



# **Woolston Eyes Nature Reserve**



© Andy Weir

# THE WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP

---

The Woolston Eyes Conservation Group, a voluntary organisation formed in 1979, manages the rich and varied wildlife of the deposit grounds with the agreement of the Manchester Ship Canal Company, owners of the land. The Group's aim is to promote the study and conservation of the wildlife and habitat of the area with particular regard to ornithology. In 1986 the Reserve (an area of nearly 700 acres) was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in order to protect its wintering wildfowl especially Teal, Shoveler and Pochard. In 2004 the SSSI was revised to include the nationally important breeding populations of Black-necked Grebe, Pochard and Gadwall. The Group undertakes management work to preserve or maximise the ornithological value of the Reserve, provides and maintains hides for the use of the public and permit holders, keeps paths open and discourages disturbance. The Group produces an Annual Report which summarises the work undertaken each year and the results obtained, including the scientific study of the Reserve's flora and fauna. To carry out this work, the group raises funds by the sale of Permits, Annual Reports and by applying for grants from various organisations. Permit Holders are encouraged to become involved in the Group's activities. If you would like to take part, please contact the Chairman or any committee member.

## THE RESERVE

---

The Reserve is situated to the East of Warrington between the River Mersey and the Manchester Ship Canal, near Latchford Locks and the Thelwall Viaduct which carries the M6 Motorway over both the river and the canal.

The main entrance to the Reserve and the only vehicular access is from the south of Warrington by crossing the canal swing bridge on the Knutsford Road (A50), taking the right-hand lane through Latchford and crossing Kingsway South into Thelwall Lane. The road goes between Novelis Aluminium Recycling plant on the left (Sat Nav post code WA4 1PD) and the Locks on the right. At the end of Thelwall Lane there is a barrier which can be unlocked with the key issued with your permit. Once through the barrier drive along the track for 200m until you reach a gated ramp on your left. This is the foot entrance to No.4 bed. The track is wider 50m before the ramp to allow car parking on the left. No.3 bed car park is just over a kilometre from the 1<sup>st</sup> barrier and the foot entrance bridge gate just 25m further from the car park. Please ensure you lock the barrier and any gates behind you and drive slowly along the track as it is also a public footpath.

For further directions and details on opening times which vary according to the season, please visit our website [www.woolston.eyes.com](http://www.woolston.eyes.com).

Reasonably dry paths give access around both No.4 and No.3 beds but sections can become wet and possibly flooded after heavy rain. No.4 bed has a viewing hide and raised open platform whilst No.3 bed has well-marked paths which give access to the five hides and a viewing platform.

The hides are basic with many constructed from metal to deter vandalism, except for the Morgan Hide which is a fully enclosed wooden hide in the middle of No.3 bed.

NOTE:- the beds can be very dangerous away from the paths. They contain areas of deep water, deep mud and are criss-crossed by steep sided water filled ditches hidden by dense vegetation.

**PERMIT HOLDERS MUST KEEP TO THE PATHS.**

## HABITAT

---

The four beds at Woolston Deposit Grounds SSSI are managed as a nature reserve by the Woolston Eyes Conservation Group in agreement with Peel Holdings. Parts of the site are still in use to accommodate dredging from the Manchester Ship Canal.

**No.1 bed** to the east of the motorway (the Thelwall Viaduct) consists primarily of rough grassland and willow scrub. Sand extraction has created a number of reedy pools which attract small numbers of Snipe and wildfowl and also Little Ringed Plovers in summer. Many Swallows and Reed Buntings roost in the reeds. The bed also supports a good range of dragonflies, damselflies and butterflies. Unfortunately, there is no access to this bed for Permit Holders at the present time.



**No.2 bed** is still used periodically for pumping dredgings from the Ship Canal. It is largely dry with some reeds and willow scrub, but when dredgings are being pumped on, can hold sufficient water on the north and north-east areas to attract waterfowl, notably Teal in winter. Increasingly, Giant Hogweed has colonised significant areas, making access to the centre of the bed difficult and dangerous. Many species of warblers breed in the summer, together with Reed Buntings and Willow Tits. Like No. 1 bed, access is not allowed by the landowner although parts of the bed can be viewed from the public footpath to Woolston Weir on the west bank.

**No.3 bed** lies north of a meander of the river. About 20 years ago bunds were built across the river by Woolston Weir and below the south bank of No.3 bed creating a redundant arm known as the Oxbow. Kingfishers frequently fly beneath the footbridge on to No.3 bed. The east and north sides of the bed are shallowly flooded and contain extensive beds of Phragmites reed, some Reedmace and other aquatic vegetation. The remainder of the bed is covered with Reed Canary Grass, Rosebay Willowherb, nettles and a number of Willow copses. Two wildflower meadows have been created to attract pollinators and a winter feed crop provides food for many species of finch and Reed Buntings. Much of the focus of WECC's management work takes place on this bed with extensive improvements to the wetland habitat in recent years.

**No.4 bed** to the west of the reserve, also lies between the river and the canal. A major new wetland has been developed on the bed funded by Natural England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. This work was completed in 2022 and the wetland is now accessible to permit holders. Access to the bed is from the canal track 200 m east of the Latchford barrier. Take the footpath left once you have passed through the gate. The path continues along the west bank to the north-west loop where there is a hide and from there circles around to a new viewing platform. It is approx. 1.5 miles from the entrance to the hides.

All the beds are enclosed within steep embankments and consist of rough grassland and scrub. In places, taller poplars and willow grow alongside the river whose banks are

partially covered by hawthorn, elder and bramble. These banks are bird-rich at most times of year with late summer warbler flocks and early winter thrush flocks particularly notable. The river and canal are both benefiting from the improvement in water quality. In winter substantial flocks of diving duck, including Tufted Duck, Pochard, Goldeneye, Goosander and the occasional Scaup can be found. The rubbish tips at both ends of the reserve are now closed and have been capped. Both are attractive to winter feeding finches and thrushes.

## BIRD SPECIES

Two hundred and forty-five species have been recorded on the reserve as at Dec.2024 (see page 8), with a further 16 escapes, including fifteen species of raptor, more than thirty species of wader, all five grebes, the three woodpeckers, and five species of owl.

Lying next to the Mersey, the flooded beds attract large numbers of dabbling ducks moving inland from the estuary. The Mersey Valley Pochard flock also spends time here making it an excellent place to see winter wildfowl. A thousand or more Teal can be present, sometimes several times this figure, with several hundred Mallard, a hundred or so Shoveler, Gadwall and Tufted Duck. Small numbers of Pintail and Wigeon are also a regular feature.



Swallow

Other species of wildfowl occur less frequently or in smaller numbers and scarce or rare species such as Ring-necked Duck, Ferruginous and Long-tailed Duck, Green Winged Teal, Common Scoter and Smew have been recorded. In late autumn and winter, skeins of Pink-footed Geese are often observed making hard weather movements to the east coast.

Great Crested Grebe



The water margins of No.3 bed are an excellent nesting habitat for Black-necked, Great Crested and Little Grebes plus Teal, Shoveler, Mallard, Pochard, Gadwall, and Tufted Ducks. Garganey bred in 2019, the first time a brood of Garganey has been seen in Cheshire since 1960. A substantial Black-headed Gull colony dominates the water margins of No.3 bed.

Large flocks of aerial feeders may be present from May to September with many hundreds of Swifts joining the swirling flocks of hirundines feeding over the insect-rich lagoons. In most years, there is a sizeable Swallow roost, which has, on occasions numbered up to 20,000 birds. Inevitably, a Hobby is often in attendance and provides some spectacular aerial performances. From October to early winter, thousands of Redwings and other thrushes arrive to feed on the hawthorn berries around the banks of the beds, while Starling numbers can be spectacular, as in 2014/2015 when up to 400,000 roosted on No.3 bed.

In winter, Thrush roosts dwindle as food supplies diminish. Finches, Goldfinches and Chaffinches flock to feed on the winter feed crop and on the drier parts of the muddy beds,

with Siskins and Bramblings regularly located amongst them. The best place to see Bramblings, however, is at the feeders by the Morgan Hide. A few Chiffchaffs remain in willow scrub during most winters and Firecrests occasionally winter alongside the more numerous Goldcrests.

Wader passage is much smaller than formerly due to changes in the pumping regime into the beds. Spring passage is typically light, although Common Sandpipers are seen regularly in late April and early May and, on one occasion, stayed to breed. Little Ringed Plovers appear annually and breed most years. Autumn wader passage is heavier with increasing numbers of Black Tailed Godwits and Green Sandpipers. Snipe, Jack Snipe and Lapwing are also regularly present.

As far as rare or scarce birds are concerned Woolston offers much opportunity for the discovery of that ever elusive rarity

Over forty years of observation, spread over Woolston's huge acreage have produced some exciting birds including: Storm and Leach's Petrels, Spoonbill, Bittern, Ring-necked and Ferruginous Ducks, Quail, Honey and Rough-legged Buzzards, Red Kite, Osprey, Montague's Harrier, Temminck's Stint, White-rumped, Pectoral and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes, Avocet, Great and Arctic Skuas, Laughing, Mediterranean and Ring-billed Gulls, Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns, Bee-eater, Nightjar, Golden Oriole, Bluethroat, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Great Grey Shrike, Marsh Warbler, Firecrest and White-crowned Sparrow.



Jack Snipe



## RINGING

---

Over 168,000 birds have been ringed at Woolston since ringing first started here in 1980. A small team now operates on beds 1&3 throughout the year ringing up to 7000 birds annually.

In most years Woolston has taken part in an international ringing programme aimed at studying those migratory species which winter in Africa. During the summer and early autumn, large numbers of common warblers are ringed with full biometrics taken as part of the research programme. In the latter part of the year, the focus is on tape-luring over-flying finches, buntings and wagtails.



At any time, there is the chance of the odd surprise with Marsh Warbler, Bluethroat, Nightingale and Firecrest among the scarcer species ringed while a White-crowned Sparrow native to the West coast of the USA turned up in a net on No.3 bed in April 2016. During the winter months duck trapping takes place on No.3 bed where nationally important numbers of Teal have been ringed

## OTHER INTERESTING SPECIES

---

Woolston is not only excellent for birds but for many other animals which have been recorded.

Nineteen mammalian species have been noted from Fox, Stoat, Weasel, Mink, Otter, Roe Deer and Badger to the small mammals which make up the diet of many predators on the reserve. These small mammals include Short-tailed Field, Bank and Water Voles, Common, Water and Pygmy Shrews and Woodmouse. Five species of Bat have also been seen, Long-eared, Daubenton's, Noctule, Pipistrelle and Soprano Pipistrelle. .

Reptiles and amphibians including the rare Great Crested Newt and, more recently, the Common Lizard have been discovered on the Reserve.



Over 241 species of Lepidoptera have been found within the Reserve boundaries including the rare migrant moth, White Point. Butterflies seen include unusual visitors such as Brimstone and Clouded Yellow as well as the more common Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Common Blue, Comma, Small and Large Skipper, Painted Lady, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Orange Tip, Small Copper and many more. Recent additions to the list include White Letter Hairstreak, Dark Green Fritillary, Purple Hair Streak and Ringlet.

Twenty-two species of Odonata, (fourteen have been proved to breed), have been recorded and most can be found on warm summer days anywhere on the Reserve. Uncommon County species include Red-eyed Damselfly but such species as Southern and Brown Hawker, Azure,

Blue-tailed, Emerald, Large Red and Common Blue Damselflies are more likely to be seen.

## EARLY HISTORY

---

Not much is known about the area known as the Eyes before the Middle Ages, but we know that people were in the area during the Bronze Age, and that the Anglo-Saxons reached the region around 700 AD. In fact, the word 'Ees' is Saxon for land near a looping watercourse, so the Germanic settlers must have arrived on the banks of the Mersey about this time. Records begin around 500 years later. Land ownership in the township of Thelwall was fairly stable between 1300 and 1536. During medieval times a third was owned by the Clayton family and the rest by the Priory of Norton. The priors owned the valuable fishing rights for the south side of the River Mersey which, if the catches of 1749 were anything to go by (19 and 23 pound salmon landed in May of that year), were fairly substantial. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 all monastic land passed to the crown and all Norton Priory's former possessions were subsequently sold to the Claytons who thus acquired the whole of Thelwall as a private estate. They sold out to the Brookes who, interestingly, had purchased Norton Priory itself in the 1530s and may have been seeking to unite its former possessions. However, they in turn sold Thelwall to the Moores. It changed hands again to the Pickering family, who probably had control of the land by the 1770s when a bridge over the newly built Bridgewater canal was named after them. Thelwall remained in private hands until the late 19th century when the township was incorporated into Runcorn District Council. During the winter months, the Mersey flooded across the meadows of Thelwall (the village was situated on slightly higher ground). In the summer, it is likely that sheep were grazed on the fertile fields which were probably too wet for arable cultivation in a pre-land drain era. Regular references to the Claytons as being 'of Shepecrofte' may point to this.

At the time of the famous salmon hauls of the mid-18th century, certain transformations to the Ees meadows were underway, as the effects of the Industrial Revolution began to be felt. Powder mills with workers' cottages were constructed where the north bank of No.2 bed currently stands. Woolston Old Cut was the first navigational improvement undertaken across the north bank of No.3 bed (just north of where the new weir was recently dug), and had occurred by 1777, as testified by a map of that date. The short canal, or New Cut, further shortened the journey down the river by cutting out the loop of what is now Nos.3

and 4 beds and wharves were constructed at the southern end of Weir Lane for boats and goods to transfer onto the canal.

On the South bank of the Mersey stood Statham Chemical works. The powder mills were built in 1755 and lasted exactly a century before, ironically, being destroyed by an explosion.

The major change to the area was the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1895 which radically altered the landscape. The long meanders of the Mersey through Statham were cut off and became redundant as did the old canals to the north and the wharves. The old water meadows largely disappeared under the deposit grounds which were constructed from the 1920's onwards. The various farmsteads, which had managed a living on these lowlands, ceased to exist with the arrival of the first dredgings, except for the Wilgreaves' which continued as a working farm until No.3 bed was constructed upon the site in the late 1950's. The old farming lifestyle which had existed up to then was swept away.

## SPECIES LIST

---

The following birds have been seen on the Reserve at least once since 1978

Mute Swan	Smew	Montagu's Harrier
Bewick's Swan	Red-breasted Merganser	Goshawk
Whooper Swan	Goosander	Sparrowhawk
Tundra Bean Goose	Ruddy Duck	Buzzard
Pink Footed Goose	Quail	Rough-legged Buzzard
White-fronted Goose	Red-legged Partridge	Osprey
Greylag Goose	Grey Partridge	Kestrel
Canada Goose	Pheasant	Merlin
Barnacle Goose	Red-throated Diver	Hobby
Brent Goose	Fulmar	Peregrine
Egyptian Goose	Storm Petrel	Water Rail
Ruddy Shelduck	Leach's Petrel	Spotted Crake
Shelduck	Cormorant	Corncrake
Mandarin	Shag	Moorhen
Wigeon	Bittern	Coot
Gadwall	Night Heron,	Common Crane
Teal	Little Egret	Avocet
Green-winged Teal	Great White Egret	Oystercatcher
Mallard	Cattle Egret	Golden Plover
Pintail	Grey Heron	Grey Plover
Garganey	Glossy Ibis	Lapwing
Shoveler	Spoonbill	White-tailed Lapwing
Red-crested Pochard	Little Grebe	Little Ringed Plover
Pochard	Great Crested Grebe	Ringed Plover
Ring-necked Duck	Red-necked Grebe	Whimbrel
Ferruginous Duck	Slavonian Grebe	Curlew
Tufted Duck	Black-necked Grebe	Black-tailed Godwit
Scaup	Honey Buzzard	Bar-tailed Godwit
Long-tailed Duck	Red Kite	Turnstone
Common Scoter	Marsh Harrier	Knot
Goldeneye	Hen Harrier	Ruff



Curlew Sandpiper	Little Owl	Marsh Warbler
Temminck's Stint	Tawny Owl	Reed Warbler
Sanderling	Long-eared Owl,	Waxwing
Dunlin	Short-eared Owl	Nuthatch
Little Stint	Nightjar	Treecreeper
White-rumped Sandpiper	Chimney Swift	Wren
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	Swift	Starling
Pectoral Sandpiper	Kingfisher	Ring Ouzel
Wilson's Phalarope	Bee-eater	Blackbird
Red-necked Phalarope	Wryneck	Fieldfare
Common Sandpiper	Green Woodpecker	Song Thrush
Green Sandpiper	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Redwing
Spotted Redshank	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Mistle Thrush
Greenshank	Golden Oriole	Spotted Flycatcher
Wood Sandpiper	Great Grey Shrike	Robin
Redshank	Magpie	Nightingale
Jack Snipe	Jay	Bluethroat
Woodcock	Jackdaw	Red-breasted Flycatcher
Snipe	Rook	Pied Flycatcher
Arctic Skua	Carrion Crow	Redstart
Great Skua	Hooded Crow	Whinchat
Little Tern	Raven	Stonechat
Whiskered Tern	Goldcrest	Wheatear
Black Tern	Firecrest	Dunnock
White-winged Black Tern	Blue Tit	House Sparrow
Sandwich Tern	Great Tit	Tree Sparrow
Common Tern	Coal Tit	Yellow Wagtail
Arctic Tern	Willow Tit	Grey Wagtail
Kittiwake	Marsh Tit	Pied Wagtail
Black-headed Gull	Penduline Tit	Richards Pipit
Little Gull	Bearded Tit	Tree Pipit
Laughing Gull,	Woodlark	Meadow Pipit
Mediterranean Gull	Skylark	Rock Pipit
Common Gull	Sand Martin	Water Pipit
Ring-billed Gull	Swallow	Chaffinch
Lesser Black-backed Gull	House Martin	Brambling
Herring Gull	Cetti's Warbler	Greenfinch
Yellow-legged Gull	Long-tailed Tit	Serin
Iceland Gull	Yellow-browed Warbler	Goldfinch
Glaucous Gull	Wood Warbler	Siskin
Great Black-backed Gull	Chiffchaff	Linnet
Feral Pigeon	Willow Warbler	Twite
Stock Dove	Blackcap	Redpoll
Woodpigeon	Garden Warbler	Common Redpoll
Collared Dove	Lesser Whitethroat	Crossbill
Turtle Dove	Whitethroat	Bullfinch
Ring-necked Parakeet	Grasshopper Warbler	Hawfinch
Cuckoo	Sedge Warbler	Snow Bunting
Barn Owl	Blyth's Reed Warbler	Yellowhammer

Little Bunting  
Reed Bunting  
Corn Bunting  
White-crowned Sparrow

**Escapes:**

Bufflehead

Black Swan,  
Sacred Ibis,  
Bar-headed Goose  
White Cheeked Pintail  
Muscovy Duck  
Parakeet sp  
Sulphur Crested Cockatoo  
Cockatiel  
Budgerigar

Greater Flamingo  
Cinnamon Breasted Bunting  
Lanner Falcon  
Zebra Finch  
Pallas's Rosefinch  
Saker  
Yellow-crowned Bishop  
White Stork  
Harris Hawk

## DO'S AND DONT'S

Please:-

Do not stand on top of any of the beds' banks.

Do not venture into the middle of the beds, **keep to the marked paths.**

Do park your cars in the car parks.

Do have your permit with you and if requested show it to wardens or MSCCo officials.

Do close the windows and doors of the hides on leaving.

Do lock the barriers and gates after you - Manchester Ship Canal Co insist that they are kept locked.

Do report interesting sightings to the Recorder, Dan Owen [woolstonsightings@gmail.com](mailto:woolstonsightings@gmail.com)

## PERMITS KEYS & REPORTS

All are available from the our Permit team:-

John Blundell,48 Fifth Street, Barrow Bridge, Bolton, BL1 7NA.

Single permits - £20.00 per annum      Family permits - £30.00 per annum

Printed Annual Report - £TBA              Electronic Annual Report £3

Key for the barrier on Thelwall Lane and the footbridge to No.3 bed - £10.00 non-returnable deposit-

Permit Holders who let their membership lapse must not use their keys to gain access to any part of the Reserve and must return their keys to the Chairman.

## NOTE

The Group uses a computer to store Permit Holder's records i.e. name & address, type of permit (family or single) date paid, request for an Annual Report and purchase of a key. The information is used to address the envelopes for mailing Newsletters and Annual Reports. The information stored in the computer will not be divulged to any third party. If you do not wish to have your name and address stored in the computer please write to us via our Contact Us tab on the website.

The Group also has a website, [www.woolstoneyes.com](http://www.woolstoneyes.com), which is updated regularly. E-mail addresses of all wardens are posted on the website.

## OFFICERS OF THE WECG

Vice Chairman: David Bowman

Treasurer/Secretary: David Spencer      Recorder: Daniel Owen

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

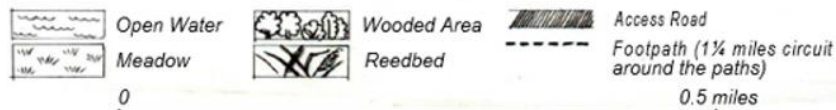
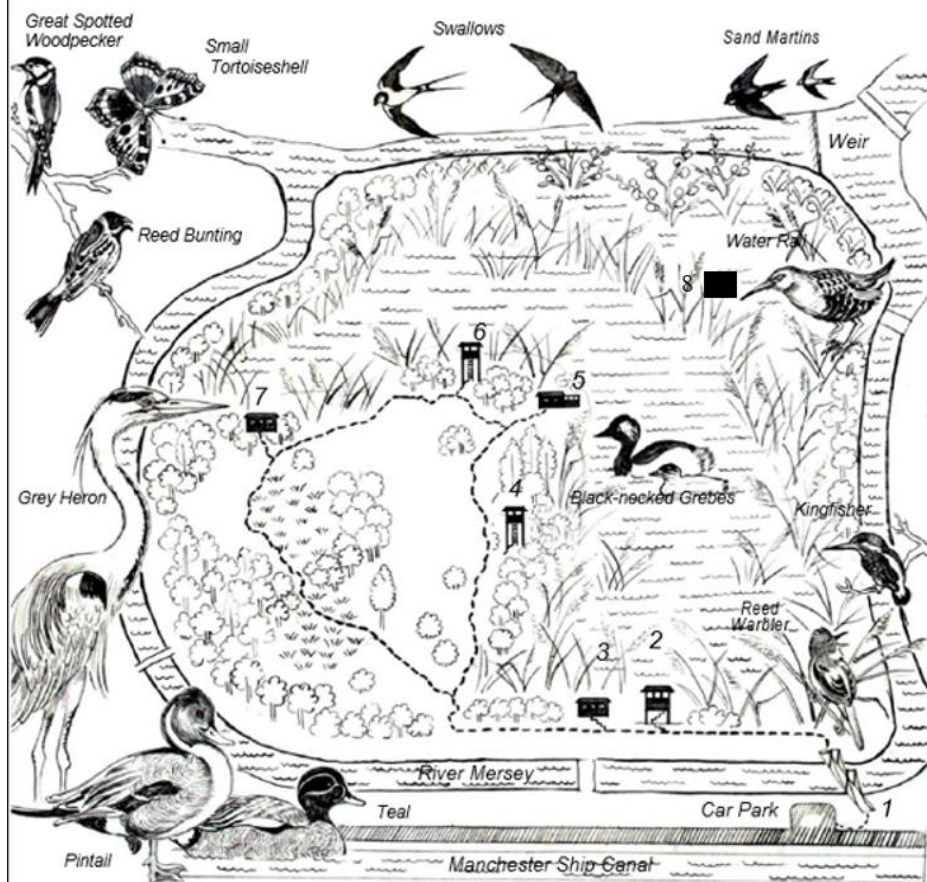
David Hackett  
Alexander Mansfield

John Blundell  
John Haddock

Sue Haddock  
Dan Owen

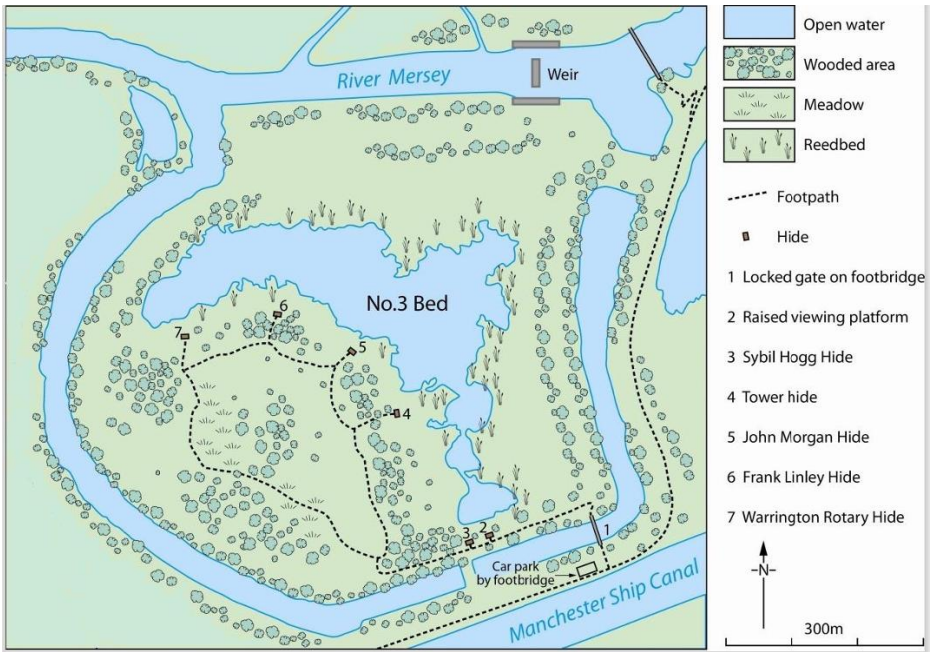
Helen Wynn

## Plan of Number 3 Bed



- |                             |                                     |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Locked Gate on footbridge | 5 John Morgan Hide                  |
| 2 South Hide                | 6 Frank Linley Hide                 |
| 3 Sybil Hogg Hide           | 7 Warrington Rotary Hide            |
| 4 Tower Hide                | 8 Monitoring Hide<br>(wardens only) |

Illustration by Trisha Thompson



No.4 bed Map showing footpath, in red, to the hide and viewing platform.