



FLEET'S GATEWAY TO HART VALLEY THREATENED BY MORE HOUSING.

Not as well-known as other Fleet open spaces, such as Tweseldown or Fleet Pond, the Hart Valley, meandering northward just west of the town, is a hidden jewel. The Valley is highly prized by many locals for its scenic countryside on their doorstep and is easily accessed by numerous public footpaths. The Hart Valley is exceptionally rich in wildlife, with important concentrations of rare and declining birds, such as skylark and yellowhammer.

The Valley's picturesque countryside contrasts with the blasted heathlands and dark pine forest across the town and is rich in diversity and natural beauty. It has farmland with hedgerows, ancient woodland with rare plants and floodplain wetlands, grazed by cattle, horses and sheep. It is an irreplaceable natural asset for Fleet and its residents but is under ever greater pressure from housing developers who are keen to build on its open fields. Grove Farm, formerly the Local Gap between Crookham Village and Fleet is particularly at risk. The local campaigning group FACE-IT recently undertook research to assess just how important Grove Farm and its landscape are to people and discovered some interesting findings.

Volunteers from both Fleet and Crookham Village recently spent 10 hours gathering information from those using the network of footpaths through the farmland and around the attractive landmark known as 'The Tump'.



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This distinctive low hillock visually separates the Hart Valley from Fleet and is a noticeable feature clearly seen from Hitches Lane, just south of the Hart Leisure Centre. The survey data has yet to be fully analysed but initial messages from the 100 users questioned one weekend were clear:

- Over 95 % of those questioned relied on the area for their daily and weekly recreation and did so by walking, jogging or cycling from the nearby Village and adjacent Fleet neighbourhoods such as Tavistock Road and Netherhouse Moor.
- None travelled there by car.
- There was an intense sense of belonging with much passion expressed about the beauty of the area and people favoured walking in a farmed landscape, rather than in Country Parks or Heathlands.
- All those questioned identified the importance of access to the beautiful open countryside and the impressive bird song of the skylark in their quality of life.
- More than 50% said they had moved to the area because of the proximity of this open countryside.
- It was noticeable how many people walked from the West Fleet neighbourhoods to buy their Sunday papers in the Village or to enjoy the Post Office Tea Gardens.
- People had jogged to the area from the centre of Fleet whilst others had walked from Galley Hill Road, both about a mile away.
- One lady organised weekly 'Walking for Health' groups of up to 70 around Grove Farm's circular footpaths.
- Most people confirmed that, if the area became developed, they were likely to get in their cars and drive to alternative recreation sites and many agreed it would be to the Heathland Special Protection Areas to the east of the town.

A further group of Fleet residents use Grove Farm as a Gateway to the idyllic countryside beyond, around Pilcot and the River Hart itself. People enthused about the chances of seeing barn owls and buzzards breeding so close to a large town.

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Netherhouse Copse, a Site of Interest to Nature Conservation, on the edge of the proposed development site, has 28 species of ancient woodland indicator plants, making it one of the richest in the UK.

A FACEIT Spokesman said “The stunning landscape, high recreational value and rich biodiversity of Grove Farm and the Hart Valley should be properly recognised before the area becomes another high-density housing estate and our natural heritage is destroyed for good. Local people deserve to be heard, it’s our health and well-being that’s at stake.”

Ends

For further information contact publicity@faceit-group.org

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