



**Preliminary Ecological Assessment, Pleasantfield,
Ayrshire**

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Report by

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Executive Summary

- A preliminary ecological assessment of Pleasantfield, near Ayr, was carried out in support of current woodland management at the site and to assist with future management planning.
- The desktop study identified that Pleasantfield does not have any statutory or non-statutory nature conservation designations within its boundary.
- Long-established woodland of plantation origin at Barsarroch Belt is directly adjacent and east of the site whilst the Carcluie Loch Wildlife Site lies within 300m of Pleasantfield's western boundary.
- The desktop study found very little ecological information for the Pleasantfield site. This is not a surprise as recce surveys by FFC alongside the desktop survey had not identified any habitats or species of significance on the site, which is largely composed of highly intensive agriculturally improved grassland.
- An evaluation of the ecological information in and immediately adjacent to the Pleasantfield site was carried out, which concluded that Hedgerows and Neutral grassland (currently being enhanced) represent the key existing habitat interests on the site outwith the new woodland. These habitats have been identified by other bodies and partners, such as the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere, as priorities within their respective plans.
- Recommendations for further essential and desirable surveys are proposed in order to address gaps in current ecological knowledge for the site and to assist with management. Further surveys are likely to confirm the presence of priority species on the site but these interests are expected to be focussed on the linear boundary features, such as hedgerows.
- Management recommendations are also made within this report.

1). Introduction and Aims:

A preliminary ecological assessment of land at Pleasantfield, near Ayr, South Ayrshire, was carried out in support of current management at the site and to assist with future management planning.

Map 1: Pleasantfield Location Overview



The aims of this assessment were as follows:

1. To collate any existing desktop ecological data for the Pleasantfield site (and land adjacent to its boundary); and
2. To evaluate the ecological interests identified within this desktop study; and
3. To identify any further ecological surveys or information required to address any gaps in existing understanding of the Pleasantfield site in order to aid future management planning.

2). Background:

Pleasantfield (*Maps 1-3*) is located approximately 2km to the south-east of Ayr, South Ayrshire, Scotland. The former farm covers an area of approximately 34.3ha and is dissected by the Glasgow –Stranraer Railway Line, and by a disused branch line to Dalmellington, whilst sitting next to the C73 road which connects to the B7034 road (Ayr-Dalrymple).

The farm sits at approximately 76m altitude, reaching 98m at its highest point, and includes large areas of improved grassland, bisected by stockproof fencing with very derelict, degraded hedging in places, and old standard trees, along with heavily cattle-poached wet ditches. There is some adjacent woodland outwith the site alongside the adjacent railway lines. The site is centred around grid reference NS 35502 16046.

The land was acquired by the Future Forest Company Ltd. (FFC) in 2021 with the intention to use the land to maximise the removal of carbon dioxide from the environment, primarily through tree-planting. The tree-planting commenced in December 2022 over the majority of the site. A small area of land beside the C73 road has been set aside for wildflower meadow enhancement at this time.

Map 2: Pleasantfield Boundary



Map 3: Pleasantfield Final Woodland Design



Meadow Enhancement Area (0.49ha)

3). Methods:

This appraisal aimed to identify key ecological desktop information which would allow a preliminary ecological assessment of the property to be carried out along with identification of further information requirements as part of the future management of the property.

The appraisal took full cognisance of the 'Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal', produced by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) (Second Edition, December 2017).

Due to the nature of the land management, and the location of the Pleasantfield site, it was considered that the search area should include the entire property as well as any interests approximately 500m from its boundary which may have a bearing on management within the landholding.

The desktop study collated open-source information on any sites, habitats or species of international, national, regional (Council-wide) and local importance from a wide variety of sources, as well as information on other relevant nature conservation aspects *e.g.* SiteLINK, Living Atlas Scotland, *etc.*

No contact with the local biological records centre has taken place at this time, in part due to the paucity of information from other data sources covering the site *e.g.* Living Atlas Scotland, but also from site records, suggesting there is likely to be little other information available. This will be reviewed in due course.

This appraisal has also been informed by two site visits by Lindsay Mackinlay MCIEEM (LMK) (FFC).

4). Results:

The desktop survey collated information on the following ecological interests within 500m of the site:

There are no biological records for the site and only one record (an old botanical record from 1880s) within 500m of the site boundary (*Source: NBN Atlas Scotland (also known as Living Atlas Scotland)*). FFC have commenced collecting biological records on the site, as of November 2022.

4.1.) Statutory Designated Sites:

There are no statutory designated sites either within the Pleasantfield property or within 2km of its boundaries.

4.2.) Non-Statutory Designated Sites:

There are no South Ayrshire Council listed Wildlife Sites within the site itself, as highlighted within the South Ayrshire Local Development Plan 2 (August 2022). However, the Carluie Loch Wildlife Site sits within 300m of the western edge of the site.

The site does not appear to have or be adjacent to any non-statutory designated sites owned or listed by other organisations *e.g.* Scottish Wildlife Trust, RSPB, National Trust for Scotland.

The site does not sit within any Important Plant Areas (IPAs) - geographic areas noted for their nationally important wild plant assemblages - as listed by Plantlife, in partnership with other nature conservation organisations.

4.3.) Landscape:

The site is not currently listed within any landscape designations within South Ayrshire Council, though it does lie on the boundary of the Doon Valley Local Landscape Area as well as within 500m of another Scenic Area designated within the current local development plan (The South Ayrshire Local Development Plan 2

(August 2022)). The site is located within the 'Ayrshire Lowlands' landscape area according to LCA (Land Use Consultants, 1998).

4.4). Habitats and Vegetation:

There does not appear to be any up-to-date Phase 1 habitat survey or National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey information available for the site. A couple of walk-over recce surveys have been carried out by LMK. The site is very limited in its habitat diversity, being primarily made up of very species-poor improved grassland, with a small area of species-poor marshy grassland. There are two or three badly degraded/heavily cattle-poached wet ditches crossing the site, one of which has some remnant gorse, bramble, rosehip and hawthorn scrub alongside it.



Heavily cattle-poached wet ditches cut across the site in serious need of restoration, sometimes with small patch of remnant scrub (below); species-poor marshy grassland (bottom-right photo)



There are a number of thick hedgerows bounding the site, alongside the adjacent roads and railways. These hedgerows are of varying quality and age, with the occasional standard tree present *e.g.* Ash. In comparison, there are a number of severely degraded, gappy hedgerows cutting across the site that have virtually no wildlife value at this present time.

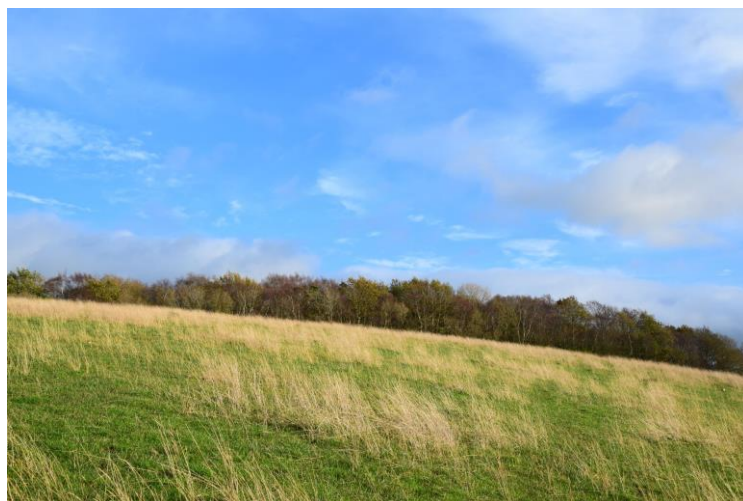


Degraded, gappy hedgerow (left) with remnant standard trees by old dyke elsewhere



Thick hedgerows by road and railway boundaries; photo on right is field set aside for neutral grassland/meadow enhancement work.

There is no existing woodland within the site, although the Barsarroch Belt woodland (*Map 3*), sitting immediately adjacent to the site (east), has been classified as 'Upland Mixed Ashwood' under the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland and Long-Established Woodland of Plantation Origin under the Ancient Woodland Inventory of Scotland, and also sits within the core zone for Native Woodland under the Integrated Habitat Network mapping. Under this habitat network mapping, primary and secondary zones have been identified within the Pleasantfield property for native woodland adjacent to this woodland belt.



Barsarroch Belt woodland adjacent to site

There is some HabMos* (Habitat Map of Scotland; EUNIS system) information available for the site, which covers habitats at a very general level. This has identified two types of habitat present on the site, namely Arable Land and Agriculturally-improved grassland. This is supported by field visits to the site.



Agriculturally-improved grassland, which dominated the site prior to tree-planting.

**The Habitat Map of Scotland (HabMoS) will become the national repository for habitat and land use data. The map adopts internationally recognised data and habitat classification standards. HabMoS is a composite map. It contains data, from many different sources, which have all been re-classified into EUNIS, the European Nature Information System.*

There is currently no systematic information on the condition of habitats on the site. However, as the habitats present are heavily agriculturally improved, it is not considered necessary to have this data at this time beyond the small area of grassland set aside for meadow enhancement (*See Map 3*), which is due for assessment in June 2023.

4.5). Peatland:

There is no peatland on the Pleasantfield site (*Source: Carbon and Peatland 2016, NatureScot*).

4.6.) Mammals:

There is no desktop information about mammals for the site. Rabbits are known to use the site and an old disused badger hole (now used by rabbits) appeared to be present on the western site boundary with the railway during a site visit in November 2022. No badger snuffle holes were observed on the site to date but the presence of badgers in the locality is viewed as likely and more work is required on this aspect to identify the location of any adjacent setts. Roe deer are also viewed as being highly likely to be present on the site, especially with sheep now removed from the fields. No bat or otter surveys have been carried out on the site as neither were viewed as required due to the nature of site and woodland planting design.

4.7.) Birds:

The desktop study provided no information on birdlife on the property. During site visits to date by LMK, there is very limited birdlife present on the site. To date, bird species identified include crow and blackbird, with mixed flocks of fieldfare and mistle thrush using taller hedgerows beside the railway. Meadow pipit was also recorded flying over the site.

The Barn Owl Trust interactive Barn owl Online Survey showed that Pleasantfield is considered probable to be used by barn owls at this time, however, there are no recent records reported for the site or within 1km. In its current state/use, most of the site is viewed as being sub-optimal for use by foraging barn owls as there is a lack of long grassland.

<https://www.barnowlsurvey.org.uk/portal/p/All%20your%20Records%20Mapped>

4.8.) Invertebrates:

There is no information on invertebrates for the site and it is considered highly unlikely to have any species of interest due to highly improved nature of the site alongside a lack of habitat diversity.

4.9.) Trees, Plants and Bryophytes:

There is no information on any plant species for the site and it is considered highly unlikely to have any species of interest due to its highly improved and degraded nature alongside a lack of habitat diversity. There are no trees on or adjacent to the property that have currently been listed on the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory. <https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

4.10). Fungi and Lichens:

There is no information on any fungi and lichen species for the site and it is considered highly unlikely to have any species of interest due to the highly improved nature of site alongside a lack of habitat diversity. However, the presence of some older Ash trees alongside boundary areas may provide some substrate for interesting lichens.

4.11). Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS):

No invasive non-native species have been observed on the site at this time nor previously recorded, although this should be monitored going into the future.

4.12). Strategic Interests:

There are a number of strategies that have relevance to the Pleasantfield site:

The site sits on the northern edge and within the Transition Zone of **the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere (GSAB)** area. The Biosphere has key sustainability goals, amongst which is biodiversity. **High Focus Habitats and Species** are those of greatest concern in Galloway and Southern Ayrshire; through extensive public and stakeholder engagement, GSAB has identified those as being of particular value and/or in critical decline. The protection, enhancement and restoration of these habitats and species is prioritised in the GSAB's land management partnerships and projects.

At this time, Pleasantfield supports one of the GSAB listed High Focus habitats and species, namely **Hedgerows** (Traditional field boundaries and margins), whilst another area of land set aside for meadow enhancement (0.49ha) will also address the conservation objectives of another High Focus habitat, namely **Calcareous and Neutral Grasslands**.

Scottish Biodiversity List* – There are no existing plant communities at Pleasantfield which are included on the Scottish Biodiversity List at this time beyond **Hedgerows**. However, a number of Scottish Biodiversity List priority species could be found to be present during the course of future survey work, most notably bat species and possibly Song Thrush (*see Ayrshire LBAP below*).

Ayrshire Biodiversity Action Plan 2007-2010 (the most recent document) has a number of listed habitats and species considered a priority for conservation action. At Pleasantfield, only the **Hedgerows** currently on the site boundary could be covered by these priorities but only if considered Ancient and/or species-rich. It is

unclear whether they could be viewed as such at this time. It is not known if any LBAP species are present, although it is likely that the priority species Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Brown Hare and Song thrush are present on the site.

Central Scotland Green Network (CSGN) Area: Pleasantfield sits within the CSGN Outer Core Area. The proposed woodland creation on the site as well as the enhancement of a small meadow and the best practice management older hedgerows helps address some of the objectives of the CSGN project. Such work will also be expected to contribute to **the Pollinator Strategy for Scotland 2017-2027** (2017; NatureScot).

The South Ayrshire Local Development Plan 2 (August 2022) is the relevant development plan for the Pleasantfield site. It has no specific, locational policies relating to the site itself but does have some interests within 500m of the site boundary, which have been highlighted in relevant sections of this report.

The National Byway has a route along the west side of the property, along the C73 Road. The National Byway® is a sign-posted leisure cycling route. The National Byway® journeys through the natural environment, providing discreet sign-posted direction along some of the most attractive and peaceful rural lanes

**The Scottish Biodiversity List is a list of terrestrial and marine animals, plants, fungi and habitats that Scottish Ministers i.e. Scottish Government in partnership with nature conservation bodies and expert, consider to be of principal importance for biodiversity conservation in Scotland. By identifying the species and habitats that are of the highest priority for biodiversity conservation, the list helps public bodies carry out their biodiversity duty*

5). Evaluation of Ecological Interests (*Tables 1-3*):

As part of this desktop study, a brief assessment of the importance of ecological interests on Pleasantfield has been carried out, with the caveat that this will require regular review as more information is collected during the course of site visits and possible future site surveys *e.g.* badgers. This information has been presented in *Tables 1 & 2*, with brief comment on the potential implications for future management at Pleasantfield.

Table 1: Existing Nature Conservation Interests & Priorities at Pleasantfield: Habitats and Species

Habitat or Species Name	Importance (International, National, Regional, Local) * = <i>Statutory legislation relating to species</i>	Management Implications
1). Habitats:		
<i>Hedgerows (& Standard trees)</i>	National/Regional/Local: Scottish Biodiversity List, Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere (GSAB) & Ayrshire LBAP	There are hedgerows lining parts of the site. All these hedgerows will likely require some form of management to retain and enhance their interest. Retention and planting of standard hedgerow trees also recommended.
<i>Neutral grassland</i>	Regional/Local: Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere (GSAB) & Ayrshire LBAP	Small area of improved grassland at west edge of site now being enhanced by sensitive management and yellow rattle introduction to create neutral grassland.
2). Species:		
<i>Bats*</i>	International* & National*	Not recorded on the site due to lack of survey but likely foraging over the hedgerow areas. New woodland along with sound management of the hedgerows will maintain these corridors for the bats and likely greatly enhance the site for all bat species. Care required if carrying out tree surgery on any mature trees on the site that no bat roosts present (bats and roosts protected by law).
<i>Badgers</i>	National	Badgers and their setts are protected by law. There are no setts on the site at this time but vigilance and potential survey work in adjacent woodland and disused railway line is advised to locate any nearby setts.
<i>All nesting birds</i>	International and National*	All wild birds, their nests and their eggs are protected by law unless some specific exception is made in the legislation. Some species receive stronger, special

		protection <i>e.g.</i> barn owl. Management activities will therefore need to take due cognisance of the location and species of breeding bird on the site. However, at present, very little breeding on the site beyond small patches of scrub, mature trees and hedgerows.
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6). Recommendations for Further Ecological Surveys (Table 4)

This desktop study has collated information at a basic level of detail at this time, however, due to the existing impoverished nature of the site, it is considered highly unlikely that a lot of ecological data could be collected by field surveys.

The following surveys are recommended in order to address gaps in current knowledge for the Pleasantfield site. These have been highlighted as either 'Essential' or 'Desirable' in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Recommended Ecological Surveys on Pleasantfield

Survey	Level of Importance	Comments
1). Hedgerows	Desirable	Collate information on length, condition and management needs in order to inform future land management.
2). Neutral Grassland area	Essential	Collect baseline information on current plant species and condition of small grassland area set aside for meadow enhancement, using Site Condition Monitoring method alongside DEFRA 3.1 Metric approach.
3). Badgers	Desirable	Survey surrounding woodland and disused railway areas to confirm presence/absence of badger setts nearby. Observations on any badger snuffle holes on site.
4). Bats	Desirable	Carry out bat transects across site and long hedgerows to assess current use of site and hedgerow areas, as well as mature standard trees. This will provide baseline data to monitor changes in bat use of site as woodland matures but also might identify bat roosts in mature trees within site.
5). General species records	Essential	Collate all species sightings during site visits in order to build up knowledge of habitats and species moving into the site, and also using the site as new woodland grows and other habitats respond to removal of intensive agricultural management. Fill in Biological Records Sheet on file.

Up-to-date ecological information is essential to allow the sound management of land and ensure compliance with relevant legislation. At Pleasantfield, the collection and further evaluation of such information is necessary to ensure the following:

- There is a clear understanding of the location of habitats and species on the Pleasantfield site which have conservation importance, including those which are subject to some level of statutory legal protection i.e. legal compliance;
- There is a minimum level of ecological information available to inform future site management planning, potential future grant bids and the development of biodiversity and other commercial opportunities;
- Future management does not adversely impact key species, but instead, seeks to conserve and enhance such interests wherever possible;
- Potential grant aid specifically relating to the conservation of habitats and species of recognised conservation importance can be identified and obtained to assist with the management of the site;
- Baseline information on the condition and populations of key habitats and species (including deer) is available to permit the assessment of the success or otherwise of management activities on the Pleasantfield site in respect to biodiversity work and any relevant grant conditions *e.g.* forestry.