



Litcham Common – a local success story

Litcham Common is situated to the south of Litcham, a rural Norfolk village (population c. 600) in an area of mainly arable farming. The common consists of approximately 24ha of mixed woodland and heath, along with smaller areas of neutral grassland and some ponds, and is all that remains of what were once far more extensive areas of heathland within the parish. In the west, the land can become quite boggy along its border with the river Nar, which is an SSSI. The site is roughly split into two by a public road, which at times can become busy with school traffic and agricultural haulage lorries.

Since 1945, when there were very few trees on the common, significant areas of scrub and woodland have developed. The change was brought about by the cessation of grazing, which allowed self-seeded trees, particularly birch and oak, to become established. Common rights used to be associated with certain village houses, but none were registered following the 1965 Commons Registration Act, and it was only due to the actions of the freeholder, the late William Foster of Lexham Hall Estate, that the common was registered in 1968.

Norfolk County Council (NCC) declared Litcham Common a Local Nature Reserve in 1984, and it is also a County Wildlife Site. Litcham Common Management Committee (LCMC), comprising local residents and representatives from Lexham Hall Estate, Litcham Parish Council and the County Council, was set up to manage the reserve.

The common is of particular value as an area of heathland. The open areas are dominated by purple moor-grass, with clumps of heather, bell heather, cross-leaved heath and heath bedstraw. The grassland species include harebell, sweet vernal-grass and crested dog's-tail. There is a good population of adders, as well as common lizards and slow worms. Bird species include greater spotted woodpecker and barn owl, and in autumn many interesting types of fungi can be found.

The main management objective is to increase the amount of heathland and to reduce the tree and scrub cover (particularly birch), whilst at the same time retaining areas of woodland to provide a variety of habitats. The importance of the common to local people is recognised with the provision of a car park, benches and the maintenance of footpaths. NCC funded and organised the management work until 2011, when its involvement finished owing to spending cutbacks.

Conservation group

Having expressed an interest, I was invited to join the Management Committee in 2003 and volunteered to set up a conservation group. An announcement in the parish magazine generated an enthusiastic response and the group has met on a monthly basis ever since. Our core autumn/winter work is 'scrub bashing', with an associated bonfire (the main attraction for some!), and other tasks such as litter picking carried out during the spring and summer. Amongst our 'pool' of volunteers we are

↑ The ponies' first tentative steps of freedom, as the roadside fence starts to come down on 4th September 2012.

John Relph

So often when local commons lose their graziers, the connection with the local community is lost and the wildlife-rich habitats they once supported gradually fade away. Tim Angell outlines a success story where the local community has taken the initiative to restore grazing on its common.



↑ A view of the main open area that has been grazed since 2008.
Tim Angell

fortunate to have two builders and someone with a chainsaw license, whose skills come in very handy.

Despite all our efforts, it became apparent that we were fighting a rearguard action against the encroachment of scrub and trees. Several plant species recorded in a 1969 survey had disappeared, including petty whin and marsh gentian.

Grazing is the answer

In September 2005, we decided to bite the bullet and pursue grazing as the best management solution. A longstanding aim had been to install cattle grids on the public road and to reintroduce grazing, but for many years this had been on the 'back burner', due to issues such as the need for legal consents, the cost of making the site stock proof, ownership of any animals and the possibility that public access would deter graziers.

Extensive research was carried out, and invaluable help and advice was received from several organisations on issues ranging from the design of cattle grids and holding pens to the type of animals to be used. The plans had to be reconsidered after the highway authority (NCC) decided that it would not allow cattle grids on the public road. The revised plans involved fencing the common into two separate compartments, one either side of the road. Neil Foster of Lexham Hall Estate offered us the use of a small area of land adjacent to the river Nar so that livestock would

↓ Conservation volunteers taking a break during a 'scrub bashing' session in December 2011.
Roger Watts



have access to fresh water.

In December 2006, we submitted an application to fence the common. Despite an objection from the Open Spaces Society (OSS), the Secretary of State granted permission for a ten-year period.

Fencing work on the part of the common to the north-west of the public road was completed in 2008, paid for with funding from NCC. We decided to leave the other half of the common unfenced for the time being, while we evaluated the success of 'Phase 1' of the project; in any event, we did not have the money to do everything in one go.

The ponies arrive ...

Four gelding Dartmoor ponies were purchased by LCMC, and we took delivery of them in June 2008. Several volunteers came forward following an appeal in the parish magazine, and we were all given comprehensive training by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's (NWT) Grazing Officer. A huge amount of help was received from the Grazing Animals Project, the Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust and NWT in deciding what type and number of animals to use, together with advice on the welfare and care of the animals. Volunteers check the ponies daily and they are rounded up approximately twice a year to have their hooves trimmed by a farrier, but essentially they are handled as little as possible.

... and people like them!

The presence of the ponies has, overall, proved very popular. Locals enjoy seeing them on the common and, apart from a couple of minor incidents, any fears about how the ponies would interact with dogs have proved unfounded. Despite prominent notices, we do have cases of people petting and feeding the animals, so they are not quite as wild as we would like. However, we have managed to keep on top of the problem so far.

The initial results were also pleasing from a conservation point of view. Grazing had a noticeable impact on the appearance of the heath, cropping the grass sward and reducing the dominance of the coarser vegetation such as brambles and gorse. The question now was what, if anything, to do next.

Cattle grids are on again!

The original idea was to have one ring fence round the entire common, with cattle grids mimicking the situation of 100 years ago, when there used to be a gate at either end of the road. During the course of the 2006 fencing application, I promised the OSS that we would have one final go at persuading NCC to allow cattle grids. The OSS and Litcham Parish Council wrote letters of support, and I was able to inform NCC that two major commercial users of the road did not object to our plans. Somewhat to my surprise, NCC did reconsider its position, and in 2010, after carrying out a feasibility study and safety audit, agreed to support the installation of cattle grids provided LCMC funded the entire cost.

NCC's projected cost for two highway cattle grids was £75,000 and we estimated that other work (perimeter fencing and gates, a track-way cattle grid, and clearance of roadside trees and scrub for safety reasons) would cost a further £25,000. The total of £100,000 seemed a lot for our relatively small site, but we decided that this was our ideal solution and there was nothing to be lost by making grant applications. After considering several possibilities, we submitted two full applications for Landfill Communities Fund grants. The process was a revelation: I knew what we wanted to do and why, but found that everything had to be justified in a language of professional conservation that was entirely alien. After a while I became familiar, but never entirely confident, with concepts such as BARS and BAPs and HAPs!

Are we sure?

To our delight, SITA Trust made an offer of the full £100,000 in June 2011. However, our acceptance was not immediate. The composition of Litcham Parish Council had changed since 2007, and support for the cattle grids was no longer unanimous. An internet search revealed vehement opposition to some cattle-grid schemes, and we were keen to avoid similar problems. A particular concern was the financial risk to us as individual members of LCMC. NCC would only proceed if we agreed to pay all its costs, which would remain uncertain throughout the project, but could potentially rocket if there were objections during the legal process. On the other hand SITA Trust capped its budget at £100,000, and stressed that if the scheme was aborted part way through they would want their money back. We therefore carried out a consultation to gauge local opinion; this elicited 28 responses, of which 23 supported our plans, giving us a degree of confidence.

The next step was to secure 'third party funding' of £11,500, required by SITA Trust to cover its administration costs. We had some reserves, and these were augmented by grants from Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership, NCC and generous gifts from private individuals, enabling us to proceed.

The highway cattle grids were the crux of the



scheme, and to limit our risk we paid NCC a capped sum of £7,500 for initial design and survey work. Once we were reasonably confident that there were no major practical obstacles to putting the grids in, NCC displayed legal notices giving people the right to comment on the proposals. We were very fortunate in having only one objection, on the grounds of road safety, which was subsequently withdrawn. Had a public enquiry been required, the costs could have been huge.

Full steam ahead

With the legal process complete, NCC got on with the task of finalising the design of, and then constructing, the cattle grids and bypass gates, while we organised the other work. NCC uses

↑ Top There's a road there somewhere! Our contractors were given a four-day window during the road closure period to fell and remove roadside trees, before work started on the cattle grids. They worked flat out and got the job done. *Tim Angell*

↑ Middle April 2012: Our trackway cattle grid arrives. It was installed the same day and the total cost was £2,840. The highways grids cost a lot more! *Tim Angell*

↑ Bottom One of our warning signs on the bypass gate. The agricultural haulage lorry that can be seen is typical of those using the road. *Tim Angell*



↑ The same stretch of road through the common in January 2011 and March 2013, when Molly, the hinny, posed for the camera.
Tim Angell

two private firms for its highways design and construction work, and under their working arrangements there was no scope to obtain fixed fee quotes. As a management committee, we were never comfortable with this arrangement. A senior NCC engineer had the task of overseeing our project, and he did an excellent job keeping us informed, but for various reasons the process became fraught at times as the construction date was delayed more than once. Despite the traumas along the way, everything did eventually come together, with about £1,700 to spare in the budget. On 4th September 2012 we had a grand opening ceremony, when the ponies were able to cross the road for the first time.

Teething problems

Inevitably, there have been a few teething problems. One of our main concerns was to ensure the highways grids would not be excessively noisy, and as these were Hopkins 'quick fit' grids with metal resting upon metal, we requested that rubber strips be fitted between sections. It was therefore unfortunate that these strips were not glued in place, and the grids' bolts were not tightened properly, so in the first fortnight we experienced increasingly loud clanging noises across the village. This was easy to remedy, but did generate some ill will at the time.

Initial feedback

The ponies have adapted well to their new territory, and motorists generally drive appropriately, despite the national speed limit applying. Our main concern is to avoid accidents, so we have installed additional warning signs and fitted the ponies with fluorescent collars.

In December, a hinny joined the ponies and settled in as part of the herd. With extra land to graze, we are considering using cattle on a seasonal basis, but will take a cautious approach as the animals must be people and dog friendly, and we want to avoid overgrazing.

Despite some initial scepticism, feedback from the public is generally positive. Significant numbers of mature trees were felled alongside the road, both to improve visibility and to link up existing areas

of heath. Several people who had misgivings about the loss of trees have commented that they like the new open look. The felling of trees is still an issue though, and the need to explain this is ongoing because tree clearance will continue under a Higher Level Stewardship agreement.

Ecological monitoring of both plants and reptiles will take place over the next few years, to gauge the impact of our project.

Reflections

- For a group of volunteers, this project was hugely time consuming and potentially financially risky. We received excellent guidance from SITA Trust, but as the main coordinator I found the work involved dominated my life, and consider myself extremely fortunate to have a very tolerant wife, and an understanding employer! I suspect many groups might have been put off at the start, especially by the risk involved. There must be a better way.
- We consulted widely on various aspects of our scheme and I was invariably struck by how generous individuals were in sharing the benefit of their knowledge and expertise. This was a very positive aspect of the whole experience.
- Being a community group has advantages. Although we take advice from experts, nothing has been imposed from outside. Importantly, our committee includes a well-respected longstanding resident who remembers when the common was virtually tree free. This all helped give our plans credibility.
- Litcham Common is much loved by locals and it is understandable that some people were anxious about change. Similarly, there were genuine concerns over issues such as the safety of the cattle grids. We always aimed to be totally open about our proposals, with regular updates in the parish magazine and at parish council meetings. It was vital to listen to people's opinions, take their views seriously, and try to understand their viewpoints. Inevitably, we could not please everyone, but I believe the policy of openness helped keep most people on side, brought in more volunteers, and has contributed to our success so far.

Weblink

For more information, see www.litcham.org/Litcham/Common.html

Tim Angell is a member of Litcham Common Management Committee, and is responsible for coordinating the grazing project and conservation work. Tim joined the Management Committee in 2003; prior to that he had acquired his knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, voluntary conservation work as a member of the Norfolk Conservation Corps. Tim can be contacted by telephone: 01328 700045; or by e-mail: angell.family@talktalk.net