

Cleeve Common Annual Report 2010



Chairman's Report

Without doubt the 'big story' of 2010 was the installation of a mains water network across the Common. This major project, costing nearly £400,000, was made possible through funding from Natural England. Although the work took longer than anticipated, it was completed before winter set in, enabling watering of the cattle in their enclosures without daily tractor and tanker trips across the Common. The project is a significant advance in our ability to maintain successful conservation grazing.



But before all this happened, we endured a second severe winter, making feeding and watering the cattle an arduous job for our Rangers. Regrettably, as usual the melting snow revealed a great deal of debris left by tobogganers.

In September Alistair Bird, our long-standing agricultural consultant, decided to stand down. Alistair has provided invaluable guidance to the Board for the past 20 years and was a lynchpin in securing funding under the Cotswold Hills ESA scheme. This supported numerous projects such as stone wall restoration, gorse cutting and dredging of the Washpool.

The Board is delighted by the progress our Conservation Officer, Ellie Phillips, has made in monitoring the habitat of Cleeve Common and engaging with local naturalist groups. Her report provides more detail of what has been achieved in 2010. Regrettably, however, we have made much less progress than hoped in sorting out encroachment issues and negotiating a new lease for the Golf Course.

During the winter months a Board sub-group has been working on signage and information. We intend to bring in new orientation boards, leaflets and a revised website during 2011. We are also in the early stages of reviewing the management structure for the Common to reflect the growing amount of work and changing times. We must however avoid being too ambitious: the coming years will inevitably see a squeeze on funding and we may find it harder to manage the Common to the standards we aspire to.

Our staff worked very hard throughout the year and the Board is, as always, most grateful to our Clerk, our two Rangers, our Conservation Officer and our Voluntary Wardens.

Financial report will be added when accounts have been audited.

Michael Bates
Chairman, Cleeve Common Board of Conservators
January 2011

Conservation Programme

The efforts of our grazing regime are really paying dividends and the winter 2009/2010 paddocks in Postlip Valley looked in excellent condition come spring. The difference in the frequency of herbs throughout the sward and the amount of 'thatch' (uneaten dead grass) between the newly grazed paddocks and the sward further up the valley was quite marked; you could even straddle the 'diversity line' between the grazed and un-grazed sward!



Management of the herd is not without its challenges and unfortunately following the death of one of our steers in early spring we lost an additional three cattle to TB during 2010. Two consecutive clear tests finally rendered us 'TB free' in December. Our herd now stands at 36 and continues to thrive. With the increased frequency of testing it became apparent that our now fully grown cattle (who each weigh in excess of 500 kg) had out-grown our old crush and it was

decided to upgrade our cattle handling facilities for both the safety of our rangers and for the welfare of the cattle.

Our habitat monitoring has really taken shape this year, with the introduction of grassland condition assessments. We recruited and trained up a team of 15 volunteers to carry out these surveys on the Common through June and July. The data gathered allowed us to prioritise our efforts and directly informed our decisions on scrub clearance and winter grazing. The data can now be used as a baseline to measure change of condition of the grassland as our work progresses. We are extremely grateful to all the volunteers who committed time and enthusiasm to the surveys and hope that many of them will return to help us in 2011.



Meanwhile we discovered great crested newts and at least two species of bat roosting on the Common; all of these species are protected by European legislation. Moth trapping sessions were held throughout the season and several Nationally Notable species were found. Through work with a local bryologist we have discovered that Cleeve Common is an exceptional site for mosses. Finally, we began work on updating our management for the heather plots and commenced a trial to restore a small area of heather outside of the enclosure; like calcareous grassland, heathland is a declining habitat across the UK - it is particularly unusual in the Cotswolds.

In addition to our baseline monitoring, several recording groups visited the Common this year, including Cheltenham Bird Club, Gloucestershire Rare Plants Group,

Gloucestershire Invertebrate Group and Cotswold Fungus Group. These groups, along with the many individual recorders who have been very generous with their time, have all generated invaluable survey data; a particular highlight was a discovery of a rare 'bug', *Hallodapus montandonii*, which has 'Red Data Book 3' status and has not been seen in Gloucestershire for over 60 years.



The capital works programme under our Higher Level Stewardship agreement progressed well in 2010, with gorse clearance targeting priority areas to leave a mosaic of scrub for future rotational management. A new tractor, a Kubota M128, was purchased before the VAT increase as the older tractor lacked the power needed to clear tall, dense gorse. Preventive clearance of young scrub meant that we were preventing degradation of the grassland by 'nipping it in the bud'.

Events Programme

We ran several events in 2010, beginning in April with a dawn chorus walk in collaboration with Cheltenham Bird Club. Despite the 4 am start, this event was very well attended, with one member of the public commenting: "*We are all pretty busy these days and I really appreciate people taking the time to share such a simple, but hugely enjoyable pleasure*".



We led several guided walks throughout the summer months, including a Conservation Walk as part of the award-winning Winchcombe Cotswolds Walking Festival, a Wild Flower Walk for Cotswold Wild Flower Week and a walk for the Disabled Ramblers. The Disabled Ramblers hold regular rambles throughout England and Wales using all-terrain, power wheelchairs called 'Trampers'. The event was a great success, attracting nearly 20 members of the Ramblers plus partners from all over the country. We worked closely with the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens for many of our walks, and were happy to lead a guided walk over the Common for their annual walk as a 'thank you'.



We hosted a FWAG conservation grazing workshop which attracted attendees from Cheltenham Borough Council, Hartpury College, the Countryside & Community Research Institute, as well as local farmers. We were able to share knowledge and best practice on managing cattle for conservation and made some useful contacts on the day. We also gave indoor talks throughout the year to various organisations, including Rotary Clubs, WIs and Probos Clubs.

Ellie Phillips
Conservation Officer