

ASHT Learning Resources

Elveden and the Brecks

Ecology and landuse on a Suffolk estate



KS3/4 Geography



Anglo Sikh Heritage Trail
Preserving the Past, Inspiring the Future

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INTRODUCTION

Elveden is a 19th century landed estate of c. 10,000 acres which still flourishes today as a diverse agricultural enterprise. It is set in the Brecks, on the Norfolk/Suffolk borders - one of the major surviving natural areas of England. As such it offers a comparative study of changing land use on one landed estate from the 19th to 21st centuries, and of the effect of human activity on the ecology of the surrounding area.

Elveden and the Brecks

Elveden is situated at the southern end of the Brecks, an area of heathland, forest and agricultural land which extends across the Norfolk / Suffolk border, from Swaffham in the north to Bury St Edmunds in the south.

A 'breck', or 'break', was an area of heathland which was broken up for arable cultivation in times of agricultural prosperity and allowed to revert to heath when soils were exhausted or prices fell. The term is used in the 17th century (John Ray, 1673), but the term Breckland was not coined until the end of the 19th century (W G Clarke, 1894).

The climate of Breckland is more continental than the rest of Britain, having relatively hot summers, cold winters and low rainfall. Its unusual ecosystem is home to many unique or distinctive species of birds, plants and animals.

The Sikh connection

In 1863 Elveden was bought by Maharajah Duleep Singh, the dispossessed Sikh ruler of the Punjab in India. He transformed the house in the Indian style and lived there as a Victorian country gentleman, with his wife and five children, until 1886. He rebuilt the local church, where both he and his wife are buried. His second son, Frederick, also lived nearby and became a local benefactor. This early connection of a Sikh royal family with Elveden is remembered and valued by Sikhs in the UK today.

The learning resource

This pack supports the study of Place in the KS3 Geography curriculum. It encourages pupils to understand the physical and human characteristics of a real place over time. It includes sections on the different ecosystems and patterns of land use in a highly distinctive area of England. The pack aims to stimulate geographical enquiry: it includes a wide range of sources: historical photographs, personal records, maps and aerial photographs. It is very relevant to contemporary contexts: it includes up-to-the-minute accounts of the planning inquiry for the A11 and the Elveden bypass.

Learning outcomes:

Ecosystems

to identify different ecosystems and differentiate between one ecosystem and another
to understand that ecosystems are a result of an interaction between climate, animals, rocks, soil and water

to realize the effect of human activity on different ecosystems

to appreciate that ecosystems must be sensitively managed in order to protect them

Land use and economic activity

to identify different land use, using a range of different resources

to distinguish between the three main types of economic activity and identify examples

to recognize that land use and economic activity can change over time

to recognize that specific economic activities are suited to specific locations and ecosystems

to understand that land use can lead to a conflict between social, economic and environmental needs

to appreciate that different economic activities have an impact on the environment

to recognize ways to conserve natural resources for future generations

Cross-curricular links

History

Duleep Singh owned Elveden during the 'Great Depression' in the 1870-80s. Find out more about this crisis of Victorian agriculture

Art & Design

The house and church at Elveden have been altered several times to reflect different aspects of 19th and early 20th century taste. Use historic photographs to map the changes.

English

Investigate writing about 'place': how have authors conjured up the distinctive landscape of Breckland.

Citizenship

Investigate the different community interests involved in the decision to go ahead with the Elveden bypass.

Ecosystems in the Brecks: Heathland



Heathland with gorse in the Brecks near Elveden
© David Hawgood

Heathland is the most characteristic ecosystem of the Brecks, but also the most threatened. It has decreased from 29,000 hectares in 1900, to about 7,000 today. The greatest extent of Breckland heaths are today concentrated on the Elveden Estate, and another area in Norfolk used for military training.

Healthy heaths depend on sustainable stock grazing by sheep and, to some extent, cattle. Rabbit grazing is vital in supporting tightly-grazed disturbed lichen and rich grass heaths.

Some reasons for decline of ecosystem

- Over 21,000 hectares of poor land was converted from shooting estates to conifer plantations as a result of social and economic changes following the First World War
- Decline of rabbit numbers following severe outbreak of myxomatosis in 1954 caused many of the remaining heaths to deteriorate
- Nitrogen pollution, from urban and livestock sources, and windblown fertilizer from arable farming causes the vegetation to change from heather to grass

Species at risk

Stone curlews are ground nesting birds which rely on sparse vegetation with some degree of soil disturbance. They are listed globally as at risk. About 65% of their British population nest in Breckland, half of them on heathland. About 40% of the British population of woodlarks nest in Breckland, 20% of them on heathland

19 nationally rare or scarce flowering plant species are found on Breckland heaths, with Breckland thyme and spiked speedwell being found nowhere else in Britain. 11 species, including starry Breck lichen, spanish catchfly, purple stem cat's tail and tower mustard are of international conservation concern.

180 nationally rare species of invertebrates are recorded in Breckland, 26 of them are at risk of extinction in Britain. Species such as the lunar yellow underwing, marbled clover and tawny wave moths are particularly listed.