



Cover story: Coming to a common near you – the return of grazing

Commons are special, open landscapes; popular places for walking and enjoying the countryside; and they are also some of the best areas for wildlife in Hertfordshire

Commons contain rare habitats like lowland heath and unimproved grassland with specialised wildflowers and insects. This is because the soils are frequently very poor and have not been agriculturally improved. As a result commons are often the best places to see remnant wild flowers like heather, and orchids.

Heaths are man made habitats historically kept open by grazing, burning or cutting for firewood. However, now that sort of traditional management has ceased, trees like silver birch and oak have established themselves and they shade out the heather, gorse and grass. In Hertfordshire a staggering 97% of heathland area has been lost since 1940.

At Bricket Wood, Chorleywood, Colney Heath and Nomansland the South Herts Grazing Group is working towards returning grazing animals to the Commons.

Currently, the commons are kept open by cutting or wiping with chemicals. Grazing would be a more sustainable and natural way of maintaining these habitats. In addition to stopping the trees encroaching on the heathland, grazing has a number of benefits. It will allow a more varied vegetation structure to develop and will help maintain low nutrient levels in the soil.

But it would mean some changes to the commons. Some fencing will be required to contain the livestock. Gates will allow access, but inside the fence dogs will need to be kept on a lead. Paths will need to be accessible both inside and outside the fence so that people who want to walk on the common can choose to go into the fenced area or not.

Hertfordshire farm livestock are almost endangered species in their own right. Only certain breeds of sheep, cattle or ponies will cope with the rough grazing and poor quality fodder available on the commons. They are likely to be traditional or rare breeds like the English Longhorn in the picture. This might provide an additional attraction for visitors to the common. Equally though, the scarcity of livestock in the local countryside may mean that people will need to be informed about how to deal appropriately with animals. The welfare of the animals will need to be assured. They will need water, shade, and daily monitoring.

To publicise the return to traditional management methods, Commons Grazing Roadshows visited the four commons in April (*Chorleywood Common show pictured above*). The roadshows gave people an opportunity to see some rare

breed cows and sheep close up; make a bird box or do a scavenger hunt; and see some traditional wood crafts. Experts were on hand to answer questions about the animals and to explain what returning livestock would mean for the commons. In addition there are guided walks at Nomansland on May 21st, Bricket Wood on May 23rd and Chorleywood on June 7th.

The South Hertfordshire Commons Grazing Group is a partnership between St. Albans District Council, Chorleywood and Colney Heath parish councils and the Countryside Management Service.

Site profiles

Colney Heath Local Nature Reserve encompasses 2 areas of common land in the heart of the village. The area known as Furze Field to the south contains good areas of heather, dwarf gorse and petty whin and has not had the problems of tree encroachment suffered by other areas of lowland heath, but it is a constant threat. Hundreds of small hawthorn trees have invaded the heath, and although they are being kept short through occasional mowing, it is not ideal.

Chorleywood Common Local Nature Reserve has areas of oak woodland in the centre, but still has large areas of

lowland heath and wildflower meadows around the edges. The Parish Council currently mow and remove the cuttings once a year to enhance the flora. The proposed grazing area cuts across the Common and encompasses the best of the wild flower meadows.

Nomansland Common, in between Sandridge and Wheathampstead, has some very important remnant lowland heath and still retains many of the rare specialist invertebrates associated with it. Oak trees have encroached on the heath, and there is an active plan to remove the trees where the heathland vegetation is still struggling to survive beneath the tree canopy. Grazing would ideally take place across the whole common, helping to keep tree regeneration down and enhance the remaining heath.

Bricket Wood Common is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It had become very overgrown with birch trees; generally the first tree to take advantage of a lack of management. A large area of trees was cut down several years ago, but the birch trees continue to invade. Grazing animals on this important wet heath would greatly help to minimise the current difficulties that goes with chemical control or mowing on rough and wet terrain.

Get CMS News on your computer!

As a friend of the environment, you can help us save paper and divert savings into work that directly benefits the countryside by opting to read CMS News on your computer. Currently, the CMS posts out hundreds of paper copies but we suspect that many of you could download it through your internet connection. CMS News is available as a pdf that Adobe Acrobat can open. Please email the CMS at northeast.cms@hertscc.gov.uk or southwest.cms@hertscc.gov.uk if you'd like to take up this offer. We'll remove you from our postal delivery list and let you know by email when a new edition comes out.

We get several copies returned where recipients have forgotten to inform us that they've moved. Please let us know if your circumstances change. Our contact details are on page 2.