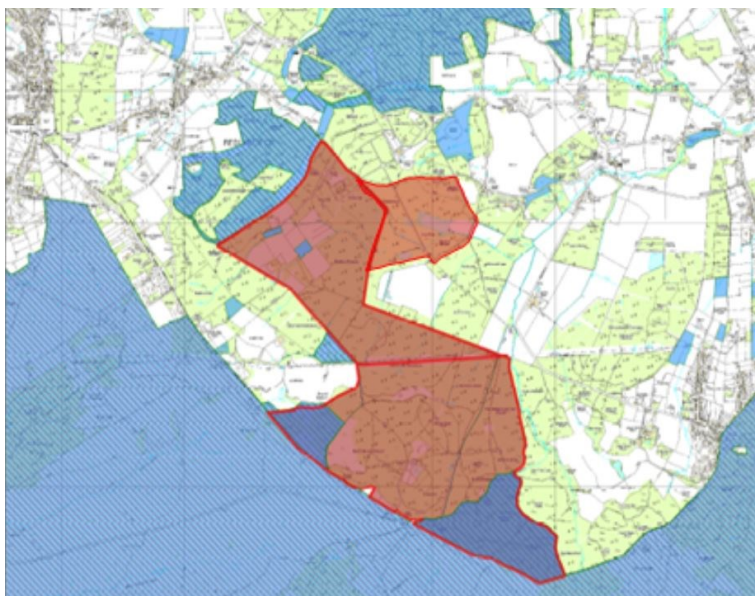


## THE RSPB IN THE NEW FOREST

### *IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BIRDS!*

The New Forest is one of the RSPB's 'Priority Landscapes', giving recognition to its significant value for nature and providing impetus to increase our work in the area. To this end, a conservation officer was appointed to protect and enhance the nature value of the landscape (which covers not only the New Forest National Park but also the Avon Valley and parts of East Dorset) and in 2018 we acquired a 400ha site at Franchises Lodge in the northern part of the Forest – our first land holding here and an opportunity for us to become a significant landowner and manager.



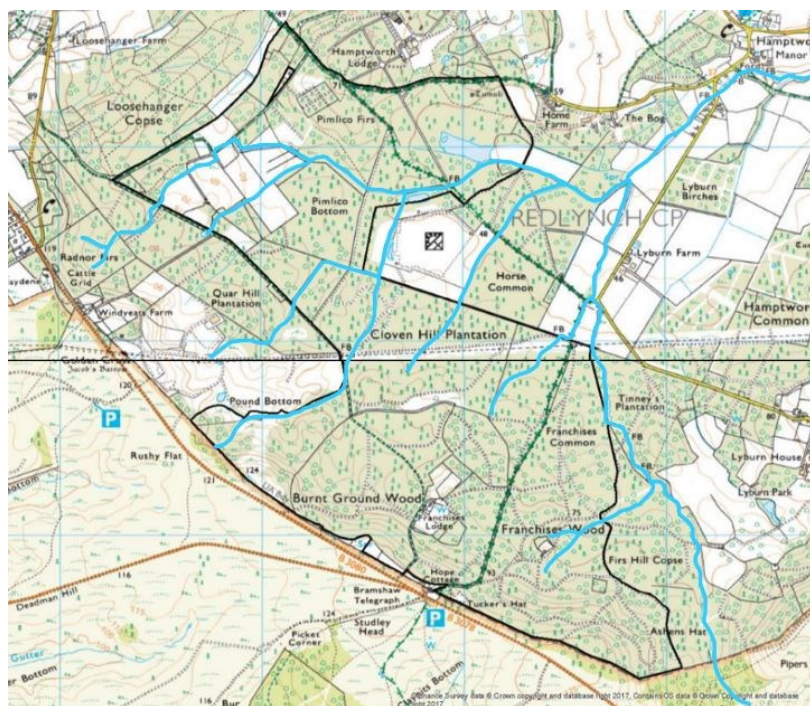
*Franchises Lodge (in red) showing designated areas (SSSIs in blue and SAC with diagonal lines), with the open forest to the south and*

We are very much a new arrival on the New Forest scene and have spent the last few years getting to know our site at Franchises, as well as the wider area, and improving our understanding of how the Forest works. We now have the beginnings of a plan for our work going forward. Although very much in its infancy, and still evolving subject to our increasing knowledge, the RSPB is very excited about the potential we have to make positive impacts on the landscape. Whilst some birds feature in our plans, it's more about making habitat improvements to encourage a whole suite of species.

At Franchises Lodge, suitable management is very much in our gift. The land has been in private ownership for many years, and we have been finding out what's there to create a baseline for any work we do. The site is largely covered by conifer plantations and rhododendrons at present. In the past it would have been ancient woodland and more open habitat, with mires and wet heath in the area known as Pimlico Bottom. Open habitats would have connected from east to west, with woodland on the slope near Telegraph Hill. Most of the open land was lost under conifer as the country sought to boost timber production after the second world war. Now only a few fields and clearings remain. A lot of the hardwood was removed too, but pockets remain, much of which is designated SAC and SSSI woodland.

Our aim is to restore a mosaic of habitats to allow for greater connectivity through the landscape. Open habitats will be restored to allow east to west movement, whilst thinning or removal of conifers, and restoration of native woodland, will create a north to south corridor. We would then become a key piece of the landscape puzzle, connecting the open forest to the south with Loosehanger Copse and Langley Wood, both designated areas, to the north. Grazing has already been reintroduced to support wood pasture management, we have started the task of removing rhododendron, and increased the intensity of deer management to encourage a shrub layer to develop.

The southern edge of Franchises Lodge sits on the scarp, which slopes downhill to the north. We have several springs along the slope, making our land the head of a tributary of the Blackwater. The map below shows the extent of our current channels, and you can see that some of these have been straightened historically to help drain the site. This is especially evident around the fields at Pimlico, where there was a working farm for a period in the 1860s and 1870s. The fields would have been reclaimed from the bog, but it would have been very challenging farming this area due to the wet nature of the ground. A small part of it is designated SSSI for its wet meadow plant assemblage. This had become overgrown due to a lack of management, but we now have cattle on the ground to help bring it back into favourable condition.



*Franchises Lodge (outlined in black) with adjacent water sources and channels (in blue).*



There is also a lake on site, originally built around 1850 and subsequently extended with a dam on the eastern side. It was used as a decoy pond and to add amenity value to the estate house. We have records of the numbers of duck taken in some years from the pond, and some of the infrastructure for this remains in the undergrowth. There are also recollections of children swimming or boating here, and even ice skating (which can't have been a regular occurrence)! At least one fish introduction was attempted, but it was unsuccessful, and the status of fish in the lake remains unclear, though we have no evidence so far that any are present. There are, on the other hand, tens of thousands of toads using the lake, leading some to suggest that it is the largest population of toads anywhere in the country. Apparently, the pond has been drained in the past and herons arrived from nowhere to feast on the toadlets left exposed!

*An image of a toad in the grass at Franchises Lodge, suggested to be part of the largest toad population in England.*





*A satellite photo of the lake, built around 1850 as a decoy pond and to add amenity value to the estate house. There is now consideration to change the lake to restore natural flow and re-wet areas as the RSBP have acquired meadows downstream.*

We considered what the land in this area would have looked like originally and would like to restore a wetter system than there is now. We will likely keep the lake due to the species interest but could encourage a more natural flow of water in the meadows downstream (visible behind the lake in the photo below). Fortunately, we have now acquired land further downstream which gives us ownership of both meadows and a section of woodland that could also be re-wetted.

Beyond the reserve, the water flows into the Blackwater, running east under the A36 and past East Wellow before entering the Test just north of the M27, from where it drains into the Solent at Totton. In terms of wider catchment issues, we know there are invasives including Himalayan balsam just downstream from Franchises, and there has been work by the Blackwater Conservation Group to remove some of that. There was an unsuccessful bid for funding to create a landscape scale project using woodland buffers to protect riparian habitats in the area around Franchises Lodge, working with several partners. Although the bid failed, this is the sort of work and collaboration we will seek out. We will look to support wetland restoration across the landscape, working with others to develop projects and policies that help to achieve this, and we hope that we can play some part in protecting and enhancing the blue landscapes of the New Forest