Landscape Assessment. January 2014.

**Rural Hampshire at its best.**

Residential in character, St Mary Bourne has a particularly rural Hampshire quality. It is located within the North Wessex Downs and is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) The Bourne Rivulet meandering through the Village has been influential over the centuries in shaping the essential layout of the community. Apart from the larger village of St Mary Bourne, the parish also includes a smaller village called Stoke as well as the hamlets of Binley, Egbury, and Upper, Middle and Lower Wyke and Wadwick. The old hamlet of Swampton, which is close by the village school, has been incorporated into St. Mary Bourne as has also the area referred to as The Link which stretches out south to the viaduct and thence to the borders of the next door parish of Hurstbourne Priors.

**The valley in which the Parish of St Mary Bourne is located has a history of habitation that goes back some 700,000 years.** As an ancient settlement it was probably amongst the earliest in Britain.

Within a two kilometre radius of St Peter’s, the 12th Century Parish Church (circa 1157) of St Mary Bourne, there have been some twenty historic finds dating back to the prehistoric and Roman occupation periods. English Heritage on its PastScape web site refers to indications of Roman settlement (Monument No: 232070) in St Mary Bourne. Indications of a ‘surface scatter’ of brick, roof tiles and pottery suggest the possible site of a villa. Additional finds in the parish range from a lower Palaeolithic hand axe to a presumed Saxon burial. A Celtic field system has also been noted.

Early mention of St. Mary Bourne is obscure. In ancient documents it is described as being part of the Manor of Hurstbourne Priors. Historical inference would imply that St Mary Bourne was to all intents and purposes an agricultural asset of the Manor. Twice the area of Hurstbourne Priors, most of the land was put to arable use and woodland. The area of grassland was proportionately lower than Hurstbourne Priors suggesting that the seat of the Manor favoured acres of grass and parkland.

A local historian observed that St Mary Bourne was traditionally the agrarian centre and economic hub of the old Manor. In many ways, the ‘New York’ to Hurstbourne Priors ‘Washington’. The villages of St Mary Bourne and Stoke form a conservation area.

St Mary Bourne was considered so especially healthy that it used to be said that “those born in the village would live as long as they liked”. A list drawn up from the Burials Book, between the years 1826 and 1883, gives the names of 16 people who lived to be over 90, one William Bunce being 97 and the last on the list, Mary Goodyear reaching her hundredth birthday.

**With the dominance of agricultural and forestry extending back beyond the Domesday Book (Swampton Mill), the Kings of Wessex and even further into the Bronze Age and prehistory, the Parish of St Mary Bourne maintains a unique agrarian identity.**

The Bourne Rivulet divides the parish in half running north west to southeast. With a varying seasonal flow, it is a tributary of The Test, the world renowned chalk stream, famous for fly fishing. As an overflow stream to chalk aquifers, The Bourne, fed by natural springs, rises in the winter months. The depth and rate of flow is determined by the previous months’ rainfall. At least two thirds of its length dries out in summer and the early autumn months.

**Several important ancient tracks run close by the village.** This includes the ‘Harroway’, originally a pack horse route from Cornwall to Kent and the ‘Portway’, a Roman road running parallel to the north east/south east boundary. This road connected Old Sarum to Silchester. Although bisected by significant ancient routes the village was not a staging post. Most traffic passed through the Parish which, invariably contributed to the self sufficient, isolated nature of the locality. Until the 1950’s the livelihood of most parishioners was from farming. Farming is still a major player in the life of the Parish and within the valley. Much of the land is ‘Grade 2 and Grade 3a ‘farmland.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE, CHERISHING THE PAST.

*The landscape of the area is influenced by centuries of farming activity.*

Although one twelfth of the area of the Parish was covered in woodland in the 19th century,

a fair percentage was lost in the 20th century. In the last 15 years or so there has been restoration of woodland with broad leaf trees planted for commercial use.

In a leaflet entitled ‘Exploring St. Mary Bourne’ issued by Hampshire County Council, four walks are recommended to visitors varying from 0.5 of a mile to 5 miles with an estimated duration varying respectively from 20 minutes to 2.5 hours.

For the purposes of this Landscape Assessment, the group consulted the map of the Parish, and instituted four circular walks which would provide an accurate impression of the byways and access available to walkers of all abilities. To a great extent a typical sample of what the valley and the Parish have to offer. On these walks, we noted landscape sightlines and the variation of the countryside from open spaces to wooded areas. We also took the opportunity to observe the particular flora and fauna of the locality as a whole.

The 44 mile Test Way ( from Inkpen Beacon in Berkshire to Eling Wharf, Hampshire) runs through the Parish and is much loved and used by walkers who often divert to visit St Peter’s, use the shop or enjoy one of our public houses. We were able to venture on to our parish section of the Test Way in two of our walks.

Well attended by villagers, these exploratory walks took place on various days of the week and all within the month of October. In terms of flora and fauna this gave us a rich, winter perspective of the natural world. On all four walks we were lucky to have fine dry weather.

The first of these walks started from the St Mary Bourne Recreation Ground, a large expanse of grass used for sporting and social activities. On its south side there is a lake containing a wide variety of wildlife. The lake, generously stocked with Brown Trout by a fishing syndicate, is also home to an Andover based model yacht club which meets for regattas on Sunday mornings through most of the year. From its southern end water flows from the lake to once more join the Bourne and progress a course, through traditional water meadows and pasture land, towards the viaduct.

Walk one. **Across Recreation Ground, uphill along wooded path to the Test Way. Following the Test Way to Lower Wyke Farm and across to Middle Wyke Farm and then to Upper Wyke. Passing Oak Tree Farm and down to the bridle path leading to the School and Haven Hill across field pathway to the Recreation Ground.**

Right from the start, one dominant visual feature, even in autumn, were the areas of woodland with plantations and mature broadleaf trees. The installation of kissing gates, where formerly there were stiles, was noted as an improvement for access. The rolling open countryside on this walk was a typical feature of this arable, farming locality with neat fields planted with winter root crops.

The topography of the land treated everyone to vistas of ‘big’ skies and impressive elevated skylines of undulating wooded hills in some areas broken by cultivated fields, grassland, Farm houses and country houses. Views here were largely unspoilt by pylons or roads. At one point, in the far distance, a single wind farm turbine was visible in the direction of Newbury. It was strongly felt that these views and sightlines should be preserved and a major consideration in planning guidelines.

It was gratifying to see that most fields were bounded by well managed tall hedges containing native species such as hawthorn, hazel, buckthorn and maple. These were intermingled with shrubs, wild flowers and climbers. Bramble, dog rose, travellers’ joy and bryony were identified amongst others. It had the potential and good growth to shelter and feed the wildlife. Although this is serious arable farming country the general feeling was that it still managed to maintain a natural, wild landscape greatly appreciated by all those present. Three buzzards and two kites were observed at various stages of the walk. On this walk the preservation and virtue of the rural character of farming country was sustained though it was observed that what had been farm houses or small properties in the landscape seemed to be being replaced by larger properties in their footprint. Also that the gardens and immediate countryside surrounding these properties were in danger of being altered in a way that was perhaps less sympathetic to the surroundings.

Walk two. **Up Spring Hill pathway towards the Woodland Burial Ground and across arable fields and** **pasture land bi-sected by public footpath to Cold Harbour Farm. In a north easterly direction passing Dowhams Farm and onto Egbury Road. North footpath to Wadwick House and downhill to Wadwick. Diagonal Footpath south back in the direction of Cold Harbour Farm but this time to the road leading to Baptist Hill,St Mary Bourne. Then down to Spring Hill and the centre of the village.**

This still evolving Woodland Burial Ground was the first impressive feature of this walk. Extremely well maintained, a curtain of cherry trees face toward the village whilst on its other extremities it is bordered one side by open farmland and on the other by a single gravel track. A peaceful yet accessible spot for visitors and for those just travelling by. This is an area of wide open expanses comprising flat arable fields and gentle sloping pastures. Pathways at the start of this walk appear to be in good order with safe, traditional, dog friendly stiles leading all the way to Cold Harbour Farm. The views here were wide, ‘wonderful’ and uncluttered by telegraph poles or pylons. The footpath across the field from Cold Harbour Farm would suit more serious hikers. Closely ploughed to the pathway it soon opens up to pasture land with an old bluebell copse to one side of a footpath which come the summer is lush and endowed with cowslips. On a less romantic note it is also the site of the marker for the West Country gas pipeline. This pasture bounded by woods is a good location for deer but on this occasion our presence was not conducive. The pasture was rich in fungi from Field Mushrooms and Fool’s Funnel to Suede Bolete. To quote a fellow walker this was ‘truly refreshing countryside’ not suburbanised in any way. This walk offers a good network of well maintained paths. Later on though we observed that some of the stiles had rotted and badly needed replacement.

Traditional field hedgerows (some hazel) were in evidence with a few unsightly gaps in places. Nevertheless, they seemed to promise sufficient berries, nuts and fruits to support the insects, mammals and bird life that abound around here. Aged oak trees were observed which to our untutored eyes did not appear to be diseased and the Larch and Ash around Wadwick seemed fine. By Wadwick house there was a fetching row of sweet scented poplars and a field bordered by Sunflowers. The old road to Egbury had fencing typical to the area and it is here we saw a Tawny Owl quartering a field. House Martins were still in evidence and partridges were in scattering around leading up to the turnip fields. Though it was an ordinary Thursday, the old flint track up to Wadwick, we encountered some 15 to 20 hashers on a run. In the course of the walk we saw five Buzzards and a Red Kite. On the edge of a flint strewn field amongst the speedwell and toadflax near a stile we located what appeared to be a badger latrine indicating the night time presence of the creature nearby. It was noticed on a couple of occasions how the fashion of combining two cottages into one large single dwelling had seemed to become prevalent in the area.

Walk three. **From St Mary Bourne village car park and taking the Test way in the direction of Hurstbourne Tarrant. Proceeding along the Test Way to Stoke Hill Farm turning back to Stoke.**

**Crossing the road at Stoke taking the path that joins Gangbridge Lane. Walk back along Gangbridge Lane beside the Bourne Rivulet and on to the car park at St Mary Bourne.**

This walk took us through fields along a route parallel to the main village road before joining the Test Way to Stoke Hill Farm. On the way we noticed in Swatton Fields a large new barn under construction on hither to farm land in addition bordering the pathway a mature hedging had recently been excavated and replaced by new and varied hedging plants. This walk provided views of both parkland and arable fields. A Red kite was in evidence in the lower valley land close by the new barn. On this bright, sunny autumn day the views from the Test Way as it winds atop the ridge of a hill were nothing short of spectacular. Looking down on a complex of fields showing all shades of green and the ribbon of houses in villages and hamlets, with plenty of gaps for fields, trees and gardens would seem to signify the iconic image of the English countryside. The big sky and the skyline were also impressive and more so by the peace and quiet of the whole scene. That was the impression of all present on the walk employing words like ‘homely’, ’gentle’ and ‘comforting’. As for the Test Way itself? It was felt that his particular stretch needed better maintenance. Considering this is a premier Hampshire walk the signs are confusing. One moment it is signed as The Test Way the next as The Brenda Parker Way. The stiles themselves are difficult to negotiate and they are decidedly not dog friendly. The pathway back to Stoke is also hard to follow being devoid of signs.

Dolls Wood was regarded as a real asset. Obviously a wildlife haven and one of the largest accessible woods in the Parish. It appears to be ancient woodland with coniferous trees and an abundance of mature Yew trees, the girth of many implying many centuries of growth. In our walk we regarded Dolls Wood as wonderfully unique and silent location (except for the bird song) somewhere where the air must be of a high quality evidenced by plentiful mosses and lichen.

There was also a wealth of fungi which we attempted to identify with our various reference materials succeeding we hope to ascertain the possible presence of Fenugreek Milkcap,Deadly Firecap,Chicken of the Woods to name but a few. It was agreed a true expert would have a field day identifying and photographing the species.

Walk four. **Meet at St Mary Bourne Primary School then walk along Gangbridge Lane to Stoke. Uphill in the direction of Binley taking the foot path to Sladen Corner. Back down to Binley and up the road towards Wadwick/St Mary Bourne following the ancient Drover’s Track to Gangbridge Lane and on to the School.**

The ‘footpath’ from Binley Road to Stoke Hill is classified as a ‘road’ but a very eccentric one as it is extremely narrow and grass covered. This moist and very verdant track with some excellent specimens of fungi including puffball, has an old mixed hedge located both sides and it includes, mid-way along its length, a large yew tree. This separate valley stretching along towards Binley has, set amongst its landscape of arable fields and woodland, a pasture on the incline of the valley that offers a unique springtime mantle of cowslips. The stiles on this walk are in need of restoration some of them are decidedly risky to use. Two kites were observed and in one rough, flinty soil field some fieldfares were seen.

There are signs of recent landscape improvement with a new wood plantation along the road from Stoke to Binley. Approaching Binley there is a sturdy belt of mature oak trees along the side of a field. On both sides of the Drovers track from Binley to Gangbridge Lane there are some excellent vistas of landscape. Come summer or winter from this track you can see under big skies woodland, pastures, arable land, farmsteads and hamlets. From this and many other vantage points, the entirety of countryside is there to see.

FOUR WALKS AND SOME CONCLUSIONS.

It was acknowledged, by all who participated in these walks, that we were indeed fortunate to have such beautiful countryside on our doorstep. Countryside that can be accessed with minimal effort. by casual strollers, serious walkers, runners, hashers, cyclists, horse riders, bird watchers or anyone who enjoys the natural environment. Those with mobility difficulties can also, with our network of country lanes, drive and park to enjoy the serenity and panoramic views over the valley.

Preserving scenic views and sightlines was a major consideration regarding future planning development.

Even less tangible sensual values mark out the countryside difference such as smells and sound.

Mention was made of how easy it was to observe in St Mary Bourne starry night skies thanks to the lack of unnecessary light pollution. It is not unusual in the village to hear owls hooting at night (owl boxes have been established in and around St Mary Bourne) and it was assumed that a serious dark skies policy added to this enrichment of the rural environment.

What was clearly evident in our walks was the value of hedges for wildlife and pollinating insects. It is vital that hedging care and new or replacement hedging should be actively encouraged. The planting of woody species for hedges such as blackthorn, hawthorn or spindle is part of the natural

Ecology of the area as is the encouragement of oak, ash, beech and hornbeam tree planting. Trees and hedges on hill ridges have been found to assist the problems of rainfall erosion and the high water table that affects valleys like ours.

In all, what we have observed on these walks are types of priority habitats identified under the UK Biodiversity Plan. Lowlands and mixed deciduous woodland, floodplain grazing (either side of the Bourne and North West of Stoke and south east of St Mary Bourne) and lowland dry acid grassland (Stoke Hill Farm, Stoke Down, Binley Bottom, Haven Hill and Juniper Rough).

THE YOUNG HAVE THEIR SAY.

Local children from the School and its actively supported School Eco Council were keen and vocal about what they liked, disliked and wanted in their St. Mary Bourne. A group of slightly older children and teenagers were also prompted to give their views and opinions.

The School Eco Council children were appreciative of the number and variety of birds in their gardens and the fields relating that they had seen Barn Owls, Kites, Buzzards, Woodpeckers and Blue Tits. All said they put out food in their gardens and many would have liked more bird boxes around the area.

Some were hedgehog aware and had gone to the trouble of putting out hedgehog hotels. Excited by seeing deer roaming free many wished to do a survey of wild animals and know more about them.

They all used footpaths, although they found some overgrown with nettles and some hard to follow.

‘Dog poo’ was definitely a problem.

They wanted more trees planted and more bridleways for horses and paths they could safely cycle.

School Eco Council members collect flowers and check them into a flower book.

One or two observed,’ lots’ of rabbits come into their gardens eating ‘lots’ of plants. Perceptively they commented on ‘lots’ of ragwort present in fields.

Although they were aware of recent sewage over-pumping into the Bourne in winter and even found the water deep in places, they would like to use the river more and swim in it whenever possible. They would like the river bed cleared and the reeds and vegetation cut more often. They enjoyed the annual shop charity ‘duck races’ down the river and missed them when they weren’t held.

Access to the lake on the recreation ground was mentioned just to sit there. feed the ducks and picnic.

The children liked the Village because it wasn’t ‘too big’. It was quiet and the liked walking across the fields, walking their dogs, enjoying the views and playing amongst the trees.

In particular they liked the recreation ground because they felt it was safe. Although they liked the playground the felt there was not enough equipment. There was a lot of space but what was on offer was a bit ‘safe’ and not challenging enough, The tennis court was ‘boring’. Opinion was split 50/50 on a skate park as many thought it might be dominated by older children and destroy the atmosphere. Tyre swings on trees would be a good idea.

***The older children had their likes and dislikes.*** They liked the countryside views (especially from the top of Baptist Hill) as well as the lake and the Bourne Rivulet. One requested a ‘watch tower or tree house’ from which to admire the surrounding countryside.

As for paths and access there was a suggestion of ‘nice wide footpaths for BMX and smaller paths for elderly people’. Some believed there were enough paths, others wanted more (‘where you can ride your horse’). Cycling was a major consideration for a number of the younger people.

There was a call for increasing the wildlife with the provision of more ‘habitats’. One respondent was worried by ‘horse poo’ on the roads. Another favoured more ‘working farms’.

‘We used to play at the Ford and under the little bridge there – pooh sticks’ said one young person.

More lakes, clean lakes and an open air pool were amongst the comments. The lack of fishing opportunities was also mentioned.

There was an objection to tree felling and a suggestion for every tree cut down two should be planted. More conker trees, more trees to climb were required. Blackberrying was favoured.

‘I think we should be more aware of the history of the village’ said one young person. ‘I don’t know much about the history but the church is amazing’ said another. Although they appreciated ‘old buildings and old footpaths’ they admitted not knowing much detailed history of the locality but thought it important. ‘Need SMB to be famous throughout the world!’

Asked about **dark skies** there were plenty of views expressed. ‘I think we should have some more street lights in Egbury Road’. ‘If we have too many lights it will stop us from seeing the stars which are lovely!’ ‘The rec’ (recreation ground) to have flood lights with day light (?) sensors’. ‘No light pollution, no street lights, clear sky’

When asked ‘what they valued the most?’ Many agreed that ‘the village shop is very child friendly’.

The **friendliness** of people scored high with a large number of the younger people,’ people know each other’. High on the list ***was open spaces and the countryside.*** The absence of traffic jams, the rec’ (recreation ground) and the Cricket Club also received a mention.

As for what wasn’t liked opinion varied widely from the ‘smell’ at muck spreading time to ‘so many lorries and speeding cars’ to ‘the lack of a bus service for going to visit friends’. A repeated dislike of stinging nettles was balanced by an appeal for more leisure activities, more things to do and more opportunities to meet people.

Actively caring for their countryside.

One of the outcomes of this Landscape Assessment was to experience at first hand the enthusiasm of both young and old for the rural environment, ecology and wildlife surrounding them. These are people who sincerely care to cherish the natural habitat and heritage of the village. They are also realists and flexible enough to embrace change and integrate those things that will safeguard and sustain the character and uniqueness of this living, thriving Parish of St Mary Bourne into the future.