

This article was produced by the London Ecology Unit in 1993 to record *Nature Conservation in Kingston Upon Thames*. The following section is titled

'THE WOODS' AND RICHARD JEFFERIES BIRD SANCTUARY
Grid Ref: TQ 182 671 Area: 1.4ha

This small town park, close to Surbiton station, includes a fenced off section forming a bird sanctuary. Both the park and the reserve are of nature conservation value for their woodland and small areas of grassland.

The park is situated on a west-facing slope, marking the boundary of the Thames floodplain, and is underlain by London Clay, in the nineteenth century, clay was extracted for brick-making. The Kingston Tithe Map of 1840-42 shows the plot consisting of a cottage, garden and brickyard. At the time of the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1865 the picture was rather different, with an elongated lake shown along the foot of the slope and a large house surrounded by lawns just to the west of this. A network of paths skirted both the house and the lake and there was mixed woodland of deciduous and coniferous trees to the east and north of the latter, it is possible that the lake was what was left after the brick earth had been removed. It was still present in 1880 but by the turn of the century had gone. The house, which was called The Wood. was demolished some time after 1933. The Victorian layout of the house, woods, lake, oaths and lawns can clearly be followed today. The activities of the brick-makers have created a steep, in places almost vertical, face between the lower, fairly flat, public part of the park and the upper sanctuary area. A wet ditch and small pools at the base of this slope are all that remains of the old lake.

The site was purchased by Surbiton Borough Council under a compulsory purchase order in 1947 and in 1948 suggestions were put forward to turn it into a bird sanctuary. It was also suggested that it should be named "Jefferies Wood" to commemorate the centenary of the birth of Richard Jefferies (1848-1887), one of the most distinguished residents Surbiton has ever had. However, it was not until 1980 that the title "Richard Jefferies Bird Sanctuary" was officially bestowed on the eastern part of the site by the Royal Borough of Kingston. Jefferies was a naturalist and novelist who lived in & Surbiton for several years, at what is now 296, Ewell Road. In his *Nature Near London* (1883) he describes in vivid detail the wildlife and countryside in rural Kingston then. Tragically he died at the young age of 38 after prolonged illness. A memorial plaque to him can be seen in Surbiton Library.

The public part of the park, known as "The Woods", consists of two small patches of mown grass and areas of planted trees and shrubs. Many planted specimens are non-native species, as would be expected on a site previously used as a garden.

Within the trees are several grassy clearings. The first of these lies at the lowest part of the park, beside its western boundary, and is reached via the gate from Oak Hill Grove. Though the grass here is dominated by perennial rye-grass which is regularly mown, around the margins common wild flowers can be seen, such as germander speedwell, mixed with escapes from the neighbouring gardens, including alkanet an attractive but bristly plant with deep blue flowers. The surrounding woodland, which gives this open area the feel of a woodland glade, is composed of oak, ash, hazel and hawthorn with exotic species such as larch,

horse chestnut, sycamore, copper beech, false acacia and snowberry. Bluebells and other woodland flowers were introduced at the time the site was opened to the public in the early 1950s. In spring, ramsons, a shade-loving member of the onion group, sends up its flower stalk, surmounted by white, starry flowers, filling the woodland floor with its garlic scent. Further up the slope is a second clearing, again mainly consisting of rye-grass. Surrounded by trees and a dark humid undergrowth, a more secluded atmosphere prevails here. The woodland continues up the slope to a fence which divides off the bird sanctuary.

The bird sanctuary begins at the ditch on the site of the old lake. Choked with leaves and excessively shaded, few if any plants will be able to live here unless the basin is dug out to provide wetter areas and some of the overhanging trees and branches removed to allow sunlight to reach the woodland floor.

Almost immediately after the ditch, as one continues to head east, the steep, in places precipitous, artificial escarpment ascends into the dense undergrowth of the sanctuary. Here the trees and shrubs are largely of native species suggesting that the vegetation may at least be partly self-established. Mature oak trees form much of the woodland but hornbeam, lime (almost certainly planted here) and the non-native sycamore are also abundant, while the odd Turkey oak and young horse chestnut can be seen, also probably planted. Elm was formerly a major part of the community on the level land above the slope, but dead trees, ravaged by Dutch elm disease, were felled and much of the dead wood was left lying. These ivy- and moss-covered stumps and logs add a valuable niche for invertebrates within the wood. The elm is now suckering profusely to form, together with sycamores, a dense understorey in places. Holly forms a thick sometimes impenetrable, evergreen shrub layer, with smaller amounts of elder and yew. Ivy carpets the ground, except on the steep slope where the soil is exposed. Amongst the ivy grows an assortment of woodland plants, including ramsons, Lords-and-Ladies, dog's mercury, wood avens, pignut, male fern, wood-sorrel, bluebell and foxglove. As with the adjoining park, some of these flowers may have been introduced.

The public part of the park is owned and managed by the Borough, but the reserve has been managed by the London Wildlife Trust under licence since 1987. Entrance to the public part can be gained during daylight hours by a gate at the south west corner. Occasional open days are held by the London Wildlife Trust for people to gain access to the sanctuary, to see some of its wildlife. Otherwise the sanctuary remains closed to the public, although access may be permitted on application to the Trust. An enclosed footpath passes immediately to the north of the bird sanctuary and gives a good idea of the tranquil nature of the site, all the more remarkable when a walk of only 100 metres takes one to the busy Surbiton station and shopping area.