

# CARING FOR CHILTERN COMMONS

**T**his leaflet, part of the **Chilterns Landowners' Guide**, is intended to provide you with some basic information to help you maintain and enhance the natural beauty of your local landscape. It includes suggestions about how owners, commoners and volunteers can maintain and improve the value of commons for wildlife, people and the local landscape.

Commons are among the most characteristic areas of the Chilterns AONB. There are 213 commons in the Chilterns, covering 2,159 hectares or 2.6 % of the area. They range from extensive tracts of open land at the Ashridge Estate to slivers of road side verges that might have been used to drive livestock between grazing sites. Commons have a long history in the community life of the Chilterns. Many remain today as important green spaces at the heart of Chiltern village life.

## What is a Common?

'Common land' dates from the manorial system of medieval times. Under this system, crops were grown on the best soil, but the poorer land, the 'waste', was used for grazing and gathering fuel. All the land in an area was owned by the Lord of the Manor, with some other local people having rights recognised by the courts.

### These common rights included:

- **pasture** (grazing of animals),
- **pannage** (pigs allowed to eat acorns and beech mast),
- **estovers** (wood and bracken used for fuel, building repair and animal bedding),
- **turbary** (turf or peat for fuel),
- **piscary** (fishing),
- **common in the soil** (taking sand, gravel, or stone for use on a commoner's holding).

Some 150- 200 years ago agriculture became more profitable, largely due to an increase in the use of machinery. As the Enclosure Acts were passed, many areas of common or waste land became enclosed by hedges or fences and brought into agricultural production. During this time allotments were often created in return for lost rights over land.

Ownership patterns have changed since then but, contrary to popular belief, commons are not owned by the public. Some 80% are owned by private individuals or by organisations like the National Trust. There are still commoners in the Chilterns but few exercise their rights. However commons remain important for public enjoyment and for wildlife conservation. They also contain many features of historical interest and the existence of commoners' rights is a link with the land use of yesteryear.



## Commons Today

The remaining common land in the Chilterns was registered under the Commons Registration Act 1965 and the register can be viewed at County Council records offices.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 created new rights of public access to common land. This is also known as 'Open Access'. All common land over one acre that falls within the scope of the Act is available for quiet recreation.

Other commons legislation covers a wide range of issues including byelaws, access, the regulation of enclosure and the rights of commoners and owners. This is a complex issue beyond the scope of this leaflet. For further information contact the Open Spaces Society in Henley (01491 573535, [www.oss.org.uk](http://www.oss.org.uk)) or the AONB office.

## Why Manage Commons?

The commons we have inherited are the result of many years of management by local people. Because this management has never been very intensive, many local commons are important for wildlife with several designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. These include part of Nettlebed Common, Moor End Common, Naphill Common and part of the Ashridge Estate, (a combined area of over 100 ha.) Woodland cover has increased on many sites as grazing and other uses have disappeared and management is needed if the remaining mix of trees, open spaces with grasses, heathers and bracken, ponds and historical features is to be maintained.

### Management might include:

- Carrying out a wildlife survey of the common's wildlife and habitats.
- Controlling invasive scrub and bracken to maintain grassland and wildflowers.
- Felling selected trees to open out glades or prevent the loss of grassland or heath.
- Pollarding very old or 'veteran trees' to prolong their life.
- An autumn cut or grazing areas of grassland to prevent the development of coarse grasses and scrub and to encourage wildflowers. Grazing will involve taking advice on enclosure and undertaking local consultation.
- Pond conservation by clearing out some of the silt and managing trees and shrubs to maintain a mix of light and shade conditions. Areas of rough grass next to ponds will encourage amphibians such as frogs and newts. Expert advice should be sought before undertaking any pond work to minimise disruption to wildlife. The Conservation Board produces a free leaflet on ponds as part of its Landowners' Guide.
- Keeping rights of way clear and considering surface improvements for improved winter use. Liaising with footpath officers at the relevant County Council is recommended as funding and advice may be available.
- Surveying historical features and discussing management needs with County Council heritage officers.



*Heather on Kingwood Common*



*Pond on Wheeler End Common*



*Military Orchids at Moor End Common*

**This is only a flavour** of some of the work that can be done on commons and in many cases grants may be available for owners and commons groups to help care for their sites. Conservation Board staff may be able to provide further support and advice or point you in the direction of specialist help. For further information on these and other management issues please refer to other AONB advice notes or visit <http://www.chilternsaonb.org/sites.asp?type=4>.

This also includes information on the Chilterns Commons Network which is a Conservation Board initiative to assist in the sharing of skills and information across the Chilterns.

#### Why not join up to find out more about commons issues and events?

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**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION,  
PLEASE CONTACT**



**an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**