

# **Litcham Common**



## **Cattle Grids and Grazing Project Questions and Answers**

**Litcham Common Management Committee**

**22<sup>nd</sup> June 2011**

## **Why is Litcham Common important?**

Litcham Common is predominantly a heathland site. Heathlands are open areas with few trees, often dominated by heathers and gorse. These plants thrive on nutrient-poor soils where most plants would not be able to survive.

Early man cleared the woodland from Litcham Common and the rest of Norfolk around 4000 years ago. Subsequent grazing and other management kept the areas as open heathland with unique assemblages of plants and animals.

In relatively recent times there has been a dramatic loss of heathlands worldwide as the land has been used for agriculture, forestry and building development. In Britain over 70% has been lost since 1830. Litcham Common is a small remaining fragment of what was previously 500 acres of heathland in the parish, and now amounts to just over 60 acres in total. Despite suffering considerable scrub encroachment over the past 60 years, the site still retains a wealth of important wildlife species.

Because of its high nature conservation value, Litcham Common is designated as a Local Nature Reserve and also a County Wildlife Site.

## **Why does Litcham Common need managing?**

Natural succession means that without management to control invasive species such as birch and bracken, heathland will revert to woodland. If this happens many rare plant and animal species would face further population declines. A photograph taken by the RAF in 1946 shows the common with virtually no trees, and demonstrates the dramatic increase in tree cover which has taken place since World War Two.

## **Why Introduce Grazing?**

The general consensus amongst nature conservation agencies is that grazing is the best management option for most heathland sites. There are a number of advantages of grazing over other forms of heathland management and research suggests that grazing animals do a better job at keeping heathland in good condition than mechanical means ever could. In particular, the use of grazing animals is a sustainable method of restoring the heathland vegetation structure and diversity. The grazing at Litcham is closely modelled on the successful use of Dartmoor ponies on the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Roydon Common nature reserve, and the Wildlife Trust has provided a considerable amount of ongoing management advice and assistance.

## **How successful has the grazing at Litcham proved so far?**

Since grazing was re-introduced onto the north-west side of the Common in 2008 the four Dartmoor ponies have already made a noticeable difference, both by browsing scrub and also creating a more open general sward of grasses and other ground vegetation. The progress made so far was recognised last year when the Common received a CPRE Norfolk Award. More recently it was announced that Litcham Common has won Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership's 2011 Community Biodiversity Award in the 'Site' category.

## Why install cattle grids?

### Background

The Installation of cattle grids on the C123 Dunham Road was proposed in 2001 as part of a ten year management plan drawn up by Norfolk County Council. The proposed location of the grids is at either end of the public road where it runs through the common, in conjunction with the erection of stock proof fencing around the outer perimeter of the entire common. This would enable livestock to freely graze the whole site. However, the Highway Authority initially ruled out this possibility, primarily because the road is a 'designated route' for certain types of traffic, including heavy lorries, and the Authority took the view that it would not be appropriate to introduce features on the road that would slow down the flow of this traffic.

As a result, the plans for the common were revised, and in 2007 permission was granted by the Secretary of State for each half of the common to be fenced separately, including fencing along both sides of the public road. Permission was given despite the Open Spaces Society strongly objecting to the proposals. (Even though there was no question of the public being denied access to Litcham Common, the Open Spaces Society is in principle opposed to any work which might in any way hinder access, or give the impression that access is restricted.)

Litcham Parish Council supported the proposals put forward in 2007, but did express the opinion that it would ideally prefer not to see fencing either side of the road. In addition, some individuals were worried about a loss of public access to the common.

The Secretary of State took account of the concerns raised, and when permission for the fencing was granted in 2007, this was time-limited to a period of ten years, so in 2017 a fresh application will need to be made, and agreed to, if any fencing is to be allowed to remain.

As a result of the consultation process in 2006 and 2007, Litcham Common Management Committee undertook to approach Norfolk Highway Authority again and ask it to reconsider its position on cattle grids. In particular the Committee was able to produce evidence that a local haulage company and coach firm had been asked for their views, and neither had any objections to cattle grids. Litcham Parish Council and the Open Spaces Society both wrote strong letters to the Highway Authority in support of cattle grids.

Following the representations made, Norfolk Highway Authority carried out both a Safety Audit and an Environmental Assessment, and also commissioned a Feasibility Study. In 2010 the Authority confirmed that it would support the installation of cattle grids, subject to Litcham Common Management Committee finding the entire installation costs of £75,000. (Any subsequent maintenance costs would be borne by Norfolk County Council.)

On 17 June 2011 the Management Committee received notification that it has been awarded a substantial grant, which should cover the full cost of the work. A condition of the grant is that a certain amount of 'third party' funding needs to be found from other sources. Some money has been promised, but at the time of writing we still need to find a further £2,000.

## The advantages of cattle grids

As a result of the permission granted in 2007, it would be possible to graze the entire common without the use of cattle grids. There are, however, a number of reasons why the Management Committee sees cattle grids as being the better practical option for the longer term:

1. Although initially expensive, in the longer term the costs for ongoing maintenance and repairs will be lower.
2. The Open Spaces Society is still strongly opposed to roadside fencing and has indicated that it will object if in 2017 an application is made for renewal of the permission for this fencing. There is therefore at present no absolute guarantee that grazing on the common will be able to continue after 2017, which at the very least creates uncertainty when trying to plan for the future. This issue will disappear if cattle grids are installed, as there would be no need for roadside fencing.
3. There is no guaranteed supply of fresh water on the side of the road that is not grazed at present and this problem would need to be overcome if the two sides of the common were to be fenced separately. This will not be an issue if the entire common is grazed as one 'unit'.
4. Having one herd of animals, grazing the whole common 'at will', is seen as the best option. It would allow the common to be grazed naturally with the animals able to seek out the best grazing, and should result in a more balanced and diverse variety of habitats developing. We would be able to increase the number of ponies gradually, keeping a close eye on the impact of any new arrivals.

The alternatives, if cattle grids were not installed, and each side of the road was fenced separately, would be to have:

- a) separate pony herds on either side of the road (the main drawback of this is that the volunteer wardens would become very overstretched due to the extra time and work involved in looking after two different groups of animals); or,
- b) a single larger herd that would be moved across the road from one part of the common to the other as the need arose. This could be done, but would require two holding pens to be constructed opposite each other, either side of the road, so that the animals could be rounded into one of the pens prior to the road being closed, and the ponies escorted across. This would not be a straightforward procedure so there would be a lack of flexibility about the way in which the grazing regime could be managed.

Aside from the practical reasons listed above, there are a number of other more general considerations, which Litcham Parish Council took into account when it decided to write to Norfolk County Council in support of cattle grids in March 2007. The points made by the Parish Council were as follows:

1. 'The installation of cattle grids in conjunction with the planned removal of vegetation would help restore the historically open look of Litcham Common, which for hundreds of years was open heathland.'
2. 'Cattle grids in conjunction with a speed limit would significantly improve road safety along this stretch of road.'
3. 'The removal of vegetation would reduce the instances of damage to vehicles, particularly coaches, which occasionally hit hanging branches. Concern at such damage has been expressed by local businesses.'
4. 'Litcham Parish Council strongly believes (*that the*) use of cattle grids, rather than fencing, to allow the introduction of grazing on the Common would bring significant recreational and environmental benefits to the village of Litcham. The common would become more pleasant and open, with improved safety for both pedestrians and road users.'

## **Practical considerations**

### **Road safety**

The obvious concern with animals freely able to cross a public road is that there might be collisions with vehicles. The possibility of this happening has been considered very seriously, both by the Highway Authority, which has carried out a Safety Audit, and Litcham Common Management Committee. The risk of a serious accident will always exist, but the view taken is that most activities involve some degree of risk, and that measures can be taken to minimize that risk. In addition, it is felt that the safety measures to be taken will have the effect of reducing the current likelihood of certain types of accidents. The safety measures proposed are as follows:

1. The removal of trees and scrub for a distance of approximately eight metres either side of the road, so that motorists are able to see livestock (and also people/dogs) that may be about to step onto the road. This will also deal with the current problem of vehicles occasionally suffering damage from overhanging branches.

(The removal of vegetation will result in a marked change to the look of the common alongside the road, which will probably take a while for people to get used to. However, it will immediately help to restore the historical more open look of the common, which some of the older residents of Litcham remember from their childhood.)

2. The extension of the 30 mph speed limit through the common. (Interestingly, the experience elsewhere in the UK is that even when a lower speed limit is not introduced, the mere presence of cattle grids results in motorists driving more slowly).
3. Appropriate signs to warn motorists of the presence of livestock.

### **Cattle Grid design**

The Management Committee has sought advice from manufacturers of cattle grids, and also from organizations that have recently installed cattle grids on public roads, in order to gain the benefit of their knowledge and try to anticipate any potential problems. We were particularly concerned that

excessive noise might be an issue and so raised this with both Cornwall County Council, which installed six new heavy duty cattle grids a few years ago, and also the Clerk of the Minchinhampton Commoners. (Minchinhampton Common, in Gloucestershire, covers an area of approximately 600 acres which is crossed by a number of public roads and has several cattle grids, some quite close to people's homes). In neither case have there been any complaints about excessive noise, and the key seems to lie in careful design. Modern cattle grids are constructed using fixed flat topped metal bars that do not rattle in the way that the older style loose round bars do, and the noise can be further cushioned by either using rubber underlay strips, or filling the bottom of the grids with sand. There would undoubtedly be some noise made by vehicles crossing the grids, but we have been reassured that this will not be excessive.

The cattle grids would be heavy duty, in order to cope with the lorries that regularly travel along the road. The final design of the grids would be the responsibility of the Highway Authority.

### **Bypass Gates**

Each cattle grid would have a wooden bypass gate beside it for use by pedestrians and horse drawn vehicles that are not able to cross the cattle grids.

### **Location of the cattle grids**

The first cattle grid would be located on the short straight section of road (before the bend) that is just past the entrance to the Common car park. This would allow vehicles from Litcham to enter the car park without crossing a cattle grid, and also means that the car park can be fenced separately from the rest of the Common, so that livestock would not be able to wander amongst the vehicles.

The second cattle grid would be positioned on the straight stretch of road that lies towards the far end of the Common (travelling from Litcham) shortly beyond the small informal lay-by on the left hand side of the road.

### **Access to the allotments**

As agreed with the Litcham Relief in Need Charity and 'LALGA' some time ago, the new fencing would be positioned so that livestock is not able to roam onto the small area of the common which currently provides access to some of the allotments.

### **Track to Kempstone**

A small cattle grid would need to be installed on the farm track that leads over the common to Kempstone, and would be positioned close to the cottage that is situated at the edge of the common. The owner of the cottage has agreed to the position of this cattle grid, which is also shown on the plans approved by the Secretary of State in 2007. (Permission was also granted in 2007 for a cattle grid to be installed at the junction of the Kempstone track with the Dunham road, but this will not be required.)

### **Perimeter fence**

A stock proof fence would be put up around the perimeter of the part of the common that is currently not grazed. The owner of the adjoining farm-land has kindly agreed that the fence can be

erected on her side of the actual common boundary, which will make the job significantly cheaper as there will be little scrub to clear, and access should be straightforward.

Gates would be installed in the fence-line at all the current entry points to the common, so there should be no loss of public access.

There would be no need for a section of the fence that runs parallel to the road at present, and this would be removed. Ideally the holding pen for the ponies would be moved from its present site so that it is less visually intrusive.

## **Detailed map**

Attached is a map which shows the proposed changes that are outlined above.

## **Finance**

The full cost of the proposed work should be covered by the large grant that has been offered to the Management Committee. However, the money has been offered for the purposes of this project only, so if a decision is made not to proceed with the installation of cattle grids then it will not be possible to use the money for any other work on Litcham Common.

## **Support**

The following organizations have written letters to say that they support the plans to install cattle grids on Litcham Common:

Natural England

Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership

Norfolk County Council (Environment, Transport and Development Department)

Norfolk Wildlife Trust

Open Spaces Society

## **Further information**

Anyone who has any questions about this project, or would like to comment on it, is welcome to contact one of the following members of Litcham Common Management Committee:

Tim Angell (01328 700045)

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Mike Oldfield

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**Litcham Common Management Committee**

**22 June 2011**