

APPENDIX 15. RATIONAL FOR THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF GRAZING AS AN EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT METHOD

Britain has a considerable amount of Commons or common land that ranges from the wild moors of mountain districts to the densely populated and busy urban areas of major cities where the remaining commons are a greatly valued green space.

Traditionally, at least as far back as the time of the Norman conquest, Commons were a very important part of the social infrastructure. Land held by the Lords of the Manor that was usually of low productivity, ‘the wastes’, were provided for the local inhabitants to graze their domestic livestock and to harvest whatever crops were available. In bygone days, the ability to find grazing and supplies locally was highly valued and over time became formalized as Rights of Common. This system, although quaint by modern standards, was a highly valued and sustainable use of low productivity land.

More often than not, common land occurs on thin soils of low fertility, often over lying gravel/ sand deposits. With already localized settlements such areas were, in the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries, often “enclosed” for the building of new housing or the provision of locally available sands and gravels for road improvements and other local building projects.

With a few exceptions, the enclosure of the Commons led to a reduction in commoners rights and in the numbers of commoners choosing to exercise them. Many commons were saved from further encroachment either by local philanthropists or local authorities, and were generally maintained as open spaces where the public were free to walk.

Common land provides valuable informal recreational areas and are often of wildlife interest, but in many instances, the abandonment of commoners exercising their Right of Common and a lack of other management has led to a decline in the open aspect and an increase in the amount of scrub and woodland.

Whilst trees are a much valued component of the biodiversity and landscape, where they are allowed to extensively colonise open grass and heathland they have a detrimental effect on wildlife. This is because much of our wildlife is specifically adapted to open grassland, characterised by low levels of nutrients and a regular system of nutrient removal and grazing.

To some extent there is still conjecture and discussion as to how these natural ecosystems worked before humans had a major effect on the landscape but it is likely that herds of herbivores, from which our modern livestock have been developed, moved through a semi-wooded and scrubby landscape, grazing open areas and

pushing the woodland areas back. This allowed the plants and animals adapted to this habitat to flourish.

The open grazing system of Commons / wood pasture allowed some of these areas to continue in a semi-natural state, creating a mosaic of habitats from short grassland to scrub and open areas with scattered trees. In effect a habitat was maintained similar to the natural habitats.

This open landscape, where grass, heathland and woodland all meet together allows some of our most important and valuable habitats to flourish. This is not a static state however. The proportion of grassland, scrub and woodland and their distribution would constantly change and would have done so traditionally, according to local changes in the numbers and types of grazing animals as well as from the pressures from the local community.

What has happened in modern times is that with the virtual cessation of all grazing has led to woodland becoming the dominant habitat type. If this continues over many years, the original grassland and heathland communities become difficult to re-establish and the value of the open space to the community declines as it becomes thick impenetrable scrub.

It can be argued that the Commons management system was one of the earliest forms of nature conservation practice, where the natural landscape was valued and maintained and a certain harmony between people and nature sustained. As such Commons and history provide a certain duality between the landscape and natural environment and the progress of civilization.

The need to maintain a traditional landscape within a modern post-industrial society has become the challenge for people who manage Common land.

The Modern Picture

On most of our Commons, the major management tool i.e grazing, has declined to such an extent as to be of virtually no conservation value. Even where grazing has continued uninterrupted, such as in the New Forest, the number of animals used has declined as people have moved onto to other occupations.

Land managers have realized that in most instances they must take responsibility for re-introducing grazing. The constraints usually found are as follows.

Traffic. Obviously modern traffic and free ranging livestock do not mix especially in areas where motorists are not used to animals on the highway. However it has to be realized that there are many areas where it is usual for livestock and vehicles to share the highway.

Property. Preventing livestock from entering into adjacent gardens is often a problem as occupiers are not always available and/or agreeable to gently herding livestock out of their garden. The problems are usually in deciding what level of fencing and gates are required and whether the land managers or the property owners/occupiers should pay for this and the ongoing maintenance.

Recreational use of Common Land. This has increased considerably and should be a welcomed use of the resource. However two problems at least are apparent and can cause problems:

1. Exercise/walking of dogs. Often, the exercising of dogs is considered an important use, or right, of those using open recreational land. The requirement to allow dogs to run free is considered an important need or at very least a custom. And indeed dog walking is an important activity, it provides an important recreational activity, enhancing and maintaining fitness levels, and provides an opportunity to socialise.

However the uncontrolled exercise of dogs in close proximity to livestock can cause problems. Dogs, especially those unused to livestock, are likely to chase livestock, although instances of worrying or actually damage are fortunately rather rare. In most instances the livestock in recreational areas soon become used to dogs and develop strategies for avoiding, or ignoring them. However, where there is traffic close by, it is likely to be unrealistic to allow both free-ranging livestock and free-running dogs unless traffic can be sufficiently slowed to cope with the sudden movement of livestock onto the highway.

Segregation of livestock from free-running dogs is likely to be an inevitable constraint, although dogs on leads in areas that are being actively grazed is usually acceptable.

2. Horse-riding. This in itself does not usually present a problem, except that grazing animals are often curious and may approach horses. Whilst this is not usually a problem, some horses may be unsettled and cause problems of control by the rider. The best solution is again to provide opportunities to segregate the two without reducing opportunities for horse riding.

Summary

The need for re-introducing grazing on Stelling Minnis has been discussed within the main body of the Management Plan but to summarise, grazing would be beneficial because:

1. Grazing is the traditional management method used on the Common and has been largely responsible for creating the habitats found there.
2. With the cessation of grazing it is demonstrable that the biodiversity of the

common is declining and is likely to continue to do so.

3. Alternative methods of management are not as successful as grazing in maintaining the desirable habitats because: grazing is selective and tends to favour the less aggressive and ranker species that could dominate the sward; grazing opens up small pockets e.g. hoof prints which can be colonized by seed; grazing removes nutrients from the area as the grazing animals are eventually removed and so produce a net reduction in the nutrient budget to the area grazed.
4. Grazing is recognized as the optimal management method for areas such as Stelling Minnis Common and continued agri-environmental grants (Countryside Stewardship) now require grazing on the area.