Oxleas Wood & Meadow
Location: London Borough of Royal Greenwich
On the south and east slopes of Shooters Hill
Map Ref: TQ 440 759

Special designation
Site of Special Scientific Interest and Local Nature Reserve

Brief description
Oxleas Wood is part of a large woodland including Jack Wood, Castle Wood and Shepherdleas Wood. Today Oxleas is a very impressive ancient woodland, dominated by tall oak trees, with an understorey of hazel and sweet chestnut. It is actively managed for nature conservation and is reckoned by ecologists to be one of the most important woodlands for wildlife in the whole of London. Together with Shepherdleas and Jacks Wood it is the remains of a once much larger area of land which has been continuously wooded for thousands of years. Over that time an incredibly complex community of plants and animals have grown up and evolved together.

The wood is home to many different kinds of breeding birds including tree creepers, nuthatches, woodpeckers, chiffchaffs, long tailed tits and the relative newcomers - ring necked parakeets. A huge variety of flowering plants, tree and shrubs grow in the woods. Many of them what are known as “ancient woodland indicators”. An outstanding feature of the wood is the number of wild service trees, of all ages, scattered throughout the wood. This unusual berry-bearing native tree only sows itself on land which has never been cultivated.

In spring there are drifts of bluebells with wood anemone and wood sorrel, and in autumn a wide variety of fungi (especially after mild wet spells).

There is a small water course - not suitable for stream dipping.

Notable species include:

Trees/shrubs: oak, silver birch, sweet chestnut, hornbeam, ash, wild service tree, hazel, crack willow and alder; also, beech, birch, holly, hawthorn, sycamore, yew, holm oak, turkey oak.

Oxleas Meadow
A large area of grassland, on the slope south from the cafe, much of it managed for wildlife. In summer it is bright with buttercups, ox-eye daisies, yarrow, red and white
clover and humming with bees, grasshoppers, ladybirds and butterflies.

Under the southern part of Oxleas Meadow is a giant reservoir, built just under 30 years ago. It receives treated water from the non-tidal reaches of the Thames and releases it for the needs of people in a large area of south east London and north west Kent.

Falconwood Field is a large enclosed field, opposite Oxleas Wood on Welling Way and opposite Eltham Park North on Rochester Way. It is used as a short cut by commuters to Falconwood Station and by dog walkers. In summer it is left to grow until late summer when the grass is cut as a conservation meadow area and removed to encourage the wild flowers to seed. By cutting it in this way the meadow species are encouraged.

**Crucial points from the site's history**

*Ancient woodland - storehouse of wildlife and materials essential to people*

Parts of the woods are at least 8000 years old, dating back to the last Ice Age. The steep slopes are part of the reason for its survival: land like this was not suitable for cultivation or building. But the woodland itself was anyway very valuable. For thousands of years, timber was the only raw material for building as well as providing wood for fuel for cooking and heating. Trees from here were used for ship-building in the Woolwich and Deptford dockyards.

*Travellers and robbers*

Shooters Hill has been a major route for travellers since at least Roman times. It lies on the straight line of the old Watling Street. When the woods are described in early documents it is because they were a source of fear—they gave cover to bands of robbers, intent on attacking travellers. As early as 1313, when Edward II was on the throne, an order was made to widen the highway here, to reduce the threat. This situation continued for the next 500 years, or more, with many travellers carrying arms to defend themselves. The road over the hill was lined with gibbets, displaying the hanged remains of convicted robbers. It came to such a pitch that in 1810 a plan was suggested to dig a tunnel under Shooters Hill in order to try to allow travellers to proceed unmolested by highwaymen.

*Recent protest and victory*

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a dramatic demonstration of public commitment to the woods when a new road running north south (the East London River Crossing) was planned to cut a great swathe through Oxleas and Shepherdleas Woods, and link with a new crossing across the Thames. There was a long-running and ultimately successful campaign to save the woods.
Rhododendron alert!
These plants originate from the Caucasus, and were planted by Victorian gardeners in the gardens of the large houses which once stood at the top of Shooters Hill. Being very vigorous growers, they spread much too successfully into the ancient woodland and were threatening to crowd out the wild woodland plants. They are evergreen and their leaf cover is very dense, so they shade out other plants and act as an umbrella, drying out the soil beneath. When the leaves fall, they rot only very slowly, preventing other plant seedlings getting up through the leaf litter, and their leaf litter is very acid— which many plants cannot survive. The rhododendron is now cut back regularly to keep it in check.

Severndroog Castle
A very unusual triangular building, with three towers around the edge. Built in 1784 in memory of sea-faring man, Sir William James, the tower has some of the most spectacular views across London. On a clear day from the tower you can see across seven counties.

The castle re-opened in 2014 following extensive restoration through funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund

Access points into the site
The Green Chain walk comes in from the south, from Shepherdleas Wood across Rochester Way. The other branches come in at the north west corner from Kenilworth Gardens, from the west from Eltham Common and at the north east corner from across Bellegrove Road.

Other entrances come in from Welling Way and Shooters Hill.

Access to café, toilets and car park from Kenilworth Gardens, off Shooters Hill Road

Public transport to the site
Train: Falconwood Station
Bus: 89, 486 (Shooters Hill Road); B16 (Rochester Way)
But consult Transport for London’s Journey Planner

Facilities for people
Cafe: Yes - at Oxleas Meadow and Severndroog Castle
Toilets: Yes
Shelter: Yes - at the pump house on the reservoir.
Children’s play equipment: No
Other - e.g. pond dipping area? Info centre? good viewpoint?: Pond
Good viewpoints – from outside the cafe and from Severndroog Castle

Key wildlife features present
Short grass: Yes
Long grass: Yes
Lowland heathland: No
Stream: Yes (seasonal)
Hedge: Yes
Clumps of trees: Yes
Wood: Yes

Name and details of person to contact if you want to visit or know more about the site
Address: Parks and Open Spaces, Greenwich Council, Shooters Hill Depot, Shooters Hill, London SE 18 4LX

For visits (including visiting the animal park) and information:
John Beckham, Ranger Service
Telephone: 020 8319 4523

For general outreach:
Jonathan Bangs, Parks Outreach Officer
Telephone: 020 8856 2232

Jeremy Shearmur, Parks Technical For technical info: Officer
Telephone: 020 8856 2232

Other organisations involved at the site?
Shooters Hill Working Party-Contact: laurie.baker@btinternet.com

Severndroog Castle Building Preservation Trust: Contact: info@severndroogcastle.org.uk

Information already published (eg site leaflet, website etc).

Leaflet: Shooters Hill – London’s Ancient Woodland

Schools within 1 mile of Oxleas Wood & Meadow
CHRIST CHURCH CofE PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.42 miles, GREENWICH
DEANSFIELD JUNIOR SCHOOL:0.63 miles, GREENWICH
DEANSFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.60 miles, GREENWICH
EASTCOTE PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.68 miles, Bexley
EGLINTON PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.68 miles, GREENWICH
GREENSLADE PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.99 miles, GREENWICH
NIGHTINGALE PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.96 miles, GREENWICH
NOTRE DAME PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.83 miles, GREENWICH
PLUMCROFT PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.62 miles, GREENWICH
ST MARY MAGDALENE CofE PRIMARY SCHOOL: 0.47 miles, GREENWICH