



Why does our common need to be looked after?

Commons Factsheet No. 03

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Commons can vary enormously both in size and in visual appearance. What they share though is a long and often fascinating history. They can provide some of the most direct links we have with the past through a pattern of use that may stretch back many centuries. The activities of commoners, who exercised ancient rights such as turf cutting, grazing livestock or gathering wood, have had a profound effect on the way commons look now, even if those uses stopped years ago. Today, the many different uses of commons that need to be accommodated may bear little resemblance to former uses. But your common will still need to be looked after, i.e. managed, if it is to be a valued place for people to enjoy, for wildlife to flourish and for history to come alive.

Traditional uses

The ancient origin of commons and greens and the rights to use products from the common that have passed down through time are described in *FS1 What is a common?* and *FS2 Exploring our common's past* describes how this varied history can be traced. The very long tradition of use and often the absence of modern agricultural methods have meant that most commons and greens have a very different character from the majority of the surrounding farmed countryside. Those traditional uses, even if they have ceased now, have shaped the common of today.

Grazing was one of the most frequent rights exercised, so commons often have a very long history of livestock grazing. On 'stinted' commons, rights often stipulated the number and type of beasts assigned to each right holder. In some instances, a commoner could put out only as many stock as he could sustain through winter on his own holding. In the past, grazing pressure often prevented trees and scrub from growing. As grazing has declined in

A wide range of historic practices and rights have helped shape commons and greens over the centuries. Many of these activities, such as turf digging or bracken cutting, may no longer seem relevant today. However, some replication of their effect is needed to conserve the character of the common or green. This factsheet explores how some of these traditional practices maintained our commons, and explains why we need to repeat them today.

recent decades, scrub such as gorse, bramble and thorn has started to grow on many commons, covering much of the original open grassland or heathland. And within these scrub patches, tree saplings like oak or ash may have appeared. In time, with no further intervention the open common will change into woodland.

A very distinctive type of grazed landscape that also included trees, and was characteristic of many commons, is wood pasture. Perhaps



Ancient oaks in grassland, Phoenix Green, Hampshire

the most famous and easily the most extensive example of this is the New Forest, where large stands of ancient trees blend into heathy glades and expanses of open heath or stream-side lawns, all subject to extensive grazing by ponies and cattle – and pigs too in autumn! This is a huge site, but large, old trees in grazed pasture are not that infrequent elsewhere. There may be more examples of these veteran wood pasture trees in England than anywhere else in Europe, so keep an eye out for the possibility of a few examples on your common! *FS10 Trees and scrub* describes wood pasture more fully.

Today the ancient trees of wood pasture can be very important for lichens, fungi and a number of insects dependent on deadwood with some of them restricted to this special habitat. The ancient wood pasture trees will have grown in full light and their dependant wildlife flourishes best if the veteran trees are not shaded by recent young tree and scrub growth.

Because of their ancient origin, commons and greens are largely free from chemicals and may support grassland with an abundance of wild flowers. But without the traditional

uses of grazing or cutting of vegetation, the character of such grassland steadily changes. Imagine your lawn uncut for a season, or a few years! The short turf would be replaced by coarse tussocky growth and eventually woody scrub. In old grassland this means the loss of many of the scarcer plants that cannot cope with such conditions; gems like devil's-bit and saw-wort, or wild chamomile that used to be so typical of village greens but is now a great rarity.

Some grass commons were also managed for a hay crop, perhaps with grazing later to take off the re-growth or 'aftermath'. Strips of the meadow were held by different rights holders and so no single person had total control. This meant that ploughing or fertiliser applications were uneconomic or not allowed and ancient grassland, often extremely rich in a wide variety of flowers, grasses and sedges survived.

A few famous examples of this rare habitat are found, for instance around Oxford and in the upper Thames valley, but small pockets can exist anywhere in greens and commons. In each case, for the special vegetation to continue to flourish, the old management practice, or at least a modern version of it, needs to be in place. Heath commons, again with lack of recent grazing or the taking of



Wild chamomile



Devil's-bit

firewood, or fuel from gorse stems, have often become heavily clothed in trees such as birch or pine. A closer examination usually reveals that much of this thicket growth is young and recent, with closely packed, straight, spindly stems. There may be a few big old trees deep in the thicket; if so these are likely to have full spreading crowns, showing that they originally grew and developed in open conditions in full light. These veterans are probably the origin of the younger, dense thickets that now envelop them and mask their attractive form.

This feature can be seen in many heathland areas; Surrey for instance has numerous commons where you really cannot see the wood for the trees! Though much has been done in recent years to restore some of the commons to open vistas again, there are plenty of examples of the picture painted above. As well as affecting the views of the noble veteran trees, or the impression of an ancient open common, the dense stands of birch or pine seriously impede access for walkers or riders and may also impart a feeling of insecurity to those passing through.

The shade quickly suppresses the heathland vegetation but subtle and potentially more serious changes may be underway too. Such dense growth of trees is bound to take up a lot of water so any shallow pools or wet heathland will become progressively drier, affecting the habitats and species that can survive there. And soils will change too under a prolonged period of tree growth, so that if the scrub is cleared, bracken is more likely to follow rather than heather or heathy grassland.

Heath commons often carried rights for the gathering of heather turf for fuel. These rights



Young birch encroaching on heathland on Thursley Common, Surrey (P. Wakely, ©Natural England)



A turf cutter at work

of turbarry were very widespread. On the wetter sites in moorland areas, peat was cut across great swathes of bog but even on the drier heaths of southern England, heather turf was extensively harvested. This had the incidental effect of continuously depleting the already poor heath soils by removal of the thin humus layer that was taken in the turves, allowing the characteristic vegetation to persist. Heather grew again, from seed dropped from plants nearby and so there was a continuous and sustainable cycle of production. Grazing and/or burning as part of this cycle, kept the heather short and suitable for cutting as turf.

Another product regularly harvested from heath or acid grassland commons was bracken. This was used for roof thatch (as was heather), animal bedding, and potash fertiliser after burning. Even well into the 20th century bracken was being harvested for bedding (for example from Eskdale Common in Cumbria) and as insulation for stored root crops for winter feeding of livestock (for example Bampton Common in Cumbria). Today, in the absence of all of these uses being practised, and also with a shift to sheep grazing in the uplands rather than heavier cattle that trample bracken shoots, bracken is a major problem, covering vast tracts of land.

A consistent feature of most historic influences on common land was the removal of products such as grass, turf, wood and bracken etc. with the result that fertility remained low. The contrast with the modern farmed countryside is strong, as here nutrients, in the form of artificial fertilisers or slurry and dung, are always being added to boost production. The result is that the intended crops (including sown grass leys) flourish, but the wide variety of flowers and associated insects that cannot survive under such productive systems are out-competed by the more vigorous crops, assisted of course by the use of weedkillers and pesticides. On commons, however, significant addition of nutrients is far less likely to have happened, so in general a much greater number of interesting species may still survive, as long as the competition from dominant grasses, scrub and bracken can be controlled.

Looking after commons and greens today

Many of the historic activities described here that have shaped the common and played a major part in defining its character are largely redundant today. Nonetheless their effect has been fundamental and an understanding of the historic use of your common will help decide what management practises might need to be put in place now.

FS8 How to manage different habitats, FS10 Trees and scrub and FS11 Grazing our common can help you consider whether or how to bring back traditional activities – or their modern equivalent – so that your common or green can reflect the continuity of the past whilst having real relevance to the needs of the present community.

Almost certainly you will wish to accommodate a range of activities that were not part of the original common use, and it should be possible to ensure that these sit perfectly well alongside enhancing the wildlife interest or caring for ancient features. *FS4 Getting started* and *FS5 Who has an interest in the common?* guide you through the ways to tease out these varied requirements and to satisfy the views and aspirations of the local community.

Many of the traditional activities that maintained the common no longer have any economic value; today such activities are carried out, or replicated in some way, because of the non-monetary benefits they

bring to the common and its users. Cutting back scrub, clearing bracken on an annual basis or dealing with a species like ragwort for instance (see *FS8 How to manage different habitats* for further information), may all be ongoing requirements needing volunteers and/or funding to be carried out (see *FS4 Getting started* and *FS15 Fundraising*).

There are many examples of local groups successfully looking after their common or green. 'Friends' groups that have been started in many local communities to care for their local common are really inspirational. Bands of volunteers – the Friends of the Common – routinely take on tasks like these and many others, perhaps under the guidance of a management committee or a specialist body like a wildlife trust.

Not only are they working to keep the common a vital part of the local community, or to maintain its history or wildlife, the activity itself is a social network and a great opportunity for community cohesion. They all share the vision that a common which is cared for is appreciated and far less likely to be misused.



A work party clearing gorse (courtesy of J. Davis, Butterfly Conservation)

Case study: Melmerby Green, Cumbria

Melmerby is a fell-side village in Cumbria with a large, 11-acre, green in its centre. Until about 30 years ago the Green was traditionally grazed by cattle and geese but this type of farming has gone now and with it the grazing animals.

The Green had become increasingly unmanaged and the grassland dominated by tall weeds, with just the flatter areas mown a few times a year but with the grass cuttings left.

There was the realisation that the vegetation had become rougher, much of the former wildlife and plants were disappearing and the use of the Green was becoming more and more restricted. In 1999 the Parish Council invited suggestions for a village Millennium project and the idea to bring back the historic Green into amenity and conservation use was put forward.

This won general support in the community and the project was successful in attracting a Local Heritage Initiative grant, allowing purchase of a mower and strimmers to keep the vegetation in check according to a management plan. Now with the benefit of the grant, a management plan and with much support from a large band of volunteer helpers, the traditional flora is recovering, including the fortunes of several plants now rare in the general countryside.

There is now a proposal to bring back some seasonal stock grazing, to further benefit the flora. And the historic uses have been assisted too, including the May Day celebrations, as well as regular day to day use by villagers for recreation and games.



Melmerby village green, Cumbria (photograph courtesy of VisitCumbria.com)



A traditionally managed haymeadow in Ravenstonedale, Cumbria (photograph courtesy of B. & I. Jolly)

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One of a series of Factsheets created to help stimulate management on common land and village greens in England.



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