



Rosebay willowherb

## A rewilded suburban sanctuary

Danielle Lowy shares her journey through Ryebank Fields, from barely registering some humdrum fields, to feeling passionately attached to this haven for people and wildlife.

In the 1990s I would pass by Ryebank Fields with my young children on our way to the varied delights of Longford Park, thinking nothing of it: it was just some sports fields that had been left by Manchester Metropolitan University when they moved to new facilities. I had no idea that years later I would feel so anxious at its looming sale for housing development that I'd weigh up whether I was too old to do a 'Swampy'-style move into a favourite old elder tree in an effort to save it.

Hearing about the plan to sell the fields, I joined one of the guided walks

**Danielle in the elder tree**



with Julie from the Friends' group and was surprised to hear its interesting history. As early as the Domesday Book of 1086, there is mention of the Nico Ditch, part of a six-mile boundary-marker across Manchester dividing the ancient boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. From oak and willow woodland, to farmed pasture, Ryebank Fields became part of the Egerton Estate bordering the adjacent Longford Estate created in 1857 by John Rylands, whose wife Enriqueta oversaw the planting of magnificent trees like the native Manchester Poplars, resilient to air pollution from the mills. From late 1800s, clay pits at Ryebank Fields were excavated for bricks, from which many Chorlton houses were built. The pits turned into ponds that were then unofficially used as rubbish dumps, unfortunately acquiring toxic waste including asbestos, that were later filled in with rubble. Given to MMU by the council in the 1970s for recreational purposes, the university left the fields in the 1990s, later having a development proposal agreed by the council to sell the land for building 120 houses. MMU is currently assessing buyers.

So what's happened in these two decades to turn this unremarkable space of less than 5 hectares into

one of Chorlton's most cherished environmental assets? That's inspired a passionate group, the Friends of Ryebank Fields, to work tirelessly to save it as a wild green space?

No longer used as sports fields, the area became wilder with new flora and fauna appearing to join maturing trees and growing grassland, these habitats, offering food and shelter to insects, birds (from little robins and song thrushes, to owls and sparrowhawks), small mammals like hedgehogs, foxes and even bats - a key indicator species for a balanced ecosystem. At a time of rising worry about climate change, the trees and land provide a carbon store and hold water that reduces - but doesn't prevent - flooding of local residences.

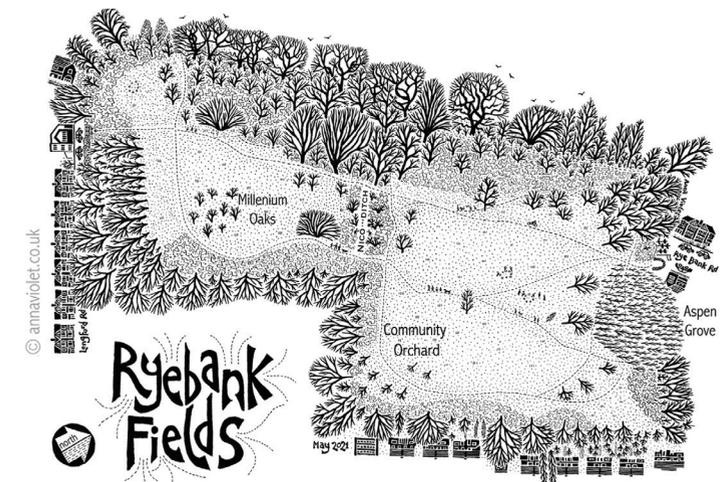
The fields, encircled by mature trees, are well used by families, amblers, dog walkers, foragers, early morning sun-rise worshipers, dusk-time walkers (spotting bats?) and evening star-gazers. This community became its caretakers, gently supporting its rewilding as a greenfield site, displaying a fine example Chorlton's can-do community. Small actions blossomed into wonderful happenings:

- 20 years ago a dog walker, fearful of the land being lost to, sowed 300

acorns, now grown into 150 mixed native oaks;

- a resident planted apple and cherry trees for passers-by to enjoy, encouraging the creation of a small orchard of fruit bushes and trees, and a community veg plot;
- someone created two paths through the tall, thin trees of the aspen grove transforming it into an enchanting walk-way;
- over the years the community has flocked to many events organised by Friends of Ryebank Fields and others including theatre, music and dance, family-friendly picnics, nature-based crafts and, my favourite for meeting old friends and making new ones, a series of safe women's evening walks;
- this spring, a community camp emerged, hosting theatre, arts and wellbeing events;
- coming together to tend their street's entrance to the fields, Trafford residents on Rye Bank Road have created a welcoming community garden with art, herbs and a free library.

Ryebank Fields is more than a green lung for a very built-up area of Manchester, it has become like an outdoor community centre. A friend remarked during one of the women's walks that, unconnected to Covid safety, many people are more comfortable joining outdoor events



than feel confident entering buildings for meetings.

I have asked myself, what does Ryebank Fields offer that makes it different to either the adjacent park or the other local wildlife areas? Whilst appreciating our local parks, it is quite a different experience walking in wildlife areas: personally, I feel closer to nature, further away from crowds, it's more mindful and has a different energy. Interestingly, studies show that wildlife-rich, varied habitats supporting for example, a wide variety of birds, have a bigger positive impact and are more restorative to good health.

I know too, from my work creating the Our Green Chorlton map, that some people feel reluctant to visit nature reserves like Chorlton ees, daunted by their size and network of paths. The openness of Ryebank Fields,

however, feels more accessible and allows lone walkers to feel safer.

The Greater Manchester Nature Recovery Plans, which our council signed up to, advises that easy access to wildlife spaces in urban areas is crucial for our wellbeing, helps tackle climate change and creates resilience.

There are many studies showing the increasing problems created by our 21st century lifestyles' disconnection from nature: stress, poor sleep, ill-health. During the ongoing Covid crisis the positive role of nature in contributing to urban wellbeing has been well-documented. The 'natural health service' improves our immune system, gives us an energy boost, helps relieve stress, anxiety and depression. Doctors are even giving nature prescriptions! Sometimes wild areas are saved from development by the discovery of protected species. But a place doesn't need to yield rare flora or fauna to be deemed extraordinary. The quite ordinary wildness of Ryebank Fields gives us an outdoor community, saves us from disconnection from nature, from rising air, noise and light pollution and from contributing to climate change. The least we can do is try to save it back.

Danielle Lowy  
Any factual errors my own.

Ryebank Fields illustration Anna Violet.  
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Friends of Ryebank Fields  
[saveryebankfields.org](http://saveryebankfields.org)

Our Green Chorlton - for a map of green spaces: [ourgreenchorlton.org.uk](http://ourgreenchorlton.org.uk)



Candles in Aspen Grove during a women's walk