HAWKESWOOD ECOLOGY
Specialists in Ecological Survey and Assessment
Tel: 07957 154794 E-mail: hawkeswoodecology@btinternet.com
VAT Reg No 926 9271 93
(Proprietors: Niki and Eric Hawkeswood)

Mr R Oatway
Senior Project Manager
Tai Tarian Ltd.
Tŷ Gwyn,
Brunel Way,
Neath,
Neath Port Talbot,
SA11 2FP

16/08/2024 Our Ref: HE/15/2024

Dear Richard,

Grassland Assessment, Site of the Tudor Inn, Cimla.

Introduction

Hawkeswood Ecology was instructed to undertake an assessment of the grassland habitat present at the Site of the former Tudor Inn, Cae Rhys Ddu, Cimla. The Site was assessed by Ecological Services Ltd in April 2022 (reported as '*Preliminary Ecological Assessment, Tudor Inn, May 2022*') when the grassland area was categorized as semi-improved neutral grassland supporting 'many large anthills across the area'. This current assessment is best read in conjunction with that Ecological Services Report.

Following from this, the Neath Port Talbot Biodiversity Unit (NPT) has requested that an assessment of the grassland is undertaken to properly assess its value. From the Pre-application consultation they comment:

A further assessment of the grassland is required, the presence of large ant hills indicate the potential presence of long undisturbed soils, which is classed as an irreplaceable habitat in PPW12. It should also be addressed against the SINC criteria'.

During 2023 Hawkeswood Ecology was instructed to undertake bat and reptile surveys at the Site. During the survey period, adventitious records were made of non-target flora and fauna.

The current assessment was undertaken on 14th August 2024. In addressing the value of the Site against SINC criteria, the records from the initial survey of 2022 and any adventitious records are considered, there are constraints against earlier records and these are commented upon below.

Survey methodology

The assessment consisted of a walk over survey, covering all areas of the grassland species were identified and their abundancy noted using the DAFOR abundance scale.

The DAFOR scale is used as a simple measure of cover abundance for individual plant species within a habitat. The scale is as follows:

D Dominant
A Abundant
F Frequent
O Occasional
R Rare
(L Locally – sometimes used as a prefix to the above)

The surveyor and report author is Eric Hawkeswood. Eric has many years experience of broad habitat and detailed botanical and species surveying. He has extensive experience of protected species survey and holds Natural Resources Wales scientific and conservation licenses for bats and dormice. He has been a professional in the nature conservation field for thirty five years formerly working as Reserves Manager and Conservation Officer at Gwent Wildlife Trust and Woodland Manager for the Ruperra Conservation Trust. Eric has worked as an Ecological Consultant as joint proprietor of Hawkeswood Ecology since 2001.

Constraints
The current assessment was undertaken late in the season when early flowering species may not be visible. This constraint is largely overcome by using adventitious records from 2023 and records from the 2022 survey undertaken by Ecological Services Ltd.

Hawkeswood Ecology note some constraints on use of records from Ecological Services 2022 survey. There are no Target Notes to directly assess species recorded against the area they were found. The survey was also undertaken in April which is early in the season for grassland survey. Findings from that assessment were used with caution.

Results
Flora
The grassland area is an unmanaged plot of land to the immediate south-east of the Inn buildings and car park. Aerial photography from Google Earth shows changes in the land between 2006 and 2022 with significant bramble and bracken encroachment on all boundaries (see photographs). The area of interest is the remaining grassland area which shows to be managed as a football pitch in 2006. By 2009 the Site has been abandoned with the buildings demolished around 2012-13 following a fire.

The grassland is dominated by grasses with approximately 80/85% ground cover being graminoid species. No sedge or rush species were noted. The most abundant grasses are red fescue, common bent, creeping bent, Yorkshire fog, sweet vernal grass, false oat-grass and perennial rye-grass.

Broad-leaved herbs are scattered across the Site and are rarely frequent across the grassland, the main exceptions being red clover, bird’s-foot trefoil and common knapweed which occurred throughout the grassland albeit locally, in colonial patches in the case of bird’s-foot trefoil and red clover rather than throughout the sward.

Other species noted were meadow vetchling, black medic, creeping buttercup, meadow buttercup and white clover. The list of species recorded in 2024 is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1, Species recorded 14th August 2024:

Common Name	Frequency	*Scientific Name*
Bird's-foot trefoil	LF	*Lotus corniculatus*
Black medick	LA	*Medicago lupulina*
Bracken	LA	*Pteridium aquilinum*
Bramble	O	*Rubus fruticosus* agg
Cocksfoot	F-LA	*Dactylis glomerata*
Common bent	LA	*Agrostis capillaris*
Common dock	O	*Rumex obtusifolius*
Common knapweed	F	*Centaurea nigra*
Common sorrel	O	*Rumex acetosa*
Creeping bent	LF	*Agrostis stolonifera*
Creeping buttercup	O	*Ranunculus repens*
Creeping thistle	O	*Cirsium arvense*
Crested dog's tail	O	*Cynosurus cristata*
Dandelion	O	*Taraxacum officinale*
False oat-grass	LF	*Arrhenatherum elatius*
Hogweed	O	*Heracleum sphondylium*
Meadow buttercup	R	*Ranunculus acris*
Meadow vetchling	LF	*Lathyrus pratensis*
Perennial rye-grass	A	*Lolium perenne*
Ragwort	O	*Senecio jacobaea*
Red clover	F-LA	*Trifolium pratense*
Red fescue	A	*Festuca rubra* agg
Ribwort plantain	F	*Plantago lanceolata*
Sweet vernal grass	F-LA	*Anthoxanthum odoratum*
Timothy	O	*Phleum pratense*
White clover	O	*Trifolium repens*
Yarrow	F	*Achillea millefolium*
Yorkshire fog	F	*Holcus lanatus*

Adventitious records gathered during 2023 not indicated in Table 1 were bluebell and pignut.

Of the records from 2022 that were likely to be located in the grassland only bulbous buttercup was not located, and it was not found through the survey season of 2023.

Anthills

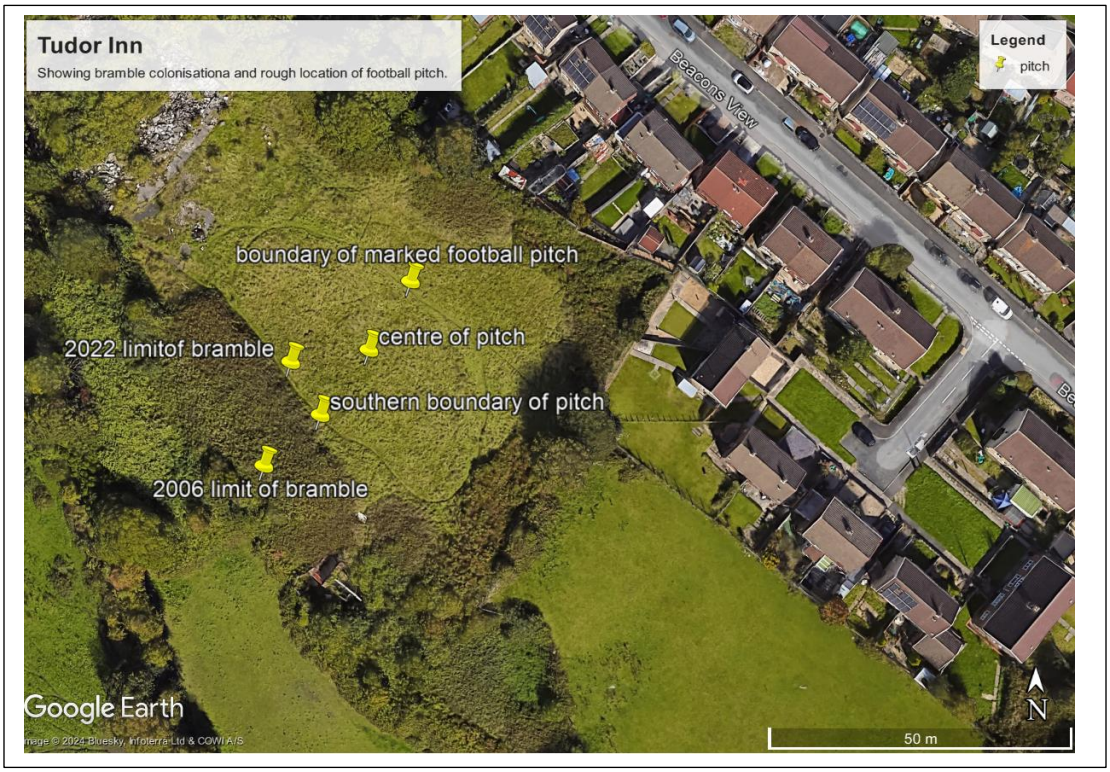
Ecological Services state that there were '*many large anthills present across the area*'. Whilst we would agree that anthills are present, would dispute that they are particularly large or that they are present across the area. They appear to be confined to the east of the

Site and particularly the southeast of the open grassland on what was once a football pitch. The ants present, yellow meadow ants (a group of anthill building ant species), are known for building anthills that can reach a height of around 0.5 metres. The hills on Site would appear to reach a maximum of around 8-10 centimetres. A photograph of a typical sized anthill on Site is shown in the photographs below.

Discussion
Two photographs taken from Google Earth ™ from 2006 and 2022 show the changes in management of the Site and the resultant encroachment by bramble and bracken into the once open grassland area. What is clear is that the area where the anthills are found was previously managed as a football pitch and this would certainly agree with an onsite assessment that the area has been subject to earth moving and levelling at some point in the past

The land falls away to the south and north from the plateau of the field.

At some point from the date of this image in 2006 to 2009 the Inn and associated grounds were abandoned. By 2022 areas of dense bramble and bracken are well established in previously managed areas. The photograph below shows the condition of the Site in 2022 with placemarks identifying features shown in the 2006 photograph above.



The 2022 assessment considered the grassland to be semi-improved neutral grassland. Hawkeswood Ecology hold the opinion that this overstates the ecological value of the grassland and consider it best described as poor semi-improved grassland. It is relatively species poor and dominated by graminoids. Forbs occur patchily through the sward and few forb species can be said to be widespread within it.

The grassland is clearly in a recovery phase following management as a playing area, and although it is not possible to know what the area was like during and before the advent of the football pitch, it is possible to surmise that the pitch was developed prior to the development of specialized sports seed mixes available today.

SINC criteria call for 8 indicator species to be recorded for a grassland not fitting a NVC category for consideration as a SINC. It also calls for those species to be occurring at a '*high frequency throughout*'. Six indicator species were identified from all surveys but none occurred at a high frequency throughout. Indeed,, many were local and occurring in a single area of the Site, as with pignut which occurred only towards the eastern boundary.

Yellow meadow ants are a widespread subterranean ant species and can have significant impacts upon grasslands. They can be considered a keystone species in natural grassland habitats and their mounds offer heterogeneity to grassland habitats, affecting both the flora and fauna present and also the soil structure. They also occur regularly in gardens and other amenity areas where mowing prevents the development of anthills.

It is clear that in this instance, however, that the anthills have appeared at an early successional phase in the grassland development and do not reflect the presence a long undisturbed grassland and soil.

Recommendations
A number of recommendations are made in regard to the protected species survey undertaken by Hawkeswood Ecology n 2023. In particular, paragraph 8.31 stated amongst other things that '*Improvements to the existing dense bramble area should be made to create open 'glades' and maintained as such to improve the retained area for birds and any remaining reptiles in particular*.'

We would suggest that the open glades should be managed by strimming rather than mowing as this can allow for the development of anthills over time.

Conclusions
Hawkeswood Ecology consider that the grassland does not meet SINC criteria or that the anthills represent an important soil resource.

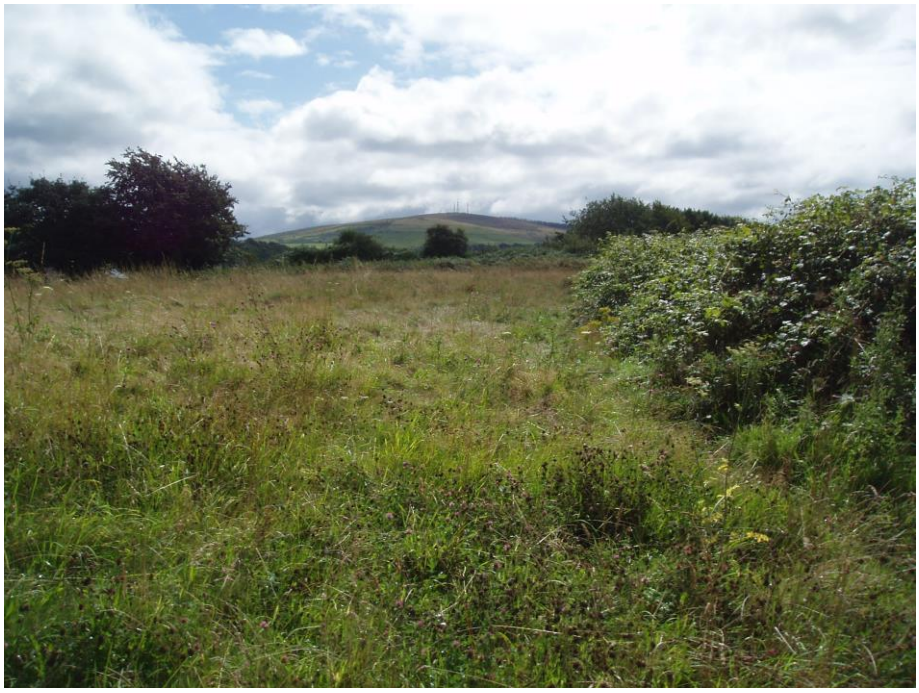
Recommendations are made in the various reports produced that should ensure long term a Net Benefit for Biodiversity is gained.

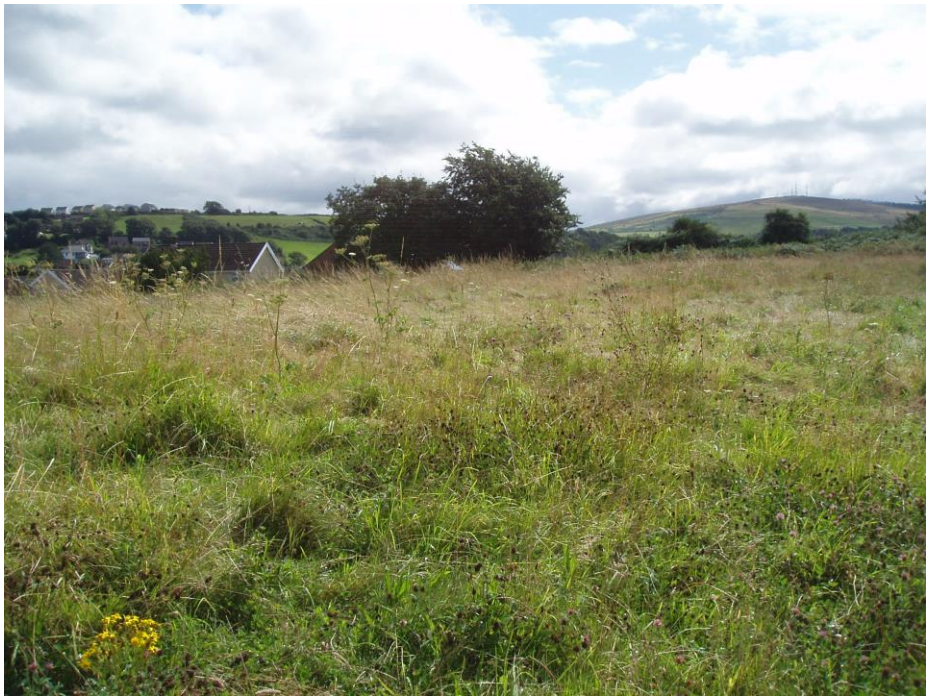
We hope this is of use, if you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely

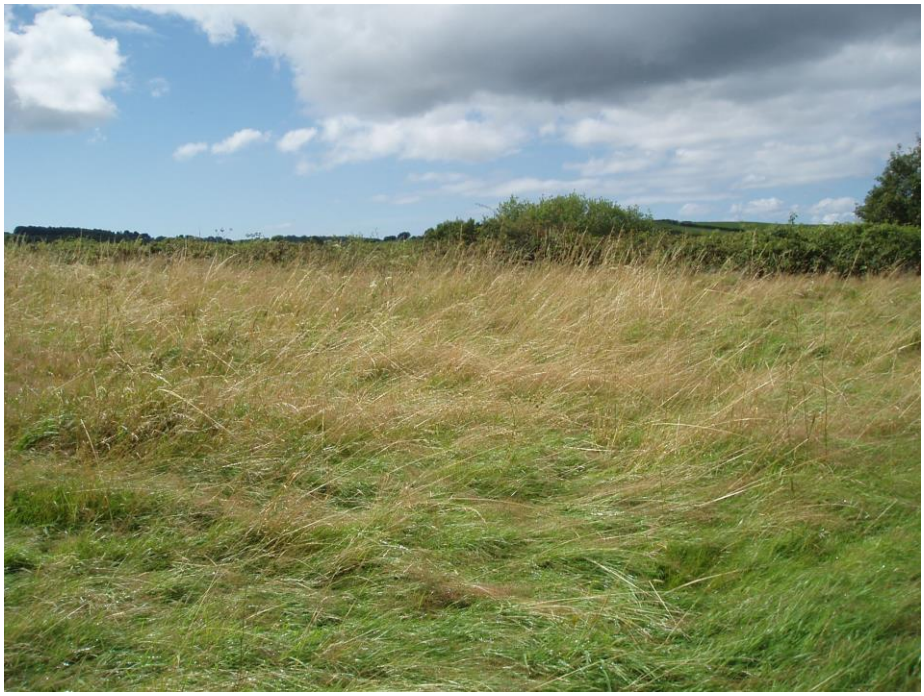
Eric Hawkeswood
Principal Ecologist
07957 154794

Photographs

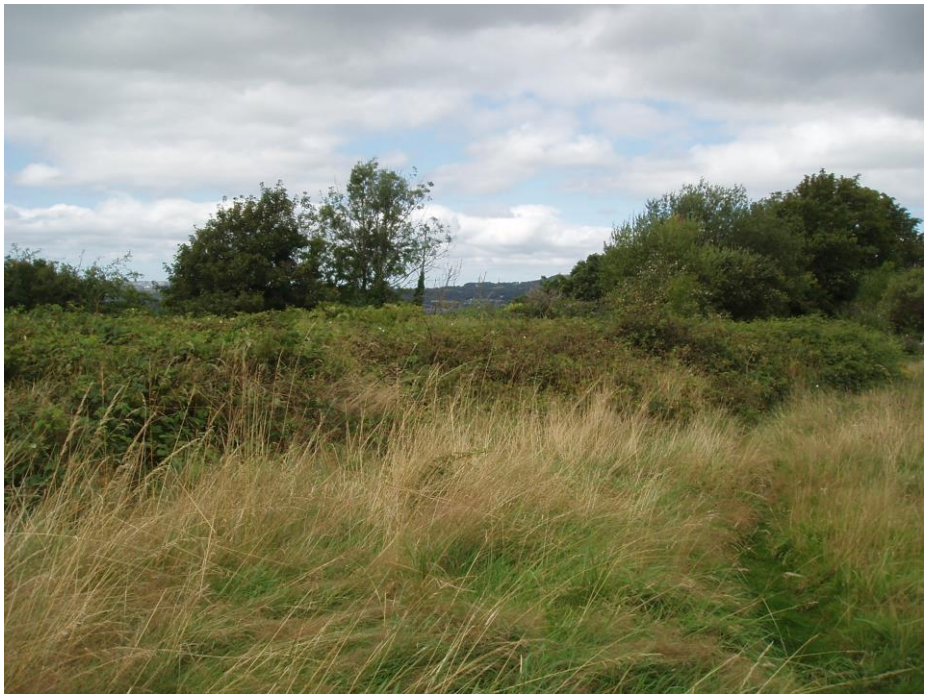




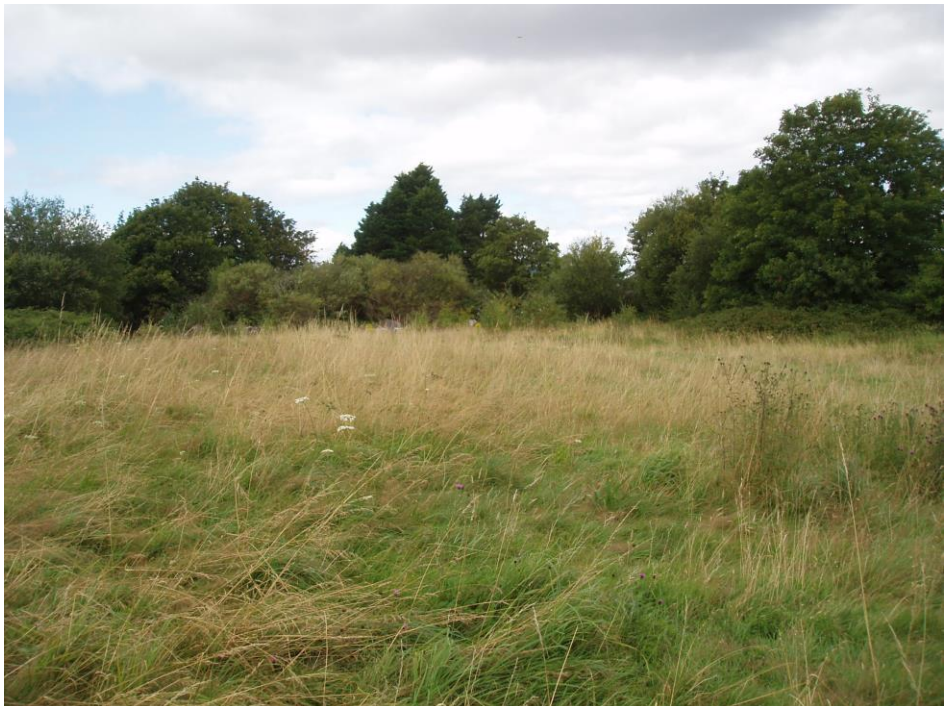
Viewing the Site from the former Tudor Inn car park looking east.



Looking south across the former football pitch



Bramble encroachment from the steep south facing bank



Looking north west across the field to the Inn Buildings area.

One of the larger anthills found on Site.