

M4. Housing development

Skerningham strategic site allocation (policy H10)

Allocating Skerningham for development is baffling when there are urban brownfield sites available and especially when documents on Darlington Borough Council's (DBC) own website consistently refer to the area so positively in terms of its importance for both wildlife and to existing residents for recreation:

- *large nature reserve*
- *Designated Wildlife Area*
- *Skerningham Plantation SNCI (a designation given to sites that have substantive local nature conservation and geological value)*
- *a location where a strategic countryside site could be developed, due in part to the area's existing high landscape value*
- *part of the cultural landscape of Darlington*
- *Jewel in the Crown of Darlington's countryside provision*
- *significantly tranquil*
- *fundamentally attractive, giving people a sense of tranquillity*
- *countryside that can provide venues for quiet enjoyment*
- *probably the best countryside for quiet recreation*
- *desirable physical feature*
- *Skerningham Countryside Park*
- *quality countryside*

In 2004, Skerningham Community Woodland (plantation) was part of a project, funded by a £64,000 grant from the New Opportunities Fund, to improve the biodiversity and recreational use of nature reserves across the Borough, as well as increasing the total area of protected land within Darlington. The target, set by English Nature, was to create one hectare of local nature reserve for every 1,000 people and for that land to be located within one kilometre of where those people live (the woodland is a ten-minute walk from existing homes). As of 2012 however, Darlington was falling below the national standard and had only created 0.64 hectares for every 1,000 people.

DBC's website promotes Skerningham Community Woodland as a *large nature reserve*. The 2015 SHLAA report lists Skerningham SNCI as a site constraint. SNCI, or Site of Nature Conservation Interest, *is a designation given to sites that have substantive local nature conservation and geological value*. When looking at factors that restrict development on DBC's website it says that *designated sites within the natural environment are protected*

against destruction or gradual erosion and one of the types of sites listed are SNCIs. Yet the bid submitted to MHCLG in 2018 shows Darlington Golf Club relocating into this *large nature reserve/SNCI*.

This large *nature reserve/SNCI* was developed with the help of forestry grants and, according to a 2017 article in *The Northern Echo*, *was donated to local residents as community woodland*. It is home to the black poplar - a tree of wet woodland and stream sides and the UK's most endangered and rarest native timber tree. It was hoped that Darlington would become a focal point for its resurgence. Skertingham Community Woodland is one of the few places in England where this tree survives and Darlington is at the limit of the black poplar's northern territory.

Skertingham Community Woodland is a burial ground. Campaigners have tried to find out from DBC exactly how many full-body burials have taken place on the community land. The number ranges between 4-7. There are also ashes on the site. David Green, a respected illustrator and conservationist from Darlington, was buried in a reed coffin, decorated in painted butterflies and fresh leaves, and rests in the woodland where he would often walk. Six of the rare and prized black poplar trees were planted in a circle around him and a seventh directly over his grave. David Bellamy, a friend of David's and a supporter and patron of The Arbory Trust, an organisation which promotes environmentally-friendly burials in specially designated woodland, attended his funeral. The area of woodland where he is buried is affectionately referred to as *Dave's Wood*. The Good Funeral Guide states that *natural burial is a term used to describe the burial of human remains where the burial area creates habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitat (woodland, species rich meadows, orchards, aquatic, sustainably managed farmland etc.) which are rich in flora and fauna*.

The land mosaic at Skertingham - arable land, hedgerows, veteran trees, woodland - means wildlife can thrive. Skertingham is the door into a large block of land (which includes Barmpton and Ketton Country) that is free from roads and development, with only farmsteads dotted about the area. This is quite unique and allows wildlife (and people) to move safely over a vast distance, whilst also affording it opportunities to rest up in the many wooded areas and hedgerows and drink and forage in the becks, temporary ponds and River Skerne. The area of Skertingham, Barmpton and Ketton Country is all connected and the Lawton Review, published in 2010, looks into why this is important:

Isolated nature reserves are not enough. In a landscape fragmented by human activity like development and intensive agriculture, and subject to rapid change, such as climate change, species are unable to move or adapt quickly enough. Action is needed across whole landscapes to reverse the effects of fragmentation and environmental degradation. The Lawton review cites the importance of ecological networks, suites of high quality wildlife sites containing biological diversity, with connections between them enabling species, or their genes, to move. Establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network will help

wildlife cope with change, but will also improve the ability of the natural environment to provide for us.

Below are just some of my wildlife observations from Skerningham (including a few sightings from adjacent land). This is a catalogue of personal evidence to show how rich the area is in terms of its fauna. Links to the ecology report and documentary, which were funded by donations from Darlington residents, are included below my records. I have also added a small sample of some of the thousands of photographs taken on my walks through the area.

Red-listed bird species (*RED being the highest conservation priority, with species needing urgent action*) sighted in Skerningham between 2019-2021:

- **CUCKOO**
- **FIELDFARE**
- **GRASSHOPPER WARBLER** (*sighting made by a fellow wildlife photographer*)
- **GREY PARTRIDGE**
- **GREY WAGTAIL**
- **HERRING GULL**
- **HOUSE SPARROW**
- **LAPWING**
- **LESSER REDPOLL**
- **LINNET**
- **MISTLE THRUSH**
- **REDWING**
- **SKYLARK**
- **SONG THRUSH**
- **STARLING**
- **TREE SPARROW**
- **WILLOW TIT**
- **YELLOWHAMMER**
- **YELLOW WAGTAIL**

Further red-listed bird species recorded just outside of the Skerningham site:

- **RING OUZEL** (*Barmpton*)
- **CURLEW** (*Ketton, heard recently but not seen to date*)

Amber-listed bird species (*AMBER being the next most critical group*) sighted in Skerningham between 2019-2021:

- **BLACK-HEADED GULL**
- **BULLFINCH**
- **COMMON GULL**
- **DIPPER**
- **HOUSE MARTIN**
- **KESTREL**
- **KINGFISHER**
- **MEADOW PIPIT**
- **MUTE SWAN**
- **OYSTERCATCHER**
- **REED BUNTING**
- **STOCK DOVE**
- **SWIFT**
- **TAWNY OWL**
- **WILLOW WARBLER**

Further amber-listed bird species recorded just outside of the Skerningham site:

- **MARSH HARRIER** (*Barmpton*)
- **TEAL** (*Barmpton*)

Further interesting bird sightings between 2019-2021 (*including which species have additional protection under SCHEDULE 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and which are from Annex I of the Birds Directive*):

- **BARN OWL** - *SCHEDULE 1 (Barmpton)*
- **LITTLE EGRET** - *Annex I of the Birds Directive*
- **PEREGRINE** - *SCHEDULE 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Annex I (Barmpton)*
- **RED KITE** - *SCHEDULE 1, Annex I*

Additional significant wildlife sightings in Skerningham between 2019-2021:

- **BADGER** - *protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992*
- **BROWN HARE** - *UK BAP Priority Terrestrial Mammal Species*
- **COMMON TOAD** - *UK BAP Priority Herptile Species*
- **GOLDEN-BLOOMED GREY LONGHORN BEETLE** (*locally common across south and central England, becoming scarce further north*)

- **WALL BUTTERFLY** - UK BAP Priority Terrestrial Invertebrate Species, conservation status “high” (further sighting at Barmpton)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14c9xWGN9FIvbCejxD7wjdyHCEB1-R7P6/view>

<https://youtu.be/e12GY0dkYYg>



NPPF, Section 8, point 96 says that *access to a network of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity is important for the health and well-being of communities* and point 97 goes on to say that *existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location.*

The Darlington Open Space Strategy 2007-2017 recognises the importance of the Skerningham area (a large expanse of Open Access land) for people to get out and about in. It states that *the Skerningham/Barmpton Lane area is identified as a location where a strategic countryside site could be developed, due in part to the area’s existing high landscape value, which attracts visitors from throughout the Borough and beyond.*

The vision of Darlington's Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) is *to create a facility that allows all of the public to have sustainable access to quality countryside. Countryside where they may experience the full richness of an unpolluted and biodiverse environment, as well as one that encourages healthy and safe travel.* The plan looks at where *high quality* countryside can be found and Skerningham Community Woodland is mentioned.

The map for the planned urban extension shows a local distributor road (inner ring) running close to the land set aside for biodiversity and habitat creation (and a feeder road from a northern link road cutting through it), as well as new housing situated directly on the other side of this new infrastructure. Any new woodland planted could no longer be described as being of *high quality* because the ROWIP says that countryside fails to deliver quality for a few reasons, including:

- *the separation of the countryside by busy roads*
- *litter (roads are notorious litter hotspots)*
- *urban noise (in this instance generated by both traffic and the proximity of new homes)*

Skerningham would also lose its feeling of tranquillity (the CPRE stated it was *significantly tranquil* in the 2015 SHLAA). Wildlife disturbance would be a big issue too because the area would be a lot noisier and busier with more people having to share less space. Existing residents who are used to quiet countryside to exercise in might therefore be less inclined to want to spend significant amounts of time there, especially families, the elderly and those with impaired abilities.

It states in the ROWIP that *the Council's work with the visually impaired also brings to the fore the importance of providing areas for recreation away from the distractions of urban noise. Again, Skerningham Community Woodland is just such a facility and could become increasingly important as a venue for this particular User Group.* It goes on to say that there is *a raft of benefits that comes with improved countryside access. These benefits include the value of green exercise to mental and physical health as well as helping increase the public's perception of the value and importance of the natural world.* The loss of this peaceful countryside would impact on health and well-being and goes against the Government's public health strategy the Local Plan makes reference to - *Healthy Lives, Healthy people* - which explicitly recognises that *health considerations are an important part of planning policy.*

The ROWIP recognises that it is **ONLY** the northern part of the town (Skerningham/Barmpton/Ketton Country) that has *countryside that can provide venues for quiet enjoyment and probably the best countryside for quiet recreation.* It is very concerning to read therefore in the *North Darlington, Skerningham, A Garden Community for Tees Valley* prospectus that Skerningham *provides a unique opportunity to deliver 4,500 new*

homes over the next 20-25 years with scope to significantly expand, meaning over the River Skerne into Barmpton and Ketton Country. The prospectus also states that the Masterplan has been designed such that it is entirely complementary to the North Darlington Relief Road and the current Tees Valley Mayor has recently said that if the relief road is built, this could allow for infilling with up to 12,000 further homes!