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Artificial Setts

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An artificial sett (sometimes known as a badger bunker) is a sett constructed by humans to be suitable for badgers to move into. In a few rare cases people may build setts with the hope that some badgers turn up and occupy the sett. This is what the well-known countryman Phil Drabble did on his land as back back as the 1970s. Realistically, there is often an element of "force" on our part to compel the badgers to use their new home.

The two main reasons why people would want to force badgers into using an artificial sett are because:

- people propose to destroy their existing sett to make way for a road or a property development, or
- their existing sett is at serious risk of collapse or attack by badger baiters; and they need a safe, secure home

However, badgers and their setts are protected by the law; and before any badger sett can be damaged or destroyed a badger licence needs to be issued to define precisely what is allowed and at what times of year. Without the grant of a satisfactory licence, destroying a badger sett is illegal.

If a **main** badger sett is threatened, there may be serious problems as the badgers will be extremely reluctant to move elsewhere. The chances of success may be enhanced if there is large alternative sett nearby. However, generally outlying or subsidiary setts are too small for permanent occupation by a group of badgers, and may be in a situation where it would be difficult for them to be enlarged.

When it is a main sett that is being threatened, an artificial sett (or a badger bunker) will have to be provided, rather than just trust to luck that the badgers will take up permanent residence in a another sett within their territory. Provided that the artificial sett is well constructed and in a suitable location, it is likely to be adopted by the badgers, eventually. Many natural setts are excavated in man-made features such as railway embankments or old quarries anyway, and artificial fox earths are often taken over by badgers. The advantage of taking over or enlarging existing tunnels can be very useful, as those tunnels may already have "proven" themselves as having enough ventilation, safety from predators and interference; and, importantly, being unlikely to flood.

If an artificial sett is constructed, the badgers are normally phased into it over several days. As well as being left to explore it on their own for a few days, they may be lured into exploring it with food so they see the new tunnels as a friendly, safe area. At some stage, the badgers may then be excluded from their own sett (by the use of one-way gates; and be forced into the new sett. Volunteers may then pen the badgers in to the new sett, and provide feeding and watering them for a few days, whilst the penned area is gradually enlarged. Hopefully, after a few days of acclimatisation, the badgers will have got used to the new sett and will be content to remain there. That said, it is not uncommon for the badgers to begin enlarging the artificial sett almost immediately; and the appearance of new tunnels and exit holes may need to be monitored closely if the new sett is still in the vicinity of the building works. As soon as the badgers are installed in their new home, the old sett will need to be thoroughly destroyed or securely stopped up (e.g. with high-strength concrete). This phase can be critical, and the badger consultant will normally be very keen to stop the old sett as soon as the badgers are in their new sett. As badgers have such superb digging skills, no-one will be certain that the badgers are truly confined in their new sett; and they may suddenly appear out of a newly dug exit

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tunnel; and return to their old sett before it has been destroyed.

As for how to construct an artificial badger sett, the most common arrangement will be for a couple of nesting chambers to be excavated in a sloping woodland, and for these to be connected together; and have at least a couple of tunnels (made from concrete pipes) which connect the chambers to the outside world. Some of the underground tunnels ought to have diggable gaps, to allow the badgers to expand the sett in due course. Joints in the tunnels should be overlaid with very thick water-proof plywood (to prevent soil trickling down into the tunnels as the soil is re-laid). The chambers should also be capped with thick water-proof plywood.

The nesting chambers can be made from water-proof plywood or breeze blocks cemented in position; and should be big enough to allow badgers to sleep in a "big-hug" arrangement, in a deep layer of bedding materials.

The tunnels should slope to prevent water logging, and there should be suitable soakaways at low points in the tunnels system, and beneath pipe joints. It is also a good idea to ensure that the two entrances are at different horizontal levels; as this may well encourage fresh air-flow through the sett in a "chimney" effect. Depending on the concrete pipes actually used and the ground conditions, it is often an advantage to lay some pipes with unsealed ends, to allow badgers to dig into the surrounding woodland. Remember that if the badgers can not expand their sett, it will be unlikely they will be able to cope with "bonus" years when lots of cubs survive, due to their being lots of year-round food and good water supplies.

Importantly, though, the construction of a new badger sett may become well-known; with the risk that the sett will become a target for attack by badger baiters. For this reason, it is customary to seal the top of the badger sett (i.e. tunnels and nesting chambers), with large areas of 8mm weld mesh and/or a very rough concrete cap. Once set, the concrete cap can then be overlaid with a thick layer of soil and vegetation cover to make the new sett blend into its surroundings.

The construction of a new badger sett is one of the most valuable things done by [Badger Groups](#) in the UK; and most will be well able to do the work themselves - either alone or in conjunction with any retained badger [Consultant](#). However, the work can be very difficult in certain ground conditions; and we would urge all construction companies to use their considerable resources to help badger groups. Making donations of "skills" to registered charities (like badger groups) is a very public-spirited thing to do; and it can result in good local publicity, which will have a beneficial effect when it comes to selling the houses.

We would also urge members of badger groups to "spread-the-word" to the pro-badger community. Children and Students are increasingly being given credits for charitable and community work; and we'd like to think that many young people would be keen to "do something" for the natural world, that their parents (and grandparents) have often treated badly.

Graveyards and Churches

On rare occasions badgers have caused problems in graveyards and with churches; when their digging can risk the collapse of walls and monuments; and possibly result in the distressing exhumation of human bones.

In those serious circumstances, an artificial sett is a possibility; although great care needs to be taken to exclude badgers from the church environment thereafter. Issues with [Fencing](#) will become very important - especially if church visitors have a tendency to leave gates open.

Railways

Railway embankments can become common places for badgers to dig setts.

If the badgers are digging into a cutting, all that it needed might be suitable badger-proof fencing to keep them off the permanent way (especially the track).

If they are digging under the tracks or into an embankment on which the track stands, this is more serious; and it may be necessary to exclude the badgers from the whole embankment. Apart from the fencing issue; the badgers may simply be tempted to simply re-dig another sett right next to the one which was closed. If it is believed that the badgers will do this, it might be possible to cover the whole embankment with a strong galvanised wire netting which will prevent the badgers

digging any tunnels.

Railways are controlled environments, so there is necessarily a whole raft of health and safety guidelines and work practices which can make badger management more difficult on the railways than many other places.

Roads

The situation with roads is sometimes easier than with railways.

Whilst the public nuisance of closing a road for road works may be very great, and rules and regulations concerning works may be less onerous.

At one time it was almost a rule that any badger sett or tunnel which went under a road would be destroyed. However, in recent years, other options are being thought about.

If, for example, a badger tunnel goes under a road, that tunnel might be at risk of collapse if it undermines the road which carries the heavy traffic above. A more modern solution might be to convert the tunnel into a secure concrete wildlife tunnel, which will allow badgers to pass under the road in safety; whilst the heavy traffic thunders overhead in equal safety.

If part of a badger sett is under a road or in an embankment, it might be possible to cover the top of the sett with a series of reinforced concrete lintels, and allow the badgers to live under the road.

Whilst this might appear strange at first, you have got to consider that wild badgers live where they are happy living; and if you exclude them from their home; they often just dig another one immediately next door. You are often better to try and leave badgers in situ, rather than have to deal with repeated badger tunnels and digging attempts along a short stretch of road.

Levees and Flood Barriers

The risk with badgers digging into levees is that the tunnels may so weaken the earth barrier that it collapses in the event of a flood; or that it allows such rapid water seepage that the levee leaks too quickly.

In such situations, the situation can become very difficult; and experts from many different agencies may need to consult on the matter; before any satisfactory solution can be thought through and a badger licence obtained.