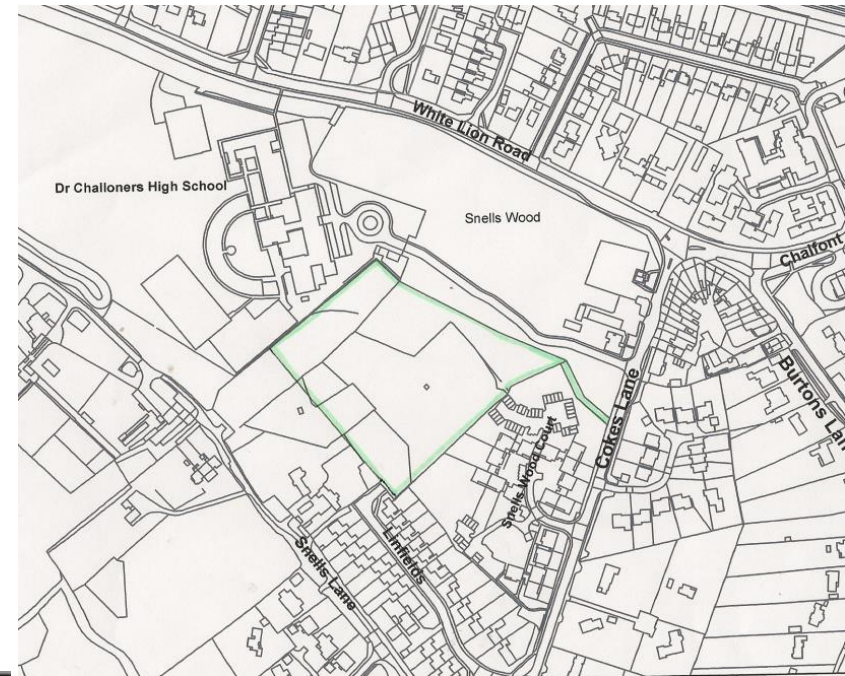
It has been both a fascinating and very enjoyable exercise.

Peggy Lancaster  
May 2015

## The Setting



1876



2011

Both maps show the position of the Nature Park outlined in green.

The 1876 map shows Snell's Farm with an orchard behind it and Snell's Wood bordering the road, now the A404.

In the 2011 map Snell's Farm is marked but not named. Dr Challoners High School has appeared and Snell's Wood is named but is much reduced in size.

Therefore it would appear that the Nature Park is on land that once belonged to Snell's Farm and was in fact an orchard. It also incorporates a small section of Snells Wood.

Going back as far as possible - where does the name Snell come from?

Ivor White in his 'History of Little Chalfont' refers to the will of Samuel Snell of Snell's Estate in 1684, so probably after that, the farm was always known as Snell's Farm.



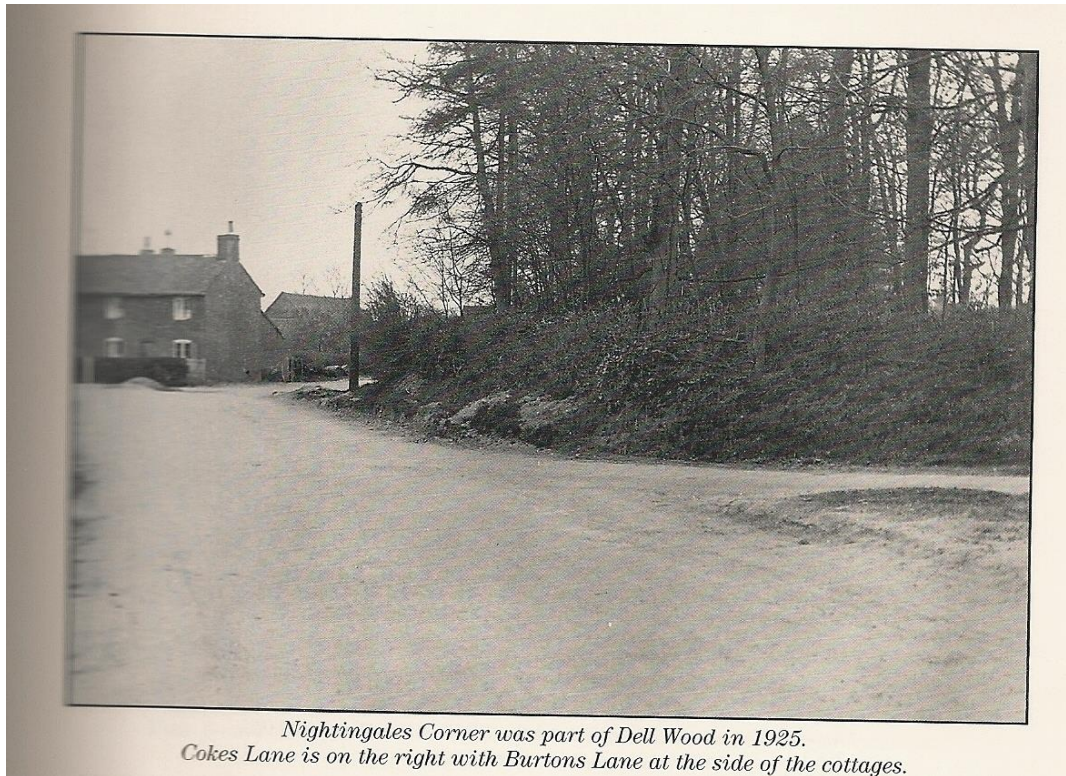


At the time of the Enclosures in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Kender Mason closed the section of Chesham Lane which ran through Beel House Estate. The remaining stretch was renamed Snells Lane. Realising that there was now no route from the south to Chesham, he asked the Enclosure Commissioners to create a new road to link the end of Snells Lane to the Amersham/Rickmansworth Road, the A404, where Nightingales Corner is now. This was done and is an extension of Cokes Lane - the only straight road in this area.

To see where the new road was constructed, below right is a later estate map of Beel House, dated 1816



Neither Beel House nor Snell's Farm are labelled but the buildings are drawn in so imagine a line from the bend in the lane in the bottom right hand corner of the map to the junction of the roads at the top. The new road can be seen on both maps on page 3.



This photo is taken from Ivor White's book and shows where the new Cokes Lane joined Nightingales Corner.

Notice that Snell's Wood is referred to as Dell's Wood, which is an earlier name. As yet there are no shops but there are cottages where the village green is now.

Another interesting fact about Kender Mason concerns the name of the public house, now a restaurant, along White Lion Road. Until 2013 it was known as The Pineapple but then recently changed its name to The Pomeroy. Both names relate to Kender Mason's son William who married into the Pomeroy family. Both the Mason and Pomeroy families owned pineapple plantations in the West Indies. There are stone pineapples on the roof of Beel House. In 1861 William Lowndes of The Bury in Chesham acquired Beel House although he didn't live there. However in a land certificate he put a restrictive covenant on an area of land belonging to Snell's Farm stopping any building that could be detrimental to Beel House. This covenant still stands today.

The land where Snell's Farm is situated could originally have been 1) Part of the Beel House Estate - in which case it could have been the Home Farm, or 2) On the Duke of Bedford's land, or 3) Owned by the Brudenell family who had land in the Chalfont St Giles area. The reality has not yet been established.

## **Snell's Brickworks/Farm**

It is not clear whether Snell's was originally a farm or brickworks but the fact that it is called Snell's Farm would indicate that it was originally a farm.

1684 Ivor White says the first mention of the farm is in the will of Samuel Snell in which a charge of £5 a year was made on the estate called Snells, 'for putting out Poor Boys Apprentices whose parents were or should be inhabitants of Agmondesham'. This later became known as The Nathaniel Snell Charity.

Recently two tiles (c1540 – 1798) were found from the barn, one inscribed Ralph Nathaniel. This seems to confirm that Nathaniel Snell operated the Brickworks on Snell's Farm in the 17/18<sup>th</sup> Century.

1763 map on page 4 gives the field names as Great Kiln Field and Little Kiln Field, indicating that there was a brickworks there then.

1774. Snell's Farm was let to John Ayres at a rent of £8 per annum. A brick kiln was in operation.

1787 Prior to this the Wingfield family owned Snell's Farm

1816 The Beel House Estate map shows workings, presumably for clay, to the east of the farm buildings.

1841 The earliest Census shows that Thomas Andrew lived in Snell's Farm and was a farmer and a brick maker. The later Census returns, see page 13, show that the subsequent inhabitants are all brick makers and/or farmers or employed someone who often lived in one of the farm cottages to do either job.



Remains of a clay pit still visible today

It is very probable that some of the holes in the Nature Park were the remains of chalk pits.

The chalk could have been used for: -

- making bricks when it would have been mixed with the clay, which gave the bricks a yellowish appearance
- or burnt in a kiln to make lime for mortar
- or the lime could be used on the land.

These chalk pits were often called dene holes especially if they were fairly large with a shaft which opened into a cave-like structure below.

When no longer in use they were covered or partially filled in.

Dene holes have been found at the old brickworks in Lane End.

Brick making was common in the Chilterns as deposits of clay could be found above the chalk. Many brickworks were small and soon disappeared as the deposits of clay were used up. Today only one brickworks remains in the area, HG Matthews near Chesham.

The two black and white photographs below were taken in HG Matthews Brickworks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and they illustrate what the brickworks at Snell's Farm would most probably have looked like.



This one on the left shows the clay being dug. If the deposit was big enough some form of lifting gear would probably have been used.

Most of the pits in the Nature Park are not as big as this but there may have been one of this size where Snell's Wood Court is now.



This is where the bricks were moulded.  
They would then be dried before going to a kiln to be fired.

## Snell's Farmhouse

The farmhouse, adjacent to the Nature Park, is of 17<sup>th</sup> century origin and a Grade II listed building. Originally it most probably had two or three bays and was built using timber-framed construction. There is also a large chimney stack as can be seen in the centre.



Here the timber framing in the interior can clearly be seen.

The farmhouse was re-fronted in brick and extended to provide an additional bay at its south eastern end in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reddish colour of the bricks is from deposits of iron oxide found in the clay. It seems highly probable that the bricks were made from clay dug on site and fired in the kiln on the farm. A cross wing at one end was also added.

Therefore it would seem that Snell's Farm was a timber framed house but at some stage bricks were used to rebuild the exterior of the farmhouse.

As can be seen in the Census Returns on pages 13 and 14, brick making continued until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last brick maker was Albert Saunders in 1901. At that time Henry Smith was the farmer but in 1911, the last accessible census, there was a bailiff in residence. Perhaps this indicates the end of Snell's as a working farm.



## Tithe Records 1840

I have outlined the land belonging to Snell's Farm in red and put in the field names according to the apportionment.

Field number 284 would have been where the brickworks were, as indicated by its name, Great Kiln Field.

Field 285 is called Little Kiln Homestead and Orchard indicating the presence of an orchard.

The total acreage was 54 acres with a value of £11.

The owners are stated as Elizabeth Charsley and James Rogers. The latter also farmed the land at that time.

The extent of the farm varied over the years.

## Pre Census Records

- 1684 Samuel Snell gave the farm its name.  
 1763 The map on page 4 shows that the owner at that time was Isaac Eeles Esq and the field names - Great Kiln Field and Little Kiln field – indicate the presence of a brickworks  
 1774 Record of a brick kiln in operation on Snell's Farm, let to John Ayres  
 1787 Prior to this date the Wingfield family owned Snell's Farm.

## Census Returns of Snell's Farm

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Place</u>          | <u>Occupier</u>          | <u>Age</u> | <u>Occupation</u>                   |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1841        | Snell's Farm          | Thomas Andrew            | 25         | Farmer, Brick maker                 |
|             |                       | Harriet, his wife        | 25         |                                     |
|             |                       | 2 agricultural labourers |            |                                     |
|             | Snell's Farm          | John Pearce              | 40         | Agricultural labourer               |
|             |                       | Mary, his wife           | 30         |                                     |
| 1851        | Snell's Farm          | Thomas Andrew            | 20         | Brick maker (emp. 7 men and 1 boy)  |
|             |                       | Unmarried, son of        |            |                                     |
|             |                       | above                    | 18         |                                     |
|             |                       | Elizabeth (sister)       | 24         | Carter                              |
|             |                       | William H.               |            |                                     |
|             | Snell's Farm Cottage  | John Pearce              | 49         | Farm labourer                       |
|             |                       | Mary, his wife           | 47         |                                     |
| 1861        | Snell's Farm          | John Andrews Sarah,      | 59         | Brick maker and Farmer 37 acres     |
|             |                       | his wife                 | 61         | employing 10 labourers              |
| 1871        | Snell's Farm and Kiln | James Clark              | 47         | Farmer of 40 (acres) and brick kiln |
|             |                       | Bertha, his wife         | 49         | employing 2 men & 1 boy             |

|      |                      |                                       |          |                            |
|------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|
|      | Snell's Kiln Cottage | John Harris Caroline,<br>his wife     | 34<br>30 | Ag labourer<br>Plaid maker |
| 1881 | Snell's Kiln         | George Puddephat<br>Rebekah, his wife | 28<br>29 | Late brick manufacturer    |
| 1891 | Snell's Farm         | Henry Smith                           | 46       | Farmer                     |
|      |                      | Sarah, his wife                       | 47       |                            |
|      | Snell's Farm         | Albert Saunders Sarah,<br>his wife    | 27<br>30 | Brick maker                |
| 1901 | Snell's Farm         | Henry Smith                           | 56       | Farmer, employer           |
|      |                      | Sarah, his wife                       | 57       |                            |
|      | Snell's Farm         | Albert Saunders                       | 39       | Brick maker                |
|      |                      | Sarah, his wife                       | 42       |                            |
|      | Snell's Farm         | William Mead                          | 47       | General labourer           |
|      |                      | Rose, his wife                        | 38       |                            |
| 1911 | Snell's Farm         | Francis Fordham                       | 28       | Estate bailiff             |
|      |                      | Mary, his wife                        | 27       |                            |

It is interesting to see how the enumerator each time classifies the buildings. There would not have been any names or numbers on the houses so it would depend on what they were known by e.g. 'Farm', 'Cottage' with 'Kiln' thrown in occasionally.

In 1881 Snell's Farm isn't mentioned at all!

There are frequently discrepancies in the ages of the people from one census to the next - possibly owing to illiteracy or of not being sure of dates of birth.

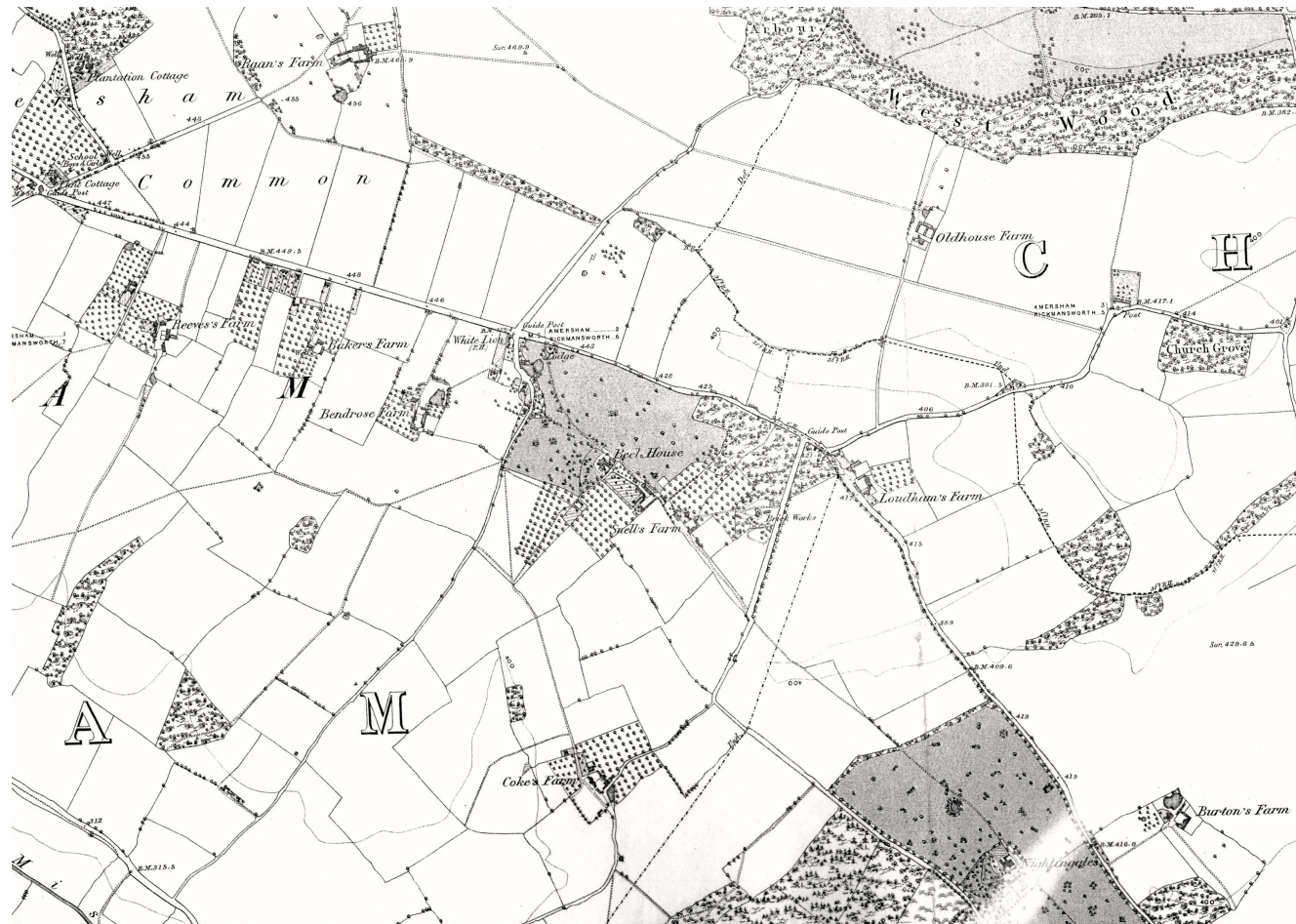
## The Twentieth Century

Until now the area, today known as Little Chalfont, had a population of approximately 100, living in a few farms, cottages and the prestigious Beel House, and situated between Amersham, Chalfont St Giles and Chenies.

This can be seen in the map below c1880's.

Snell's Farm is in the centre and the others can be seen around it.

c1880's



It might have stayed that way but in 1889 the Metropolitan Railway Company, which had built a railway line from the city out towards Amersham, opened a station originally known as Chalfont Road Station and today known as Chalfont and Latimer Station. This was a signal for the developers to move in and build houses, shops etc and in 1925 on 15<sup>th</sup> January the name Little Chalfont was officially recognised.

On the map on page 3 some of this development is clearly visible and this photograph, taken in 1993, shows the shops on Nightingales Corner.



Snell's Wood was divided by an access road to Dr Challoner's High School, which was built in 1962, and on the area roughly where the brickworks had been a large house, Shenstone, was built.



A painting of Shenstone House

Shenstone House has since been replaced by a development of houses and flats known as Snell's Wood Court. This was the site of the brickworks and the hollows and dips are a reminder of where the clay was dug.

In the 1950s Hugh Montgomery and his wife, Molly, moved into Snell's Farmhouse.

In the 1990s their son, Bryan, created a Sculpture Park in the meadow/orchard area. This was to promote outdoor sculpture made by recently graduated artists from the UK, Russia, Eastern Europe and former countries of the Soviet Union.

Each year one of these graduates was granted residency and one of these was Slawomir Brzoska from Poznan in Poland.

'Breath' by Slawomir Brzoska from Poznan, Poland



There were occasional open days when the Sculpture Park was opened to the public.

Following Bryan Montgomery's death in 2008 the sculptures were dispersed all over the country. Eight went to the Broomhill Art Hotel Sculpture Gardens just north of Barnstaple in north Devon. Others went to the Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden near Dorking and the Ragley Estate in Warwickshire.

## The Heritage of the Area



This photograph was taken on a bright day in March 2014 and gives an indication of the site as it will appear to the public when they first enter the area before any enhancements are made.

It shows the original position of the orchard and is an area of unimproved grassland, classified as MG 5 (Mesotrophic Grassland 5). Essentially it is rich in many types of grasses and wild flowers which would need to be mown once a year after flowering to allow the seeds to set and fall to the ground. Without mowing, the grass would become rank and degenerate to coarser grasses and eventually lead to scrub and woodland encroachment. After mowing the cut grass must be removed.

The many types of grasses found on the site are listed in ‘A Biological Survey’ carried out by Alistair McVean, Brian Ferry, Ross McVean and Richard Jefferies, through the company ‘Spruced-Up Ltd’.

Unimproved grassland is not only becoming very rare in England but it is one of only a few countries in the world where it occurs naturally. It is almost impossible to recreate MG 5 grassland. We have the owners of Snell’s farmhouse to thank for keeping the orchard, as opposed to selling it for development, in the years after the rest of the farmland was sold in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is because there have been no fertilisers or herbicides applied to the site that it now has the status of unimproved grassland.





Common blue butterfly



Wild daffodils



Common knapweed



Ox eye daisy



Common spotted orchid

These are just an indication of some of the flowers in the Nature Park. There are also many different types of butterflies and bees. The daffodils, while definitely wild, may have been planted and not been there for centuries. Today wild daffodils are virtually only found in the West Country or the Lake District.

The fact that it was an orchard and therefore not cultivated is paramount to its status as unimproved grassland. We know for certain that it was a mainly a cherry orchard, as this has been verified by Mary Eldon and her son David. Mary was the housekeeper at Shenstone House and they both remember the 'cherry orchard belonging to Snell's Farm at the bottom of the garden'. They also remember two small apple orchards, one of Cox's and the other cooking apples, some of which still remain.



When the land was purchased, there were only 5 cherry trees left from the orchard – all very old and some dying or even dead, as can be seen in this photo.

**Cherry orchards** were once common in this part of the Chilterns. The same clay that was used in the manufacture of bricks provided the damp conditions the cherry trees needed and the underlying chalk the necessary drainage. The trees were very tall, and well spaced out.

This photo taken in 1926 of a cherry orchard in Little Missenden indicates the height of the cherry trees at that time.



A very long ladder with a wide base for stability was needed for picking the cherries in these old orchards, as can be seen here at Flackwell Heath.

Today's orchards are much more concentrated, with smaller trees and set closer together - easier for harvesting but providing no areas of grassland.

There were several types of cherries grown in the area, one being a dessert black variety called the Prestwood Black. These were often referred to locally as 'Chuggies'. It is planned to grow a number of these local varieties in the Nature Park.

People came out from London to admire the cherry blossom in the Chilterns and possibly also to help with the harvest. Several villages or public houses celebrated the end of the harvest by a 'Cherry Pie Fair' or 'Cherry Pie Sunday' when cherry pies were enjoyed by all. The increase of fruit growing in Kent and Herefordshire, and eventually abroad, led to the demise of the cherry orchards in Bucks.

Part of the ancient woodland before clearance – 2014

Along the northern edge of the park adjacent to the road to Dr Challoner's High School is an area of woodland, a segment of the larger ancient semi-natural woodland, Snell's wood.

John Morris of the Chiltern Woodland Project prepared a comprehensive Woodland Management Plan in 2013. This detailed everything that needed to be done including protection, maintenance and work programmes, both prior to the opening of the Nature Park and thereafter. His recommendations, with the approval by the Forestry Commission were implemented in 2015. (The Management Plan is available from the Little Chalfont Charitable Trust).



He also noted an old boundary bank with hornbeam stumps and evidence of an old track across the meadow. This is marked on the map on page four. It started at the farmhouse, crossed the orchard and went through Snells Wood until reaching the White Lion Road. This track is barely discernible now but there is just a suggestion of its position and existence.

The Biological Survey mentioned on page eighteen, also supplied a 'baseline' survey of all the trees in the Nature Park, its invertebrates, mammals and birds.

Apart from the beech trees there are also Oak, Lime, Sycamore, Scots Pine and others. Of particular note are a Western Red Cedar, a Dawn Redwood, a remarkable very old twisted Hornbeam and last but not least, a Metasequoia (a deciduous conifer), that may have come from China.

It has been learned that Mollie Montgomery, during her 62 years in Snell's farmhouse, had plants sent to her from overseas. Many of these that were planted in the garden of the farm house have disappeared but perhaps the Metasequoia, the Dawn Redwood, and some others in the Nature Park date from this time.

The Survey also identified 37 different species of invertebrates on the site, owing to the diverse habitats available. This would provide an excellent opportunity for educational activities.

In addition, seventeen types of birds were noted, along with 4 mammals – a fox, a muntjac deer, a roe deer and grey squirrels. Bats too have been seen flying around the site and a small roost of common pipistrelle bats was found in a roof of the farmhouse. No roost was been found on the site itself.

## **Summary**

Properly managed, the site can provide a habitat for a wide variety of species that are interdependent of each other.

Following the opening of the railway station in Little Chalfont at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a frenzy of building. This was on land that included most of the fields that had been part of Snell's Farm, but it is thanks to the Montgomery family, and the previous occupants, that the orchard and woodland were retained.

As a result we now have a haven, almost in the middle of the village, that is preserved for today's residents, young and old, to enjoy a few moments of quiet to experience nature at first hand away from the noise and bustle of the shops and cars.

In today's thinking, any time spent in the countryside is beneficial to one's physical and emotional well being and certainly a little time spent in the Nature Park would fulfil this criteria.

## **Sources**

- A History of Little Chalfont by Ivor White
- Molly Montgomery's Autobiography
- The Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Aylesbury
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- A Biological Survey of Little Chalfont Nature Park
- Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Action Plan
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- <http://hannahpescharsculpture.com>
- <http://ragley.co.uk>

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- Verena Clark – Chiltern Open Air Museum
- Anthony and Christina Hawkins - Snell's Farm
- David and Paddy Goble - Snells Lane
- A. E. Kempster – Snells Lane
- Paul Holloway – Dr Challoner's High School
- Trafford Matthews - HG Matthews Chesham
- Andrea Sansom - Chesham Library Study Centre
- Alistair Mcvean – Spruced-up Ltd



# *Little Chalfont Nature Park*

*A hidden gem in the Chilterns*

