

An independent evaluation of the report: Ecological appraisal of paddock adjacent to Purn Way, Bleadon, Somerset. Issue date: 22 March 2017 (Crossman Associates)

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1. Introduction

The ecological appraisal (hereafter referred to as the Crossman report) was submitted in support of a planning application to erect 16 dwellings on a small paddock on the northern edge of the village of Bleadon, North Somerset (site location OS grid reference ST334571).

Phil Quinn (Ecology & Land Use) MCIEEM (hereafter referred to as PQ) was approached by Bleadon Acting Together (here after referred to as BAT) to offer an independent appraisal of the Crossman report. BAT are a group of Bleadon residents opposed to what they believe to be inappropriate development within their village.

PQ identified many faults within the Crossman report; most importantly a significant number of standard ecological survey and appraisal processes were not followed in the report; however the report also contains numerous instances of the Crossman report author's poor writing skills which add considerable confusion to what should be a clear interpretation of the site's ecological value. In summary the Crossman report is of poor quality and does not satisfy basic requirements of clarity or professional best practice.

2. Disclaimer

PQ has no known prior professional or private association with any member of BAT nor any employee / affiliate of Crossman Associates nor any other party in favour or against the proposal to develop this site but is an independent ecological consultant with over fifteen years' experience of commercial ecological practice and as such is in a position to offer an objective assessment of the status of the Crossman report.

PQ has been undertaking ecological survey and appraisal for over thirty years, predominantly in western England and South Wales; PQ has been a member of CIEEM (and previously IEEM) since September 2008 and has been an ecological consultant trading as Phil Quinn (Ecology and Land Use) since 2004. PQ's specialisms lie in: botanical survey; habitat survey and assessment; and European and UK Protected species survey and assessment. PQ has extensive experience in working with the development sector since 2003 and prior to that in the nature conservation sector (predominately with Avon Wildlife Trust).

The intention of this evaluation is to determine whether the Crossman report adequately addresses the fundamental issues which an experienced ecological surveyor would note upon evaluating a site's ecological value and potential. PQ is not in a position to assess the report author's other survey reports nor is PQ able to assess the quality of other Crossman Associates reports.

Due to funding constraints it was not possible for PQ to visit the site and undertake an independent visual assessment of the site's likely ecological value in comparison to that provided by the Crossman report. Nor was there access permission from the site owner for PQ to enter the land in question.

3. Significant errors and failings within the Crossman report

3.1 LACK OF INFORMATION ON PERSONNEL

The surveyor for the Crossman report is stated to be Fairbrass Knowles who is described in the report as an experienced ecologist & licensed bat worker. However there is no context to Mr Knowles' experience and it is not stated where, beyond being a bat worker, his expertise lies; how many years he has been undertaking this work; nor whether he is a member of a recognised professional body such as CIEEM.

There is no information on who wrote the Crossman report.

3.2 REPORT-SPECIFIC FAILINGS (with relation to particular paragraphs in the Crossman report)

Double digit numbers preceding each paragraph here are those given in the Crossman report and retained here to aid clarity and cross-referencing.

3.2.1. Introduction: site description and proposals

1.3 The ruined barn is here stated as being in the north-west corner of the field but in the Results summary it is described as being in the north-east corner.

1.5 The report here states that "There are no significant blocks of woodland or significant watercourses within close proximity of the site" without defining "significant" either with regard to size, species composition, connectivity etc., nor is "close proximity" defined.

1.6 "Development proposals involve the redevelopment of the land into residential housing". Re-development is the wrong word to use here- this implies the site has already been subject to some development in the past; this is not the case as the field is otherwise described as pasture.

3.2.2 Results

Desktop study

2.2 The BRERC data search area is stated as being a 0.5km radius with regard to all but bats (but 2km for bats); this is too small a search area for non-bat protected species. In addition this section of the published report states that "Results are pending" with regard to receipt of the BRERC data – it is very odd to commission record centre data and then to publish a report in support of a planning application before that data has arrived. This demonstrates a very poor regard for the data search element of the ecological appraisal and has not allowed the report author, Crossland Associates, the client, or any other person reading the report to place the site in a wider ecological context.

However in section 3.2 there is the ungrammatical and contradictory statement: “Individual species records provided by Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BREC) is discussed under species observations below.” This implies that the BRERC data had been received by the report author, contrary to the statement in 2.2; thus there is an inherent confusion apparent in this part of the report.

3.1 “The MAGIC website informed that there are no statutory sites designated for nature conservation within a 2 km radius of the site, and no statutory sites designated specifically for bats within 4 km of the site” **This is completely untrue:** Bleadon Hill SSSI is 1.25km to the north-east of the centre of the site whilst Purn Hill SSSI is 350m west of the centre of the site. The boundary of the Severn Estuary SPA is exactly 2km from the centre of the site. SSSIs (Sites of Special scientific Interest) are statutory protected sites; whereas SPAs (Special Protection Areas) are strictly protected statutory sites with a level of importance higher even than that of SSSIs.

In addition there is Helenge Hill, an Avon Wildlife Trust nature reserve (as well as being a Site of Nature conservation Importance - SNCI), located 500m from the centre of the survey site. Although this is not a statutory site it is of regional importance for its unimproved grasslands and should have been identified and described within the appraisal. However there is no mention of this anywhere in the appraisal.

3.6 The description of the sward within the survey site lists only four species of plant including the almost certainly erroneous entry of “sheeps sorrel *Rumex acetosella*”. Sheep’s sorrel is an indicator species of unimproved acidic grassland and would not be anticipated in what is described here as “intensively grazed improved grassland”. It is almost certain that the surveyor /author has made an embarrassing error in confounding the locally rare acidic grassland indicator sheep’s sorrel with the relatively abundant and non-indicator species common sorrel *Rumex acetosa*. This is a very significant ecological error to make. Listing sheep’s sorrel as one of four plants recorded in this field implies that the field has a much greater botanical interest than is otherwise implied and would necessitate further detailed botanical survey especially given the context of SSSI’s / nature reserves within 2km of the site that are designated for their national and regional grassland interest.

The author notes in 3.14 that “No rare or notable plant species were found on site during the survey” thus implying that they either mis-recorded *R. acetosa* as *R. acetosella* or that they did indeed record *R. acetosella* but did not realise it was a rare or notable plant in North Somerset.

3.20 This paragraph states that “The site does not support any area of standing water and there are no known ponds within close proximity of the site, which is likely to preclude the presence of great crested newt *Triturus cristatus*”. This statement is confounded by the planning application site location plan which shows a pond immediately on the survey site’s south-eastern boundary and within the boundary of the adjacent allotment.

Personal Communication with Kirsten Hemingway of BAT has informed PQ that this pond no longer exists but that her garden (within approximately 50m of that former pond) contains a pond which supports breeding amphibians.

To make no mention of the status of the allotment pond and to make no observation on the possibility of ponds being present within the curtilages of private properties within 250m of the survey site boundary is negligent. Thus the potential for breeding great crested newts being present within 250m of the survey site boundary, and thus potentially utilising the site as terrestrial habitat, has not been ruled out.

3.28 The report text here states that there are three mature trees within the survey site boundary yet the site survey map (Figure 2) only shows two mature trees. The photographs attached to the report show semi-mature and not mature trees at the locations shown for mature trees on Figure 2. Thus there has either been a recording error or the surveyor has demonstrated confusion over the definition of mature and semi-mature trees. In addition Photograph 2 shows many semi-mature trees along one of the site's boundaries to be densely covered with ivy *Hedera helix* –this is well known to offer bat roosting opportunities yet it is nowhere discussed in the report.

3.29. Bats. “The hedgerows are likely to provide suitable foraging and commuting habitat for bats and are likely to be used in conjunction with habitats within the surrounding landscape. The site is small and in isolation, is not considered to form a significant habitat component for any local bat population”. This is a very vague statement and is supported by no qualifying statements defining the field's context within the wider landscape, for example the likelihood of bats foraging here as opposed to larger and more exposed fields that may be present adjacent to it.

3.3.1 “BRERC informs that no significant bat roosts have been recorded within 2 km radius of the site” Again there is no discussion of what constitutes “significant” and the reader is thus reliant upon what the author arbitrarily determines to be “significant”.

3.34 With regard to dormice the report states that “BRERC informs that no dormice have been recorded on the site and no records exist for this species within a 2 km radius of the site.” This contradicts that statement made in 2.2 whereby the report states that only a 0.5km radius data search was requested for protected species (with the exception of a 2km radius for bat species). Thus the author is either confused by their own data search; has been supplied data by BRERC beyond the data search boundary (a very unlikely possibility); or has extrapolated this statement from no factual basis.

3.2.3 Recommendations

4.3-4.5 There is a discussion here regarding strengthening the site's boundary hedgerows by coppicing, hedge laying & planting whips. There is no discussion of the inherently very high nature conservation value of bramble previously described as being abundant in the site's boundaries. Bramble acts as a nurse crop allowing young trees and shrubs to grow within its protection from grazing animals; there is no mention of this in the report.

Furthermore the author suggests including planting elder and privet in the hedgerows as part of the strengthening programme: both of these are very weak species to include in a hedgerow, elder especially, and they are typically removed from hedgerows by professional hedge-layers and hedge managers to provide space for more vigorous and more substantial shrubs such as hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*.

4.7 With regard to bats: “Boundary hedgerows are being retained within the proposals so it is not considered likely that there will be any direct impacts to possible commuting routes.” This statement completely overlooks the negative impact that artificial lighting associated with housing on this site will have upon bat populations that currently utilise the site and its boundary features as a foraging and commuting resource. Almost every species of UK bat demonstrates a strong aversion to artificial light; the only species that has traditionally not been seen to demonstrate a strong aversion to artificial light – common pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* – is now believed to favour areas with no artificial light, or when recorded in proximity to artificial light, is actually in a state of impaired operation in that it cannot forage successfully but is nevertheless drawn to high concentrations of aerial invertebrates which are in turn drawn to artificial light sources.

These observations are not negated by section 4.9’s requirement for a suitable lighting scheme to be included within the development.

4.15 Here there is much detailed description of a reptile displacement programme despite the report suggesting that reptile populations here are likely to be limited to, at most (and no more than speculatively), a small population of slow-worms *Anguis fragilis*. The report needs to clearly determine whether reptiles are a concern at this site or not; the inclusion of this detailed displacement strategy would suggest that they are a significant concern yet the site survey and the author’s interpretation of the BRERC data suggest otherwise.

3.2.4 Lack of further survey recommendations

The Crossman report is demonstrably lacking in recommendations for further survey requirements despite there being statements within the report regarding the likelihood of both foraging /commuting bats and reptiles utilising the site. This is highly negligent and suggests either considerable inexperience on the part of the report author, or a desire to spare the client further costs and time delays that such necessary surveys would incur.

At a minimum there should be a recommendation for bat activity surveys involving both bat surveyors present on the site at suitable times of the year, and the positioning of data loggers within the site’s boundaries.

With regard to reptiles there should have been a recommendation for reptile surveys to commence immediately after the published date of the report.

Thirdly there should have been a recommendation to contact local residents to establish if they have ponds on their properties to thus assess the number of potential great crested newt breeding ponds within 250m of the survey site. To not even suggest this demonstrates either negligence, an unwillingness to involve the client in additional costs and time delays, (and potential licensing issues), or a concerning level of inexperience on behalf of the report author.

With regard to the site’s botanical value the confusion caused by the inclusion of a record of sheep’s sorrel from the field exacerbates concern that the site may support species of plant for which the southern slopes of Bleadon Hill are of national and regional importance. A recommendation for a full botanical survey at an appropriate time of year (May to late August inclusive) should also have been included.

3.2.5 No discussion of the site within the context of the North Somerset and Mendip Hills Bat SAC

The survey site lies within a band B Zone of this SAC and as such there is a requirement by the ecological consultant to address in detail the site's likely value for foraging and commuting bats, in particular horseshoe bats *Rhinolophus* spp. The B Zone SAC status is arguably the most important ecological consideration with regard to this site and would require the ecological consultant to at least engage in discussion with the North Somerset Council planning ecologists and relevant staff from Natural England to ensure that the requirements of the SAC with regard to proposed development have been met. That this process has not even been discussed in the report suggests that the surveyor / report author is either ignorant of the SAC, or has erroneously determined that the SAC status is of no concern with regard to this site.

4. SUMMARY OF REPORT FAILINGS

4.1 BRERC data: One part of the report states that BRERC data had not been received yet other parts of the report discuss BRERC data that had been received.

There is no mention of whether a request for information on non-statutory sites within a 1km radius of the site was requested from BRERC. Such a request would have demonstrated the presence, amongst others, of the Helenge Hill SINC 500m from the survey site boundary; as such there is no mention of Helenge Hill or any other non-statutory site.

4.2 Erroneous statement on statutory sites: The report makes a grave error in stating that there are no statutory sites within 2km of the survey site boundary. This is completely inexplicable as two SSSIs lie within 2km of the survey site boundary and the boundary of an SPA lies exactly 2km from the survey site boundary.

Furthermore there is no discussion on the North Somerset and Mendip Hills Bats SAC. The survey site lies within a consultation Band B zone of the SAC as identified on Plan: 1 Bat Consultation Zone (North Somerset) in North Somerset and Mendip Bats Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Guidance on Development Version 1 - May 2017 and as such a detailed and well-argued assessment of the site's value for horseshoe bats should have been presented within the report and discussions entered into with the North Somerset Council planning ecologists and staff from Natural England to determine the level of bat survey effort required for this site. There is no recommendation in the report that such discussions will be required.

4.3 Lack of survey recommendations: To discuss the likelihood of reptiles and foraging / commuting bats utilising the site (to the extent of designing strategies to prevent their harm) and to not recommend further survey effort for these groups is both inexplicable and exceptionally negligent.

The inability to consider the likelihood of ponds within the curtilages of private residences within 250m of the survey site's boundaries, and the potential for such ponds to act as breeding sites for great crested newts, also demonstrates poor ecological awareness. This is

in addition to no discussion of the pond (now known to be in-filled) shown on the plan accompanying the site's planning application; there should have been at least a mention that this pond exists on current maps but no longer exists as a pond.

4.4 Missing information on local bat roosts: Inexplicably the survey report does not mention two known bat roosts within two kilometres of the site boundary. However these are mentioned in detail within the APPLICATION SUPPORTING STATEMENT IN RESPECT OF: The proposed erection of 16no. dwellings (outline application) at land off Purn Way, Bleadon by Urban Design Practise (nd): "The site is located within 1km of a greater and lesser horseshoe bat hibernation roost to the north within Oldmixon and Upper Canada Scarp Wildlife Site, designated for its ancient semi natural woodland, and within 1.56km of a further lesser horseshoe bat roost to the west in proximity to Purn Hill Wildlife Site, another area of woodland. The proposals are considered to result in the loss of 0.8ha of grazed pasture, a noted habitat for horseshoe bats, the qualifying interest species of the North Somerset and Mendip Bats Special Area of Conservation (SAC)." Such information on these roosts should have been included within the BRERC data search results supplied to Crossman Associates and such an omission from the survey report is glaring and indicates a poor grasp of the seriousness of bats by the report author with regard to this site and the development proposals.

4.5 Botanical confusion: It is most likely that the surveyor / report author is an inexperienced botanist and made an error in recording sheep's sorrel when it is most likely that common sorrel was the plant actually seen in the field. Such an error is serious however as the recording of sheep's sorrel here would necessitate a full botanical survey at a more suitable time of year especially given the large area of species-rich grassland on the southern slopes of Bleadon Hill. Objectively it cannot be assumed that an error in recording was made and as such it must be taken as fact that sheep's sorrel was recorded as this was stated in the report.

4.6 Confusion over location of the barn: The barn is shown on the site plan as being in the north-west of the field but is also described within the report as being in the north-east of the field. Such confusion further diminishes confidence in the reliability of the report to convey accurate information.

4.7 Poor written communication skills: Throughout the Crossman report the author demonstrates: a poor grasp of basic grammar; a poor grasp of syntax; a consistent misspelling of Bleaden instead of Bleadon; and a number of other errors that a basic computer spell-checker should have immediately rectified. Again, this further diminishes confidence in the credibility of the report author.

Furthermore there is no evidence that any proof-reading was undertaken neither by the report author nor by another affiliate or employee of Crossman Associates. Not only have numerous and embarrassing spelling and syntax errors been allowed to remain in the published report but very basic errors in the understanding of ecological survey and site interpretation have been allowed to remain unchallenged.

4.8 Overall summary: In summary the Crossman report is a very poor document which should never have been submitted in support of a planning application. It fails to adequately demonstrate the status of the commissioned BRERC data search; it makes untrue assertions about the absence of statutory sites within 2km of the site boundaries; it appears to make fundamental botanical errors; it offers no description of the SSSI & SNCI grasslands of national and regional importance close to it; it fails to discuss the site in context of the North Somerset and Mendip Hills Bat SAC; it fails to appreciate the need for a greater effort to identify potential great crested newt breeding ponds within 250m of the site; and it fails to offer recommendations for further survey effort with regard to bats and reptiles.

Furthermore it has been written with very poor grammar, spelling and syntax throughout –to the extent that some sentences are highly ambiguous. Overall the impression is one of an author with poor written communication skills not having been proof-read by a colleague who would have immediately amended the many embarrassing and avoidable errors that distract from the body of the report, and which diminish confidence in the quality of the report.

It may be pertinent to note that the Crossman Associates website Home Page states: “Three reasons we are the #1 choice for planning applications and licenses”. The first of these three reasons is given as “Our consultancy was built for speed. You’ll benefit from fast quotes, efficient surveys and reports within days”. It is thus probable that there may be a company ethos with regard to a very quick turnaround of jobs which does not allow time for proof-reading and as a consequence reports such as this for Purn Way are produced which fundamentally fail to address the requirements of local authority planning ecologists and which overlook basic survey requirements for protected species. However PQ has not reviewed other Crossman Associates reports to be able to validate this supposition and as such this possibility will remain speculation.