Sawbridgeworth Parish LNRS. Bob Reed, August 2025.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Sawbridgeworth Parish.

We are told that the UK is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world. How has this come about? Before having any discussion or making any recommendations it might be useful to consider how biodiversity has been lost locally.

Post World War II Sawbridgeworth was a different place to what we see today. The great majority of people were locally employed in shops or local businesses, working in local industries such as the Maltings and Lawrence's Joinery Works as well as on local farms such as Clay Lane Farm, Crumps Farm, Tharbies Farm and so on. These were all mixed farms growing a variety of crops and inevitably having a herd of cattle for beef. All along the River Stort floodplain there were herds of bullocks and two dairy farms based at New House Farm, Sheering and South House Farm,Little Hallingbury. The presence of herds of cattle maintained a high level of biodiversity in the flora and fauna of the River corridor.

The fact that they were growing mixed crops on rotation in smaller fields with sympathetically maintained hedges also encouraged biodiversity.

Very few people were car owners and a trip to Bishops Stortford market was a weekly event. Foreign travel was virtually unheard-of and a trip to the East Coast was looked upon as a major expedition! Very few people could afford to keep and own pets such as dogs.

The weather was different and much more reliable, it was almost guaranteed that there would be snow after Christmas before we went back to school and the river frequently froze over. It is not difficult to recall family picnics on the fields at Hoestock with Cowslips in the meadow and Skylarks overhead.

We assumed that the river would always be full of a range of coarse fish for us to catch and that we would continue to go birds nesting in Pishiobury Park in the days when no one saw anything wrong with egg and butterfly collecting because these forms of life were so prolific.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the first expansion of housing starting with Bullfields and soon expanding to take in areas such as East Park and the surrounding area, Gilders, Wychford Drive, Vantorts and the Crest. Many of these developments were on pre-existing farmland and in several cases on allotment sites which had been created during the war in 'Dig for Victory'. There is little doubt that loss of these areas would have been one of the starting points for the loss of biodiversity locally because although the new properties would have had sizeable gardens they would have been no substitute for the pre-existing farmland and its associated wildlife.

At the same time, Bishops Stortford was expanding and along with Sawbridgeworth needed to have a functioning Sewage Treatment facility which as has so often happened in the past did not keep pace with development and resulted in a drop in water quality especially at Bishops Stortford which inevitably worked down to affect the river at Sawbridgeworth. The building of the M11 in the 1970s and the

announcement that Stansted would be the Third London Airport in the 1980s meant that areas such as Sawbridgeworth became increasingly desirable as a place to live which is something that still holds good today.

We all know that there is no point in going on about the old days because they are gone and will not return and so we have to work on the present day and immediate future but the fact is that a lot of biodiversity loss has got to be attributed to changes that have taken place in Sawbridgeworth since World War II and this is something which is reflected across the country.

Bearing these unavoidable changes in mind is there anything that can be done to stop the loss of biodiversity? We would all like to think that we are going to live in modern homes heated by solar panels and heat pumps and that we shall all be driving electric cars powered by an inexhaustible supply of clean energy but the fact is that it is not going to happen overnight and in the meantime is there something that can be done to halt the loss of biodiversity?

The starting point would be to look at the interactive map which is given in the LNRS document, highlighting our home area and taking each section in turn to examine its feasibility and chances of success. It might also be possible to add some sites which have been omitted for some reason or other. It seems that many of the sites marked on the map are in private ownership and the chances of individuals or the Town Council being able to bring about any changes are probably remote so therefore it is best to concentrate our efforts on sites which do have public access or are in public ownership.

In order to achieve the objectives of the Nature Recovery Strategy it might be suggested that the following measures are put in place.

1. Review the management of existing green spaces to include where possible a space for nature. This could include less regular mowing, leaving a margin adjacent to the hedge, fence or boundary, carrying out an annual conservation cut in September.

2. Search for funding to support projects such as tree planting and new hedge creation.

3. Make every attempt to get the local population to support Nature Recovery and to do this by having some kind of exhibition or display open to the general public.

4. Encourage the formation of Wildlife Areas in school grounds.

5. Build partnerships with groups such as the Canal and Rivers Trust, the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and the Essex Wildlife Trust. Specifically meet with farmers and landowners whose property adjoins or is included in Sawbridgeworth Parish.

6. Be prepared, in recognition of the fact that Nature Recovery is a landscape project, to go over the border into Essex overcoming the traditional county boundary of the river which tends to split our area into two parts.

7. Be prepared to put in place monitoring and evaluation especially of development sites where claims have been made to increase Net Biodiversity Gain.

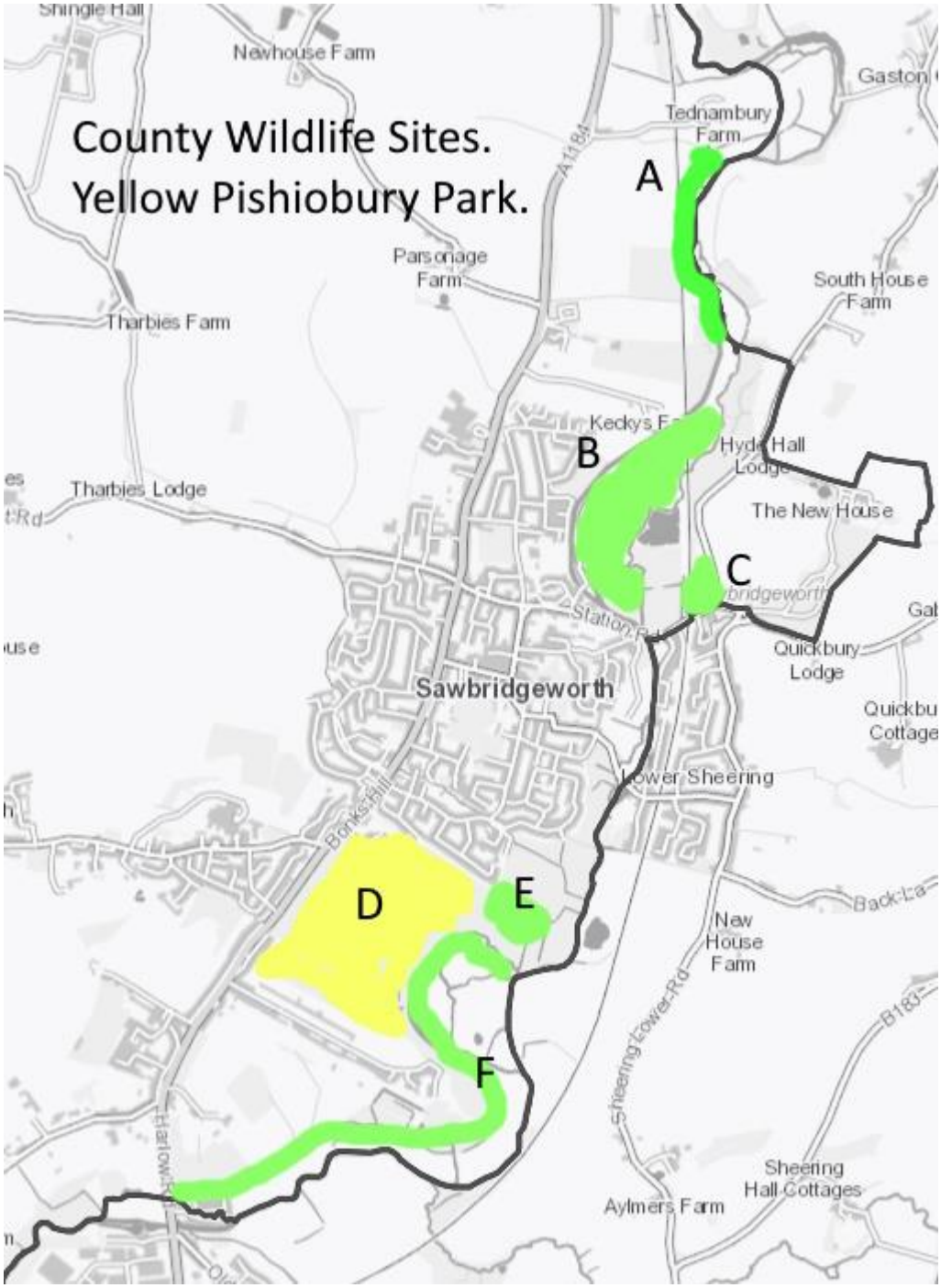
8. Be prepared to work with developers who propose to deliver mitigation measures as a result of site development and ensure that Net Biodiversity Gain is included in the development proposals.

9. Review the County Wildlife Site Inventory for the Parish and try and reach a conclusion as to whether they are in good condition or need to be included in the LNRS. This could be a Citizen Science Project.

10. Make use of the ‘Walk the Stort’ pamphlet to raise biodiversity awareness along the river and follow the network of local footpaths which cover all habitats in the parish to once again raise biodiversity awareness.

11. Encourage people to ‘make space for wildlife’ in their gardens following the advice and practical measures as advocated by the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts. Raise awareness of the environmental consequences of block pavior areas with no collecting gully for rain run-off made worse by resin bonding. Although convenient ‘astro turf’ is an environmental disaster for biodiversity.

12. Make use of existing County Wildlife sites as shown on the map most of which have public access to a greater or lesser extent.



Comments on existing County Wildlife Sites recognised on the 2013 Inventory and which may or may not be included in LNRS.

A. Tednambury Farm meadows. This area was previously recognised for its flora particularly the Meadow running parallel to the railway in the southern section of the farm. At the extreme southern end adjacent to Kecksy's Bridge there is oak and Hazel woodland with a population of Bluebells and Primroses. This area also has Sweet Chestnut and was planted up and utilised by Thomas Rivers as a source of materials for the Nursery. They is remaining a disused railway crossing leading to the wooded area down the field from Three Mile Pond Farm.

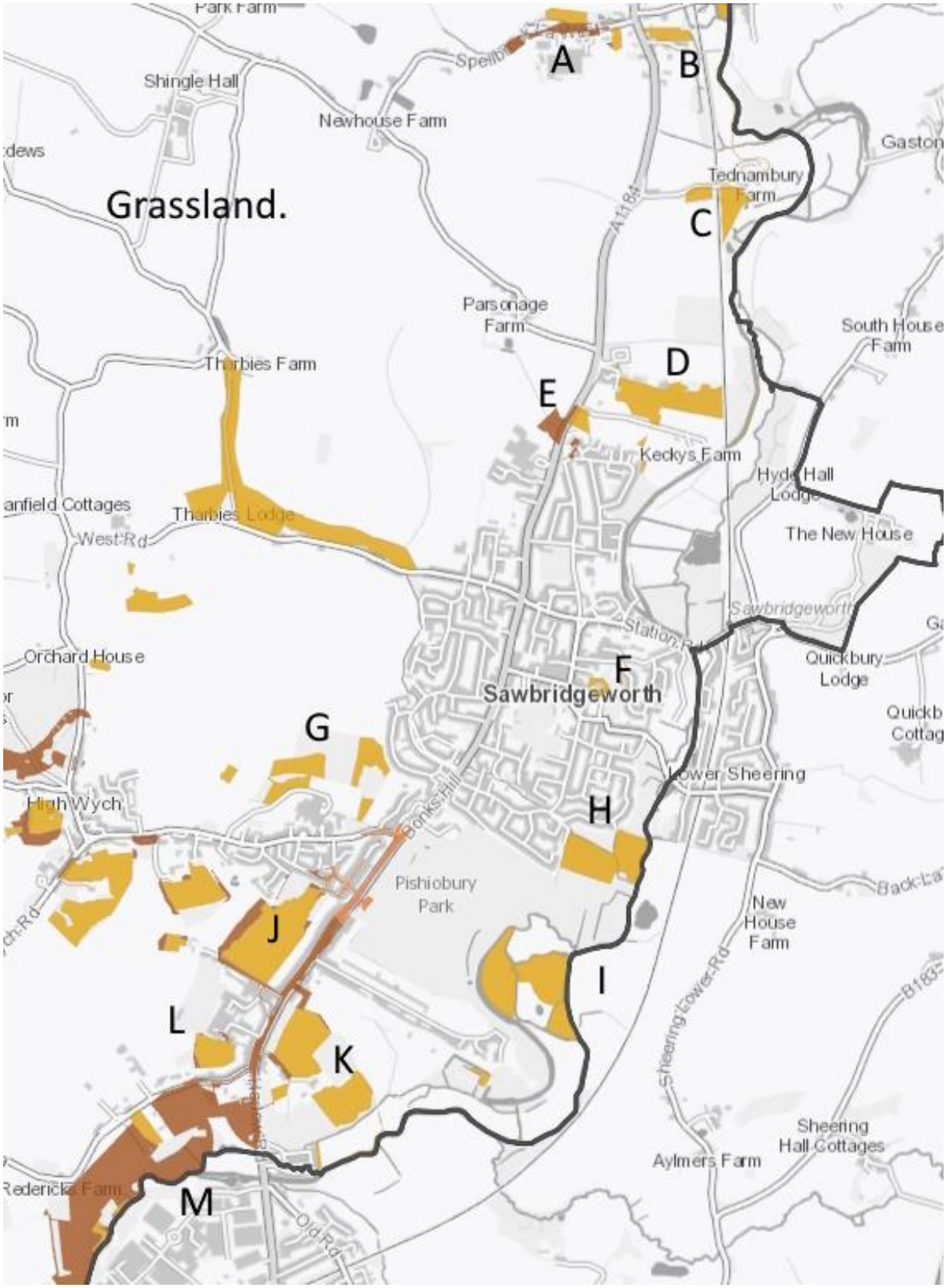
B. Mill Fen. This large floodplain area extends from the Station Road area in a northerly direction almost up to Kecksy's Bridge and is sandwiched between the Old River Stort and the canal leading to Burtons Mill. Some parts of this area have been purchased with a view to 'carbon offsetting' and have been planted up with trees not in character with the floodplain. The area is crisscrossed with a series of ditches dividing the floodplain up into fields many of which have been given the name of local farms which presumably had a right to cut hay and graze animals at some stage in history. The Northern section is an 'Unfenced Common' and up until fairly recently there was a gate on the tow path at the entrance to this 'Common'. It is a designated flood relief area with the tow path being deliberately lowered south of Kecksy's to allow floodwater out of the canal and to take the pressure off sluices at Burtons Mill.

C. Hither Gravel Pit Mead. This small area adjacent to Sawbridgeworth Railway Station and sandwiched between this and the Hallingbury Road. It has standing water all year and is spring fed. Water can be seen running of this area opposite the new development on the site of the old Railway Hotel and this water then makes its way under the railway and eventually into the Stort at the Maltings. The biodiversity of this area has not been surveyed but is almost certainly high.

D. Pishiobury Park. This area including the Osier Bed receives mention a number of times in the LNRS and full details of the biodiversity are recorded elsewhere.

E. Plovers Mead. This floodplain meadow is part of Pishiobury Park with a high water table for most of the year. It has a weak spring feed which maintains the water table and there are several silted up ditches indicating that drainage has been attempted in the past. Biodiversity is almost certainly high for the area.

F. These series of floodplain meadows are part of the old Pishiobury Estate and are in private ownership with no public access. Since they ceased to be used for grazing of the dairy herd at New Farm they have received a variety of treatments unsympathetic to biodiversity including turf stripping, cultivation of Linseed and Cannabis for fibre. More recently they have been part of an attempt to reintroduce cattle grazing with a herd of Dexter cattle and 'Regenerative farming' at New House Farm of which sheep were part of the project but this now seems to have ceased.



Annotations to go with the Grassland map.

A and B. Both areas in private ownership and unlikely to be candidates for LNRS.

C. Tednambury Farm. Suggested that contact be made with the owner who may be amenable to LNRS. At the southern extent there is woodland with Bluebells and Primroses and the long Meadow running in parallel to the railway was a County Wildlife Site.

D. Kecksy's Farm. As large areas of this are due for development then there may well be mitigation in place but otherwise it is unlikely to be favourable for LNRS.

E. Bullfields football field. There is already a strip along the southern boundary which has been assigned for wildlife and where there have been some shrubs planted. This would be an excellent site for LNRS.

M. The area marked here is somewhat uncertain but if the assumption is that it includes the Churchyard of Great St Mary's along with the wildlife area in tandem with the children's play area then it could be developed for LNRS. Suggest monitoring the existing wildlife area and may be leave an unmown margin around the children's play area with a conservation cut.

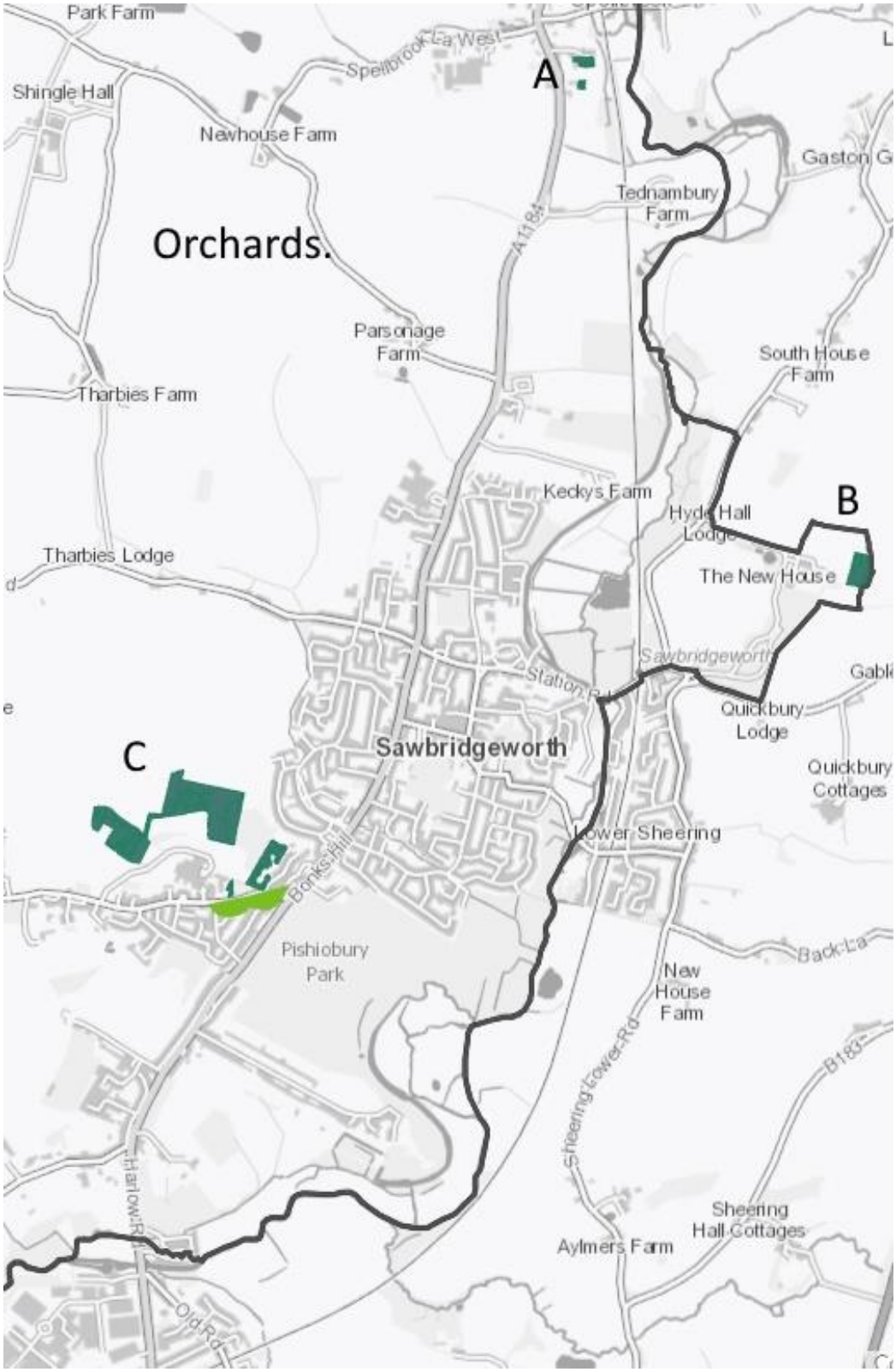
G. Rivers Nursery site, wildflower meadow and scrub. This already has a management plan in place for most of the area.

H. This area appears to be the old Town Tip along with the adjacent wooded floodplain and the Meadow running alongside Springhall Lane leading to Pishiobury Park. The Town Tip area is too hazardous for access but can be monitored from the footpath and tow path. The wooded floodplain has apparently recently been purchased and is in private ownership. The meadow which was originally an arable field has reverted to rough pasture land and has a good population of wild flowers but as with this year it has been mown at a most unfavourable time. Suggest the owner manages this area more sympathetically.

I. The fields and meadows known locally as The Mores. Much of this is on the Essex side of the river and is in private ownership. It encompasses a really good area of high biodiversity but is unlikely to be a candidate for LNRS.

J and K. These area appear to be the fields surrounding Rowney House. It is in private ownership with a security fence so is unlikely to be a candidate for LNRS.

L. Meadows, arable and rough land between Redricks Lane and the river. This is all in private ownership with limited footpath access. It is potentially high biodiversity but are unlikely to be a candidate for LNRS.

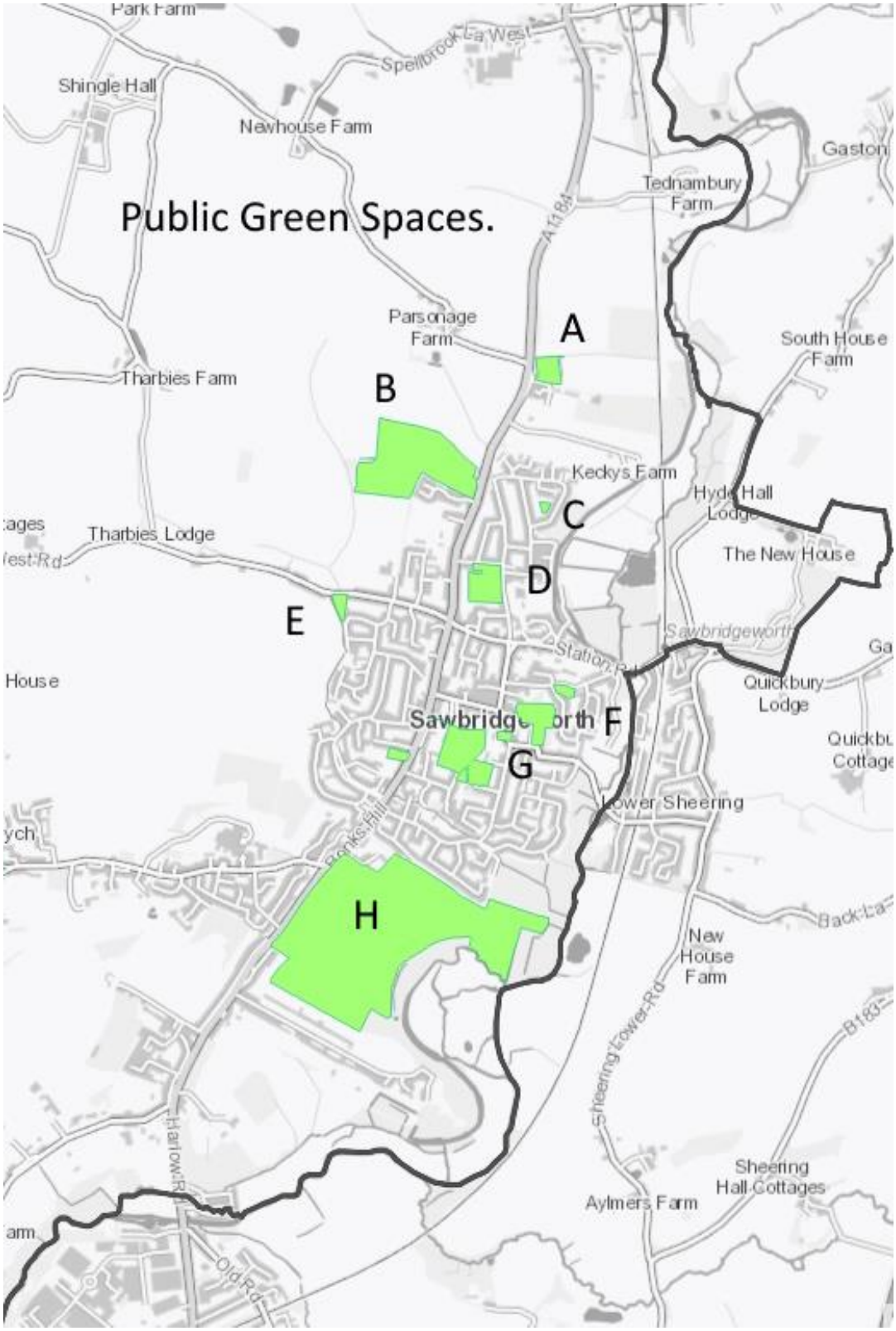


Annotations for the Orchards map.

A. This old Orchard is at the back of Lock Farm , Spellbrook and can be seen from the tow path, being private I don't think is a candidate for LNRS.

B. The Orchard at Great Hyde Hall. The residents here are somewhat divided on the management of the estate because while some are in favour of nature others are much more 'neat and tidy'. I know for a fact that they had the gardener tidy up all the windfall fruit which would suggest they may not be sympathetic to LNRS not only from the point of view of the project will also because the site is highly private.

C. The Rivers Orchard complex. As we all know, the Orchard is well managed by a local group who will already have in hand measures in line with LNRS.



Annotations for Public Green Spaces.

A. Town Cemetery. Not a candidate for LNRS although some of the older graves and memorials will have an interesting collection of plants and lichens.

B. Leventhorpe School Grounds. Most of this area is now given over to sporting activities and I'm not aware that they have a Wildlife Area any more which used to be at the bottom end of the sports fields. There is a quite well established hedge around the periphery including the belt of Elm Trees running up from the Bull Public House and which are a remnant of the population of this tree which used to be on the meadow adjoining. Unless there is a member of staff willing to create or maintain the Wildlife Area it is probably not a candidate for LNRS. The school has purchased the field to the north with a view to development but I understand that will not take place so there is a possibility that this could be LNRS but will contact will be needed with the school to explore any possibilities.

C. A small area at the top of the hill adjacent to Edens Mount. LNRS?

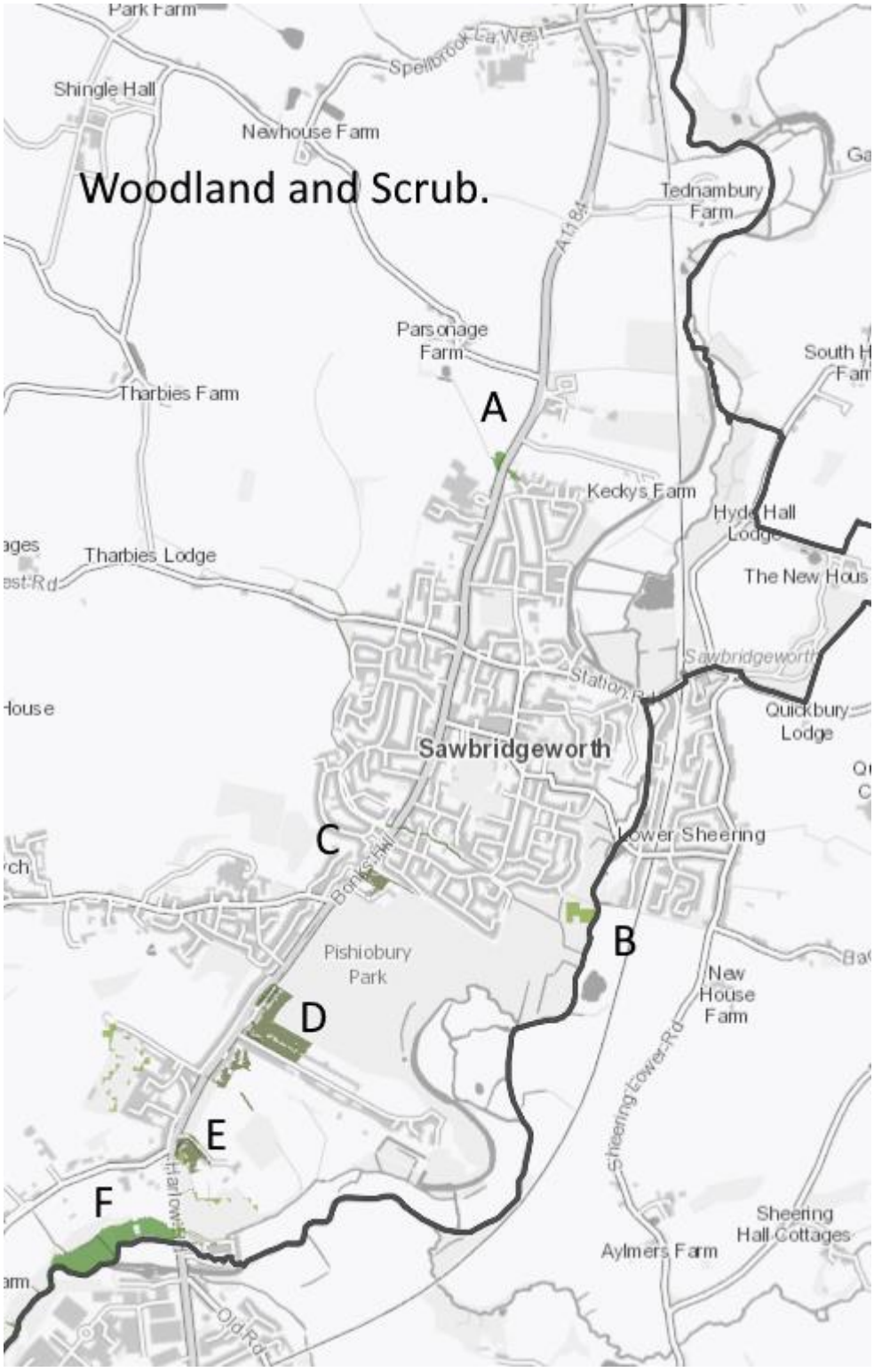
D. Bullfields Football Field. A strip along the southern margin has already been given over to wildlife and there could be increased planting of shrubs and plants for pollinators.

E. West Road Play Area. A hedge was taken out bordering the play area with the neighbouring residence in West Road, presumably to facilitate the installation of a new fence and it has not been replaced. Suggesting the planting of a mixed native shrub hedge.

F. These areas appear to be the churchyard and Forebury. The latter seems to be managed privately and is probably not a candidate for LNRS. Churchyards are always a sensitive issue with regard to being kept neat and tidy but the older area is not easily available for cutting and mowing and there is the wildlife area extending alongside the children's play area. A bat survey has been carried out in the churchyard and it would be a worthwhile exercise to make a proper record of the flora and wildlife in order to promote the idea of LNRS and may be demonstrating how this can be carried out in this type of circumstance and situation. The area is also adjacent to the Forest School area for the Fawbert and Barnard School giving the opportunity for education of pupils regarding LNRS.

G. Vantorts Open Space. Most of the area is dedicated as a play area but there is the area on the west where an attempt has been made to establish a wildflower meadow. This project should be monitored to judge its success and possibly extended.

H. Pishiobury Park. The park has its own detailed Green Space Action Plan running for the next eight years or so and is heavily weighted towards nature conservation. The Park could be used to give publicity to the LNRS and demonstrate how this can be put into practice by carrying out conservation measures.



Annotations for Woodland and scrub.

A. This small triangular section is opposite the Bull Public House. It has been planted up with a variety of trees and shrubs but has also been a dumping place for rubbish from the houses in Cherry Gardens. The proposal would be to have a general clear up of the rubbish and possibly extend this area to the plot just to the north which has

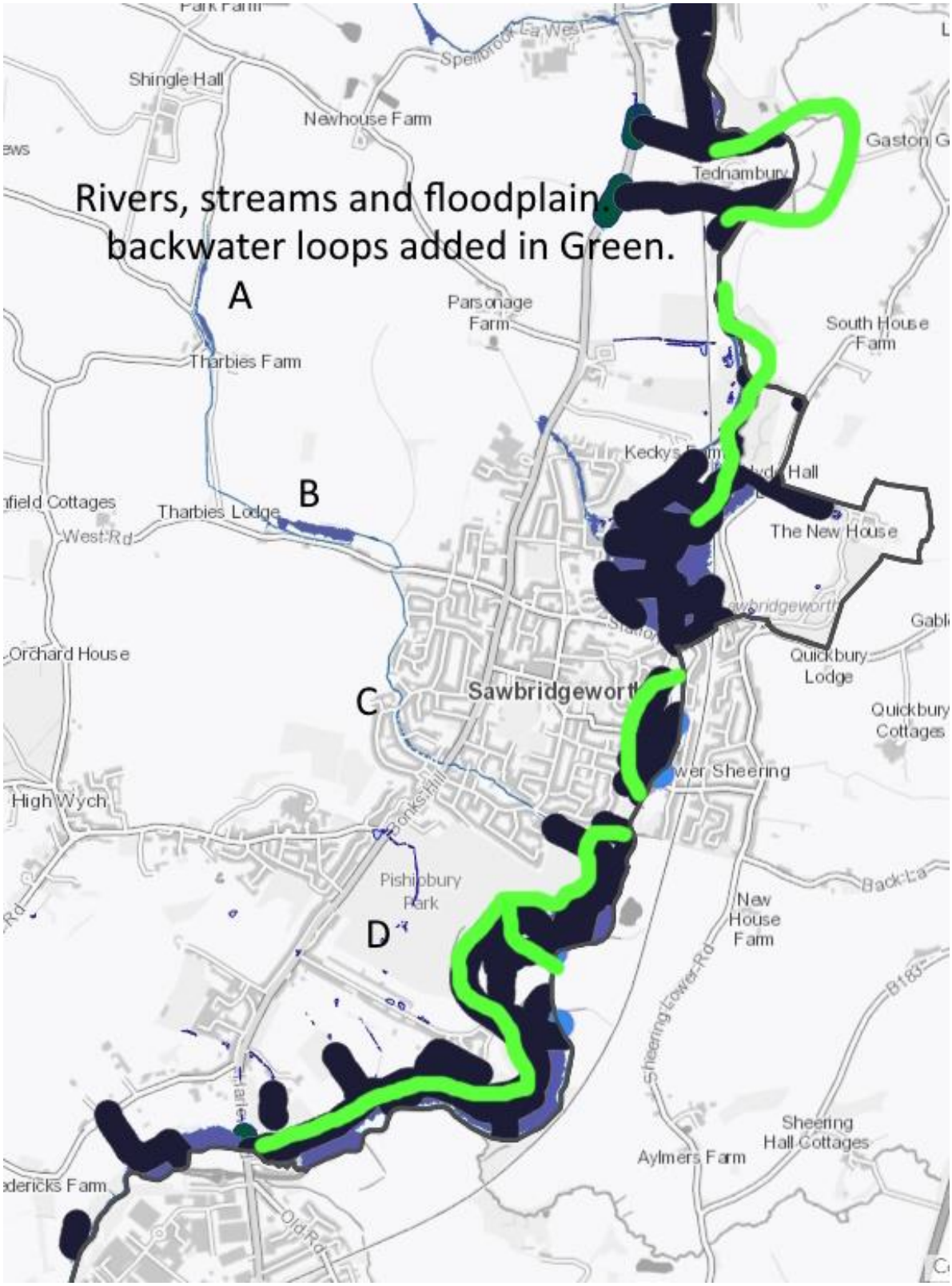
been suggested for LNRS and could be planted up with trees and shrubs as a screening woodland between the main road and the forthcoming development at Kecksy's Farm.

B. The old Town Tip. This has been mentioned before and is largely inaccessible for safety reasons due to the danger of subsidence as it is basically sludge pits and channels overlain with 1950s domestic rubbish. Although residents have largely appropriated sections of the old access road at the bottom of The there is access near to the entrance to the Southbrook Allotments and the area can be viewed along the adjoining footpath and tow path.

C. Pishiobury Park. As has been mentioned before this whole area is under the direction of the Green Space Action Plan with EHDC that there is a section indicated in the south-west corner which is currently designated as the Children's Activity Area. This has not been happening in recent years due to a reduction in activity with the Friends Group and a proposal might be to extend the planting of the hedge separating the area from the main road and footpath, with a range of trees and shrubs to increase and encourage biodiversity.

D. There are indicated on the map a number of plots in this area, essentially to the south of Redricks Lane. They look to have potential for LNRS but are in private ownership.

The same applies to the next area E which is sandwiched between the River and various areas of arable land fringing Redricks Lane. It does have public access to a degree but is in private ownership.



Annotations for streams and river.

A. Sawbridgeworth Brook. Most of the course of the Brook is dry or partially dry from its source at Tharbies Farm to London Road. A plot of the watershed area shows this to be mainly urban/suburban witth the exception of the source area which is intensive agriculture. This means that most rain will either be

directed into surface water drains rather than soaking into the soil and water table reservoir. There is a strong input from at least two directions in terms of road run off where the Brook crosses the main road. There is a spring feed from the small lake in the garden of Springhall House which enters the Brook at SouthBrook. The Brook is subject to spate flooding at times of heavy rain. Modern housing developments all have balancing ponds with the intention of releasing run-off water into the Brook by concrete culverts. The main threat to the biodiversity in the Brook is the polluting influence of road run off in terms of rubber dust, oil, tarmac and grit from the road surface and rust and other metallic items which fall off cars including brake linings and catalytic converter metals. If it was feasible within the LNRS a SUDS arrangement could be installed at London Road to trap all the above items.

B. In this area the Brook flows through a channel which is usually dry and running through highly improved grassland which has been cultivated to produce hay and silage in the past.Biodiversity is low.
C. C. The Brook is essentially flowing through an urban/suburban situation. In the White Post Field section there is a substantial hedge bordering the Brook which should be good for biodiversity. In the Brook Lane section the channel is usually dry and is colonised by Fools Watercress. Mentioned has already been made of the major inputs from road drains in the London Road section and from here downwards there are various drains and culverts which bring in surface water from Springhall Road, Brook Road and surrounding area. Biodiversity low.
D. In the South Brook and South Brook Allotment sections the biodiversity in the past has shown to be higher with some significant species present such as Minnows and Bullhead. Much of this section is affected by spate flooding and the last two species have yet to be confirmed as have other indicators of high biodiversity which have been recorded in the past but which may have been adversely affected by the spate flooding.
E. This is the ditch which takes surface run-off water from the High Wych Road area and only usually runs at times of heavy rain, flowing through the Park to Pishiobury Drive and eventually discharging into the Pishiobury Brook.
F. Marked in green these are the backwater loops which being of significant biodiversity importance have been given their own section.

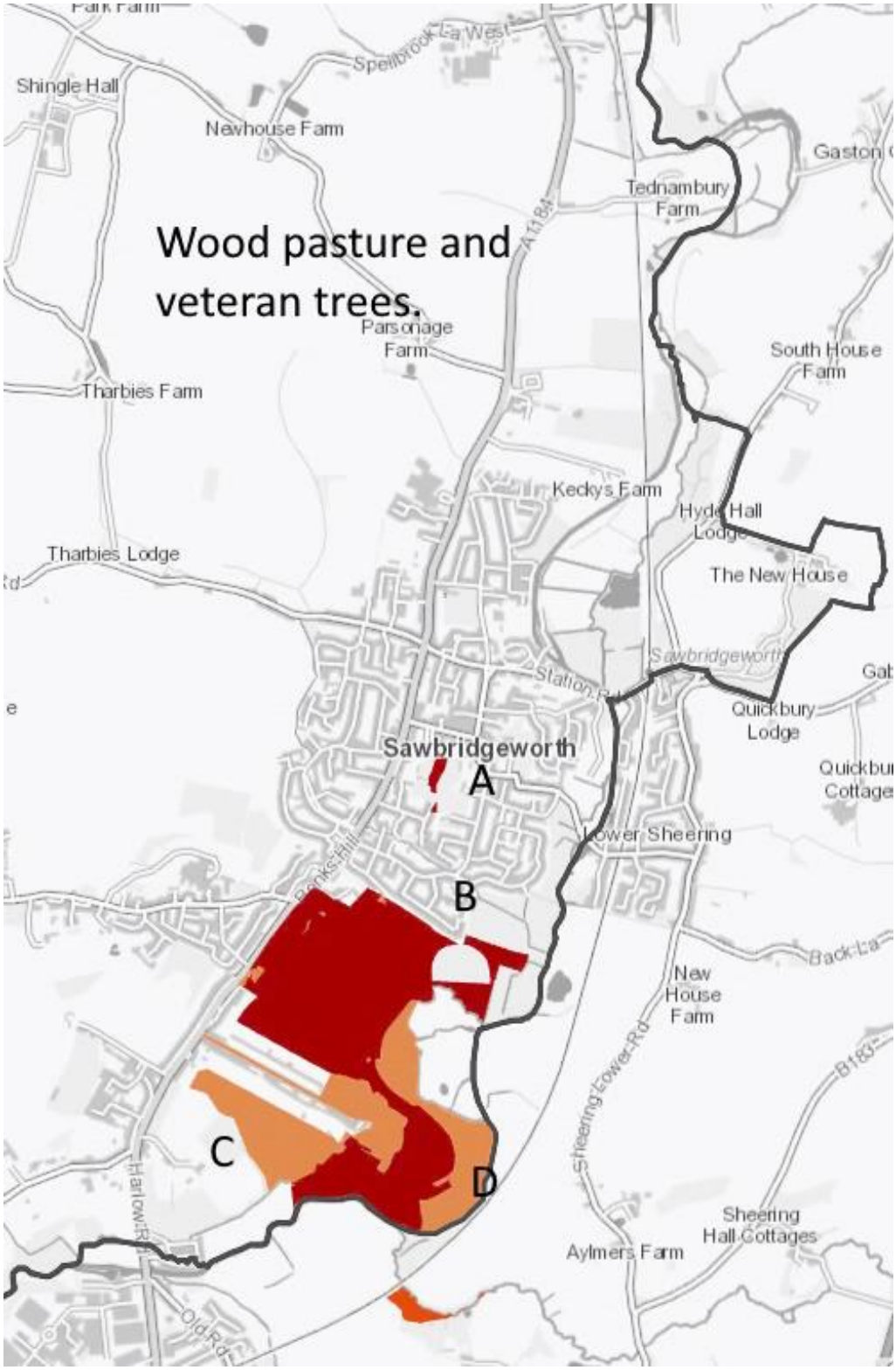
The general course of the main river and its floodplain is rather clumsily and non-specifically indicated by heavy and thick black and blue lines of colour. Surveying of the River corridor has shown that there are at least 60 different types of flowering plant along the River corridor and tow path. See Apendix 1. The floodplain is less diverse with lists given in Appendix 2. The biodiversity in the main channel of the canal is generally poor especially so at the Harlow Mill and and steadily improving the further north you go and nearer to Spellbrook. See Appendix 3.

The main recommendation for the river is to push for phosphate stripping to be carried out at all Sewage Treatment Works. It is this element which is making the

water nutrient rich resulting in excessive growth of some species such as Canadian Pondweed and blanket weed. These grow rapidly but die down in the Autumn resulting in a large amount of organic silt which has a smothering effect on higher water plants and a potentially deoxygenating effect on the water body as they decay.

Important addition to the Rivers and Streams map.

There has been an important omission with regard to the back water streams which I have added to the map in light green. These are known as the 'backwater loops' and are a special feature of the River in the Stort Valley. They represent the original channel of the River before canalisation where a new course for the river was often made cutting across the river valley spurs. In our area they are the Tednambury Loop, the Sawbridgeworth Loop, the Sheering Mill Loop and the Pishiobury Loops. The situation is repeated down the valley being the Eastwick Loop and the Briggens Loop. In 2009 the Environment Agency commissioned a detailed survey of these loops resulting in a comprehensive publication which flagged up the presence of a wide biodiversity and some Red Data species. These backwater loops all lie on the floodplain and are accessible to a greater or lesser degree by the general public. They represent a major source of biodiversity and a general refuge for nature. Although the best management is probably to leave them alone and let natural processes proceed their presence should nevertheless be recorded as an invaluable element of LNRS.



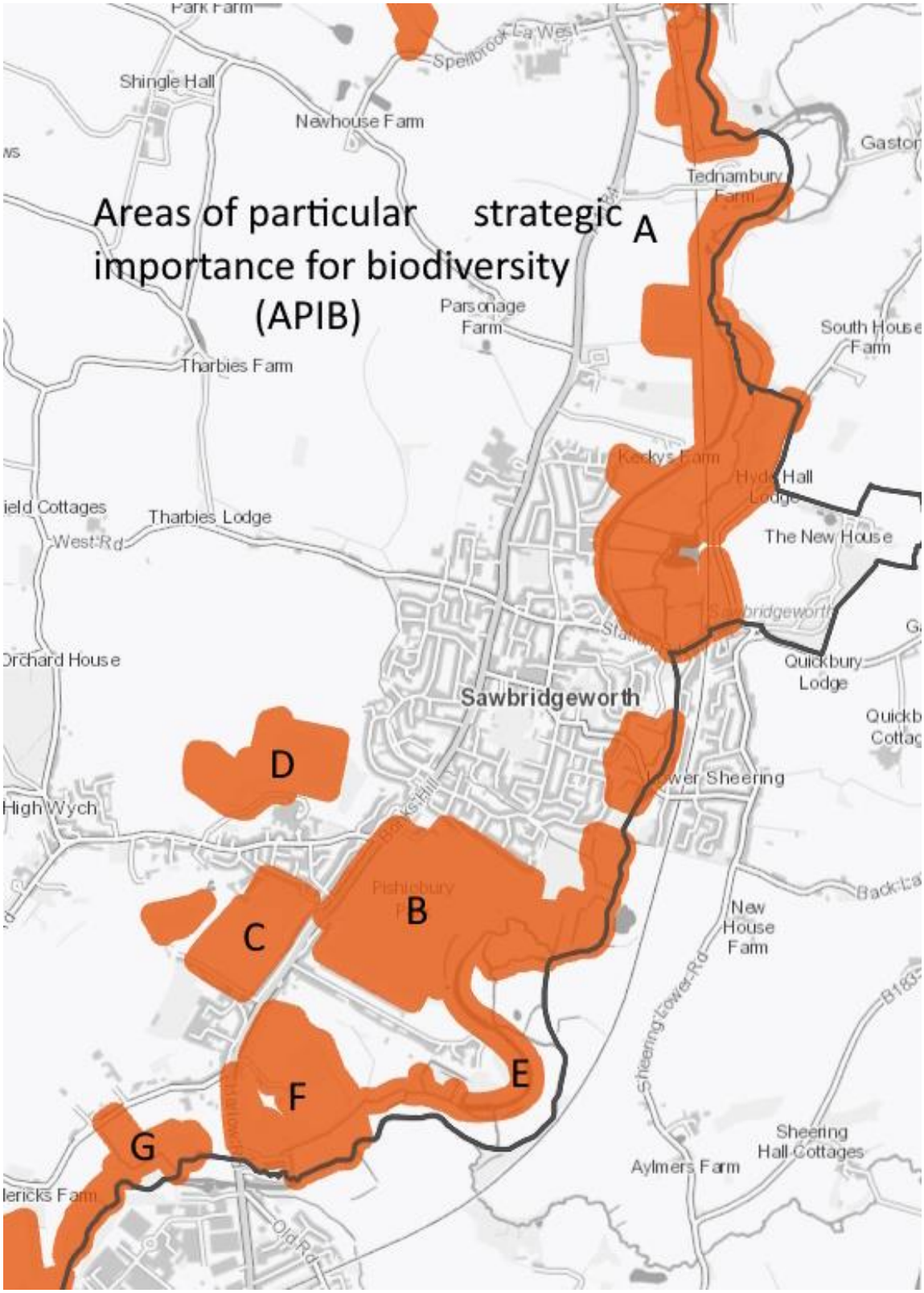
Annotations for Wood Pasture.

A. This appears to be a small plot in the centre of Sawbridgeworth and may be intended to include the area around the Central Surgery. This may already have been mentioned as part of the Town Plan.

B.Pishiobury Park. It has already been stated that this area is under the direction of the Green Space Action Plan which is heavily weighted towards nature conservation. A large number of veteran trees have been entered onto the Ancient Tree Inventory and they are checked on a regular basis by tree surgeons with a view to maintaining their safety.

C. This area appears to include the land surrounding Rowneybury. This whole area is surrounded by a sophisticated security fence and is all strictly Private so it is very unlikely that it would be a candidate for LNRS.

D. This area seems to be the floodplain adjacent to the main Lake at Pishiobury. As part of the original estate it does contain a number of old and veteran trees but it is in Private ownership with no public access although it can be viewed across the river from the tow path.



Comments on the areas marked up as APIB - areas which are of particular areas of strategic importance for biodiversity and ACIB - areas identified as being possible areas of strategic importance for biodiversity.

Neither map seems to be particularly clear or specific, covering large areas where a lot of further detail is needed and also areas where there is no public ownership and any work or access would be at the behest of the owners.

If we were to pick out one specific area that could be realistically improved for biodiversity it could be the Sheering Mill Backwater Loop. This area was locally known as the 'Bathing Sheds' and these can be seen figuring on the 1947 map. The water is deep at this point and it is possible that there is a historical connection with swimming in the river?

This leaves the canal at the south end of Esbies Estate, flows through a small weirpool and then through a winding course to go under the road at SheeringMill by the Lock Keepers Cottage. At the north end where it leaves the canal a large and dense area of scrub has developed obscuring the small weirpool. A lot of willow trees have established themselves along the course of the channel which has without doubt along with all the other backwaters been dredged out in the 1960s when the policy was to get floodwater away by 'digging deep and straight'. This would have led to the homogenisation of what would have been a previously natural channel which may well have had a gravel bed known to be high in biodiversity.

The proposal would be to:-

a) remove completely the area of scrub which is threatening to encroach onto the towpath. This would open up the whole of the weirpool area giving it pleasant public access. Benches or seating would not be recommended as it could encourage antisocial behaviour. A walking route could be established along the re-gravelled channel starting at the weirpool and returning to the tow path above Sheering Mill Lock.

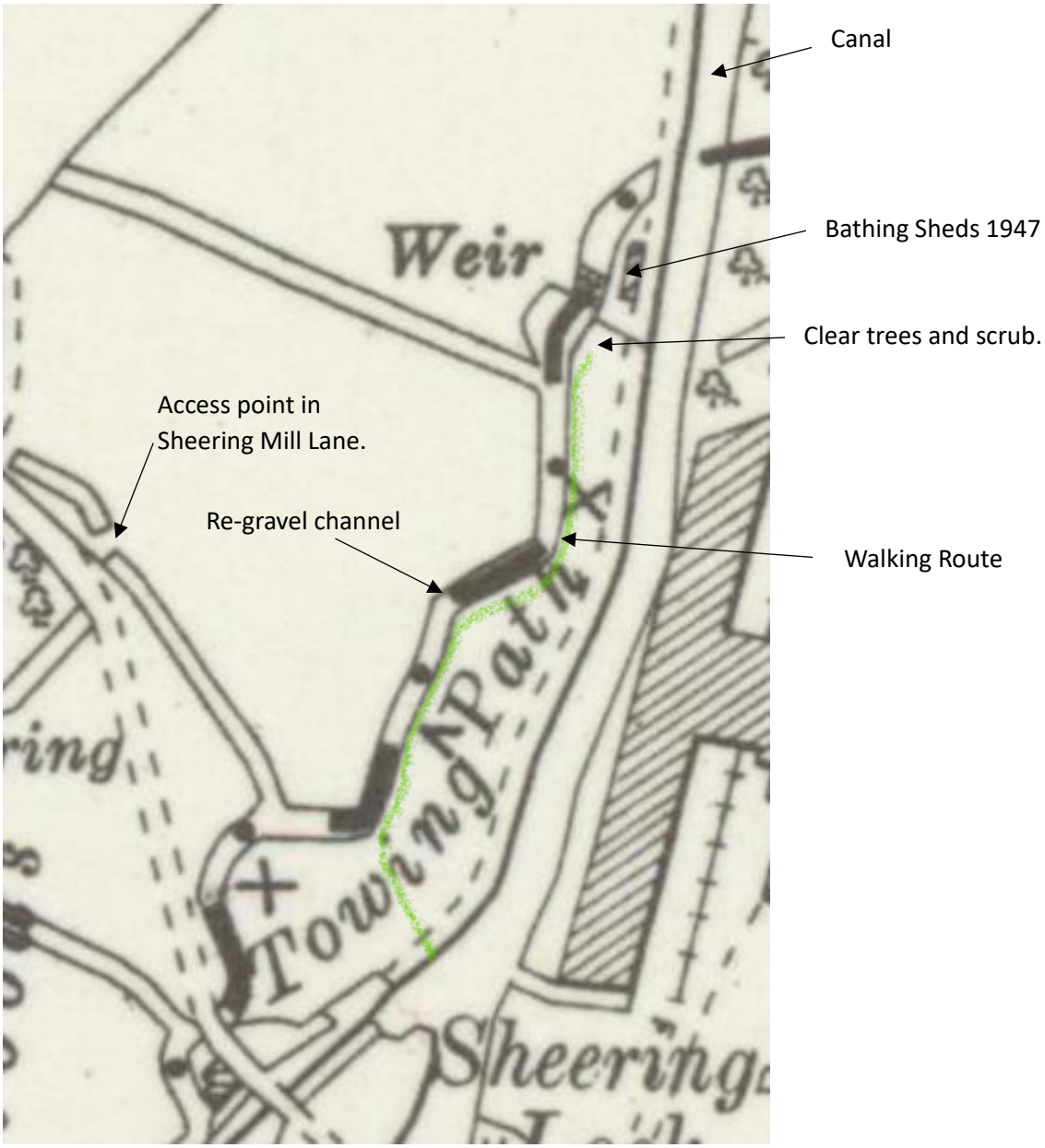
b) Pollard or coppice the Willows allowing air and light into the channel.

c) Carry out re-gravelling of the channel to create a series of 'pools and riffles'. There is an access point to do this at the bottom of the hill in Sheering Mill Lane where some degree of vehicular access would be possible to transport the gravel. This work would need to be under the direction of the EA to decide on the site of gravel deposition according to the stream morphology. This process has been carried out very successfully on rivers such as the Rib at Standon.

This project if approved it would have the benefit of being centrally placed in Sawbridgeworth with easy access so that people could see and experience a backwater loop. It has the historical context of Sheering Mill and the Lock Keepers cottage as well as the local historical connections with the Maltings Industry opposite. It could act as an element of focus for the annual River Day held at the Lock.

A project of this kind could well generate a lot of local interest and would certainly be in the context of the LNRS.

Bathing Sheds Backwater Loop Project.



Note for specific ACIB area.

This area refers specifically to the rough field adjacent to Springhall Lane and just south of the South Brook allotments. Up until the 1960s this field was regularly cultivated to grow crops of wheat and barley. Since that time it has undergone succession and at one time looked as if it was becoming scrubby oak woodland. The owners have cleared the area several times in an apparent effort to return it to grassland? This year, the field was covered in wild flowers until the farmer decided to mow it at a most inopportune time for biodiversity. Since that time with a small amount of rainfall the field has sprung back into life and is now once again covered in wild flowers albeit most of them in a somewhat reduced size. The species list without a detailed survey includes:-

St John's Wort.

Ragwort.

Agrimony.

Ribwort Plantain.

Broad-leaved Plantain.

Hedge Parsley.

Bladder Campion.

Hogweed.

White and Red clover.

Oxeye Daisy.

Mullein.

An incomplete species list of this size must qualify for biodiversity importance because in due course it will be attracting a large number of insects of different types. It is also adjacent to the green corridor of the Sawbridgeworth Brook

Apendix 1. Riverine vegetation.

Ash.

Indian Balsam.

Flowering Rush.

Great Willow herb.

Stinging Nettle.

Burdock.

Hybrid Poplar.

Balsam Poplar.

Greater Pond Sedge.

Hard Rush.

Unbranched Bur Reed.

Branched Bur Reed.

Yellow Water Lily.

Meadowsweet.

Wild Plum.

Arrowhead.

Elodea sp.

Spear Thistle.

Creeping Thistle.

Hawtjorn.

Blackthorn.

Goat Willow.

Crack Willow.

Common Comfrey.

Russian Comfrey.

Greater Bindweed.

Lesser Bindweed.

Hop.

Bramble.

Bur Marigold.

Dandelion.

Coltsfoot.

Aspen.

Himalayan Balsam.

Common Mallow.

Golden Rod.

Sycamore.

Yellow Flag Iris.

Ragwort.

Yarrow.

Mugwort.

Water Mint.

Hogweed.

Angelica.

Ivy.

Elder.

Common Reed.

Reedmace.

Field Sow Thistle.

Herb Robert.

Horsetail sp.

White Dead Nettle.

Hedge Woundwort.

Hedge Parsley.

Wild Rose.

Alder.

Alkanet.

Teasel.

Snowberry.

Amphibious Bistort.

Small-leaved Elm. Hornbeam.

Field Maple.

Hawkbit.

Common Reed.

Creeping Buttercup.

Herb Bennet.

Woody Nightshade.

Fleabane.

Appendix 2. In-channel vegetation.

Unbranched Bur Reed.*Common in places.*

Yellow Water Lily.*Occasional.*

Arrowhead.*Rare.*

Crisp Pondweed.*Rare.*

Broad-leaved Pondweed.*Rare.*

Canadian Pondweed.*Abundant.*

Blanket weed.*Abundant.*