

Restoring Helmdon's Disused Railway

A Calcareous Grassland Restoration Project – Natural England

Introduction

Natural England, working in partnership with the landowner, is supporting a programme of habitat restoration along the disused railway at Helmdon. The aim of this work is to restore a rare and valuable habitat known as calcareous grassland, bringing long-term benefits for wildlife, landscape character, and public enjoyment.

Why Calcareous Grassland Matters

Calcareous grassland develops on lime-rich soils and supports an exceptional diversity of wildflowers, insects, and associated wildlife. This habitat is now rare across the UK, yet historically railway embankments often provided ideal conditions for its persistence.

Historical Importance of the Helmdon Site

The Helmdon railway corridor was traditionally a species-rich calcareous grassland containing many key indicator species. Over time, management ceased and scrub, bramble, and thorn species encroached, reducing biodiversity and shading out specialist plants.

Why Management Is Needed

Without intervention, calcareous grassland is quickly lost. Scrub removal and vegetation management are essential to reopen sunny areas, restore plant diversity, and allow characteristic species to return.

Work Being Undertaken

Scrub, bramble, and thorn are being removed outside of the bird breeding season. The site is being carefully prepared for wildflower grassland restoration, recognising that recovery will take time and that early stages may appear disturbed.

Public Access Improvements

The landowner is providing new permissive access along parts of the former railway. Steps are being constructed at the Helmdon village end to improve access up the embankment, and kissing gates are being installed to guide visitors along agreed routes.

Request to Visitors and Dog Walkers

Visitors are kindly asked to remain on permissive paths, keep dogs under close control, and respect newly restored areas. These measures will help wildlife recover and ensure the success of the restoration project.

What to Look Out For

As restoration progresses, visitors may see classic calcareous grassland species such as Common Rock-rose, Bee Orchid, Small Heath butterflies, and Burnet moths. These species are indicators of healthy, species-rich grassland.

Looking to the Future

This restoration is a long-term investment in nature. With continued management and community support, the Helmdon disused railway will once again become a thriving and wildlife-rich grassland enjoyed by both people and nature.

Please take time to enjoy this evolving landscape and look out for the many wildflowers and insects that depend on calcareous grassland habitats.