Gill Mill

Summary

The planned restoration illustrates a biodiversity led scheme influenced by the availability of inert wastes with which to raise levels for creation of reedbeds, managing groundwater and flooding in the Valley, delivery of a progressive working restoration scheme to minimize the extent of open disturbed land, and managing bird strike issues.

Location

The Windrush Valley lies in West Oxfordshire. There are a number of lakes in the Valley around Witney resulting from previous extraction.

History

Smiths and Sons of Bletchington have been operating in the Windrush Valley since 1989 when they opened their new greenfield Gill Mill Quarry. This was substantially extended with an application prepared though the mid 1990s and eventually granted in 2001. The approved restoration scheme provides for landscaped fishing lakes. There was no provision for bird strike management.

The Restoration Scheme

Since the end of 2009 Smiths have been working up a planning application to extend the quarry. The land extends north from the current workings to the A40 and falls within the safeguarding birdstrike zone for RAF Brize Norton with flights directly cross the site, usually from east to west on a landing approach.

Consultation on the proposal elicited comments from Defence Estates (DE) and nearby Oxford (Kidlington) Airport that any significant rise in the number of birds could be hazardous with DE providing generic advice with the aim to minimize the risk of a potential birdstrike incident. This included:

- Areas of open water to be kept to a minimum
- Open water no greater than 200m x 200m
- Steep bank sides and no shallow margins
- No islands
- Simple lake perimeters, no undulating margins, margins planted with common reed
- A bird management plan

It was clear that in addition to the principle restoration objectives of creating a wetland nature reserve with landscape scale biodiversity benefits the scheme also had to be designed so that it wouldn't attract large flocks of birds, particularly wildfowl and gulls. The restoration was also steered by the availability of inert wastes to landscape and raise levels, groundwater and flooding in the valley, the delivery of a progressive working restoration scheme to minimize the extent of open disturbed land.

The scheme design was developed through 2011 in consultation with the planning authorities, Defence Estates and ngos (RSPB and Nature After Minerals), eventually incorporating a large area of reedbed, reed marsh and wet woodland. The planning permission was eventually submitted to extend the existing site by 97 Ha
with extraction of an additional 5 million tonnes of sand and gravel, consolidating part of the current permitted area into a single new application of 184 Ha and 7.8 M tonnes. Planning permission was granted in 2014.

Lessons learned include:

- Bird strike hazard can be designed out of a biodiversity restoration scheme without compromising the wildlife value of the site
- Engage on bird strike issues with all relevant people at the very start
- Accept compromise
- Accept that a BMP will be required and secure agreement in advance from third party landowners

The plan below illustrates the restoration scheme dominated by reedbeds and reed marsh, reducing the area of open water and grazing marsh.

*Plan not included due to file size*