

Biodiversity net gain. Good practice principles for development

Case studies

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11 Quarry extension at Gill Mill, Witney, Oxfordshire

Details

Organisations Smith and Sons (Bletchington) Ltd
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11.1 PROJECT SUMMARY

Smith and Sons (Bletchington) Ltd is a family-run minerals company based in Oxfordshire that has several award-winning biodiversity projects to its name.

At its main sand and gravel site of Gill Mill in the Windrush Valley, progressive restoration of worked sites has delivered an impressive wetland nature reserve at Rushy Common, as well as recreational lakes that link to the wider river valley landscape. It recently gained approval for a further major area of extraction with progressive restoration planned to deliver



Figure 11.1 Quarry extension at Gill Mill, Witney, Oxfordshire

one of the most extensive reed beds in southern England, improve public access and construct holiday lodges that will give revenue for ongoing management as well as enjoyment. The current land use is arable, and improved and semi-improved pasture in the river valley.

11.2 ISSUES

The principle of continuing the quarry in the long term initially met with scepticism from the local community in an area that has many former sand and gravel sites. Smiths ultimately won support on the strength of its history of restoration at sites within the current quarried area. It also engaged with the RSPB and other local conservation partners and adjusted its plans.

The projects that Smiths have delivered and plan to deliver show the importance of collaborative working in the design and restoration of sites for biodiversity, including delivery of wider environmental and social benefits. The projects link effectively with the landscape in terms of biodiversity and recreation and access, with designs changed where possible to deliver as many benefits as possible.

11.3 OUTCOMES

The company has recently secured permission for a major 97 hectare, five million tonne extension to Gill Mill. This will enable the site to supply a further five million tonnes of sand and gravel to help meet local

needs over the next 25 years. In doing so, it will protect the future of an existing operation that supports 40 jobs directly and many more indirectly, and which recycles local building waste as aggregates.

The approved restoration scheme has had to reflect various demands, opportunities and constraints, including reducing the risk of bird strike hazard, mitigating flood risk and water management, biodiversity enhancement, and delivering tourism and recreational opportunities.

The scheme includes 61 hectares of reed beds and 66 hectares of other largely priority habitats. Among priority species it will attract bittern, barn owl, water vole, bats and otter. The restored Gill Mill quarry site near Witney will also lead to increased public access to the beautiful countryside. The scheme avoids and protects Ducklington Meads SSSI near to the extraction area, which has cultural importance to the local village due to snakes-head fritillaries, celebrated in the annual fritillary festival.

The plans include lakeside 'eco lodges' to help fund long-term biodiversity management. They will then be powered by a renewable energy plant fed with biomass from the reed beds and woodland. In addition there will be some 11 kilometres of new paths and bridleways. While these will be provided over the long life of the quarry development, in the short term Smiths will also provide new paths along the Windrush Valley linking into their Rushy Common Nature Reserve and the Tar Lakes recreation area. Associated with this Smiths will work with the parish council to provide new parking places in the village for walkers attracted to the new paths.

Once complete, the restoration at Gill Mill will deliver one of the largest connected priority wildlife habitats, including one of the largest reed beds, in southern England.

The scheme won the Mineral Product Association's Biodiversity Award for Planned Restoration in 2015. The judges were particularly impressed by the scale and ambition of the project, and that the design reflects the views of conservation bodies, the local community, the local authority and the Ministry of Defence and will deliver multiple benefits and 'ecosystem services'.