

Summary of the Management Plan for Hawridge and Cholesbury Commons

Supporting documentation is available for viewing at East Wing, Shire Lane (Isobel Clark) or Home Farm, Cholesbury Common (David Barnard)

Aim

The Management Plan aims to provide a structured approach to looking after the Commons that will enable them to fulfil their public amenity role, retain their remarkable biodiversity and keep their semi-wild character.

Requirements

1. Walkers, joggers and horse riders: Footpaths and rides kept clear and as free of mud as possible. Rides sign-posted to increase quality of footpaths. Rides are closed for 1 day a year to retain their permissive status.
2. Families with young children: An area of short grass at Cholesbury and another at Hawridge.
3. All Users: part of the pleasure of all users is derived from the natural character of the Commons. The particular character of our Commons comes to a great degree from its remarkable diversity of habitats. We need to preserve this diversity for aesthetic and environmental reasons. This includes:
 - a) Maintaining the several glades as grassland
 - b) Maintaining the open areas at Cholesbury along the top of the Common on both sides of the road. Maintaining the ride alongside the road as open grassland
 - c) Maintaining the areas of acid heathland bounded by the road, the lower ride, and the areas of woodland below The Row and Shepherds Cottage
 - d) Keeping views open
 - e) Maintaining the pond by Cholesbury Road and the one by the cricket pitch
 - f) Bracken control in selected areas
 - g) Rotational clearance of the understorey in selected woodland areas and rotational maintenance of scrubland. Paths must be maintained and/or created in these areas for accessibility.

Basic Principles of Conservation Management

In order to understand the basis for the plans it is helpful to consider the following principles:

1. THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PLANTS AND ANIMALS WHICH MAKE UP THE ECOSYSTEM ARE EVER CHANGING - WE HAVE TO RUN TO STAND STILL!

The natural succession in this area in the absence of grazing is from grass to scrub to woodland. If the Society had not started to MANAGE the Commons in 1967 then we would by now have 100% woodland cover instead of the current estimated 75%. A wild wood is very nice for some kinds of plants and animals but would greatly reduce the biodiversity and also the range of activities which people are able to enjoy.

2. STRUCTURAL DIVERSITY ENCOURAGES BIODIVERSITY (AND ALSO EXPANDS OPPORTUNITIES FOR HUMAN USE)

Both for conservation and enjoyment we need to encourage DIVERSITY - in both the structure of the vegetation and also the range of species of plants and animals within each habitat type (woodland, grassland etc.). By structural diversity we mean maintaining open spaces as well as areas of shrubs and trees of varying ages. The edges between these different vegetation types are important habitat for many birds and insects.

3. THE WAY SPECIFIC VEGETATION TYPES ARE MANAGED HAS A PROFOUND EFFECT ON DIVERSITY

Within vegetation types we can encourage DIVERSITY of plant species which in turn encourages more species of animals. For example, thinning out the scrub in woodland areas will encourage herbs and grasses including species such as bluebells and wood anemones; discouraging the bracken will encourage heather and native grasses; a cut and collect regime, which mimics grazing, will encourage harebells and other wild flowers which in recent years have been outcompeted by more vigorous grasses. These grasses need a lot of nutrients to thrive, so they can be discouraged by removing the hay and so over time making the area less fertile.

4. WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING IS OFTEN AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU DO

Birds need peace and quiet in order to breed - Working Party activities should be finished by the end of March so as not to disturb them; soil disturbance will be minimised if we carry out mechanised work in the autumn before the ground becomes saturated; timing of cuts is critical in the grassland management - winter growth should be removed by end of March before the flowering plants have grown, then do not mow any more until about the end of August when these plants have set seed.

Every management action we take should be consistent with these principles - although of course we may choose to vary the prescriptions for any particular area to take account of the needs of user groups. For example, while the major aim of the grassland management is to recover a more naturally biodiverse community, it is quite possible to agree that heavily used areas near to the road should be cut more often. For the network of paths on the Commons access is obviously the primary concern, so cutting should be carried out as often as necessary in order to keep them clear for pedestrians.

Annual Calendar of Activities

Jan	Cut degenerate scrub by rotation over 15 year period.
Feb	Check paths and access areas for swiping. Cut degenerate gorse down to 45cm to encourage regeneration. Remove trees in gorse areas.
March	Work on bottom ride. Remove any large growth (downed trees/bushes) which would impede swipe. Begin swiping programme in grassy areas - "which must not be cut between July and September to protect species such as harebells which must be allowed to grow and seed. Please note position of heathers before cutting and lift swipe over or cut around them. We do not wish this area to be invaded by gorse so please cut this".
April	Train tractor drivers - cut paths when dry enough. Paths to be cut 4m wide to encourage butterflies on grassland edges.
May	Train tractor drivers - cut paths when dry enough.
June	Roll bracken to weaken rhizomes in control areas in last 2 weeks (may be earlier depending on weather). "Please try to note position of heathers and foxgloves before cutting and lift swipe over or cut around. Established gorse can be left as gorse, heather and foxgloves will prevent bracken growth". Cut paths and short grassland areas. Hand/foot crush bracken stems in heather areas.
July	Finish rolling bracken in control areas in first 2 weeks. Cut paths.
August	Cut paths and have a holiday!
Sept	Cut paths. Swipe and collect grassland areas. Clear around planted trees. Clear around degenerate heather plants to encourage seeding to provide new plants.
Oct	Cut any regrowth of bracken and collect. Finish swiping and collecting.
Nov	Clear and mark horse rides. Pond – consider whether any clearance is necessary. If so, clearance must be in autumn when water temperature is low. Clearing stirs up nutrients, which will result in algae and make the water look scummy and dirty if the water is warm. Clear no more than 1/3 of the area in any one year - this will keep the natural look and encourage animals (dragonflies etc.) to recolonise the cleared areas. Latest advice is that leaving the removed plants on the bank for some days to allow insects in it to crawl back into pond is ineffective. Open up woodland pasture in selected areas.
Dec	Open up any paths as necessary and enjoy Christmas!

Some of the work on the Commons is carried out by contractors with specialist machinery. The advantage of contractors is that they will do the work when we require; they may have expertise and machinery which Society members do not possess; and most importantly, they are responsible for maintaining their equipment if it breaks down.

We have also developed a more systematic approach to record keeping. This involves dividing the Commons into 14 map units of A4 size which can be used on-site for noting actions. It is now possible to track what was done when, and so to improve the efficiency with which we manage in the future. There is as yet no "new" management plan document equivalent to that produced in 1989. We have produced a digitised version of the map so that we can print whatever scale is appropriate to the project in hand, e.g. large scale when mapping the location and extent of the heather, small scale when marking paths/rides.

Resources

The amount of work carried out on the Commons will continue to depend on the time Members wish to donate; the money we are able to raise; and the cost and availability of local contractors. All of these things change over time and the Committee needs to adjust the plans accordingly. It is important to continue the practice of seeking professional comment/advice in order to ensure that the considerable efforts of Society members have the desired effects in conserving our very special environment.