

BRILL PARISH COUNCIL

BRILL COMMON – THE WAY FORWARD A CONSULTATION



A consultation to seek the views of Brill residents, commoners and others who use the area, on the future management of the Common.

Consultation closes on May 31st 2009

April 09

Brill Common – The Way Forward. A Consultation.

1. Background

Brill Parish Council is the registered owner of the Common which consists of about 70 acres of undulating grassland grazed for 400 years by sheep, cattle, horses and goats until all grazing ceased around 1996. The absence of grazing has resulted in large areas of grass sward being replaced by rank grassland, scrub, brambles and some rough woodland.

All the historic evidence points to the fact that, since it became common land, this area was an open grassland dotted with occasional trees and small amounts of scrub. This is in contrast to the situation where prior to the start of the Grazing Project in 2007/8 there was scrub cover and secondary woodland extending to much of the total area. Unless action is taken and maintained, scrub develops into nearly impenetrable woodland as can be seen in the triangle at the bottom of Tram Hill.

Brill Common is a vital part of the regional wildlife corridor which links Boarstall and Rushbeds Woods and which allows the free movement of species including small animals and invertebrates. Improvement in the habitat which the Common provides will be beneficial far beyond its immediate borders.

2. Purpose of this document

The Parish Council is anxious that any changes in the way the Common is managed are the result of seeking the views of Brill residents and the wide variety of others who use the area, not least those Commoners who retain a right to graze cattle, sheep, horses and ponies. This document provides basic information on those options which the Council believes are viable. Background documents can be read at the Parish Council Offices, or on the Parish Council section of the Brill website (see Section 8). An Open evening will be held in the village hall on **May 6th** to clarify the options.

3. The NERC Act 2006

In 2006 the Government introduced the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act which gave the Parish Council a legal obligation to take account of biodiversity in carrying out its duties. One definition of biodiversity is *'the variety of life, including habitats and species (both plants and animals) and the way in which these living things interact with one another'*. In other words biodiversity is wildlife. The Act makes it clear that the duty of the Parish Council is not simply to maintain the status quo, but that efforts should be made to restore or enhance habitats and the species which live in them.

4. The importance of grassland

The Common was designated a Local Wildlife Site in December 1997. When this designation was made it was made principally due to the range of botanical species found and because of the scarcity in Buckinghamshire of this unusual mixture of acid and calcareous grassland.

The humps and hollows left by the old clay workings gave a unique character to the Common grassland. Sloping sides tend to be nutrient poor and give rise to a wide variety of flora including burnet saxifrage, harebell, ladies bedstraw, birds foot trefoil, and wild marjoram. Grasses include sweet vernal, red fescue, and quaking grass. Plants rare in Bucks are the carline thistle, pyramidal orchid, bee orchid and fine-leaved

sandwort. Unfortunately many of these areas have now been subject to rank grass and scrub encroachment and the variety has been lost.

For maximum diversity it is important to provide a variety of grass height. Long grass provides shelter for bird nesting and chick concealment as well as providing areas for insects to feed and to hibernate. Great Crested Newts over winter in tussocks of grass before returning to the Common ponds in summer. Shorter grass and even areas of bare soil allow plants to regenerate and insects to lay eggs.

5. Present situation

In the Spring of 2007 a small scale grazing project was implemented with a view to assessing the impact of a group of Dexter cattle on the character of the grassland. Permission had been granted previously to use temporary electric fencing on areas of the Common. Although the cattle are few in number it is clear that rank grass and scrub have been reduced to an extent on the areas which they have grazed. No formal evaluation of the project has yet been undertaken.

In addition, successful working by the Common Conservation Team, and more recently the Friends of Brill Common, on scrub clearance has begun to make visible inroads into the tree seedlings and bramble encroachment.

Unfortunately because of the ease with which bramble and scrub regenerate , keeping the areas cleared will require further effort unless a longer lasting solution can be found.

6. Options

In considering the options available to manage Brill Common the Parish Council has sought professional advice from external bodies and has reviewed advice previously obtained in 1998 from the Hyder Consultancy. We have only considered options which are capable of being implemented in the short to medium term. Therefore options such as Directional Virtual Fencing which is in development but not yet commercially available have not been included.

In selecting those options to put forward the Parish Council has been mindful that an ideal solution should

- Be sustainable
- Increase biodiversity
- Maintain the appearance of Brill Common
- Be affordable
- Increase enjoyment of Brill Common for the majority of residents and visitors, whilst minimizing inconvenience

The options which we feel are available to us are:

- **Option A** To revert to the situation prior to the grazing project with the Common managed by work groups of the Common Conservation Team.
- **Option B** To continue indefinitely with the present temporary grazing arrangements plus work by the Common Conservation Team.
- **Option C** To institute a managed grazing regime.
- **Option D** To commission grass cutting.

6.1 Option A To revert to the situation prior to the grazing project with the Common managed by work groups of the Common Conservation Team.

In 1999 a group of volunteer Brill residents (then named the Common Management Team, now the Common Conservation Team or CCT) took on the task of maintaining the Common in the absence of grazing animals. Grazing by sheep had ceased several years previously, primarily due to the reluctance of graziers to use the Common after stock losses partly due to sheep worrying and partly due to the pressure of increased use of the Common by the public.

The CCT meets fortnightly on the Common for two hour sessions of scrub clearance, litter picking, wildlife habitat and pond restoration and in July grass is mown for haymaking. Paths around and across the Common are also maintained, allowing free access for walkers. The CCT also coordinates wildlife surveys on the Common – this year butterflies, moths and fungi will all be studied by local experts.

<u>Advantages</u>	<u>Disadvantages</u>
Makes use of local knowledge and expertise.	Insufficient time and manpower to manage 70 acres of grassland.
A low cost (approx £1500 per annum) option	Reduction in biodiversity
No change to completely unrestricted access to all areas of the Common	Increase in scrub cover, unwanted tree seedlings (sycamore, hawthorn)
Achieves limited management	Previously open vistas from and across some areas of Common now restricted by bushy growth
	Worn tracks are developing across the Common as walkers take same 'path of least resistance' through scrub and tall vegetation
	Evident decline in finer grasses

6.2 Option B: To continue indefinitely with the present temporary grazing arrangements plus work by the Common Conservation Team.

In the Spring of 2007 a small experimental group of four Dexter cattle were placed on South Hills within electric temporary fencing with access points and gates. By the end of 2008 their numbers had grown to nine and most areas of both South and North Hills had been grazed for short periods. Provision for public access was included within the fenced areas so as not to exclude the public.

It is a condition of the Secretary of State's permission to erect electric fencing on Common land that the fencing cannot remain in any one area for more than four months. Therefore the animals need to be moved on a regular basis. This places a burden on any graziers who use the Common.

There has been good positive support as well as a small number of complaints concerning dogs encountering electric fencing and also complaints from walkers who feel their regular routes have been blocked.

The work of the Common Conservation Team has continued and in conjunction with The Friends of Brill Common significant inroads have been made into the existing scrub cover.

<u>Advantages</u>	<u>Disadvantages</u>
Reduction of rank grass and scrub where cattle have been grazing	Electric fencing is intimidating and does not encourage public access
Uses a traditional management practice	Is labour intensive for graziers who have to remove and reset fencing every four months therefore probably not sustainable
Animals provide visual interest	The quantity of fencing required is obtrusive
The animals are prevented from straying onto roads making the grazing more attractive to prospective graziers	Possible damage to anthills
Animal dung provides habitat for invertebrates	Fencing easily vandalised or stolen
Hooves create areas of bare soil which allow plants to regenerate	Cattle can 'poach' the ground if over wintered on the Common in very wet or snowy conditions
Animals provide educational potential for children and visitors	
Cattle will trample into areas of scrub which smaller animals such as sheep would not.	

6.4 Option D To commission grass cutting

In this option contractors with the appropriate specialist equipment would be invited to mow the Common. It has been suggested that a cut once every two years could be sufficient.

The nature of the terrain on the Common makes it unlikely that the whole Common could be mowed, but one contractor believes that his equipment could make it possible to mow 70% of the area. The cuttings would not be collected nor removed or burnt.

<u>Advantages</u>	<u>Disadvantages</u>
Could be implemented quickly	Cutting maintains a virtually closed sward. This has the effect of crowding out less competitive plants and reducing variety
No capital outlay	Allowing the cuttings to remain in situ will increase the nutrients in the soil. This encourages growth of rank grasses.
Completely unrestricted access to all areas of the Common	Cuttings will form a 'thatch' preventing the seeding and germination of rarer and less sturdy plants
	On-going expense (approx £3000 per annum)
	The speed of cutting does not enable invertebrates and insects to avoid harm
	Will damage anthills
	Is not environmentally friendly

7. What will happen now?

May 6 th 2009	Public meeting held to clarify the content of the consultation document and to answer questions from the village.
May 31 st 2009	Consultation ends.
June/July 2009	Results of consultation presented to the Parish Council.
September 2009	Parish Council discusses the results and next steps.

8. Documents available to view at the Parish Council Offices

The following documents, which form a background to the consultation, are available to read at the Parish Council Offices and are also available on the Parish Council section of the Brill village website www.brillvillage.co.uk :

Parish Councils and the Duty to conserve Biodiversity – Guidance on the implications of the NERC Act 2006 (BBOWT)

Brill Common Management Report 2008 (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group)

Brill Common Management Plan 1998 (Hyder Consulting Limited)

Brill Commons Option Supplement Report 2009 (Andrew McVeigh, Principal Landscape Ecologist, Buckinghamshire County Council)

Common Management Options – Consultation Paper 2008 (Brill Common Management Team)

Brill Common Conservation Team – Terms of reference 2008 (Brill Parish Council)

Management Objectives Brill Common 2008 (Brill Parish Council)

Commons Act 2006 (HMSO)