

Land at Ashlawn House, Rugby

Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

Prepared by: The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd

On behalf of: Modern Plant Hire Limited

June 2021 Report Reference edp6601_r003b

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	Report Ref: edp6601_r003				
	Author	Formatted	Peer Review	Proofed by/Date	
003_DRAFT	FA	SC	RF	-	
003a	FA	-	RF	CR 051120	
003b	FA	-	-	CM 240621	

Section 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This Preliminary Ecological Appraisal has been prepared by The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd (EDP) on behalf of Modern Plant Hire Limited (hereafter referred to as 'the Applicant'). This report considers the implications of future development at Land at Ashlawn House, Rugby (hereafter referred to as the 'Site').
- 1.2 EDP is an independent environmental planning consultancy with offices in Cirencester, Cardiff and Cheltenham. The practice provides advice to private and public sector clients throughout the UK in the fields of landscape, ecology, archaeology, cultural heritage, arboriculture, rights of way and masterplanning. Details of the practice can be obtained at our website (www.edpuk.co.uk).

Background and Scope

- 1.3 The Site is centred approximately at Ordnance Survey Grid Reference (OGR) SP 506 724 and the Local Planning Authority is Rugby Borough Council (RBC). The location and extents of the Site are illustrated on **Plan EDP 1**.
- 1.4 The Site measures approximately 6 hectares (ha) and comprises the majority of two field parcels on either side of the Ashlawn House driveway. These field parcels support a grazed parkland habitat and there are a number of mature parkland trees scattered throughout. Adjacent to the B4429 is a woodland belt, which forms the northern boundary of the Site. Within this belt of woodland is a house with associated garden and outbuilding. In the south-eastern corner of the Site is a small allotment.
- 1.5 This Preliminary Ecological Appraisal presents the findings of an Extended Phase 1 Habitat survey, desk study and bat survey in relation to the potential future residential development of the Site.

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Section 2 Methodologies

Desk Study

- 2.1 The desk study is an important element of undertaking an initial ecological appraisal of a site proposed for development, enabling the initial collation and review of contextual information such as designated sites together with known records of protected and priority species.
- 2.2 The desk study involved collating biodiversity information from the following sources:
 - Warwickshire Biological Records Centre (WBRC);
 - Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) website¹; and
 - National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas website².
- 2.3 The desk study was undertaken during August 2020 and involved obtaining the following information:
 - International statutory designations (10km radius around site);
 - National statutory designations and non-statutory local sites (2km);
 - Annex II bat species³ records (6km); and
 - All other protected/notable species records (2km).
- 2.4 The search areas described above are considered to be sufficient to cover the potential zone of influence⁴ of the proposed development in relation to designated sites, habitats and species.
- 2.5 Freely available web-based Ordnance Survey plans and aerial photographs were reviewed to identify key habitat features including ponds within 250m⁵ that could offer potential breeding habitat for great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*), and strong linear 'green' (terrestrial) or 'blue (aquatic) connecting features in the landscape.
- 2.6 In addition, ecology information pertaining to the a nearby residential planning approval (planning reference: R17/0455) was reviewed to provide local baseline context.

¹ Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside website (http://magic.defra.gov.uk/)

² National Biodiversity Network Atlas website (https://nbnatlas.org/)

³ Bat species listed in Annex II of the EC Habitats Directive, namely Greater horseshoe, Lesser horseshoe, Barbastelle and Bechstein's bats

⁴ Zone of Influence – the areas and resources that may be affected by the proposed development.

⁵ 250m is the upper distance over which most great crested newts typically disperse from breeding ponds (English Nature (2001). *The Great Crested Newt Mitigation Guidelines*. English Nature, Peterborough.

Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey

- 2.7 The survey technique adopted for the habitat assessment was at a level intermediate between a standard Phase 1 survey technique⁶, based on habitat mapping and description, and a Phase 2 survey, based on detailed habitat and species surveys. The survey technique is commonly known as an Extended Phase 1 Habitat survey, as recommended by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management⁷. The survey was completed by a suitably experienced ecologist on 04 August 2020 and included a search for signs of badger activity.
- 2.8 An updated walkover was also undertaken on 18 June 2021.
- 2.9 The timing of the survey was optimal, due to being within of the active growing season for flora and habitat identification, it is considered the survey work is not constrained.

Bat Surveys

2.10 The Extended Phase 1 Habitat survey included an assessment of the trees and buildings on-site for their bat roosting potential. Full details of the survey methodologies are included in **Appendix EDP 1**.

⁶ Joint Nature Conservation Council (2004) Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey - A Technique for Environmental Audit (reprinted with minor corrections for original Nature Conservancy Council publication)

⁷ CIEEM (2013) Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal. CIEEM, Winchester

Section 3 Survey Results

Designated Sites

- 3.1 Information relating to designated sites was obtained during the ecological desk study. Statutory designations (those receiving legal protection) and non-statutory designations (those receiving planning policy protection only), are discussed in turn below
- 3.2 There is one statutorily protected site located within 1km of the Site, namely Ashlawn Cutting Local Nature Reserve (LNR), which is located approximately 820m east of the Site. This area is also designated as a non-statutory Local Wildlife Site (LWS). It comprises a steep sided railway cutting with limestone grassland and scrub mosaic. Notable species occurring include greenwinged orchid (*Orchis morio*), broomrape (*Orobanche minor*), grass pea (*Lathyrus sativus*) and adder's tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*).
- 3.3 In addition, there are four locally designated Ecosites within 1km, the closest is Sow Brook and Barby Road Ecosite located 645m north of the Site. A watercourse and roadside verge supporting a variety of flora and fauna.
- 3.4 The designated sites identified are not hydrologically linked or readily accessible by public rights of way from the Site.
- 3.5 The Site is also identified as a National Habitat Network Expansion Zone (May 2020 Natural England)⁸ and lies on the edge of a Potential Green Infrastructure Corridor, as identified in the RBCs Local Plan (2011-2031) Green and Blue Infrastructure Policy Map.

Habitats

- 3.6 The habitats on-site are identified as Priority Wood-pasture and Parkland on Magic maps⁹. The Extended Phase 1 Habitat survey sought to confirm whether this is the case and recorded a number of habitats present within the Site, the nature and distribution of which is summarised below and illustrated on **Plan EDP 1**.
- 3.7 In summary, the Site comprises the majority of two fields. Both fields support grazed parkland. The grassland was cropped short and grazed by cows in the western field and a mixture of horses and sheep in the eastern field (**Image EDP 3.1**).
- 3.8 Recording a full species list from within the grassland was not possible due to its cropped nature, although a certain dominant species were readily identifiable. These included white clover (*Trifolium repens*), Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*), perennial rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), thistle species (*Cirsium spp.*) and creeping buttercup (*Ranunculuns repens*).

⁸ Edwards J, Knight M, Taylor S & Crosher I,E (May 2020) National Habitat Network, User Guide v2, Natural England

⁹ Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside website (http://magic.defra.gov.uk/)

- 3.9 The mature trees were a mixture of birch (*Betula* sp.), copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica 'Purpurea'*), horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), lime (*Tilia* sp.), oak (*Quercus* sp.), walnut (*Juglans* sp.) and wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). The trees were often grouped in small clusters and only occasionally associated with boundary hedgerows.
- 3.10 A BS 5837 arboricultural survey of the Site completed in September 2020, identified the trees to predominantly be Category A trees, of high quality and value, including three veteran trees on the western boundary. There are also some lower value trees but where they are failing and have dead wood or damaged limbs this presents opportunities for wildlife.
- 3.11 Prior to the update survey in June 2021 a number of trees within both fields had been felled, as shown on **Plan EDP 1**.



Image EDP 3.1: View across the grazed parkland.

3.12 Close to the north-western corner of the Site there were some large earth piles and a hardcore track (**Image EDP 3.2**).

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Image EDP 3.2: Hardcore piles in north-west corner of the Site.

3.13 The woodland belt along the northern boundary comprises well-spaced Category A mature trees with patchy canopy cover (**Image EDP 3.3**). There was no ground flora or understorey apart from some grassland species and encroaching brambles (*Rubus fruticosus*). Prior to the update survey in June 2021 a small section of woodland in the north-east corner of the site was felled to allow access.

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Image EDP 3.3: Woodland belt along the northern boundary.

3.14 The house (see **Plan EDP 1**, **B1**) adjacent to the B4429 is a 2-storey brick and render dwelling with a complex roof structure (**Image EDP 3.4**). In the garden associated with the house is also a large single-storey wooden summerhouse (see **Plan EDP 1**, **B2** and **Image EDP 3.5**).



Image EDP 3.4: House B1 on northern boundary of the Site.



Image EDP 3.5: Building B2 – summer house on northern boundary of the Site.

3.15 There is an intact hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) hedgerow, which forms the boundary to the tarmac track, which leads from the A4429 to Ashlawn House (**Image EDP 3.6**). This is closely managed to around 4m tall and 1m wide. Other boundaries have a mixture of fencing and scattered scrub, which is generally dense bramble (*Rubus fruticosa*) with occasional elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) as well.



Image EDP 3.6: Hornbeam hedge bounding entrance drive.

3.16 An allotment area in the south-eastern corner of the Site comprises a mixture of vegetable plots, chicken coop and fruit trees (**Image EDP 3.7**). The ground flora is well maintained.



Image EDP 3.7: Well-maintained allotment and fruit trees.

3.17 The woodland, mature trees and hedgerows are considered to be of at least Local-level ecological value. While the improved grass pasture is considered to only be of Site-level ecological value in its own right, and despite the recent removal of some of the mature trees, it forms part of the wider wood-pasture and parkland mosaic, which is considered to be a priority habitat.

Species

Data Search

3.18 Protected and notable species records derived from the desk study are provided in **Table EDP 3.1** along with the suitability of the Site to support them.

Species /	Summary of Data Search Records	Potential Presence On-site
Species Group		
Notable Birds	Records relevant to the Site include farmland birds such as linnet (<i>Linaria cannabina</i>), dunnock	Limited extent of suitable habitats, though common
	(Prunella modularis), bullfinch (Pyrrhula pyrrhula),	
	song thrush (<i>Turdus philomelos</i>) and	and widespread species likely to forage and breed
	yellowhammer (<i>Emberiza citronella</i>), closest	on-site, particularly in
	records over 800m to the east.	association with the mature
	records over 800m to the east.	
		trees and boundary
Dealers		hedgerows.
Badger	Two records of badger (<i>Meles meles</i>) casualties	No evidence recorded during
	along Ashlawn Road, with additional sett records	site surveys but potential for
	from within Ashlawn Cutting LNR.	foraging and dispersal
		through the Site.
Bats	Records of Pipistrelle spp., brown long-eared bats	Suitable foraging habitat and
	(Plectotus auratus), noctule (Nyctalus noctule),	roosting opportunities in
	serotine (Eptesicus serotinus), Leisler's (Nyctalus	certain mature trees. Further
	leisleri) and Myotis spp. The majority of records	consideration provided in the
	are from urban areas north of the Site.	sub-section that follows.
	No records of Annex II species within 6km.	
Amphibians	Four old records of great crested newts, closest	Limited suitable terrestrial
	record 1.5km north-east of the Site.	habitat on-site. Further
	Many records of common frog (Rana temporaria)	consideration provided in the
	and common toad (Bufo bufo) and smooth newt	sub-section that follows.
	(Lissotriton vulgaris), closest 370m	
Reptiles	Three records of grass snake (Natrix Helvetica),	Limited suitable habitat
	closest 850m.	on-site as grassland is
		managed.
Other Mammals	A number of hedgehog (Erinaceus europaeus)	Suitable habitat for
	casualties recorded along Ashlawn Road close to	hedgehog foraging, dispersal
	the Site.	and refuge.
Invertebrates	Limited records returned and none of particular	Interests primarily restricted
	note in context of the Site.	to higher quality tree and
		boundary habitats.

 Table EDP 3.1:
 Summary of Protected and Notable Species Records from Local Landscape and Potential to be Present Within the Site.

Bats

- 3.20 Building B1 has at least moderate suitability to support roosting bats and requires further assessment. This is due to the condition of the roof valleys, hips and ridges and access potential at the eaves and a hole in the side of one of the chimney stacks. Building B2 has negligible potential to support roosting bats.
- 3.21 Six trees (T4, T9, T12, T25, T33 and T35) were assessed as having moderate potential to support roosting bats, a further six trees (T5, T6, T7, T10, T11 and T26) showed low potential to support roosting bats in 2020. The update survey in June 2021 also found three additional trees (T21,

T29 and T39) with moderate suitability to support roosting bats due to recent damage causing tear outs and lifted bark.

- 3.22 A large number of the trees, specifically the groups of lime trees, have dense canopies and were unable to be assessed fully. These should be assessed during winter when the leaves have dropped.
- 3.23 Prior to the update survey in June 2021 a number of trees had been felled as shown on **Plan EDP 1.** This includes three trees (T12, T33 and T35) with moderate suitability to support roosting bats and two trees (T10 and T11) with low suitability to support roosting bats.
- 3.24 The grass pasture, mature trees, hedgerow and woodland are considered to also provide good opportunities for a variety of foraging and commuting bats that are likely to require further investigation to support any future planning application.

Amphibians (Great Crested Newts)

- 3.25 The Site does not support any ponds. There are three ponds within 250m, which have previously been assessed as having poor or average suitability to support great created newts and returned a negative eDNA result in 2016. The closest record of great crested newts was from 1.5km north-east of the Site.
- 3.26 During the Extended Phase 1 Habitat survey an assessment of two of these ponds was made. Pond 1, as shown on **Plan EDP 1**, is a duck pond located 50m south-east of the Site, which had bare banks, no aquatic vegetation and poor water quality (**Image EDP 3.8**). Pond 2 is a large, steep-sided pond located 200m east of the Site, which supported lots of submerged vegetation at the edges but had a similarly poor water quality and was stocked with fish (**Image EDP 3.9**). The condition of the ponds closely matches the assessment made in 2016 by Just Ecology.



Image EDP 3.8: Pond 1.

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Image EDP 3.9: Pond 2.

- 3.27 Terrestrial opportunities for amphibians on-site are considered to principally be limited to the woodland, hedgerows and allotment, given the closely cropped nature of the grassland that comprises the majority of the Site.
- 3.28 Given the limited terrestrial habitat on-site, continued poor suitability of Ponds 1 and 2 to support great crested newts and the historic negative eDNA results for great crested newts, it is considered highly likely great created newts are absent from the Site.

Section 4 Constraints and Opportunities

Policy Context

- 4.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) February 2019 requires planning policies and decisions to contribute to and enhance the natural environment by protecting and enhancing sites of biodiversity value (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan (paragraph 170.b); avoiding, adequately mitigating or compensating for significant harm to biodiversity (Paragraph 175.a); and by "...minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures" (paragraph 170.d).
- 4.2 In addition, the forthcoming Environment Bill 2020, subject to its adoption, includes additional policy for protecting and improving the natural environment. This includes a requirement for new developments to deliver 10% biodiversity gain, as evaluated using a Biodiversity Impact Assessment calculator.
- 4.3 At a local level, the Rugby Borough Council Local Plan (2019) 2011-2031 affords policy protection for designated sites, priority habitats and species via Policy NE1 *Protecting Designated Biodiversity and Geodiversity Sites*, with development expected to deliver biodiversity net gain in accordance with the mitigation hierarchy.
- 4.4 In addition, the Site lies on the edge of a Potential Green Infrastructure Corridor, as identified in the Local Plans Green and Blue Infrastructure Policy Map. This means that Policy NE2 Strategic Blue and Green Infrastructure is also relevant to the potential development of the Site. This policy states that "where appropriate new developments must provide suitable Green and Blue Infrastructure corridors throughout the development and link into adjacent Green and Blue Infrastructure networks or assets where present". It also requires a 'framework plan' to be produced as part of planning applications where such provision is made.

Designated Sites

4.5 Given the spatial separation of designated sites from the Site, and lack of receptor pathways, no direct or indirect impacts are anticipated to arise from the potential residential development of the Site. Indeed, none of these designations are considered to be at risk of recreational impacts resulting from any associated new residential population given their reasons for designation and the limited scale of any future development.

Habitat and Species

4.6 The Site predominantly comprises of priority wood-pasture and parkland habitat and falls within potential habitat/Green Infrastructure expansion networks identified at both a local and national level. However, the grassland itself, which comprises the majority of the Site is relatively species-

poor and in poor condition owing to intensive grazing. As such, a level of sensitively designed development that retains the more valuable tree and hedgerow habitats and seeks to deliver biodiversity enhancements, including Green and Blue Infrastructure connections, may be acceptable.

- 4.7 The Site is considered to provide opportunities for protected/priority species, principally birds and bats. Further bat surveys would be required to better understand the value of the assemblage and presence of roosts, in order to inform the design and appropriate mitigation strategy. However, owing to the predominance of improved grassland and intensive grazing, other species are considered unlikely to be present as significant populations beyond a site context. A sensitively designed scheme would not only safeguard protected species interests but deliver enhancements through new habitat creation and the strengthening of wildlife corridors linking with the wider landscape.
- 4.8 To remain compliant with relevant wildlife legislation and both national and local planning policy relating to biodiversity, the following design principles are recommended to be included within any emerging masterplan for the Site, as set out below:
 - Retention/buffering of existing hedgerow, woodland and mature trees;
 - Enhancement of existing hedgerow network through selective 'gap' planting with native hedgerow species of local provenance;
 - Retention, restoration and enhancement of areas of grass pasture and creation of new species-rich wildflower grassland within areas of green open space;
 - New woodland/tree/hedgerow planting to enlarge and connect existing areas of woody habitats and enhance the local Green Infrastructure network in line with Policy NE2;
 - Provision of sustainable drainage features designed to benefit biodiversity through appropriate design, planting and management of surrounding green open spaces, and enhance the local Blue Infrastructure network in line with Policy NE2;
 - Incorporation of a range of bat and bird boxes to provide new roosting and nesting opportunities;
 - Creation of new breeding/basking/hibernating habitats for widespread reptile and amphibian species within the green space provision; and
 - Wildlife-sensitive lighting scheme to retain dark corridors for commuting and foraging bats.
- 4.9 In accordance with planning policy at a local and national level, Biodiversity Impact Assessment calculations would be required to demonstrate any proposed developments potential to deliver net gains in biodiversity. It is unlikely, given the presence of priority habitats and location within

a national habitat expansion area, that off-site biodiversity compensation would be acceptable in this instance, should a loss be identified.

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Section 5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The baseline investigations have identified that there are no statutorily or non-statutorily protected nature conservation interests within the proposed development site or wider landscape that are likely to be materially affected by the proposals. However, the Site falls within a National Habitat Network Expansion Zone and lies on the edge of a Potential Green Infrastructure Corridor identified in RBCs Local Plan. In addition, the Site predominantly comprises of wood-pasture and parkland, a priority habitat, which is therefore afforded a level of protection by planning policy and is considered to be a constraint to the future development of the Site.
- 5.2 Despite this, the improved grassland that makes up the majority of this parkland habitat mosaic is relatively species-poor and in poor condition. As such, a sensitively designed scheme that retains and buffers the valuable tree, woodland and hedgerow habitats, in addition to restoring and enhancing areas of retained grassland, could potentially be brought forward in accordance with planning policy. This would limit the quantum of development that is acceptable and would need to be part of an overall strategy that seeks to deliver local Green and Blue Infrastructure enhancements and net gains in biodiversity.
- 5.3 Detailed protected species surveys, principally relating to bats, are likely to be required to accompany any planning application for the Site, together with an assessment of potential effects and strategies to avoid, mitigate or compensate for such effects. However, it is considered that through the retention of the higher value habitats and the adoption of industry standard impact avoidance and mitigation measures, any adverse effects on protected species can be appropriately addressed to ensure such interests are safeguarded and opportunities for them enhanced.
- 5.4 To surmise, it is considered that the Site offers sufficient flexibility that a level of sensitively designed development could potentially be brought forward that is compliant with planning policy at all levels. Furthermore, given the poor condition of the improved grassland that comprises the majority of the Site, a sensitively designed development incorporating appropriate mitigation and enhancement has significant potential to deliver a net gain in biodiversity. It also presents an opportunity to contribute towards strengthening the local Green Infrastructure network in line with local and national objectives.

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Appendix EDP 1 Bat Surveys

Methodology

- A1.1 As described within **Section 2** of this Ecological Appraisal, the following surveys for bats were undertaken, with reference to national best practice guidelines¹⁰:
 - Investigations of bat roosting, comprising:
 - (a) Preliminary ground level assessment of trees and buildings for bat roosting potential.

Investigations of Bat Roosting

Preliminary Ground Level Assessment of Trees and Buildings

- A1.2 A preliminary ground level assessment of all suitable trees and buildings on-site for their potential to support bats was undertaken with reference to best practice guidelines. The preliminary assessment was undertaken on 04 August 2020. The trees were searched as thoroughly as possible from ground level, with all elevations covered where accessibility allowed.
- A1.3 Signs of roosting bats include:
 - Bats/roosting in situ;
 - Bat droppings within or beneath a feature (hole or split);
 - Staining around or beneath a feature;
 - Oily marks (staining) around roost access points;
 - Audible squeaking from the roost;
 - Large/regularly used roosts or regularly used sites may produce an odour; and
 - Flies around the roost, attracted by the smell of guano.
- A1.4 Based upon the results of the preliminary ground level roost assessment and features/evidence identified as above, the following ratings for trees were used during the assessment:

¹⁰ Collins, J. (ed.) (2016) Bat surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines (3rd edn). The Bat Conservation Trust, London.

- **Known or confirmed roost** European Protected Species (EPS) licence required for works to trees to be completed lawfully;
- **High potential** Tree supports one or more features that are obviously suitable for use by larger numbers of bats on a more regular basis and potentially for longer periods of time;
- **Moderate potential** Tree supports one or more features that could be used by bats but are unlikely to support a roost type of high conservation status;
- **Low potential** Tree supports one or more features that could be used by individual bats opportunistically, or is of sufficient size and age to contain such features; and
- **Negligible potential** Negligible features likely to support roosting bats.

Limitations

- A1.5 Preliminary roost assessments for roosting bats can be undertaken at any time of year and these assessments were not limited by seasonal or climatic factors.
- A1.6 Bats are mobile animals and will move between a series of different roost sites, frequently establishing and occupying new roost sites depending on seasonal requirements and resources available locally. This survey, therefore, only provides a snapshot of the conditions present at the Site at the time of survey.
- A1.7 It should be noted that this type of assessment is based on features visible from the ground level and is not considered to be a definitive bat roosting survey. Additional survey work may therefore be required to establish if any bats are roosting within the trees and if present, their species, type of roost supports, and size of the roost, should any trees of sufficient potential be subject to felling/tree surgery.

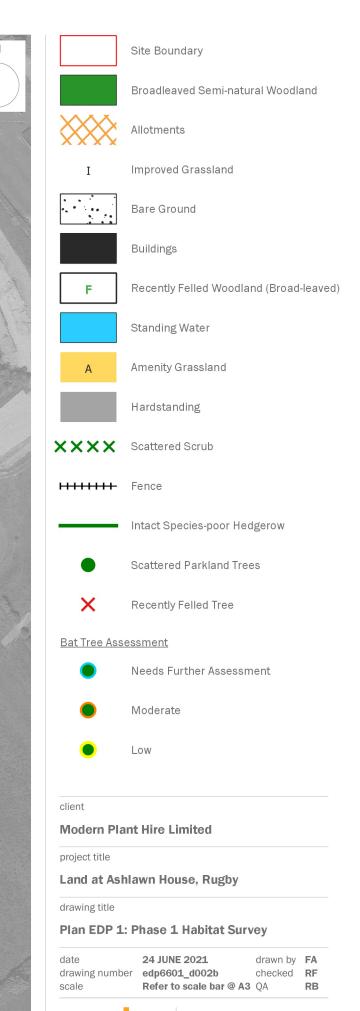
Plan

 Plan EDP 1
 Phase 1 Habitat Survey

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the environmental dimension partnership

Registered office: 01285 740427 - www.edp-uk.co.uk - info@edp-uk.co.uk

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e environmental mension partnership

CARDIFF 02921 671900

CHELTENHAM 01242 903110

CIRENCESTER 01285 740427

info@edp-uk.co.uk www.edp-uk.co.uk

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