

Ham Common

Local Nature Reserve

Site of Special Scientific Interest

Britain has some of the finest remaining examples of heathland in Europe, one such area is Ham Common Local Nature Reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

This area was part of a continuous block of heathland in the 1760's and it covered approximately 100,000 acres of acidic sands, gravels and clays, broken only by the richer soils in the valleys of the Rivers Stour, Frome and Piddle.

Ham Common is an area of great beauty and interest. It provides a habitat for an immense variety of flowers and animals as well as being a place where visitors can enjoy the peace and tranquillity of this site. Birds such as the Dartford Warbler might be spotted flying in jerking movements low over the gorse bushes.

If you are very lucky you might be able to spot a lizard flicking its tail through the bushes.

Characteristics Of Heathland

Heathlands are renowned for their changing seasonal colours. Carpets of bright purple ling and bell heather and an array of bog plants flower in the Summer. In the Winter, green, crimson and orange bog mosses brighten dark mysterious pools. While the Spring brings once more the sweet coconut scent of golden yellow gorse flowers.

Historical Background

Heathlands are a semi-natural habitat whose origins in the Poole Basin go back to 8000 BC and the arrival of Mesolithic people.

Primeval woodland was cleared for pasture and crops, a process which continued throughout the Bronze Age. Grazing prevented tree regrowth and so the soils became leached and acidic, the vegetation changed and around 500 BC heathland was established.

The area around the hamlet of Hamworthy remained relatively untouched until 43AD when Roman Legionaries built a road nearby known as Ickfield Way.

Exploitation of ball clay began here at this time but it was not until the 19th Century that large scale quarrying was carried out by Royal Doulton. The clay is so named because it was originally dug out using curved spades and so curled into balls. Commercial quarrying ceased in the late 1920's and

heathland returned once more to the area. The quarry pit still remains and is now known as Hamworthy Lake.

Ham Common is one of the few British sites where fossil plants, which grew some 55 million years ago, can be found. The fossils consist of fruits, seeds and the wood of trees and vines which grew in the tropical Mangrove swamps which one dominated the area.

Conservation Of Heathland

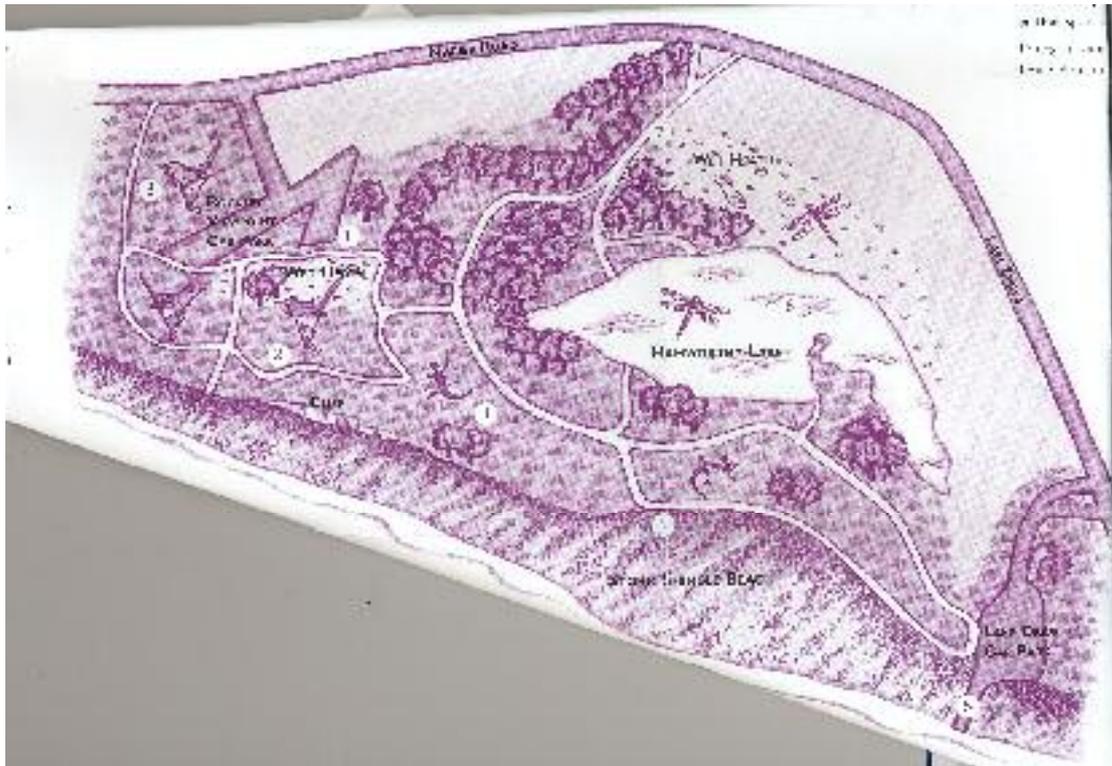
British heathlands are on the decline. Of the 39,000 hectares which existed in the 1750's, little over 5,000 hectares remain. In 30 years time there may be very little left. The site was notified in 1987 as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), because of its rare and endangered species, its geological importance and its size as the fourth largest remaining fragment of heathland left in The Borough of Poole.

Ham Common is particularly vulnerable to fire through vandalism. It also suffers encroachment from scots pine trees and silver birch shrub, gorse and bracken which leads to the steady disappearance of the typical heathland community of plants and animals. Even dog fouling is a threat as, not only a health hazard in itself, it also fertilises the soil and so prevents heather from growing.

The area has great fragile beauty and needs to be sensitively managed. Many of the techniques which the Countryside Wardens use may seem drastic, but they are necessary in order to ensure the survival of this unique and precious habitat. The invading trees and plants will be cut down and cleared. Firebreaks are cut and erosion barriers (revetments) are used around the coastal and lake area. Public pressure on Ham Common is enormous and so the risk of disturbance and erosion is very apparent.

The future of Ham Common has now hopefully been secured. It was declared a Local Nature Reserve on the 16th May 1992. With positive management techniques and sensitive approach to its use the heathland will continue to survive, not only as an area of great scientific value but one which will bring pleasure to those who are fortunate enough to visit it.

Map and walk around Ham Common



1. From this point look south right across Poole Harbour towards the heathland on the Arne peninsular and the Purbeck Hills beyond. Ham Common is an important link in a chain of heathland areas in Dorset, by presenting a bridge between the heaths of Arne and Canford.

Species such as the Dartford Warbler and certain dragonflies need to be able to move with ease between habitats in order to survive.

On a clear day looking south west you might be able to see the church tower at the old Saxon town of Wareham. Follow the channel and pick out the tiny landscapes of the islands of Long, Round, Green and Furzey before coming to Brownsea Island, the largest island in Poole Harbour to the east. Let your eyes follow the vegetation near the cliff edge and notice how it changes. At this point you can clearly see the spring line where pebbly plateau gravels lie on top of clay. This marks the change from dry to wet heath, a characteristic of all good heathland habitats.

2. The outfall pipe and inspection cover came from the original pumping station for the quarry during the 19th Century when clay was extracted here. More than 100 ancient clay workings were discovered in 1926 within the old Lake Clay works, where quarry workers also discovered an old Roman lamp.

3. One of the ways Ham Commons is protected from the devastating effects of fire by a series of firebreaks and entry points for fire fighting vehicles. Firebreaks don't stop a fire from occurring they merely slow it down because the bulk vegetation is removed. Each fire break is cut to a minimum of 4 metres in width. This ensure that when the fire reaches the break it has enough room to either slow down, thereby giving a firefighting team time reach and control the fire, or perhaps burn itself out.
4. Purple flowered Bell Heather, Common Heather or Ling and Gorse are the main types of vegetation on the dry heath of Ham Common. After fire, Bristle and Bent Grass is the first to colonise the area in vast willow masses. Bracken can be seen where the soils are richer or where heather has been weakened by scrub invasion or by fire. Insects such as Green Tiger Beetles, Small Copper and Green Hairstreak butterflies, Scarlet and Cream-spot Tiger moths are especially interesting to look out for in these dry heath areas. As well as these, try and find the intriguing Robber Fly, which sits in wait for other insects – darting out when a likely meal arrives – and then sucking them dry with its stout proboscis.
5. The old jetty was used to ferry clay from the quarry. During the 2nd World War, RAF Hamworthy was based near here with their famous Flying Boats. These exciting planes had huge floats and roaring propellers which flew them in and out from this area during wartime expeditions.

Ham Common was once known as HMS Turtle, an amphibious training area which prepared troops for the D Day landings in Northern France on 6th June 1944.

6. Walking along this stretch of naturally formed 'storm shingle' beach you will find many interesting plants like Sugar Beet, Sea Champion, sand Couch and Sand Sedge. All these plants help to protect the cliffs from erosion by wind and wave action.
7. This is the best spot to look across the wet heath in the valley. Cross-leaved Heath with its greyish hairy stems and pink flowers along with Purple Moor Grass and Cotton Grass occur here. Beneath these plants lie carpets of mosses, Bog Asphodel and Sundews whose sticky pads capture insects which the plant digests.

The bogs themselves have a slight orange colour, caused by iron being released by bacteria from within the underlying peat. Here you might be fortunate enough to spot insects such as the Keeled Skimmer Dragonfly, Red Damselflies, Hoverflies and Raft Spiders.

During the Summer months the reed beds play host to Reed and Sedge Warblers.

8. Hamworthy lake is just under 750 metres in circumference and was formed during the days when clay was quarried from the area. The fine silt/clay bottom gives the lake a unique colour which changes from a deep blue/green to a luminous grey depending on the sunlight. If undisturbed, visibility under the water can be as much as 10 meters. The lake margin is full of aquatic plants. It is a popular spot for anglers. Fish such as Carp, Roach and Pike occur. Pike are predatory fish, their distinctive, elongated jaws and razor sharp teeth makes them instantly recognisable.

During the winter months the lake provides a refuge for many species of birds particularly ducks and waders.