

LITCHAM COMMON

(Local Nature Reserve) - The Next Ten Years

Background History

Litcham Common was in the past, part of a larger 500 acre common, but successive Inclosure Acts in the 17th and 18th centuries have whittled it down to its present 60+ acres. Historically, heathlands like Litcham Common were large open areas of low growing heather and gorse and traditionally managed by grazing animals, these animals browsed the seedlings of woody plants and thus prevented them from establishing as large trees and scrub. In the past certain householders possessed "common rights" to graze stock on the Common, but no rights exist today. Neglect and lack of management (particularly since the great wars) have meant that most of the heaths today are being lost to thick scrub, trees and, bracken, to the detriment of the plants, birds and animals that are associated with heathland habitats.

Reclaiming Lost Heathland

1980-1990:

Fortunately for Litcham Common, the late William Foster (Lexham Hall) and freeholder of the Common, was aware of this neglect and decline in heathland habitat. In the early 1980s he contacted Norfolk County Council to seek help in restoring the heathland. Working teams of the unemployed (under the Government's Community Programme) cleared extensive areas of scrub birch and gorse to create open heath grassland.

1984:

In recognition of its wildlife and landscape value, Litcham Common was declared a Local Nature Reserve, under the terms of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. A Management Committee was appointed to oversee and implement a management plan. The Committee comprises Lexham Hall (freeholder), Norfolk County Council, Litcham Parish Council, two Litcham residents and English Nature. The Committee meet twice annually and presents a report to the Parish Council Annual General Meeting.

Objectives of the Management Plan

To reduce the areas of gorse, oak and birch scrub, but retaining good specimen trees.

- To increase and maintain the areas of open heathland.
- To promote the growth and establishment of heather.
- To reduce and limit the areas of bracken.
- To provide public access and promote environmental education.

It is fair to say that these objectives are being achieved by:

- Clearing selected scrub but allowing the woodland to naturally mature.
- Removal of deep bracken and gorse litter and reseeded with heather.
- Grazing and mechanical control of woody scrub to provide open grassland.
- Frequent mowing of bracken to encourage heath grassland species.
- Provision and maintenance of footpaths and car park.
- Encouraging High School to use Common as "natural classroom".

1991-2001 Countryside Stewardship Scheme

In 1991 the Committee successfully brought the Common into this Agricultural Environmental Scheme, originally supervised by the Countryside Commission but now under the control of the Ministry for Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF). The scheme provides financial assistance to landowners and land managers to encourage better management for countryside conservation and landscape projects. The scheme lasts for ten years, and the Committee is now negotiating with MAFF to have the present agreement on the Common extended to 2011.

The Stewardship Scheme demands rigorous adherence to agreed conservation management practices, recognised by English Nature (Government environment advising agency) and other leading conservation bodies, Norfolk Wildlife Trust and RSPB. MAFF have visited the Common and have wholeheartedly endorsed the works undertaken by the Committee to achieve the objectives in the management plan.

During the ten years of the Scheme much work has been undertaken to "claw back" the heathland that was lost in the 50 or so years since traditional management ceased. Drastic measures such as removing deep bracken litter with large machinery, and clearing tall, spindly gorse and birch is an inevitable consequence of this neglect. Heathland is a rare habitat, rarer than Tropical Rainforest, and is a habitat targeted for recovery under the Biodiversity Action Plan for UK. Therefore Litcham Common as a heathland habitat, has a national, as well as a county recognition as an important site for protection and enhancement.

Norfolk has lost 85% of its heathland - in 1800 there was 76,000 acres, today there is barely 7,000 acres.

2000-2005 : Woodland Grant Scheme

The Committee recognises the diversity of habitats on the Common. The extensive (some 20 acres) semi-natural oak and birch woodland on the western (wetter) side of the Common has been entered into a scheme with the Forestry Commission. This scheme will attract a small amount of money over five years, to help manage the wood for nature conservation and public access.

2001 -2011 : Countryside Stewardship Scheme (the next ten years')

To build on the success of the last ten years, the Committee will need to secure funding under this scheme for the next ten, and there is every chance we will succeed in our application. The Committee also has the task to consider the best ways to deliver the appropriate management for the Common, using the most natural and sustainable methods possible.

Mechanical means of controlling scrub regrowth and encroachment is not a viable solution for the long-term management of the 'he open heathland areas. It is not a natural method and is not cost-effective, and requires (if to be effective) the application of chemical treatments. Many sites in Norfolk are grazed by cattle/sheep as an essential part of the management of the heathland vegetation. Hanworth, in the north of the county, has cattle ranging over an open common with public roads, with cattle grids at strategic points for containment. Cattle are very effective at keeping woody scrub and rank vegetation browsed, thereby allowing the more interesting heathy species to get established.

The Committee are in agreement that grazing cattle on the Common, would in the long-term, be the best method by which to manage the annual growth in grass and woody scrub. The Committee, therefore, have included in their application for Countryside Stewardship, a request for funding, to supply and install cattle grids, under Special Projects, for which the grant is 50%.

The cattle grids will be installed in the highway on the C123 (Dunham Road) at either end of the Common. The grids will have by-pass facilities for walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

The cattle grazing and the grids combined, could provide an effective means to curb the speeding traffic through the Common, which would be welcomed.

The cattle will be grazing "free-range" over the Common, and at times crossing the Dunham Road. Facilitating these movements, in a way that is both safe for the cattle and the road users, will require a substantial removal of roadside vegetation, trees and scrub. This removal will also help give the Common its "open heath" aspect, which it is presently lacking.

The Committee has given due consideration to the fact that the Common is both home to wildlife and an amenity enjoyed by the public. By grazing with cattle/sheep, the Committee firmly believe they can serve both interests. Dog walkers may, initially, be perturbed by the cattle "free ranging", but both cattle and dogs (under responsible control) can co-exist.

The Committee has endeavoured to do its best in all matters concerning the Common, and has followed (wherever possible) the principles of the management objectives. It has organised and staged open days and guided walks to inform and discuss management policy with those who use the Common for recreation and relaxation. It has also provided opportunity for local residents and others who use the Common to participate in "hands on" practical conservation tasks. It is regrettable that not that many people have availed themselves of these opportunities to be involved in, or at least to be properly informed as to the work undertaken by the Committee.

The Committee is aware that not all who use the Common are in agreement with some of the work that needs to be undertaken. Cutting down trees and clearing scrub can be a difficult concept to accept on a nature reserve, but we must keep the objectives of the management plan to restore the Common's heath, firmly focused as a priority target.

To that end, members of the public were invited to a presentation by the Common's Committee, in May of this year, at the Coronation Hall. It was regrettable that only a few residents availed themselves of the opportunity to listen to and discuss proposals for managing Litcham Common Local Nature Reserve over the next ten years. However, those that did attend (and many were older residents) were supportive of the Committee's proposals to graze the Common, for they remembered, as children, when the Common was actively grazed in the past.

Litcham Parish Council has representation on the Committee, through its Chairman, John Mitchell. The Committee is pleased that the Parish Council is supportive of the management proposals, and will endeavour to keep the Council informed of progress on this matter.

Raz Woollacott 4th September 2001