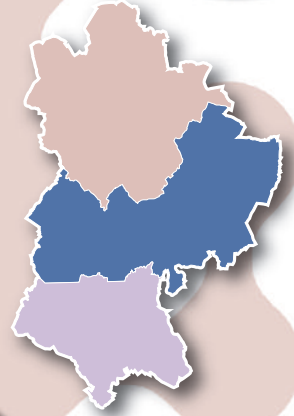




1. The Forest of Marston Vale



Following a successful joint bid by Mid-Bedfordshire District Council, Bedford Borough Council and Bedfordshire County Council, the Forest of Marston Vale was designated by Government in 1991 as one of England's 12 Community Forests. Its purpose is to use trees and woodlands to transform 61 square miles between Bedford and Milton Keynes, repairing parts of the Marston Vale landscape scarred by decades of clay extraction, brick making and landfill.

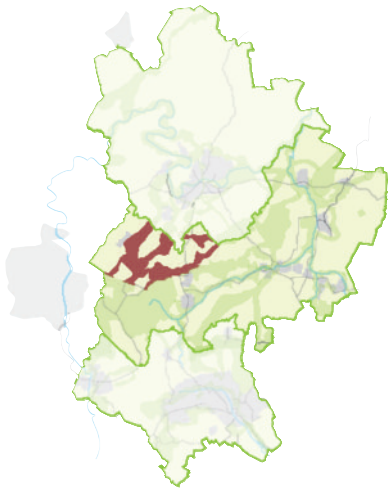
There is a Government-set target to increase woodland cover from 3% (as at 1991) to 30% by 2031. Approximately 50% of the 61 square mile area designated as the Forest of Marston Vale lies within Mid Bedfordshire. The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale is guided by the 'Forest Plan', which was produced through extensive consultation and is endorsed by Local Authorities and Statutory Agencies, and its implementation is being led by The Marston Vale Trust on behalf of the Local Authority partners. The Marston Vale Trust (MVT) is the registered charity dedicated to environmental regeneration and the delivery of green infrastructure throughout the Vale. Working with local communities, government and businesses, the 40-year vision is to deliver environmental regeneration that catalyses social and economic regeneration of the area, whilst providing major recreation, landscape, biodiversity, cultural heritage and quality of life benefits.

As the existing publicly and politically endorsed strategy for the area, the Forest Plan is the key reference for creating the Forest of Marston Vale and sets out agreed key principles, objectives and broad proposals relating to GI. This Mid Beds GI Plan seeks to compliment this overarching strategy by reflecting relevant aspirations of the Forest Plan at the District level. Woodland creation is the primary GI objective in the area and the vehicle for delivering a wide range of associated benefits (i.e. landscape, biodiversity, access/recreation, sustainable timber production, carbon sequestration, health/well-being, and amenity). The delivery of the 30% woodland cover target by 2031 requires around 20 square miles of woodland to be created, with a nominal 10 square miles of this being within Mid Bedfordshire. This unprecedented scale of positive transformation will fundamentally change the landscape and perception of the Marston Vale, will necessitate

concerted effort and support from all parties involved, and will require the harnessing of a range of existing mechanisms and the creation of innovative new ones.

The Forest Centre & Millennium Country Park, created, owned and privately operated by MVT, was opened in 2000 and provides a strategic new multi-functional greenspace for the District, including a major visitor centre, access routes, and valuable new wetland habitats. The Millennium Country Park, which receives over 400,000 visitors annually, is the only Green Flag Award winning site in the District. Beyond the Millennium Country Park, the other wetland habitats in the Marston Vale range in size from small field ponds and marshy areas to the large disused clay pits at Brogborough and Stewartby, collectively supporting important breeding and wintering birdlife and amphibian populations. The Marston Vale is widely believed to host a potential meta-population of Great Crested Newts, a European Protected Species and UK BAP priority. The ponds and lakes of the Vale are noted in a national study as important stonewort areas. There are important ancient woodlands on the slopes of the Greensand Ridge and also on the slopes of the clay ridges at Salford, Holcot, Marston Thrift, Wootton and Kempston. The Vale contains a rich heritage of human settlement and iconic brick making works and pits which make a distinctive contribution to its character.

The M1 forms the south western boundary of the Forest of Marston Vale area and the planned dualling of the A421 will increase the impact of transport corridors on this area and increase severance of existing ecological and access corridors. The Vale has long been identified as a strategic growth corridor between Bedford and Milton Keynes, and is currently



1. The Forest of Marston Vale

highlighted for major housing and industrial development as a key part of the Milton Keynes & South Midlands Growth Area. Current housing growth plans will result in a doubling of the existing population in the Vale by 2021, and it will receive impacts from developments in adjacent areas like Milton Keynes. The NIRAH scheme, which has planning permission at Quest Pit near Stewartby, will be a major tourism attraction in the future, as will the nearby Center Parcs development at Warren Wood, helping to transform perceptions of the area and foster 'green tourism'.

Apart from the primary target of achieving 30% woodland cover in this part of the District, there are major GI initiatives for wetland creation in relation to the proposed Milton Keynes to Bedford Waterway Park and restored brick pits, significant new areas of accessible greenspace and woodland and other habitat linkages between the existing ancient woodlands on the wooded slopes surrounding the Vale. The Marston Vale Trust is also leading on the delivery of the Bedford River Valley Park, a 3½ square mile greenspace creation project to the East of Bedford, which although outside the District will benefit residents of Mid Bedfordshire.

Forest of Marston Vale Project List

Creating the Forest of Marston Vale. This is the primary, overarching green infrastructure initiative for this part of the District, seeking to deliver the agreed vision of 30% woodland cover across this landscape by 2031. This requires the creation of some 10 square miles of woodland within this part of the District. New woodlands will range from small farm woodlands on private land, delivering just landscape and biodiversity benefits, through to large-scale multi-purpose community woodland projects delivering the full suite of GI functions and benefits to a high standard. The Forest of Marston Vale is specifically supported by the East of England Plan (RSS14) which identifies it as an asset "of particular regional significance for the retention, provision and enhancement of green infrastructure" (Policy ENV1), and is further supported in the Milton Keynes & South Midlands Sub-Regional Strategy.

Bedford & Milton Keynes (B&MK) Waterway. This is a major green infrastructure project that seeks to complete a missing link in the national waterway network between the Great Ouse at Bedford and the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes. The majority of the proposed route runs through the Forest of Marston Vale and the Waterway project has the potential to help deliver the Government's environmentally-led regeneration objectives for this area, as well as closing the gap in the waterways to complete a link identified by British Waterways as of national strategic importance (Waterways 2025, British Waterways June 2004). The project is also specifically supported by the East of England Plan (RSS14), identified as being "of particular regional significance..." (Policy ENV1), and it is noted as a "strategic waterway" capable of providing "strategic bridleway, cycle and footpath links" in the Bedfordshire & Luton Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan (2007). The project is currently being progressed in stages as funds become available. The stage between the M1 near Milton Keynes and Stewartby Lake lies within Mid Bedfordshire, and offers a major opportunity to deliver a significant green infrastructure project in this part of the District which delivers not only a section of the B&MK Waterway but also contributes to the objectives of the Forest of Marston Vale – both regional GI priorities.

Local authorities are working with the Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG), the B&MK Waterways Trust, landowners and the Marston Vale Trust to secure a broad multi-functional 'green corridor' along the proposed route. This corridor, a potential 'linear park', will vary in width and nature but will provide a range of major access, landscape and biodiversity benefits through the heart of the Marston Vale whilst also providing for the future construction of the B&MK Waterway.

Milton Keynes to Brogborough Lake – a potential landmark engineering attraction will define this section of the Waterway as it 'climbs' over Brogborough Hill, through areas suitable for habitat creation/linkage as part of the Waterway corridor development.

Brogborough Lake to Stewartby Lake – proposals to link these lakes include major wetland and woodland habitat creation and access improvements. M.3. Clay Ridge Woodland Linkage Corridor. A landscape-scale woodland linkage project to reverse the isolation of a set of key remaining ancient woodlands along the slopes of the Clay Ridge, using the creation of new woodland and grassland, hedgerow corridors, new public greenspace and including enhanced management of the existing ancient woodlands. Together with a similar proposal along the Greensand Ridge Scarp (see project G3), this woodland linkage concept along the once-wooded slopes of the Marston Vale is a key habitat creation proposal in the Forest Plan. With the restoration of Brogborough Landfill site, linking a number of surrounding sites, there will be a significant block of woodland, grassland and ponds of strategic importance in terms of landscape, biodiversity and public access.

Holcot Wood to Salford Wood – proposed woodland linkage of increased importance within the context of the eastward spread of Milton Keynes and the need for strong structural woodland planting and landscaping on the rising ground.

Brogborough Landfill – major restoration scheme that includes woodland, ponds and neutral grassland habitat creation and a bridleway scheme within and around the site.

Reynolds Wood – new multi-user route to Holcot Wood and linking to NCN Route 51, plus associated improved management.

Rectory Wood – linking Cranfield to Marston Thrift, a major new 70 hectare native species community woodland.

Marston Thrift – infrastructure improvements that will assist access, conservation of rare species, interpretation and the de-coniferisation of this SSSI woodland.

Marston Thrift to Wootton Wood – improved habitat linkages, using woodland creation, grassland and hedgerow corridors, along clay ridge from Marston Thrift to Wootton Wood.

Millennium Country Park – New wetlands habitats are being provided with improved management of herb rich grassland. Enhanced visitor facilities and access improvements.

Wetlands Nature Reserve – access, habitat and visitor infrastructure improvements to create exemplary 'safe and welcoming' nature reserve for all.

Access 'hub' development – creation, upgrading and promotion of radial network of access routes from the Millennium Country Park into the wider Marston Vale, linking to other GI assets and communities.

Expansion/Links: Rookery Pit North – proposed nature reserve 'extension' to the existing Park with wetlands, surrounding grasslands including great crested newt habitats, and new access links.

Expansion/Links: Berry Wood – proposed linkage to nearby under-utilised Berry Wood site (in Bedford Borough) as part of B-MK Waterway GI corridor development and enhancement.

Wixams – Multi-functional woodlands and greenspace buffering the new 4,500 home development, providing essential GI for the new community and preventing coalescence with Houghton Conquest. Improved off road links are proposed to the Millennium Country Park, Houghton Conquest and Wilstead.

Wixam Woods – proposed large new community woodland providing access, landscape and biodiversity benefits to existing and future residents.

Conquest Wood – expansion and linkages with Wixams site and access improvements.

Lidlington Ridge Woodlands – community woodland development and expansion along the 'Lidlington Ridge', including potential improved access and habitat corridor linkages to the Millennium Country Park.