



MIDDLEWICK RANGES NATURE RESERVE

A VISION
2025





A FUTURE FOR MIDDLEWICK RANGES

Middlewick Ranges is Colchester's ecological crown jewel and a much-loved green space for the community in South Colchester.

From dog walkers and joggers to nature lovers and families, people enjoy this haven come rain or shine. As well as being a **key 'biodiversity hotspot'**, the site also boosts physical and mental well-being, provides a base for learning and offers climate resilience by storing carbon, improving air quality and mitigating flood risks.

This is 'Nightingale Country' - a gateway to Friday Woods and Roman River Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Middlewick Ranges and Birch Brook Woodland form a patchwork of habitats on sandy soils, not only rich natural history but cultural and military history too, having been used as a firing range since the Boer War.

'The Wick' is home to the **largest surviving area of acid grassland** in Essex, a top UK Nightingale population, Barbastelle bats and a wealth of other rare species, including nationally significant grassland fungi and invertebrates; from the Splendid and Dune Waxcap – to the Four-banded Weevil-wasps and Necklace Ground Beetle.

Our vision is to secure Middlewick as a nature reserve, improving access for all while safeguarding its precious biodiversity – working in collaboration with key stakeholders.

"I played here all through my childhood with the song of Skylarks a concert in the background." ~ Kevin

Scarlet Waxcap ©
Dougal Urquhart



Green Tiger Beetle
© Andrew Neal



Chiffchaff on Gorse © Andrew Neal



Slow-worm
© Andrew Neal



A walk with friends © Martin Pugh

66%

said the Wick
'helps children learn
about nature'

91%

said Middlewick is
home to a 'unique
assemblage of wildlife'

65%

said the Wick 'assists my
mental health and well-
being'

North-western acid grassland in June (by Mersea and Abbots Road) © Friends of Middlewick



WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK?

Middlewick Ranges is not just a haven for wildlife but also a cherished community space. A recent poll conducted among **301 local residents** demonstrated the strength of public feeling for this remarkable site. Key results include:

- **91%:** *"The Wick is home to a unique assemblage of wildlife and is a biodiversity hotspot."*
- **65%:** *"Being with nature on the Wick assists my mental health and well-being."*
- **72%:** *"It's a great place to take exercise."*
- **66%:** *"The Wick helps children to learn about nature."*
- **9%:** *"I don't have access to a private garden."*
- **46%:** *"It's the last wild open space left in Colchester."*
- **28%:** *"Dark skies on the Wick help nature flourish."*

A COMMUNITY ASSET

South Colchester deserves a nature reserve! Middlewick serves communities including Old Heath, Black Heath, Monkwick and Barn Hall. The poll results underline Middlewick's role as an essential community asset. Families visit to enjoy the open space, children play and learn about wildlife, and walkers, runners and dog owners value its safe, tranquil environment.

It is a place to connect with nature, improve health and educate the next generation about biodiversity.

"I believe this is a most important site for nature and for recreation for the local community. Areas like this are becoming more rare in England and should be retained." ~ Malcolm



A RICH HISTORY

Middlewick's history is deeply intertwined with Colchester's **military heritage**, dating back to its acquisition by the War Office in **1874**; children still find old bullet casings whilst playing on the sandy rifle butts as they did in the 1960/70s. Going back much further, a **Neolithic flint axe** head has also been found on the Wick!

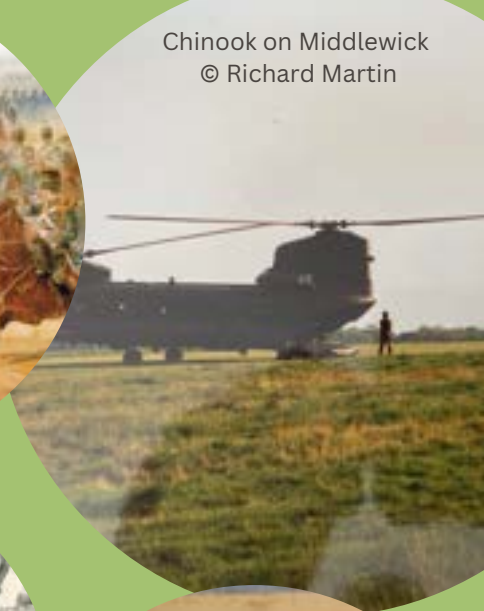
The sounds of soldiers training and live firing have now been replaced by Skylark, Linnet and Nightingales – and before, during and after military use, the site has been at the heart of the local community. The site has hosted large-scale military events, including **mock battles** that drew crowds of thousands. Its open spaces have been used for **agricultural fairs**, **community gatherings** and even rock concerts, such as performances by Mott the Hoople in the 1970s.

Our vision would include interpretation not only of natural history but of the community and military history of the site, including prominent landscape features such as the rifle butts. There are possibilities for history tours, display of artefacts or even a museum; this chimes with local sentiment, **46 people questioned** agreed that *"the history of the Wick should be preserved in situ."*

"The biodiversity on this site has been developing here since the Boer War - without pesticides, without damaging kinds of environmental impacts - and has allowed this astonishing array of species to have emerged. It is an irreplaceable site - it is a product of its unique place and unique history." ~ Prof. Ted Benton FRES FBNA (Colchester Natural History Society)



Chinook on Middlewick
© Richard Martin



Historical images courtesy
of Dougal Urquhart

A HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

Middlewick Ranges and Birch Brook Woodland form **one of the most biodiverse sites in Essex** and an example of how irreplaceable habitats can support rare and endangered species. This makes it the perfect place to learn about nature with **74%** of people questioned agreeing that *"The Wick is a great place to watch and experience nature"* and **66%** saying *"The Wick helps children to learn about nature"*.

A designated Local Wildlife Site, its unique combination of acid grassland, sandy slopes, dense scrub and woodland makes it a **haven for wildlife**. Recent surveys have confirmed its regional and national significance, with the site actually **exceeding** the criteria for SSSI.

This site, which spans **over 100 hectares**, supports some of the most threatened species and habitats in the UK. Middlewick contains over one third of all acid grassland in Colchester District and is by far the largest surviving area of acid grassland in Essex; not just a rare Priority UK Habitat but vital to the survival of many specialist species, from plants to fungi to invertebrates.

Middlewick is home to a top UK population of **Nightingales**, as well as **Barbastelle bats**, one of Britain's rarest bat species which likely breed on site. The site also supports **23+ waxcap fungi** like Parrot and Crimson Waxcap and **at least 1,480 invertebrate species** (167 rare or threatened), from the charismatic Minotaur Beetle to the Six-spotted Mouse-spider.

"This site is nationally significant for endangered species and so important for future generations to enjoy." ~ Mary

Skylark © Dougal Urquhart



Bitter Waxcap
© Martin Pugh



Ruby-tailed Wasp
© Andrew Neil

British Soldier Lichen
© Caroline White



Cream-spot Tiger
© Tracy Fance



Badgers © Wayne Richard Baker

52%

of residents highlighted
Middlewick's role in mitigating
climate change

62%

recognised its ability to
reduce pollution.



WHAT ABOUT FUNDING?



The cost of managing a nature reserve can add up, but Middlewick Range's exceptional importance to nature and the community makes it a prime candidate for long-term sustainable funding.

A range of funding schemes can support biodiversity-rich sites like Middlewick. Environmental stewardship payments, National Lottery and Landfill Tax funding, carbon credits and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) uplift schemes can all generate significant income. Middlewick's rare acid grassland and carbon storage capacity make it especially well-suited for these initiatives. Additionally, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) provides a strong framework for directing funding, while green finance initiatives and rewilding grants offer further opportunities.

Known as Colchester's "green lungs", Middlewick filters air pollution and regulates water flow, reducing flood risks in areas like the Hythe as well as storing carbon - vital '**ecosystem services**' that contribute to the economy and deliver significant long-term cost savings.

Assessing Middlewick Range's environmental and social value highlights its economic benefits - not as a commodity, but as an **essential public asset**. For example, by improving mental and physical health, it eases pressure on the NHS, whilst also providing potential educational opportunities from primary school to university level.

Potential income from a visitor centre, sponsorships and café operations could further support Middlewick's long-term management. There is a **wealth of opportunities** to ensure its financial sustainability whilst enhancing engagement and public well-being - an invaluable natural asset.



View from the top of the rifle butts © Richard Martin

MANAGEMENT - FOR PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE

Management will focus on **enhancing habitats** like acid grassland, sandy slopes, hedgerows and woodland, ensuring species associated with these complex habitats – from fungi and flora to bugs and bats – continue to thrive.

Middlewick's rare acid grassland, which supports waxcap fungi and specialist invertebrates, will be **carefully managed** through rotational mowing to maintain its nutrient-poor, fine and short-sward structure. This will help sustain its extraordinary biodiversity, from ground-nesting Skylarks to rare fungi like the Splendid Waxcap.

"Colchester's environmental Jewel in its crown!"

~ David and Georgina Nicholls

The sandy slopes and patches of bare ground, essential for invertebrates like the Green Tiger Beetle and Four-banded Weevil-wasp, will be retained and expanded. Scrub, particularly Gorse, Bramble and Blackthorn, will be managed to provide habitats for birds such as Nightingale, while preventing encroachment on open grassland.

Hedgerows will be enhanced to support bats, birds and other wildlife, maintaining vital wildlife corridors. In Birch Brook Woodland, low-intervention management will maintain its **structural diversity**, benefiting veteran trees, deadwood species and nocturnal wildlife like Tawny Owls and Barbastelle bats.



AN ACTIVE VOLUNTEER GROUP

A volunteer work party, composed of some of the 3,500 members of the Middlewick campaign group, is ready to help with hands-on stewardship. From clearing invasive scrub to enhancing hedgerows, the local community is eager to take an active role in Middlewick's care. Local naturalists and experts have already conducted many surveys to inform evidence-based management and this work will continue, ensuring Middlewick's habitats and species thrive in the long term.

Middlewick Ranges will be managed as a space for both nature and people, balancing conservation with responsible public access and ensuring future generations can enjoy and learn from this rich site.

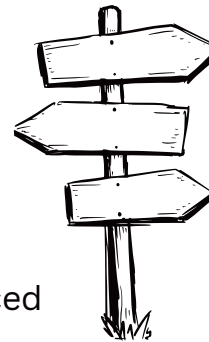
"I want to help the Wick and its wildlife - many happy memories with my children on the Wick!" ~ Lorraine

IMPROVED ACCESS

Although parts of Middlewick are fenced off, increased access balanced with nature conservation would unlock its potential for visitors while protecting sensitive wildlife. Opportunities include:

- **Improved disabled access:** Mown pathways and infrastructure to make sure everyone who wants to can enjoy the site.
- **Interpretation boards:** Highlighting biodiversity and history.
- **Dog fouling bins, signage and education:** Reducing harmful impacts on sensitive habitats.

"Always enjoying a lovely evenings walk with the dogs." ~ Alan



Community in action on the Wick © Friends of Middlewick

HOW WILL VISITORS BENEFIT?

Accessible green spaces like Middlewick Ranges are essential for community well-being. A place to connect with nature.

During the recent poll, **65%** of respondents cited the site's mental health benefits, while **49%** noted it as a safe and enjoyable place for children to play. A total of **37%** walk their dogs on the Wick, an important daily ramble with four-legged companions! And for many residents without private gardens, Middlewick is an invaluable public amenity and space to breathe and relax. For vital nature education, the site is perfect for **Forest Schools** and **'mini-beast' surveying**.

Existing buildings could host a visitor/community centre and café for the local community in an under-served part of the city.

2024 has highlighted how valued and vital Middlewick Ranges is in the community hosting **over 20 events** with **several hundred people** attending including: litter picks, history walks, Nightingale walks, natural history walks and training/recording events for butterflies, Dormice, fungi and Skylark – with **over 70 people** at the Jane's Walk, a walking festival.

BIODIVERSITY TARGETS

Securing Middlewick as a nature reserve directly supports **statutory 30x30 targets** and biodiversity obligations, making it a strategic addition to Colchester's **green and blue infrastructure** while helping fight climate change and biodiversity loss.

*"Here people have lovely memories with the nature around us.
So protect the Wick like other sites in Colchester!"*
~ Grace (10 years old)

Many ways to enjoy
Middlewick © Martin Pugh



A COMMUNITY VISION

Together, we can make sure that ‘the Wick’ is protected, not just for the wildlife it supports, but also for the people who cherish and rely on it.

Middlewick Ranges is a linchpin in a wider surrounding landscape of SSSIs and Local Wildlife Sites, essential for nature recovery. Protecting Middlewick is therefore not just a local priority – it’s a **national responsibility and a unique opportunity** for Colchester to lead by example.

It is an exciting prospect: a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a **nature reserve for South Colchester** that benefits both nature and the community in perpetuity.

*This vision has been created by **Friends of Middlewick** and is supported by **Buglife, Essex Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Colchester Natural History Society, Essex Field Club, CPRE Essex and Butterfly Conservation**.*

(See [Buglife website](#) and other links below).



‘Save the Wick’ Original Artwork © Oliver Dhakal



Friends of Middlewick





LINKS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Websites and Campaigns:

[Middlewick Ranges - Buglife](#)

[Our Position - Essex Wildlife Trust](#)

[Middlewick Ranges - CPRE Essex](#)

[38 Degrees Petition](#)

[Crowd Justice Legal Fundraiser](#)

Upcoming Feature Documentary:

[The Battle for Middlewick Ranges](#)

*Middlewick has been called respectively a **'wildlife haven'** and **'ecological jewel'** by the BBC, an **'ecological marvel'** by the Observer, a **'sanctuary'** by the Guardian, a **'highly specialised and rare habitat'** and **'vast wilderness'** by Channel 4 News, **'ecologically rich'** and a **'biodiverse green space'** and by East Anglian Bylines, a **'beauty spot'** and **'undisturbed for 200 years'** by the Gazette, and a **'really important place for wildlife'** and a **'wonderful, nature-rich, green space for the local community'** by Natural England.*



