

# Adders in Cheshire

Andy Harmer

The Adder could possibly be the most under-recorded of all of our terrestrial vertebrates in Cheshire, and though the secretive nature of this animal is a factor, it is not considered the main cause. Unfortunately, other than Risley Moss SSSI there is no evidence of structured or even *ad hoc* surveying or monitoring throughout the Cheshire recording area. At a time when nationally the Adder is regarded as our fastest declining herptile, it is crucial that Cheshire naturalists aren't caught napping. How unpalatable would it be for the Adder to survive centuries of persecution only to demise now through naturalist apathy?

All known documented sites, both historic and contemporary have been used in the preparation of this article so this animal's distribution, past and present, can be put into some type of context. The aspiration is that it will serve to encourage natural historians out of their armchairs and away from their usual haunts to go and search for this much maligned but beautiful animal. This animal can only be protected regionally if there is up to date knowledge of its distribution.



## The Records

On examination of the Adder records in the Local Record Centre's (rECOrd) database, plus a few additional records I've gleaned recently from national surveys and historical documents, I can say without doubt it makes grim reading. If the lack of modern records from former sites actually means absence of the animal rather than absence of a recorder then it is worrying, though skewed results due to recorder apathy must be considered. The most records are from Risley Moss SSSI which has an introduced population of Adder. Sympathetic management by staff and Risley Moss Action Group has ensured that there has been continued favourable habitat. With eight or even nine herptile species present Risley Moss is undoubtedly the most diverse herpetofauna site in the county so it is confusing why there is no mention of this impressive suite of herptiles in the SSSI citation.

Adders, like all animals and habitats, are at the mercy of man, though mercy is not a term often associated with man's age old relationship with this native viper. Two terms perhaps more apt in the county would be destruction and indifference; destruction of the animal itself and indifference in its plight as its habitat disappeared or became fragmented and isolated.

Killing an Adder seemed to be not only the remit of the gamekeeper but a duty no less for anybody who encountered the serpent. Numerous newspaper reports both nationally and regionally suggest

that this attitude and practise was widespread. Indeed it appears abundance was casually measured on the amounts killed annually. The following report refers to a site north of Winsford;-

*Adders have been unusually abundant this year. In the course of last week eighteen full-grown ones were killed in a field near Bradford-green, in this county.*

Chester Chronicle - Friday 27 July 1827

There are plenty of historical reports of Adder-killing in and around the country; man's instinct and ability to kill snakes, together with the obvious bad press the snake has received over the centuries combined to help man adopt this destructive theme that undoubtedly still persists in the minds and methods of some today.

The following excerpt is from the Cheshire Observer dated 28 July 1860 and gives an insight into why the Adder has long been regarded as an animal whose presence must not be tolerated.

*The Ayr Advertiser says that a little girl, about five or six years old, who belonged to the neighbourhood of Barhill, the other day put her hand into a bird's nest which she had discovered, when she was stung between the forefinger and thumb by an adder. She walked home and died the following day.*

In the following tragic case, it would have been better if the Adder had been left alone;

*SINGULAR FATAL ACCIDENT – On Sunday, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1873, a boy named George Parry, in the service of Mr Bithell, farmer, Wheatsheaf, near Wrexham, saw an adder in one of the fields on his master's farm. Shortly after seeing it he borrowed a knife from another boy to cut a stick to kill it. While in the act of trimming the stick he slipped down a bank, and fell upon the open knife, which stabbed him near the region of the heart, and he bled to death before assistance could be procured.*

One would assume that the fervour regarding the slaughter of adders would be directly connected to the fear of this venomous snake but the following report from London suggests recklessness of comedic proportions.

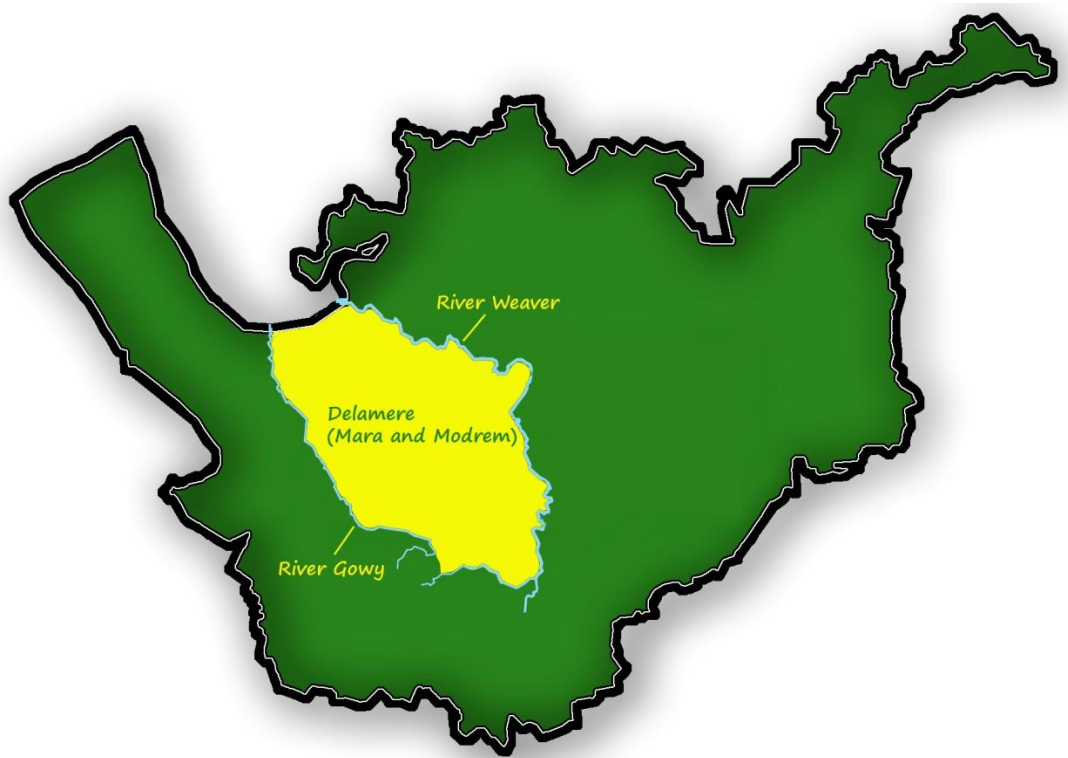
*On the previous night, while at the Cooper's Arms, Perfitt drew from his pocket what they supposed to be a snake, which they had picked up on Hayes Common, where they had been on an excursion, and suddenly found himself bitten severely in the left thumb. Perfitt threw the reptile on the table, and both his companions, in endeavouring to capture it, were also similarly bitten. It got on the floor and a dog, in attempting to seize it, was bitten in the breast, and immediately commenced howling and swelling to such an extraordinary size that it was thought necessary to destroy it. The light then broke in upon them that they had been bitten by an adder, and that they were conveyed to the hospital, where Perfitt and Lane still remain seriously ill. Cheshire Observer - 2 September 1865*

In reality, death and even serious injury from an Adder bite in the UK is extremely rare, averaging out at one death per decade. Four people were killed by cows during an eight week period in 2008, and 5000 people were treated following dog attacks in the same year.

### Historical status of Adder

Adder was probably common in Cheshire up until the mediaeval times though massive contraction in its range had already occurred through soil improvement measures and the ever increasing population farming the land. The areas of thin sandy soils that spread out across the plain, many of which linked up meres and mosses, would have created an excellent mosaic of habitats where connectivity persisted and heath would have been extensive.

The Forest of Delamere was once vast and swallowed up the two former forests of Mara and Modrem. Stretching from Frodsham, a hamlet on the north Cheshire coast down to almost Nantwich, a salt town near the south Cheshire boundary, and reaching from the River Weaver to the River Gowy, it was a substantial piece of real estate which is still contracting. As a Royal Forest, it would have been governed by Forest Law and though this could not stop 'progress' indefinitely it may well have retarded it. Perhaps this is why our largest woodland still persists in the heart of the original Delamere, and why the Adder distribution map further on in this article has a definite cluster with this region.



The following newspaper article shows that Delamere Forest, though still a large area, was contracting its range due to on-going reclamation for arable through soil improvement even in the

late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modern Delamere has shrunk further still and is now two and a half miles from the racecourse referred to in the newspaper article.

*We hear that Mr Harrison, of Woodbine Cottage, situated near the racecourse on the forest of Delamere, has taken on a long lease, together with the whole of the land within the circle of the racecourse his house and premises, together with the whole of the land within the circle of the racecourse, , computed to be more than 50 acres in extent, which is all in heath, and to break it up Mr Harrison has engaged a steam plough. The racecourse is to be kept on as usual. There are no doubts but this forest land, after the liberal use of marl upon it in moderately wet seasons, will produce good remunerative crops. Mr Simeon Leather has thus cultivated a large area on the forest.* Cheshire Observer - Saturday 2 August 1873

There is a bitter-sweet irony here regarding the amphibious herptiles and the Adder. Around 25,000 field ponds still exist in Cheshire (Harmer 2009), most of them marl pits, although historically this number would have been far greater. The saturation of amphibians across the Cheshire plain can be attributed, in the main, to these landscape features. While these marl pits in themselves don't create a problem for Adders, the reasons behind their creation do. Marl, a type of limey clay, was extracted and spread on poor soils (such as sandy soils) to enable it to be used for arable. In short, the marl, known for its ability to increase crop yield, could be used to turn heath into productive farmland. As newts, frogs, and toads of Cheshire became more numerous through this practice, the Adder declined. Despite this onslaught Adders were still present at many sites in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

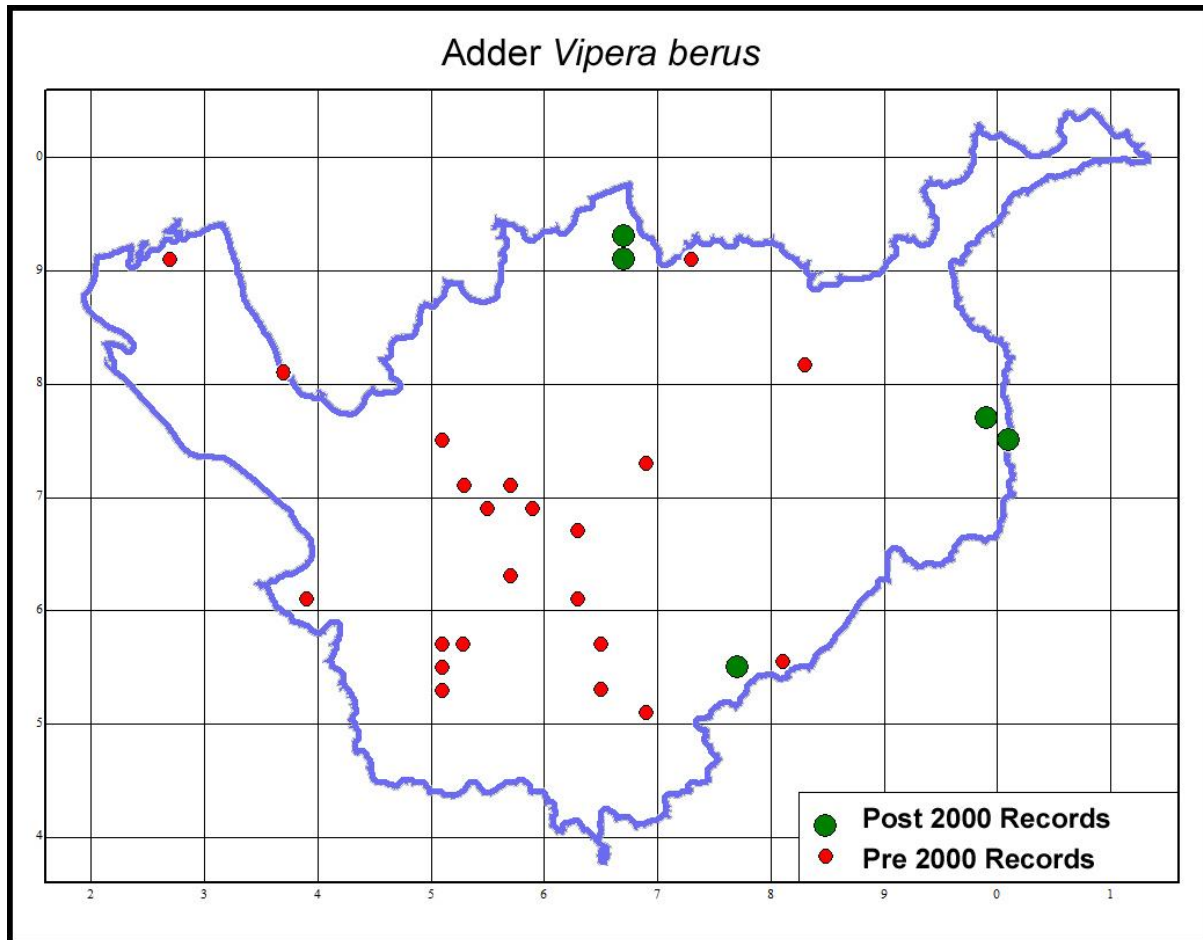
The difficulty of turning Cheshire's meres and mosses into 'productive' areas was probably their saving grace. Adder records were generated from obviously suitable sites around sandstone outcrops such as Frodsham, Peckforton and Bickerton. Frodsham, a hamlet overlooking the Mersey estuary was the most northerly of a daisy chain of Adder sites that stretched all the way down to the Shropshire border.

Carrington Moss, once part of old Cheshire had adder reported up until the summer of 1893, and though the adder was reputedly 'hardly known' by shepherds and gamekeepers in the east Cheshire hills, this still suggests that it was at least known.

Wirral has limited historical records for Adder but can they have been that rare? Sand Lizards were regarded as common along an 8 mile stretch of sand dune system from New Brighton to West Kirby - though this is not a view held by all naturalists due to documented evidence being weighted towards a single naturalist - and an Adder was recorded along that stretch at Leasowe by Isaac Byerley. Surely Adder would have found this stretch of sand dunes favourable. Eastham Woods has a record of Adder. Thurstaston Common, Bidston Moss and Cleaver's Heath are shadows of their former selves, fragments of heath now that may once have supported Adder.

## Current Status

The Adder is currently known from five tetrads (Post 2000 records) which can be defined as 4 locations (The 2 Goyt Valley sites are almost 2 miles apart) within in the LRC recording area. These are Risley Moss SSSI, which is an introduction site in the north of the county, Oakhanger Moss SSSI in the south of the county, and two sites in Goyt Valley which is in the extreme east of Cheshire. Once again, it is worth stating that this is unlikely to be an accurate picture of distribution as other than monitoring at Risley Moss SSSI the author knows of no other concerted reptile recording activity in Cheshire.



It appears that a number of sites in Cheshire and Wirral still have potential for Adder. Delamere Forest has areas of clear-felled sections complete with the structural diversity associated with good Adder habitat. Hatchmere SSSI had a large area cleared to the west of the mere; the mosaic and structure of bare sandy soil, rotting logs, Heather, Bracken, and Sweet Gale looks ideal habitat and hopefully connectivity with Delamere Forest has enabled colonisation. Shemmy and South Moss at the Abbott's Moss SSSI seem excellent candidates too. An old record exists for Wybunbury Moss and areas along the sandstone trail from Frodsham to Grindley Brook may turn up the species with a bit of survey effort. The Bickerton Hills have anecdotal records of Adder and the Goyt Valley hinterland looks promising. There are many other isolated meres and mosses across the county that have potential for Adder; Flaxmere, Oakmere and Lindow Moss to name but a few.



## The Future for Adder in Cheshire

Habitat loss, lack of, or unsympathetic management has to be at the top of the 'conservation issues' list for Adders but there are modern issues too; there appears to be dog ownership now of epidemic proportions (8.6 million dogs in the UK), and many heaths suffer disturbance through a constant stream of dog walkers and dog(s). Some remaining heathland sites have such public pressure that it's questionable as to whether an animal sensitive to disturbance can survive there.



The above images of Frodsham Hill show how an ideal habitat of Gorse, Heather, Bilberry and Bracken on gentle slopes with exposed rocks can be lost in a generation. The image on the right taken in 2012 was taken from the same viewpoint as the image on the left taken in 1930. This dramatic change in habitat occurred through a combination of factors such as lack of grazing, a halt to periodic burning and the tailing off in demand for wood (dead or alive) by locals for fuel.



Loss of habitat, whether it's caused by natural succession or unit-driven tree-planting by conservation organisations is an issue. The above image taken in 2004 shows a section of land where around seven thousand trees were planted. This was adjacent to a site where Adder had been recorded. The edge habitat of the Adder location is now totally unfavourable due to it being shaded by the developing woodland. The author was advised that no ecological surveys were undertaken prior to planting.

'Conservation by numbers' mentality can be problematic as the feeling that every effort has to be measured numerically can obscure aims and results. There is surely a need for greater detail than 'how many trees we've planted', 'how many reserves we have', 'how many records we hold', 'how

many birds we've ringed or twitched', 'how many years we've been going' and 'how many newts we've moved'. How do we measure the value of say, a particular habitat, its connectivity, or its value in a particular landscape with this vogue but vulgar tool?

Lack of management has to be addressed at nature reserves; heathland continuity is crucial in Adder conservation terms; the feast or famine management regime which goes from scrub saturation to scrub clearance degrades the habitat.



A 'heathland' reserve in Cheshire.

There could be exciting times ahead for the Adder hunter in Cheshire so it's crucial that an active group is formed and a programme of surveys worked out.

Andy Harmer  
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I would like to thank all those who have shared their records with me because this article is nothing without the data. Eric at rECOrd as ever, welcomed my interest and opened his database files to me. Thanks to the people from both inside and outside the county who gave me help with this article.

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Luck (rECOrd)

Mark Cozens

Martin Stubbs



Martin Stubbs

Natural England

Norman Ellison

David Orchard

Paul Hill

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Stan Berrington

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Warren Sloane

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