

Patchwatch: HAYSDEN, TONBRIDGE



I moved to Hildenborough in 1983 and spent a lot of time at Bough Beech Reservoir but closer to home just west of Tonbridge a less well-known series of gravel pits drew my attention from time to time. At one point I visited them for a couple of hours once a week, but for several years I hardly ever ventured there.

However several years ago I was advised to walk seven miles a week - standing on the causeway at Bough Beech Reservoir was better for birds, walking around my now home town of Tunbridge Wells with binoculars would probably get me some odd looks, I don't fancy the thought of walking around without binoculars, and Tunbridge Wells is hilly too - so I plumped for Haysden for my exercise! My earliest memories of Haysden back in the mid-eighties were of some gravel workings where **Little Ringed Plovers** frequented, of damp meadows where **Redshank** bred, and of a relatively quiet Haysden Lake where, on 5 May 1984, I found my first ever **Black Tern** - something I will never forget.

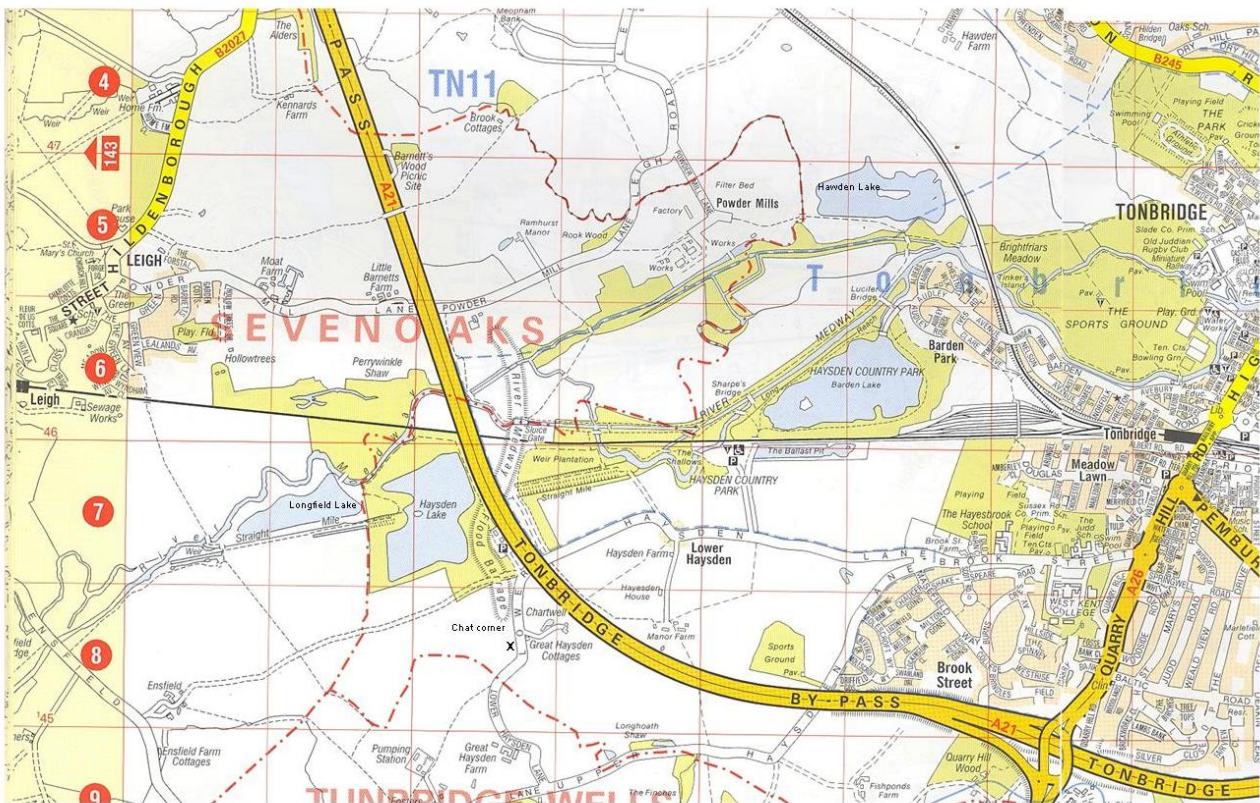
Sadly, like many places, things change - the gravel workings (Hawden) are now a fishing lake, fenced off and surrounded by people where I rarely see any waders - eleven months into 2015 and I still haven't seen **Green Sandpiper** here, and LRP is now very unlikely. The damp fields near Barden Lake are now a Country Park car park and Redshank is a local 'mega' last seen here in 2007. However this is still a great place, it's fairly close to home and I can occasionally stop by on the way to work.



You can't see the three Pintail, but they were here - 5 February 2012

I divide the area into three smaller areas:

- Hawden and the Powder Mills where I have seen 109 species of birds, the best of which have been singles of **Black-throated Diver**, **Scaup** and **Rock Pipit**
- Barden Lake and the Ballast Pit where I have seen 101 species including my only **Smew** and my only **Brent Goose** for the area. It is the best place to look for **Egyptian Goose**.
- Haysden, which includes two lakes, the Shallows and the whole area up to Ensfield Farm and Ensfield Bridge a mile to the west of the main lake. This is my favourite part of the patch where I have seen 134 species. The best birds here have been a **Black Kite** in May 2009, a **Purple Heron**, my first ever twitch in August 1985, and a **Great Grey Shrike** and **Firecrest** on two consecutive days in 1987.
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If you want to see waders this isn't the place to be. I have had one **Oystercatcher** here and have not seen **Black-tailed Godwit** since two that I flushed from the path by the main lake in April 1984 and have never seen birds as common as Dunlin. If however you want to enjoy common water, woodland and farmland birds Haysden is superb. Three hours walking round my patch a couple of weeks ago on an overcast Sunday afternoon in November yielded 52 species, which isn't too bad.

Probably the best birds that I see from time to time are **Marsh Tits**. They can be really elusive and I generally pick them up on call before I see them but occasionally they show down to just a few feet. The best place to see them is on the west side of Haysden between the lake and Ensfield Bridge - most of this footpath is the western section of 'Straight Mile'.

Tit flocks, **Goldcrests**, **Nuthatches** and **Treecreepers** are not uncommon across the whole patch. **Bullfinches** are a regular sight at Haysden too and although I never know where I might stumble across them The Shallows are a favourite haunt - again, despite being such cracking birds their call nearly always alert me to the fact that they are nearby.

The Shallows can be good in August and September when feeding flocks of smaller birds such as **Blackcap** and **Lesser Whitethroat** feed on the elderberries. Haysden is also a good place for one of my favourite birds, the **Garden Warbler** - late April and May are the best times but often they seem to sing for a little longer into the summer than the local Blackcaps. They are best looked for around Haysden and Longfield Lakes and in The Shallows.



River Medway at Haysden

Kingfishers can be seen anywhere - maybe zipping through The Shallows, but Barden Lake, Haysden Lake and Longfield Lake (just to the west of Haysden Lake) are all good for this species which can also be seen fishing along the River Medway. As with most birds, the longer you are on site, the greater the chance you have of seeing what you are after!

The fields between Haysden and Ensfield Farm can be good for **Yellowhammers** and in winter for **Fieldfares** and **Redwings** which are often seen around the farm. You might also be lucky and see one of the **Little Owls** too. **Reed Bunting** is now, sadly, most uncommon but Ensfield Farm is one of the better areas to stand a small chance of seeing one.

I have not seen Cuckoo for a couple of years and have had no Turtle Doves at Haysden since 2012 but other birds have increased. I have had four **Red Kites** in 2015 and Haysden and Longfield Lakes have become a regular haunt for both **Goosander** and roosting **Little Egrets** in winter in recent years but please be careful not to disturb them - Goosander are especially wary when on Longfield Lake.

This summer, after a year with no records, a single **Nightingale** spent some time singing its heart out in bushes along the railway embankment, sometimes right under the A21.

Noise pollution is a problem at Haysden - the railway lines are fine, but the A21 that cuts right across my patch can be really annoying when you are listening for birds as can the planes on the flight path to Gatwick. And then there are people, but I won't go there!

Visiting: on foot it's about a mile west of Tonbridge High Street (via Tonbridge Park or Barden Road) so can be reached by bus or train. It has a cycle-route through it, though you cannot view the main lake very easily with a bicycle. The main parking areas are pay and display, the one nearest Haysden Lake by the A21 is 'pay by phone' only. Enjoy...

Andy Appleton Tunbridge Wells