

Thriving Countryside Award

Shortlisted: Returning Grazing to Whitwell Common

As an ‘ownerless common’, Whitwell Common SSSI has been maintained for over 20 years by a management committee of local Trustees, Norfolk County Council, Natural England and, in recent years, The Hawk and Owl Trust, based at Sculthorpe Moor. Whitwell Common is a little-known nature reserve on Nowhere Lane (2 miles south of Reepham). Despite its size, the common contains wet woodland, reed bed, deciduous woodland and a stone-bottomed stream called Nowhere Beck.



(Picture: Highland Cattle cooling down on Whitwell Common)



(Picture: Orange Tip on Cuckoo Flower)

What the site is really notable for however, is the rare valley-mire plant community.

Bog plants with fantastic names like adder’s tongue, bog pimpernel, marsh heliborine, grass of Parnassus and fragrant orchid all grow here.

The management of the common had been funded by various countryside stewardship schemes over the years owing to the high ecological value of the SSSI, but with the Higher Level Stewardship scheme due to end in 2018 and uncertainty about future

funding for nature conservation, it was time to think of a long term sustainable way to manage the common and keep it open and accessible to the public. So in April 2014 we began a project to fence the important area of the common and graze with highland cows. We applied to the Secretary of State for the Environment for approval to fence common land. This was a lengthy task requiring wide consultation with Natural England, The Open Spaces Society, Reepham Town Council, two public events at Reepham Church Hall, and public notices in the local press.



(Picture: local children collecting manure for an allotment project)

At around the same time, we began looking for funding for the project, and approached the Biffa Awards scheme for a grant to pay for fencing, a corral for the livestock, ditch clearance and a sluice gate to manage the water levels on the site.

The Biffa Awards were very excited by our idea for local sustainable management for the site and offered the full funding.

The project culminated on a sunny evening in July 2017 when two Highland cows provided by Stephen Yarham arrived on the site. They were watched by local people, Bishop Tony Footitt (who is also a retired Trustee), Peter Lambley (who is a previous site advisor from English Nature and a continual supporter), long serving contractors, the Trustees and local reporters to record the occasion.

Since the event, we continue to be inspired by the common and have made connections with Reepham High School Allotment Club, to collect bales of fen vegetation that is baled by the Hawk and Owl Trust as a way of removing nutrients from the common.

We also have an annual open day with special wildlife themes. June 17th 2018 was about wild flowers and moths.

Most recently, we have acquired the BT telephone box at the entrance to the site under the 'Adopt a Kiosk' scheme, and will be turning it into a visitor centre!

We have also had positive feedback from Natural England about our current application for Higher Tier Stewardship from 2018-2023.



(Picture: first pond reclaimed on Whitwell Common SSSI)