

## **Litcham Common Management Committee**

### **Report for Litcham Annual Parish Meeting on 15 May 2023**

Litcham Common is a Local Nature Reserve and a County Wildlife Site. The Management Committee's primary responsibility is to manage the site for wildlife, taking particular account of its importance as an area of lowland heathland. At present, funding is received from Natural England under a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement. The agreement was due to end in February 2022 but has been extended for a period of five years while we wait for the replacement environmental schemes to be set up.

The Management Committee was established in 1984 when Norfolk County Council and Lexham Hall Estate entered into a legal agreement regarding the management of the common. The agreement has never been formally terminated but the County Council no longer provides funding and has not sent a representative to attend committee meetings for some years. The present Committee is made up of Neil Foster (who owns the freehold of the common), Mike Oldfield (representing Litcham Parish Council), Helen Baczkowska (representing the Norfolk Wildlife Trust), Juliette Short, Roger Watts and Tim Angell. Ideally, we would like an additional local person to join the committee. We are looking for someone who supports the committee's aims and objectives and is willing to contribute positively to our work.

Conservation grazing is a key part of the management strategy. We have a herd of four Dartmoor ponies, which have the right qualities of hardiness and an appetite for the rough grazing found on the common. Local volunteers play a vital role in the work that we carry out, and we are very grateful for all they do.

At present we also have five cattle on the common and this number may be increased over the summer months provided the owner is satisfied that there is sufficient grazing. The ponies and cattle complement each other with their different grazing techniques and this helps maintain a diversity of vegetation. Having the right overall number of grazing animals in the summer should also reduce the risk of laminitis in the ponies.

The perimeter fencing, some of which dates back to 2008, is showing its age and in February this year two of our ponies escaped through a section of fence that had collapsed; fortunately, they were persuaded back on to the common without mishap. We have applied for grant funding for comprehensive fence repairs but have been unsuccessful with one bid and are currently waiting to hear following a second application to Breckland Council.

Something that has become more of a problem over the past couple of years is people driving or parking vehicles on the common. This is against the byelaws but is also a criminal offence and so we have put up some signs and produced a leaflet explaining the rules. Most, but not all, motorists are understanding when the rules are explained to them.

Ongoing management work is carried out in accordance with the terms of our HLS agreement with Natural England and we receive advice and support from the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. The Wildlife Trust produced a management statement for us in 2017 and this is available to view on Litcham's website. Work carried out over the past twelve months has included the felling of a relatively small number of mature trees and the continued clearance of scrub that has encroached onto the open heathland areas. This year we are hoping to restore some of the ponds on the common, with support and guidance from the Norfolk Ponds Project.

Litcham Common Management Committee paid Norfolk County Council a lump sum of roughly £75,000 for the installation of the cattle grids, bypass gates and new highway road signage in 2012, on the understanding that the County Council is responsible for all ongoing maintenance. At the 2018 parish meeting I reported our frustrations that both bypass gates were in need of repair and SLOW

markings on the road needed to be reinstated. While the gates have been repaired it is disappointing and frustrating that the SLOW signs have still not been repainted; we were originally told this would be done in 2017!

We will be taking part in a Norfolk Wildlife Trust event in July, sharing our experience of managing the nature reserve. This will involve a walk round the common on Tuesday 4 July. We are also hoping to organise a “fungus foray” this autumn.

Looking ahead, there will always be new challenges, and management work will always be required to complement the grazing, but a lot has been achieved in recent years and we are confident that the common is in a good position to flourish in the future, both for the benefit of wildlife and local people.

Tim Angell