

## SOBERTON AND NEWTOWN: Village Design Statement

*Note on hedgerows and the Brown Hairstreak butterfly in the Parish*

### Introduction

1. The current Village Design Statement (VDS) dates from 2002.<sup>1</sup> Work to produce an updated statement is planned to start in 2021.
2. Pending the production of the updated VDS, this Note sets out a particular consideration in relation to hedgerows and wildlife in the Parish. This arises from the discovery that the Parish has a population of a rare protected butterfly, the Brown Hairstreak (*Thecla betulae*). Particular account requires to be taken of the presence and requirements of this species in relation to any development which affects any hedgerow of native species that has blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) in it.
3. *This Note does not currently have formal status, as it has not yet been through the process of public participation that would be required for it to be adopted as part of the current VDS. It is intended that the substance of this Note will be incorporated into the next VDS to be adopted. In the meantime, the Note highlights the issue, which may be relevant to the consideration of planning proposals in the Parish. It is being sent to the Principal Ecologist for Winchester City Council (Richard Smith) and is to be published on the website of the Parish Council.*

### The current VDS (2002)

4. The existing VDS emphasises the importance of hedgerows in the Parish and includes the following:

“Throughout the parish the enclosures are largely traditional hedgerows and hedges on banks above sunken lanes. Many of the hedges, which are invaluable to wildlife, are well established; others have been and are being reinstated by local farmers under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.” [p.5]

“Country lanes are a valued characteristic of the parish but infilling has increased the number of access points onto traffic-sensitive roads. Development should in future be arranged to minimise access points and to preserve existing hedgerows and trees.” [p.10]

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<sup>1</sup> The VDS is accessible from: <https://www.winchester.gov.uk/planning-policy/winchester-district-local-plan-2011-2036-adopted/supplementary-planning-documents-spds/village-and-neighbourhood-design-statements>

“Hedgerows, boundary walls and trees are also important when determining the siting of a new building or extension. Existing trees should be retained wherever possible.” [p.15]

“Hedgerows with a mix of indigenous species are common to all settlements, however, the use of single-species planting, such as *Cupressus leylandii*, can often introduce an urban feel. Similarly, high close-boarded fencing can introduce harsh interruption to softer and more subtle planting and landscapes.” [p.16]

“Guidelines for New Buildings ... DON'T ... Destroy boundary walls and existing hedgerows or use close-boarded wooden fences.” [p.18]

“Policy ... • The Countryside Stewardship Scheme should be encouraged in support of the reinstatement of hedgerows and trees.” [p.20]

5. In relation to Wildlife, the VDS states:

“The rich diversity of habitats in the parish, including the River Meon and local ponds, acts as host to an equally rich diversity of wildlife. None of these habitats could be recreated easily and it is important to protect them and to continue to manage them for their wildlife interests. To safeguard sites for the future, Hampshire County Council (HCC) has identified and recorded a number of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) in the parish. These are shown on the accompanying map. They include unimproved grassland and fen, ancient woodlands, commons, and copses where coppicing has increased light for enriching ground flora. Each of these sites has important, and sometimes rare, species of flora and fauna that, as long as they are sympathetically managed, should continue to thrive.” [p.8]

6. There is particular reference to a variety of sites, including Soberton Down which is noted for “some very uncommon plants and insects like butterflies that depend on the wild flowers and grasses that survive there.”

**The Brown Hairstreak butterfly in the Soberton area**

7. The Brown Hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*) is:

- protected in the UK under Schedule 5 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
- a priority species under the UK post-2010 Biodiversity Framework (BAP).
- a species of “principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity” under section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural

Communities Act 2006, listed for priority action, in particular habitat management.

- classified as Vulnerable in the UK using the IUCN criteria.

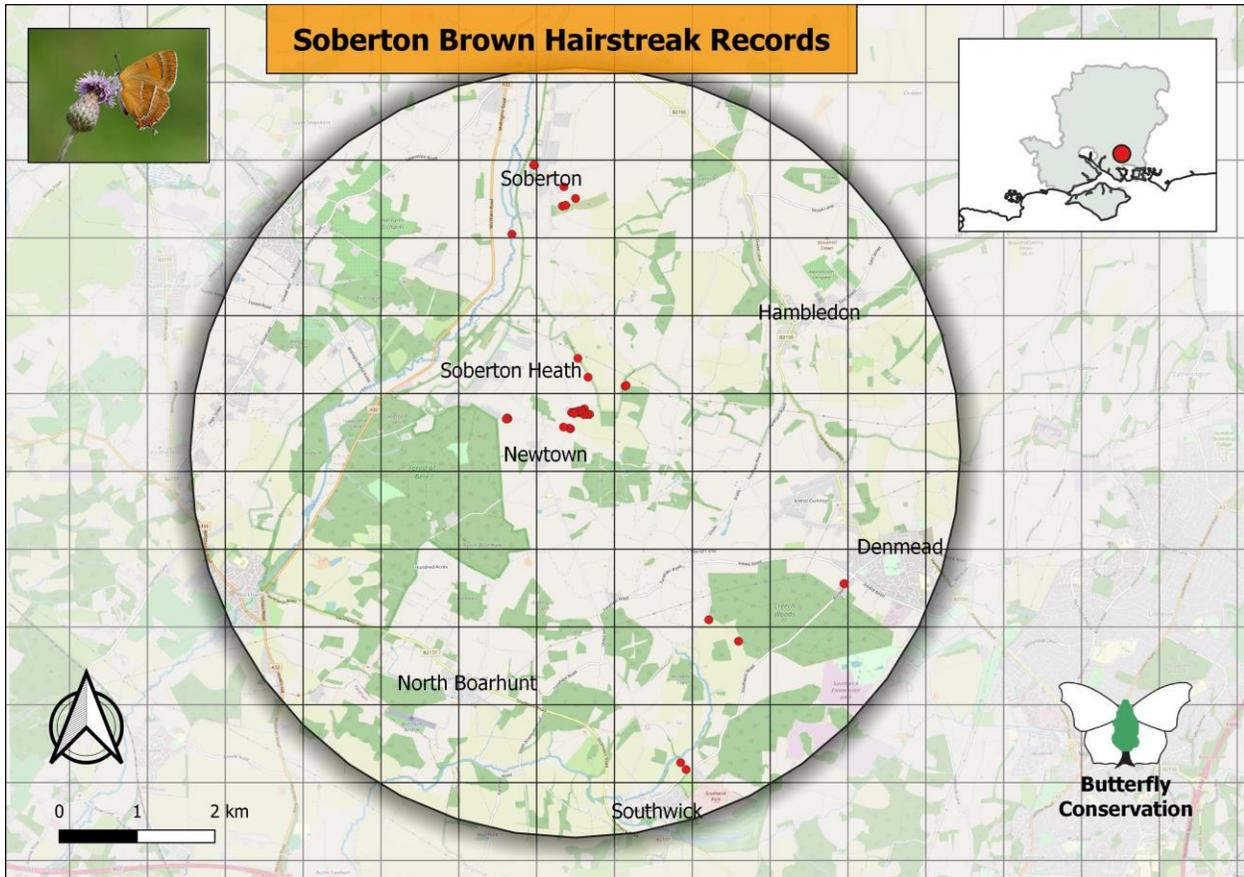
8. Historically, the Brown Hairstreak was a widespread species, but has declined nationally due to the loss of hedgerows and modern management (in particular annual hedge flailing). It is estimated that 50% of hedgerows in the UK have been lost since 1945 <sup>2</sup>
9. In the winter of 2017/2018 evidence of this butterfly breeding was discovered at a hedgerow site in Southend, Soberton. Since then it has been confirmed that the species breeds in many suitable hedgerows in the locality of Soberton, Newtown and the surrounding area. The local branch of Butterfly Conservation, has taken a close interest in this discovery and records of the newly discovered Soberton population appear in successive annual reports of the branch, and are included in the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) data base.
10. The species is elusive and its presence is hard to detect. It is therefore likely that the butterfly is under-recorded, but is undoubtedly scarce and has declined drastically over the last 50 years. There is some recent evidence of that this long-term trend has been halted. The adult butterfly lives for most of its life in the tree canopy. Females descend to hedgerows to lay their eggs on blackthorn in hedgerows in late summer, but are generally inconspicuous, secretive, and rarely encountered. The most reliable way of detecting the presence of the species is by painstaking searches for its eggs in winter, when the leaves have dropped from the host plant.
11. The population of the Brown Hairstreak around Soberton is of considerable significance. There are very few other populations of this species known in Hampshire: the principal sites are at Noar Hill (a small, but persistent population) and around Shipton Bellinger (on the Wiltshire border). A population near Stockbridge has also recently been discovered (2019).<sup>3</sup>
12. The following maps, produced by the County Recorder for Butterfly Conservation in August 2020 show local records for the species, before submission of records for 2020/2021. The records closely reflect the sites which have been searched. Unsearched sites within the area that have suitable blackthorn are likely to be breeding sites. The time and difficulty associated with confirming the presence of the

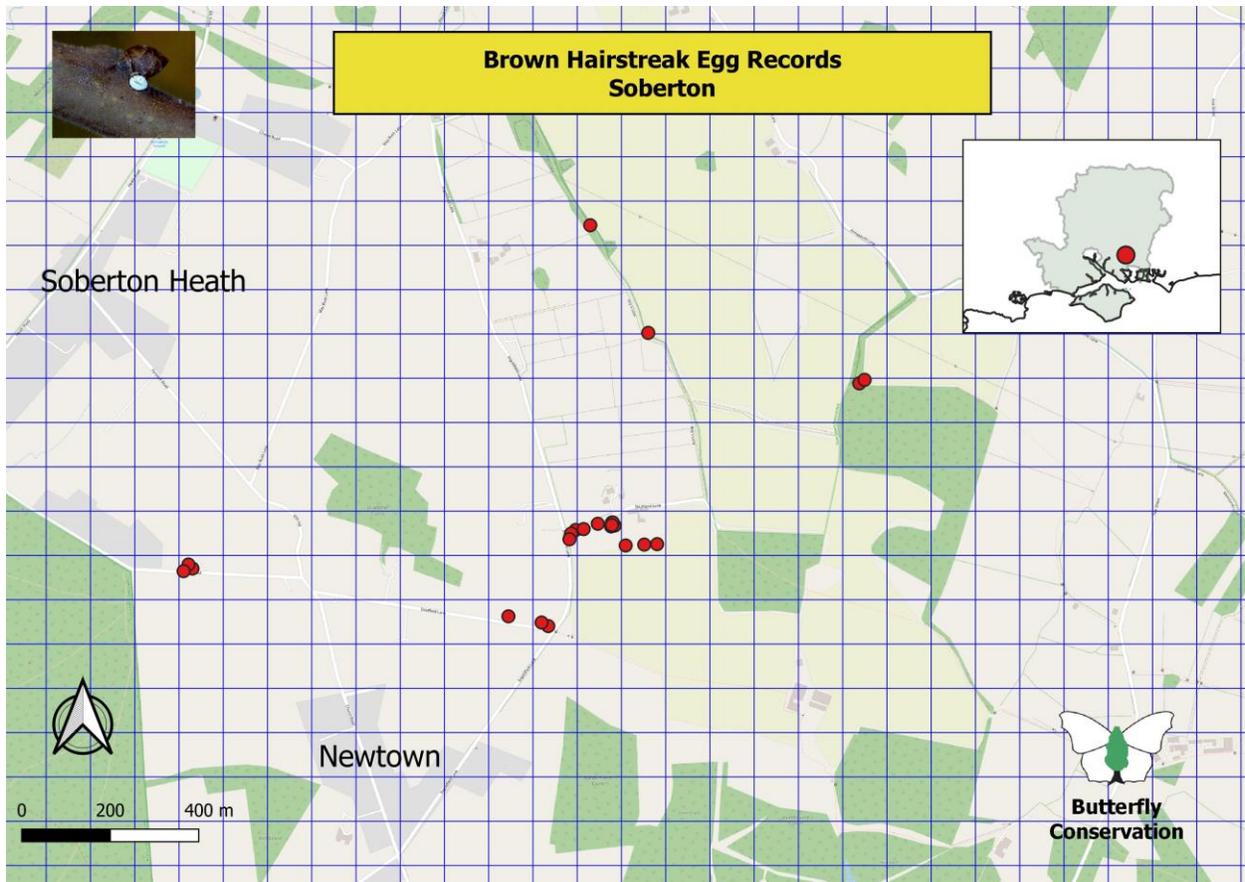
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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Eeles (2019) Life Cycles of British & Irish Butterflies and literature cited there.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Butterfly Conservation, Hampshire and Isle of Wight branch, Annual Reports, 2018 and 2019.

species, and the tiny number of recorders searching, mean that the distribution data for the Soberton population is currently very incomplete.





## Conclusions

13. In any proposal for development on land that includes mixed native hedgerows:

- Particular care to assess for the presence of the Brown Hairstreak is required, with consideration of the impact of the development on this protected species.
- In practice, such assessment requires careful searching for eggs of the species on blackthorn plants in the hedgerow in the winter months (November to early March), before any hedge cutting has taken place since the previous growing season.
- Where presence of the species is confirmed this should be taken into account in considering any proposal for development, including any conditions of development that it may be appropriate to impose.
- Conditions that may be considered include (a) a requirement to retain the hedgerow (which would lose protection under the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 if it becomes part of the boundary of a domestic property); (b) prohibition of erecting closed panel fencing alongside the hedgerow; and (c) a suitable hedge cutting regime (for example specifying that only one side of the hedge, or a proportion of the hedge, should be cut in any one year).

14. It is intended that the significance of this butterfly will be highlighted in the updated VDS, as it is prepared and produced. In the meantime, this Note should be considered alongside the existing VDS.

**January 2021**