Commons in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

For more information about the Chilterns Commons Project and commons in the region, go to www.chilternsaonb.org/commons

This report was produced by the Chilterns Conservation Board, The Lodge, 90 Station Road, Chinnor, Oxfordshire, OX39 4HA (tel 01844 355500). It can be downloaded from www.chilternsaonb.org/products/downloads

Front cover main image - Moorend Common by Claire Forrest
Small images from top to bottom -
Contractors restoring Five Knolls on Dunstable Downs by Rachel Sanderson
Volunteers surveying WWI troop training trenches on Berkhamsted Common by Colin Drake
Charleywood School pupils on Charleywood Common by James Aldridge
Bricks, Boggers and Broomsticks event by Chris Smith
Volunteer work party on Kingwood Common by Clive Ormonde
Summary

The Chilterns Commons Project was a four-year, Heritage Lottery funded partnership project focussed on commons in the Chilterns region. Working with those who own and manage commons, the project restored habitats and historic features on commons and improved access. The project also ran a programme of events and training workshops for volunteers and local communities. The project was highly successful, achieving its aims while capturing the enthusiasm and imagination of people of all age groups across the Chilterns.

Background

Commons have been at the heart of our communities since medieval times. There are 170 registered commons in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covering 2,100 hectares. These commons are important, not only for their extensive coverage of the AONB, but because they often have high quality wildlife habitats and historic features. Many have either a local or national nature conservation designation, and all are ‘open access’ land as defined by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Commons have suffered from under management, neglect or mismanagement for many years. These days only a handful of commons in the Chilterns are still managed traditionally with grazing which has resulted in most formerly open commons becoming secondary woodland.

In common with lowland commons elsewhere in the country, as their economic value declined, the social value as a local amenity increased. More recently, local community groups have taken an interest but, almost without exception, they have been groups of volunteers with access to limited manpower and funding.

Chilterns Commons Network

Many commons have local groups which are dedicated to looking after them or as part of their wider environmental interest. For many years the Chilterns Conservation Board (the Board) has fostered expansion of these groups and co-operation between them and has, since 1999, hosted the (unconstituted) Chilterns Commons Network.

The Board created the Network to provide a forum of all these groups. Initially the Network concentrated on provision of information, site visits to encourage collaboration and learning, and published a regular newsletter. By 2009, such was the scale of the task and enthusiasm of local groups and several landowners that an application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund for major funding.
The Heritage Lottery Fund initially awarded a grant of £34,600 to prepare a development plan and application for the Chilterns Commons Project. That application was successful and the HLF awarded a grant of £403,000 in June 2011 for a four-year project. Rachel Sanderson was appointed as the Project Officer and the project was launched in September. Its main aims were:

- To conserve the natural and preserve the cultural heritage on selected commons - essentially a programme of practical works
- To inspire and enable local people to play a more active role in conserving, enhancing and interpreting the heritage of commons - i.e. volunteer involvement
- To raise awareness of the natural and cultural heritage of the commons - i.e. community engagement
- An assessment on how lowland commons can be managed sustainably in the future.

These can be summed up as a desire to reconnect people with the land around them - its past, its present and, even more importantly, its future - not just the ecological aspects but the human as well.
The Project by numbers

To meet its aims, the Chilterns Commons Project committed to deliver a broad range of activities. The achievements can be summarised as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Delivered</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitat enhancement to conserve natural heritage</td>
<td>10 - 15</td>
<td>18 commons</td>
<td>120%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration and management of historic features</td>
<td>6 including 3 Scheduled Monuments</td>
<td>8 commons including 4 Scheduled Monuments</td>
<td>133%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and/or interpretation works</td>
<td>Up to 15</td>
<td>18 information boards on 12 commons, 3 other access projects</td>
<td>140%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide specialist advice for archaeological and species surveys</td>
<td>8+ surveys and reports</td>
<td>10 ecological surveys, 3 archaeological surveys</td>
<td>163%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geological surveys</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 geological surveys</td>
<td>An extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-day workshops to teach volunteers about aspects relating to the management of commons</td>
<td>27 workshops, 15 attendees per course</td>
<td>43 workshops, 800 attendees, average of 19</td>
<td>159%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage with volunteers</td>
<td>300 people</td>
<td>284 people</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of volunteer time</td>
<td>£65,000</td>
<td>£91,050</td>
<td>140%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ‘living history’ event for families to include displays of traditional activities which would have occurred on commons</td>
<td>500+ attendees</td>
<td>1,400 people attended Bricks, Bodgers &amp; Broomsticks at the Chiltern Open Air Museum in June 2013</td>
<td>280%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>An online film was produced by volunteers following Bricks, Bodgers &amp; Broomsticks</td>
<td>An extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community art projects with children</td>
<td>2 different schools</td>
<td>Year 4 from West Wycombe Combined School &amp; Year 4 from Chorleywood Primary School</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art competition inspired by Chilterns commons</td>
<td></td>
<td>50 entries</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-guided walks leaflets</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7 leaflets</td>
<td>An extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conference about the history of commons at the start of the project</td>
<td>50 attendees</td>
<td>150 attendees</td>
<td>300%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publish reports following research on the historic environment and the future role of commons</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11 reports</td>
<td>183%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conference about the history of commons at the end of the project</td>
<td>80 attendees</td>
<td>130 attendees</td>
<td>163%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conference on the role of lowland commons in the 21st century</td>
<td>80 attendees</td>
<td>70 attendees</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...in addition

- £9,305 worth of tools and equipment was bought for 14 friends groups, ranging from scales to weigh hazel dormice to brush-cutters.
- 10 grants worth over £1,000 were provided for friends groups to enable them to organise local events.
The Chilterns Commons Project was truly a partnership across the Chilterns region, extending beyond the boundary of the Chilterns AONB. As well as community activities, a total of £106,392 (net) was spent funding practical work on commons.

The Chilterns Conservation Board is very grateful to those who own and manage the commons which benefitted from practical work for allowing the project to work on their land. In alphabetical order, these partners were:-

Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Company  
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust  
Booker Common & Woods Protection Society  
Box Moor Trust  
Central Bedfordshire Council  
Chalfont St Peter Parish Council  
Chiltern District Council  
Chiltern Society  
Chorleywood Parish Council  
Christine Stott  
Coleshill Common Management Committee  
Coleshill Parish Council  
Downley Common Preservation Society  
Friends of Naphill Common  
Friends of Studham Common  
Hawridge & Cholesbury Commons Preservation Society  
Ibstone Parish Council  
Kensham Farms  
Lane End Conservation Group  
Lane End Parish Council  
National Trust (Ashridge Estate)  
National Trust (Dunstable Downs and Whipsnade Estate)  
National Trust (Hughenden Estate)  
Nettlebed & District Commons Conservators  
Sarratt Parish Council  
Watlington Environment Group  
Watlington Parish Council  
Wildlife Trust Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire  
Woodcote Conservation Group  
Woodcote Parish Council

Where applicable, permission was also obtained from Natural England for work on Sites of Special Scientific Interest, from English Heritage (now Historic England) for work on Scheduled Monuments, and from the Forestry Commission for tree work.
Chilterns Commons Project ... a landscape partnership

Aldbury Pond surveys. Bought loppers and bow saws for volunteers.
Austenwood Cleared holly scrub.
Berkhamsted Volunteer survey of WWII troop training trenches. Cleared scrub, installed directional finger posts, installed an information board.
Bison Hill Cleared scrub from chalk grassland.
Booker Bought new tool shed and brush cutter for volunteers.
Box Moor Planted a new hedge.
Bradham Hill Tree work and cleared holly scrub around The Clumps. Installed an information board.
Cadmore End Pond surveys. Installed two information boards.
Chorleywood Restored Church Pond. Installed three information boards. Funded an art project with a local primary school.
Coleshill Installed new steps and widened access from Windmill Hill. Tree work on the common and at the common pond. Installed an information board.

Hawridge & Cholesbury Bought billhook, waders and pond net for volunteers.
Ibstone Pond surveys and restored three ponds.
Ley Hill Laid an ancient boundary hedge. Installed an information board.
Maidensgrove Scrubs Work to ancient beech coppice.

Moorend Archaeological, geological and invertebrate surveys. Tree work. Installed an information board.
Naphill Geological and pond surveys. Bought brush cutter, chest waders and pond net for volunteers.
Nettebed Pond and bryophyte surveys. Restored Stradwell pond. Installed a natural play trail and an information board.
Northend Pond restoration.
Peppard Scrub and tree clearance to restore heathland.

Litstone Tree work and scrub clearance to restore the Moneybury Hill Scheduled Monument. Installed an information board.
Roughdown Installed an information board.
Sheethanger Installed an information board.
Studham Bought a new tool shed, bat boxes, dormice scales, GPS and digital recording equipment for volunteers.
Totternhoe Knolls Bought GPS units for botanical and Lepidoptera surveys by volunteers. Tree work to restore the bank and ditch between the middle and outer baileys at Totternhoe Castle Scheduled Monument.
Watlington Chalk Pits Cleared scrub from chalk grassland.
West Wycombe Hill Cleared scrub from chalk grassland. Tree work on the ramparts to restore the hill fort Scheduled Monument. Funded an art project with the local primary school.
Whipsnade Heath Tree work. Bought brush cutter, work gloves and bow saw blades for volunteers.
Woodcote Restored the Upper Pond. Repaired the Victorian brick ‘dipping well’ water filter.
Having drawn up the plans for the Commons Project back in 2010, we expected some things to subsequently change. The project delivered everything it set out to, and more. We are grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund for allowing us the flexibility to respond positively to the unexpected.

A couple of unplanned factors had to be considered in the programme of practical works. The first of these was the weather. After three years of low rainfall, wet weather raised the water in the pond at Woodcote to an unusually high level which delayed completion of the restoration work to the Victorian ‘dipping well’ water filter. Fortunately, the work, which started in March 2012, was eventually completed in December 2014.

Secondly, the planned restoration of erosion scars on the motte at Totternhoe Knolls was subsequently included within a Historic and Archaeological Feature Protection grant as part of a new Higher Level Stewardship Scheme for the common. As a result, the planned work was withdrawn from the Commons Project. This released monies which paid for extra, no less valuable, tree works on the baileys at Totternhoe Knolls instead.

We have been delighted with the enthusiasm of so many of the project’s volunteers. Their keenness to help spread the message about the treasure trove of commons in the Chilterns has broadened the outreach of the project’s activities in unexpected directions.

We are indebted to volunteers from the Reading Film and Video Makers club who made a film about commons using footage taken at the family activity day *Bricks, Bogders & Broomsticks* with old photographs provided by friends groups. We are also very grateful to a team of volunteers who devised, photographed and tested seven self-guided circular walks which cross commons. The film and walks are on the website.

Kite Festival at Dunstable Downs *by Chris Walker*
Legacy

People
The Chilterns Commons Project leaves a substantial legacy not least in terms of the many groups and individuals who have been involved with the project’s activities. More people now know more about their local common. Thanks to the comprehensive training programme, more people now know how to look after their common. More commons in the Chilterns now have groups of friends and existing groups have been revitalised with new (often younger) members who have been inspired to get involved. The friends groups are holding more regular work parties and more local events for their communities, from guided walks to picnics, demonstrating that the project has succeeded in reconnecting people with their commons.

Equipment
The project has supported the friends groups by equipping them with a wide range of tools and equipment including bowsaws and loppers, chest waders and pond nets, digital equipment for recording oral histories and even a tug of war rope. The groups remain part of an active network in which knowledge, experience and equipment is shared at regular events.

Surveys
The project commissioned 16 surveys to better understand the geology, history and wildlife of commons in the region. Many of the ecological surveys recorded species which are locally rare and had never been recorded on that common before. The survey reports have been submitted to the relevant county Environmental Records Centres and are available to download from the website. Results of many of the surveys have already been used to inform practical work funded by the project and to create a new baseline for future species monitoring.

Practical work
The legacy of the practical work funded by the project falls into different, but interlinked, categories. The restoration work to historic features has been invaluable, preserving the past for future generations to enjoy. As well as enhancing habitats, tree work and scrub clearance has opened up many commons, often making paths wider and resulting in a more welcoming atmosphere for visitors. Repeat surveys demonstrate that there has been an increase in both the abundance and diversity of species, many of which are no longer common in the farmed countryside, following some of the practical work and the information boards raise awareness by providing background to a common’s geology, history and/or wildlife.

Website and publications
The Chilterns Conservation Board’s website now includes pages dedicated to commons. 186 commons appear on an interactive map, together with supporting information about them. The website also includes a wealth of educational resources - handouts from the training workshops, the films, and sign-posting to other specialist websites. The self-guided walks leaflets and the two books of research papers, Our Common Heritage and Local Spaces: Open Minds, can also be downloaded from the website and Our Common Heritage is in every library in and close to the Chilterns AONB from Reading to Hitchin.
Spreading the message

In addition to spreading the message about commons in the local media, the Project Officer, Rachel Sanderson:-

- Gave 34 talks and led 11 guided walks for over 1,700 people.
- Was interviewed on Radio 4's Farming Today in April 2012.
- Was interviewed on Radio 4's On Your Farm in March 2013.
- Had a 3 page article about the project in the March 2014 edition of Country Living magazine.
- Contributed to the Newcastle University School of Law's project Building Commons Knowledge at three events in 2013.
- Provided advice to other HLF projects about commons - in Surrey and in Tooting.
- Presented to the National Common Land Stakeholders Group meeting at Defra in June 2015, proposing a new national initiative for lowland commons based on the success of the Chilterns Commons Project.

The Chilterns Commons Project had 20 financial partners. In alphabetical order these were:-

Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Company
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust
Box Moor Trust
Central Bedfordshire Council
Chiltern District Council
Chiltern Society
Chilterns Conservation Board
Chorleywood Parish Council
Coleshill Parish Council
Downley Common Preservation Society
Downley Parish Council
Friends of Naphill Common
Heritage Lottery Fund
Lane End Conservation Group
Lane End Parish Council
National Trust (Ashridge Estate)
National Trust (Dunstable Downs and Whipsnade Estate)
National Trust (Hughenden Estate)
Nettlebed & District Commons Conservators
Our volunteers for their valuable time, effort and dedication

The Chilterns Conservation Board would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund and the project’s other financial partners for making the Chilterns Commons Project possible.
A personal review from the project officer, Rachel Sanderson

For my part, it has been enormously rewarding to see attitudes change from one where isolated groups of keen volunteers strove against the odds, often ill-equipped and with little practical knowledge other than their own wits and beliefs and with little outside help, to one where commons friends groups are now interacting with each other. The training provided by the project has made what seemed impossible now ‘doable’. There is a huge web-base of information, volunteers and contacts have been gathered, all age groups have become more actively involved in commons and there is a growing sense of just how important the Chiltern commons and adjacent open spaces are in this crowded corner of south-east England.

I am thrilled and delighted by the project’s achievements which far surpass the original aims and am very proud of the legacy that we are leaving behind. Here are a few quotes from some of those involved with the project.

After making their film “The Hill”, children from West Wycombe School said
“I knew only a little bit (about West Wycombe Common/Hill) now I know lots.”
“I am quite glad that we have the common on our door-step.”
“I'm glad it's there - we're lucky.”
“I think the common is really important not just to us but to other people.”

The class teacher from Chorleywood Primary School involved with the art project said
“Taking them [the children] out of their classroom to explore this environment first hand enabled them to focus on the topics with great passion and enthusiasm which have been captured in the works of art which depict nature through the eyes of a child.”

The project’s extensive training programme increased the skills, knowledge and confidence of those who look after commons.

“Without the course you ran, I would have done just about everything wrong. It was extremely useful that the excellent course notes were available on the website to refer to.” (workshop about writing site management plans)
“Absolutely brilliant - just what I needed” (workshop on planning species surveys)
“Going from no knowledge to some is both exciting and a little dangerous!” (workshop on identifying butterflies)
“As it is the end of the project, may I say how impressed I have been with what you have organised and for the very interesting events I have attended.”

The project’s public events about the social history of commons also attracted large audiences and were well received. After the family event Bricks, Bodgers and Broomsticks visitors said
“That was a fantastic day. I would have happily paid for entry.”
“Brilliant! When are you doing this again?”
Following the conference Our Common Heritage which looked at various historical aspects of commons, attendees wrote
“This day was inspirational, I struggle with commons and the day prompted me not to give up … one of the best days I have ever attended.”
“The speakers were both informative and, in some cases, entertaining. For anyone who did not attend, they missed out on something.”

I believe that all the hard work has been worth it. You only have to look around the Chilterns and talk to those involved to realise the value of the project to the commons and to the people who care for, and are passionate about, them. With the continued support of the Commons Network, which originally conceived the project, the project’s legacy is assured. I cannot hope for more.
An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty