



# The town that nature built

Cambourne could have been just another new town. Only here, the developers and the local Wildlife Trust created homes for wildlife too. Liz Walker reports



**N**ine miles west of Cambridge, Cambourne could be anywhere in modern Britain. Homes rise up in a proliferation of styles and colours: cream render, pink bricks, blue pantiles, black weatherboards. Property isn't cheap, but at least here young families get more bedrooms for their buck. By 2012, the developers hope to have built at least 4,250 houses here, providing homes for 11,000 people.

And yet Cambourne is extraordinary. Built on former farmland, it's the UK's first new town where wildlife has been encouraged to make its home alongside people. Among and around the new houses are mature woodlands and hedgerows, new lakes and meadows, restored ditches and 'greenway' wildlife corridors. In fact, 60 per cent of the 417ha site has been left as 'green infrastructure' for people to enjoy, and for wildlife to move into. What was once an agricultural prairie is now rich in wildlife, with new species still pouring in. And that is down to close cooperation between the developers, the landscape architects and the Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs, Northants and Peterborough.

"We became involved in the Cambourne development very early on," explains chief executive Brian Eversham. "We always scrutinise large planning applications carefully, and offer advice if relevant. In the end, we were pleased to see that the master plan aimed to keep the best habitats – three blocks of old woodland, six farm ponds, a few stretches of hedgerow and patches of grassland – and then to link them together with wildlife corridors and an eco-park."

The Trust then worked with the developers to optimise the town's wildlife potential. "We worked very closely with Randall Thorp, the landscape architects," says Brian, "advising on planting schemes and making sure that management was tailored to the needs of wildlife. They were very receptive and imaginative, even creating a modern version of ridge-and-furrow in the meadows, using old Cambridgeshire varieties of fruit trees in the community orchard, and even agreeing to have sheep grazing some of the grasslands."



**Built on former farmland, Cambourne retained and expanded all the wildlife habitats that were still there – ponds, woodland, grassland and ancient hedgerow**

Main pic: Matthew Roberts; inset: Randall Thorp

## A few of Cambourne's other residents



Adam Cormack

### **WASP SPIDER** (*Argiope bruennichi*)

Originally a Mediterranean species, this spider has been spreading north since the 1970s, perhaps in response to climate change. A female's body can be the size of a 2p piece. The much smaller brown males are sometimes eaten while they're mating. Wasp spiders live in the long grass on Cambourne's eco-park, and in the Trust HQ's wildlife garden.



Robert Camis/FLPA

### **CORN BUNTING** (*Emberiza calandra*)

Despite its dramatic decline across the UK, this Red List species has apparently rallied in Cambourne, with birds nesting on Crow Hill, where the long grasses (cut in late August) are perfect for protection and camouflage. Most arable crops and highway verges are cut in July, wiping out any nests in the process. Cambourne has meadow pipits and skylarks too.



Matt Cole

### **RED-EYED DAMSELFLY** (*Erythromma najas*)

A good many dragon and damselfly species have made a home in Cambourne's ponds and wet ditches. It's especially good to see the distinctive red-eyed damselfly, whose body is predominantly black, but with iridescent blue markings and large red eyes. The males often sit on water lily leaves, defending their territory against all-comers.



David Chapman

### **WATER VOLE** (*Arvicola amphibius*)

You can see water voles at Cambourne in the Crow Dene Valley, in the ditches between the lakes. They probably arrived from the nearby Bourn Valley, working their way up through the village's storm-water system. You can tell them from rats by their rounder noses, deep brown fur, chubby faces and short fuzzy ears. Their tails, paws and ears are furry too.

“The site had so few natural landscape features to work with,” says Randall Thorp’s Dick Longdin. “It was an arable farmland with isolated pockets of woodland, overgrown ditches and straggly hedges, some flailed almost to the ground. One field was 300 acres of wheat. We were determined to retain and restore these features, keeping them in the public realm, to build character.”

**“Here children grow up with nature. We’re undoing some of the damage of the previous century.”**

The four new lakes were a wildlife-friendly solution to flood alleviation. “We extended the existing ditches to link up with the new lakes and reedbeds,” explains Dick. “These were designed to take excess storm water, slowly releasing it through a controlled outlet – quite pioneering for 1995. It was so new that Anglian Water insisted we laid huge concrete pipes underground as well, but of course we’ve never needed them.”

To reduce lorry trips, no spoil was removed from the site. Instead, it became Crow Hill in the new country park – a grassland now buzzing with meadow insects, ground-nesting birds and butterflies. Allotments next door benefit from the ready supply of pollinators.



David Slater

**GREAT CRESTED NEWT** (*Triturus cristatus*)

The new lakes are good for these protected amphibians, which need open water for displaying and suitable egg-laying plants at the water margins. But, in fact, the newts are in all the ponds in Cambourne. They've probably come from the old farmland ponds which have been retained, and seem to thrive in the new network of wet ditches and watercourses.



Alan Williams

**SNIPE** (*Gallinago gallinago*)

Many wildfowl and wading birds use Cambourne's marsh and lakes for overwintering, attracted by the new stretches of open water and areas of lowland wet grassland. They're likely to come from the Ouse Washes, a large wetland site 30 miles to the northeast. The newer lakes are the best place to see snipe, using their long bills to hunt for worms and insects.



David Slater

**BADGER** (*Meles meles*)

Pre-build surveys show that several setts were here before Cambourne was developed. Encouragingly, the badgers have stayed, frequenting the main open and woodland areas and using the tunnels under the roads. During building they simply shifted their foraging territories, and final landscaping has been done sensitively to accommodate them.



Derek Smith

**PIPISTRELLE BAT** (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*)

The newer houses on Cambourne don't have eaves and crannies, so the pipistrelles roost in the bat boxes instead. They're the smallest European bats, and prefer a varied habitat of open woodland, parks, marshes, farmland and urban areas. Cambourne has plenty of each. The lakes also attract Daubenton's bats (which hunt over water) and far-flying noctules.

The neighbouring eco-park is another wildlife magnet. Grassland, woodland, ponds, reedbeds and marshes accommodate all manner of bird, mammal and amphibious wildlife, extant and incoming. It's a godsend for Cambourne's many young families, although it wasn't strictly built as an educational resource.

BCNP Wildlife Trust manages these wild spaces in exchange for an office HQ and garden. As soon as the builders have gone, the Trust will take over the freehold of the wild areas too. Within a couple of decades, Brian Eversham reckons, their wildlife value could be up to the standard of a decent nature reserve. "Walking to work is always interesting. I never know what I might

see," he says. "I'd never have guessed that Cambourne would have been home to Cambridgeshire's first wasp spiders, or that the buzzing in our office window would turn out to be a hornet hoverfly – and the following week, the fluttering of a rare red-tipped clearwing moth – both stunning beasts. Most important, perhaps, is the influence of the wildlife and exciting green spaces on the people: children growing up with trees and flowers, birds and badgers as a part of everyday life. I'm always cheered to see children cycling through the woods to school, or a family walking in the meadows on their way to the shops. We're undoing some of the damage of the previous century."

**VITAL STATS**

- Population: **7,600**
- Existing woodlands: **7ha**
- New woodlands: **45ha**
- New lakes: **6ha**
- New grassland: **23ha**
- Parks: **44.5ha**
- Sports fields: **17ha**
- Trees, shrubs: **c. 250,000**
- New hedges: **10+ miles**
- New paths: **12+ miles**

Figures courtesy/Randall Thorp 2010

**“We have instant access to green space to relax in”**



Interviews and pics: Liz Walker

**SIMON GIBSON, 42, SELF-EMPLOYED**  
 “Perhaps it’s because I work outdoors that I see a lot of the wildlife here in Cambourne. Our house lies on a greenway near a run of ancient hedge offering food and shelter for birds all year round. It’s a shame the greenways are mown regularly. Even so, they’re used by foxes. And we’ve got a hedgehog living in our greenhouse. Sparrows breed locally too, and last winter redwings were flocking up and down the greenway. I’ve seen greenfinches and goldfinches bringing their young into the garden to feed, plus starlings, rock doves and a number of small toads.”

**FRAN PANRUCKER, 63, RETIRED**  
 “People have instant access to green spaces to relax in, not just to see wildlife, but to run, walk the dogs and push baby buggies. The whole atmosphere is good for the soul. My house is called Skylark Cottage, because that’s what we heard right from the minute we got here. I’m chair of the Garden Club, Cambourne Arts and the WI. I’d like to see Cambourne work more as a community; it still has that ‘dormitory’ feel. This is a very special place, but weird, too. My daughter said it’s a bit like the town on *The Truman Show* – too good to be true! But I love it to bits.”

**SONIA LEEDER, 35, MUM**  
 “All this outdoor space is great for the kids – especially in the summer holidays. You can find things to do without having to travel or spend money. The ponds at Oakwood are full of tadpoles and great crested newts. With shallow edges it’s completely safe for the children. We also go on the evening bat watch events. I’ve seen muntjac deer and foxes, and I once saw a water vole. People either love Cambourne or hate it because it’s so quiet and remote. The walks are fantastic – up to 10 miles every day. For us, it’s just about right.”

**What Cambourne can teach other developments**

In July 2010, we met with Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP (the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) and encouraged him to visit Cambourne.

We emphasised the need for future developments to go truly ‘eco’ by building in green infrastructure, as well as being carbon and water efficient. Cambourne is a great example of how green infrastructure can be an integral part of new development and provide benefits for people and wildlife alike.

The Wildlife Trusts believe that an ‘eco home’ should be defined by its impact on nature, as well as resources like carbon.



The houses could have been eco-homes, but the Laurie Lee countryside is great for people and wildlife

Matthew Roberts