

Nettlebed and District Commons Conservators

Report to “The Friends of the Commons” Annual Social Meeting

January 30th 2015



WHAT do the Conservators do?

The Conservators manage the commons, taking decisions on matters concerning wildlife conservation and public access; they work with the owners, that is largely the Nettlebed Estate, who in turn take responsibility for tree work and overall woodland management – indeed they own the trees on the common. We rely on expert ecologists (many of you here today) for guidance, and every decision is taken in the light of our existing management plans and current good practice.

WHERE does our money come from?

We rely on donations from our Friends (you), four Parish Councils (NPC, RPPC, HPC & RGPC), and the 25% refund that we receive from SODC on our annual expenses. Last year that 25% amounted to £1,132. So, every donation we receive is effectively boosted by 25%, because it enables us to spend more money, and claim a correspondingly larger refund. **Should you wish to make a donation – and all tonight’s donations will be shared with Burnham Beeches - please use our donations box.** Beside it, you will find a pile of Friends Joining Forms, where you can record your name and address, and sign up for an annual donation by Standing Order.

This year we have received, in addition, a donation from Nettlebed Art Society, and grant funding from

- ◆ The Chilterns Commons Project who helped pay for the construction of the Play Trail in Nettlebed (£2000); tree felling to restore heathland on Peppard Common (£1000); and a specialist plant survey of the Nettlebed Acid Wetlands (£400).
- ◆ TOE2 (Trust for Oxfordshire’s Environment) who helped pay for tools and training for Kingwood Volunteers (£2000). (All figures approximate)

The Chilterns Commons Project is now drawing to a close (of which more later): the money awarded to them by the Heritage Lottery Fund has been spent. We must now seek help from other sources. The kind of grants we are eligible to apply for generally require proof of community support and involvement.

VOLUNTEERING Why is it important?

The regular work sessions put in by our many volunteers, throughout the year, demonstrate community support and involvement better than anything else.

What do the volunteers do?

- ◆ Maintain and improve our paths, both designated and informal.
- ◆ Restore and maintain our heathland glades
- ◆ Support contractor-led projects, such as building steps and clearing a new route through woodland for the Nettlebed Playtrail; clearing brushwood from trees felled on the Joyce Grove Triangle, and again just recently from Peppard Common, where encroaching trees have been removed.

There are four groups who work on our commons, and in the last year they contributed at least 800 Man and Woman hours of volunteer labour (and that is allowing for coffee breaks and flapjack consumption).

- ◆ The Chiltern Society Path Maintenance Volunteers: one session to clear a path along the Joyce Grove boundary, from the centre of Nettlebed towards Highmoor
- ◆ Sonning Common Green Gym: 8 morning sessions of which 4 on Peppard, 3 on Nettlebed, 1 on Kingwood.
- ◆ The Kingwood Volunteers (KPCV): two mornings per month (normally the first Monday and third Saturday)
- ◆ Team Nettlebed: most Sunday afternoons.

Our biggest work party – a session on Kingwood Common in January with Green Gym joining forces with KPCV, numbered 20 people (at the coffee break, always a jolly affair, no less than five different home-made cakes were on offer). At the other extreme, some sessions see as few as 3 people turn up. But it is ALWAYS worthwhile. Every hour counts towards that total of 800 hours. Thank You.

Our volunteers work with a wide variety of familiar handtools, such as loppers rakes, and saws, and some not-so-familiar tools: this year we have adopted a lightweight hoe called an AZADA, ideal for uprooting bramble and small birch trees. One volunteer uses a scythe to cut bracken and bramble. All comers are offered basic instruction in the use of unfamiliar tools. We own 2 mechanical Brushcutters, which are used by trained volunteers.

What in it for the Volunteers? Working on the common is healthy and fun. It isn't arduous: you set your own limits and do as much or as little as you like. It gives immense satisfaction – that sense of achievement when you survey the results of your combined labours at the end of the morning. There are benefits not only for wildlife, but for every person in our community who walks or runs, rides or cycles on the common. The more work we do, the more enjoyment people get from the common.

New members are always welcome. If you are interested in joining any of the Volunteer groups, please pick up a leaflet, or talk to one of the Conservators.

The Chilterns Commons Project

Quite apart from the practical work it has funded, one of the great achievements of the project has been to train managers, owners and volunteers across the Chilterns in a wide variety of useful skills. Another has been to bring us together on a regular basis, to visit a particular common, see how it is managed, and learn from it. The discovery that other people are dealing with problems like ours, and the support this network is able to give to its members, has transformed commons management in the Chilterns from Peppard in the south to Totternhoe Knolls in the north.

The Chilterns Conservation Board is committed to maintaining the momentum that the Commons Project has created. They will be providing more information on the future direction of the Chilterns Commons Network in the coming months, and we will continue to work with our Friends at the CCB and across the Chilterns. We are all agreed that networking – in the form of regular visits to other commons, is a vital tool, and will continue.

Plans for the coming year:

More guided walks. Please, let us know what you are interested in.

Big Solstice Picnic: On Sunday 21 June, there will be people picnicking on commons all across the Chilterns to celebrate the achievements of the Chiltern Commons Project. Please join in - just bring a picnic!

In the coming months, we will organise a visit to Chorleywood Common where they are using the 'invisible fencing' pioneered at Burnham Beeches to contain grazing livestock.

Nettlebed abandoned claypits: led by Rod d'Ayala, we are embarking on a project to restore the acid wetlands around Windmill Hill. They represent the most extensive acid wetland site in Oxfordshire, and are home to rare and wonderful mosses and liverworts, hence the name 'The Sphagnum Lawns'.

What would YOU like to see happening on your local common? Please let us know.

You can do this via our website: www.nettlebed-commons.org

