



Commons Link

Newsletter for the Friends of Ludshott and Passfield Commons

 THE NATIONAL TRUST

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COMMON LAND, WILDLIFE & LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION in Holland and Northern Portugal

By Chris Webb

The National Trust owned-land at Ludshott, Passfield and Selborne is part of the cluster of about thirteen old commons that survive in the East Hampshire Weald. Although groups of commons also remain around the New Forest and the Odiham/Yateley area, most of the county's once extensive wood pastures, heaths and downland sheep-walks have been turned into farmland, forestry plantations or have been built over. Across Britain, particularly in the lowlands, and throughout north-western Europe the loss of ancient common land is a familiar story. There are places however, where concerns about protecting these natural landscapes and the traditional ways of life that maintain them are encouraging communities and governments to take action. In the last two years I have visited the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain to see how they are dealing with the conservation of some of their remaining wild places.

Although densely populated, Holland has developed some bold and dynamic conservation projects to preserve their remaining natural areas. Where extensive tracts of heathland in the centre of the country, such as the Veluwezoom National Park, have been set aside as nature reserves, habitats are maintained using old breeds of cattle and horses, which are allowed to interact naturally with the environment in ways very similar to their wild primeval forebears.



Icelandic ponies grazing heathland at the Veluwezoom National Park



The village of Leonen north of Arnhem has established a popular sheep festival when their 'heideschaap' (heath sheep) are gathered for shearing. The sheep follow the 'oompah' band through the village to the festival.

On other heaths and common land grazing with sheep has only recently ceased. The local communities have realised how important the old traditions of livestock keeping and shepherding are for their rural identity and landscape.

There are still considerable areas of moorland and heathland commons (baldios) in northern Portugal. Most of the commoners have abandoned grazing these areas with their goats, sheep and cattle in the last fifty years. As a consequence there are now large areas of impenetrable scrub and many more severe wildfires.



Hillsides of heathland in northern Portugal. This area near Cabeceiras de Basto was last grazed twenty years ago. A great deal of new housing is being built on abandoned common land.

Along with national parks and designated 'natural areas', some remote mountainous places do retain hardy families and communities who live lives which are closely connected to their landscape.

Along with the numerous plots and patches of potatoes, cabbages, rye, and of course vines; cattle are still kept on the ground floor of some houses during the winter, bedded down on heather, broom, gorse and bracken collected from the commons.

Although these places may seem culturally remote from modern East Hampshire, in north-western Europe where traditional land-uses of common land are still prac-

ticed, they in fact provide glimpses into the past of our local commons and how important they were for the people that depended on them. There is no doubt that

people have to work hard in these landscapes and it becomes more apparent each time I visit these special places, that we do too if we are to conserve our remaining wild areas.



Left: Typical traditional accommodation for the family above and cattle below, in the village of Rio de Onor on the Portuguese-Spanish border.



Right: At the end of the winter the soiled bedding is used as manure on the village fields, pastures and meadows. Very rarely today will you see the manure being transported in traditional boat shaped ox carts. I was lucky to chance upon this scene in the Alvao National Park, Portugal.

PLANTS OF THE COMMONS

A series on their flora and fauna

BRACKEN (*Pteridium aquilinum*)

This ubiquitous member of the Fern (Pteridophyta) family is possibly unique among world plants in that it is found in the wild in 6 of the 7 continents. Antarctica escapes but with global warming, who knows the future? Bracken is an aggressive perennial, originating in woodlands but it grows much more strongly in full light. It is most common on acid soils; and woods, heaths and grassland can be carpeted by this robust competitor.

Ferns are flowerless plants. They reproduce by means of spores rather than seeds and thus have quite a different life-cycle. In the spring the leaf fronds first appear as coils which unroll. On their undersides minute spores are produced in sacs called sporangia which are arranged in different patterns in the differing species. In bracken the sacs line the edges of each leaflet and in the late summer the spores are released. They are dispersed by the

wind and in this way colonise fresh places remote from the parents. Each spore, in favourable, moist conditions, germinates into a green scale-like disc, called a prothallus. This is about 0.5in long and bears separate male and female organs. After fertilization, in a film of rainwater or dew, a new plant develops from the egg.

Most of the spread of bracken however, is vegetative through the horizontal underground rhizomes, situated at various depths from a few inches to more than 2 feet, growing most vigorously in soft sandy soils as they can be penetrated easily. The bracken canopy is fully developed from June and July until October when it begins to wither. During the summer it casts a deep shade over the soil surface and during the winter the dead fronds form a thick decaying layer of brown litter. Thus very little else is able to germinate and grow in the spring but if it does manage to do so it is often shaded out in the summer months.

growing to over 6 feet. In 1990 it was reckoned that the extent of bracken cover in Britain was between 1.2 and 2.7% of the total land surface and maybe up to 15% in areas of rough upland grazing in northern England.

Bracken therefore is a very successful species worldwide. It still has many uses overseas and until quite recently in this country was prized for animal bedding thus controlling its growth, but its management on our commons now needs to be on-going. It can be controlled chemically but we prefer to use the mechanical method of the swipe and forage harvester where possible. Unfortunately for us, neither cattle nor rabbits will eat bracken as it is poisonous to them. Its character is redeemed, however, by the wonderful sight of its young 'fiddle-head' leaves pushing up through the soil in May, its distinctive almond scent, and the lacework of yellows, golds and browns of the dying fronds in autumn.

If you enjoy reading this newsletter, please pass it on!

Become a Friend

You will receive your own personal copy of the newsletter, and you will be helping valuable conservation work to ensure the survival of our precious landscape and habitat - 'Forever for Everyone'.

Becoming a Friend costs only £5.00 for a year. Contact the Membership Secretary, Colin Brash on 01428 713256.

Ferns are primitive plants and their extinct relatives can be found 300 million years back in the fossil record. Prehistoric ferns were generally much larger than those of today. Tree ferns reaching 100 feet formed the first forests and the wood of those trees is the basis of today's coal deposits. A few tree fern species survive elsewhere, usually in the tropics, but in Britain bracken is the largest fern, occasionally



CONFORD

Part 4 in a series concerning the history of our Open Space Properties.

Land totalling 231 acres at Passfield & Conford was given to the National Trust in 1948 as a bequest from Dr Arnold Lyndon, who had been the treasurer of the original Committee formed in 1906 to acquire Ludshott Common for the National Trust.

This bequest included Conford Moor, and the ecologically important Conford Bog, which is a rare habitat situated at the geological junction of the Bargate Beds and the Folkestone Beds, which form part of the Lower Greensand rocks of the area. Bargate is a sandy limestone (used for building) which is alkaline, and lies beneath the Folkestone, which is a soft acidic sand often stained brown or yellow by iron oxides. Because of the springline between these two rock types which outcrop on the hillside, alkaline rather than acidic water (which is normal in this area) feeds the Bog. The result is the occurrence of an unusual range of plants and insects, and because of this the conservation management was taken on by the Hants & IOW Naturalists Trust in the 70s under licence, but was returned to the National Trust Committee in 1985 because of the increasing amount of work required.

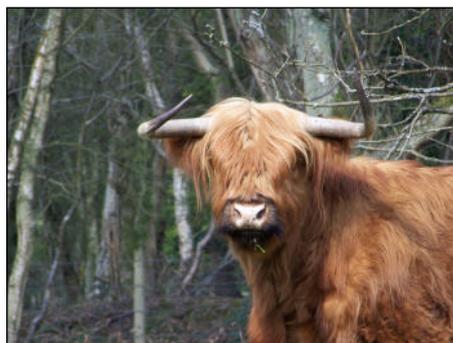


By then, there was increasing concern that the land was gradually drying out, and contact was made with the Thames Water Authority and the Army to enquire whether they had increased water extraction in the area. On receiving negative

responses, a conference was held on site in March 1986 with all interested parties, including the Nature Conservancy Council, which concluded that the problem was caused by the increased growth of vegetation and trees. This was due to the *commoners* ceasing to exercise their *rights* to graze livestock and collect bracken and wood.

The Committee therefore embarked on a programme of scrub and tree clearance, assisted by a plan settled with the NCC and the Hampshire Heathland Project in 1986, and a 5-year Management Plan agreed with the Countryside Commission in 1994, both including financial support. Scots pines which had been planted on the hillside in 1968 were cut down in 1998 to reduce their impact on the water levels as was 5 acres of alder woodland in 2001 which had grown on the original fen area during the previous forty years. All this work has proved quite successful, as the Bog is now wetter than it was in 1986, but it is very labour intensive and weather dependent to maintain the wettest areas, and rarer fen species are still being lost. With intensive management small parts of Conford Moor though are returning much more to their original open character which had been maintained for centuries by grazing. It would have been like a mini New Forest.

On part of Passfield Common, at Hollywater Green, commoners cattle returned in 1990 to graze an area of 60 acres where fencing, gates and stiles had been installed next to the busy roads and along the boundary of the common. Results have been spectacular. Very little mechanical heathland restoration work needs to be carried out, as a walk there will show. The habitat is being maintained sustainably and is extremely healthy.



Conservation cattle, Passfield Common. Shy but also curious, these friendly beasts are quite used to walkers, riders and dogs.

Conford Moor was first notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in June 1984. It was included in the Woolmer Forest SSSI area in 1993 and also in the Wealden Heaths Special Protection Area for Wild Birds in 1998.

Commoners still exist here. After the Commons Registration Act (1965), thirteen neighbouring cottages and nearby farms retained their historic rights. These range from “estovers” (collecting wood for fuel) and cutting bracken for animal bedding, to grazing cattle, horses, goats and geese. “Pannage” allowed pigs to be turned out to eat acorns during the autumn. Traditionally, peat was cut for fuel in the fen areas, but this is no longer a *common right*.

**Guided walks
and Volunteer days**

**Look for posters on the Commons and
in the press for details**

We will be looking for volunteers to help with pine-pulling on 14 November, and garden waste clearance over the winter. If you can spare a few hours we would be delighted to see you.

USEFUL CONTACTS			
Wardens	N.T. Warden's Office		01428 751563
	Chris Webb		07768 830662
	Jim Avenell		07768 830661
	Keith Blackmore		07789 926593
Committee	Dr Susan Salter	Chairman	01428 751409
	David Bird	Hon. Secretary	01428 713814
	Janet Crossman	Hon. Treasurer	01428 751980
	Colin Brash	Membership Secretary	01428 713256
	Kathleen Bird		01428 713814
	David Knighton		01428 608036
	Sylvia Gamble		01420 475501
	Craig Vincor		01428 713532

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The New Workbase

Many of you may have seen recently in the local press that we have again applied for planning permission for a warden's workbase. This is in a different location and if all goes well we will purchase land and develop a new unit. So, at the same time as the planning process is taking place we have applied for authorisation to purchase and build from the NT Projects and Acquisitions Committee. If either of these procedures fail we are back to square one, but we are cautiously optimistic this time.

A purpose built workbase, comprising a workshop, covered storage for machinery, an office, up to date washing facilities, meeting room and archive storage, will make the day to day running of the properties so much easier for the Wardens, and facilitate existing and extra conservation management.

The funding for this project is coming from money accrued over the years for this purpose by the Ludshott NT Committee's fund raising, legacies, and by our Friends' donations. If anyone would like to give a further donation we would be delighted as prices rise inexorably every month and all sorts of unseen costs are becoming apparent. To donate, please contact Janet Crossman, our treasurer, on 01428 751980.

Recent Biological Surveying Work on Ludshott, Passfield and Conford

An important part of our conservation work is the monitoring of the biological condition of our sites, helping us assess the impact of our activity. This requires patient, time-consuming and detailed effort. We benefit greatly from the assistance of volunteers, of varying degrees of expertise, who not only give of their time but some (this year 13) even pay for the privilege to come on a working holiday specifically to help with our bio-survey work.

The most recent Working Holiday, at the end of July, continued the detailed survey of Veteran Trees on Selborne Common before moving the focus of their activity to Hollywater where a detailed survey of the plants and trees around the margins of the pond found eighteen species of trees and shrubs including an Egremont Russet apple, marking the spot where someone

forgot to take the remains of a packed lunch home! A random sample of 5 metre 'quadrats' was taken in an area north of the pond. This area was treated two years ago with 'Asulox' specifically to kill off the Bracken which was blanketing the slope inhibiting other vegetation establishing. The survey confirmed that there is now abundant Purple Moor-grass and Wavy Hair-grass and a plant community containing Ling, Bell Heather and Common Gorse along with occasional Sheep's Sorrel, Common Cow-wheat, Hemp Agrimony and Sheep's-bit, although some Bracken persists in places.

Christmas trees

On Saturday 1 December we plan to cut Christmas trees to be sold on Saturday 8 December at Dunelm car park between 9:30 and 12:30.

We also took the opportunity to establish three new 'transects' on Ludshott Common. This involved surveying a 5 metre wide band of ground between two fixed points. The volunteers then recorded the dominant types of vegetation, the amount of bare ground, and depth in plant litter the length of the transect. In one case this was over 1,000 metres, the other two being a little shorter. The area targeted was that cleared by contractors in 2005 and the data collected provides a vital base from which we can, in future repetitions of the exercise, monitor with some accuracy the rate at which a Heathland vegetation community re-establishes itself on ground previously lost to secondary woodland.

This year we welcomed a German Botanist, Maud von Lampe, who had so enjoyed being on the 2006 Bio-survey that she returned under her own steam to contribute her expertise this year in a focussed survey. Mrs Sandra Baker, of the Selborne Committee, kindly hosted Maud for her

week long stay. A specialist in aquatic and marginal plant species, Maud completed her survey of the wet areas in and around Selborne before turning her attention to Waggoner's Wells. There, amongst other 'finds', we were interested to find a single example of Pink Purslane. Although a non-native species previous vegetation surveys had recorded an abundance of the plant on the banks of the lakes but, perhaps as a consequence of disturbance, it has now become locally scarce.

At Conford, the wet areas near the Hollywater Stream were surveyed although the exceedingly heavy rainfall that morning made the going 'soft' in the extreme! Here Water Mint, Water Figwort and Bogbean were recorded, along with the Marsh Helleborine. Toward the western end of the area surveyed, where there is considerable regeneration of Alder scrub, it was noticeable that the relatively drier ground was allowing less specialised common woodland plant species to establish. All of the data collected is now in the process of being collated and analysed when it will form an important resource for current and future conservation management of our sites.

2007 Events

The "Meet the Wardens" coffee morning at Dunelm car park on 9th June attracted a lot of interest and half a dozen new Volunteers joined us. Eleven people attended the Nightjar walk on 7th July.



100 Years

2008 marks the Centenary of the formation of the Ludshott Commons Committee of the National Trust, and we are planning events to mark this auspicious occasion. Details will be found in the Spring 2008 issue of Commons Link.

Centenary Photographic Competition

To celebrate the changing seasons of our beautiful commons there will be a **Photographic Competition** entitled "The Commons through the Year". The closing date will be 8 September 2008, so get busy with your cameras if you want to capture autumn colours and winter frosts. Prints up to A4 size will be accepted in two classes: Adults (over 16) and Under Sixteens. **Look in the press and the next Commons Link for details.**