

Ditchfield Common Management Plan

Approved at a meeting of Lane End Parish Council on 8 April 2013.

Vision

The Parish Council's vision for the future of Ditchfield Common is to manage it in such a way as to enhance its amenity value for the residents of Lane End Parish whilst, where possible, maintaining and improving its wildlife habitats. This aim is flexible enough to adapt to changing needs and pressures from both the human and natural worlds.

This Plan addresses two broad areas - 'habitat management', i.e. grassland, woodland and 'physical' - e.g. parking and track maintenance.

Introduction

To quote from Octavia Hill: 'I think we all need four things. Places to sit in, places to play in, places to stroll in, and places to spend a day in'. It is for these reasons and others that Lane End Parish Council (LEPC) completed the purchase of Ditchfield Common on 31 January 2012. More than 110 residents contributed over £28,000 and the Chilterns Conservation Board provided a generous grant towards the purchase.

It is clear from even a cursory examination of historical evidence - maps, photographs and personal memories - that Ditchfield was once more open. The present increasingly wooded nature - particularly the southern half - is a relatively recent feature reflecting the abandonment of traditional practices such as grazing and wood gathering. Indeed, one of the later photographs shows sheep being driven up Ditchfield.

Wetland features are to be found on many commons, and Ditchfield is no exception, most frequently where former winning of clay for brick and tile making has left pits and hollows. These ponds add an interesting dimension to habitat variety and allow varying degrees of shade which, in turn, will be reflected in fauna diversity.

During this Plan's preparation, LEPC received valuable advice from John Morris (Director, Chilterns Woodland Project), Rachel Sanderson MIEEM (Project Officer - Chiltern Commons Project), Andy McVeigh (biologist), Kath Daly (Countryside Officer - Chilterns Conservation Board) and historical insights from a number of residents of the Parish of Lane End.

Executive Summary

A simple and undemanding plan is proposed aimed at conserving and monitoring what already exists. A few capital projects, e.g. traffic management could be added if felt desirable.

Grass cutting requires improving with the aim of any new regime to strike a better balance between the 'natural' and 'urban' look. Property owners will be encouraged to continue the practice of cutting the small grass banks in front of their properties whilst private cutting of larger areas of the common, outside a number of properties, will be discouraged; with such areas included within the grass cutting contract.

LEPC will actively discourage the dumping of garden rubbish including unwanted plant material and hedge / grass cuttings on the Common.

Scrub - an important habitat for wildlife - will be lightly managed to create micro-climates for invertebrates and reptiles.

Bracken will be retained, in some areas, though kept under control. Invasive species like Japanese Knotweed or Himalayan Balsam will be treated as soon as they are identified.

Consideration will be given to the introduction of appropriate species to increase plant diversification where applicable.

The area between the Forge and the southern part of Ditchfield including the semi-open pond could be left as a minimal intervention area apart from some limited thinning of young trees and under-storey.

Elsewhere on the common, it is proposed to increase the life expectancy, and visibility, of some mature and semi-mature trees by a limited clearance of the dense younger trees and scrub surrounding them. Coppicing along the southern part of Church Road will be considered to provide a more open view line from the road and improve road safety.

'Sight-lines' will be created to improve the visual connectivity between the various sections of the Common.

Any proposed works would be carried out over a period of years rather than at one 'fell swoop'.

Ponds and water courses will be surveyed and plants / invertebrates recorded before any works are recommended.

Car parking in Lane End is an increasing problem of which LEPC is fully aware. It will be consulting with local residents and other users as to the best way forward.

Track maintenance of each of the four tracks will be treated separately since each have particular problems. LEPC's aim is to achieve improvements to the tracks in a cost effective and appropriate manner. LEPC is minded to allocate some funds for advice and then to assess both the methods and costs involved in consultation with the residents and other users, i.e. church and village hall.

Permission for bonfires will not be withheld unreasonably provided that prior consent had been sought and appropriate H&S etc. measures put in place.

LEPC is currently loathe to introduce Bye-laws; however, this decision will be kept under review.

The Common will, inevitably, require funding in addition to the money currently spent on grass cutting and this is a subject that needs very careful consideration. However, LEPC is minded to allocate an annual sum towards the common's maintenance. For larger scale or specific works, alternative funding streams will need to be found. Funding is currently available through the Commons Project for practical work on Ditchfield Common and also for events.

Getting more people - of every age and interest - aware of, and involved in, Ditchfield Common will be fundamentally important if the Common is to be part of the community and its life. LEPC will do all that it can to develop this interest.

Site

Ditchfield Common (c4.63ha) is centred around National Grid reference SU 805915, is owned by LEPC, is registered with Land Registry under Land Title Number BM 368643 and is also registered under the Common Registration Act 1965 with the identifier of CL48. Under this Act, two individuals have the right to graze a maximum of 25 sheep and 50 cattle between them.

The Title Map indicates certain areas of the land mass which have been retained by the previous owner, land owned by Holy Trinity Church together with a section of land owned by The Forge Works reducing that part wholly owned by LEPC to c3.94ha. The Holy Trinity Parochial Church Council acquired the semi-circle of land adjacent to the north wall of the churchyard in October 1972.

Following purchase, the boundaries of the Common were reviewed and where doubt existed, clarification was sought with adjoining owners, e.g. the Forge, the entrance to the allotments, Culver Graphics, Aldersyde and the Village Hall.

After purchase completion, an initial consultation evening was held for Ditchfield Common residents and near neighbours together with representatives from the Village Hall, the Church, the Forge and the Lane End Management Centre at which various issues were identified, views sought and people invited to join the Ditchfield Common Working Group.

Geology

The significance of the Common's geology, ecology and biological diversity - past and present - is of great importance.

Ditchfield Common lies on an unusual geological outlier of London Clay and Reading Beds with some gravel and sand deposits, isolated within the general chalk of the Chilterns Plateau. The Reading Formation is mainly 'sandy' while London Clay, by contrast, is much 'heavier' and is an ideal brick making material reflected in the former industry round Lane End. These formations result in acid and, in places, waterlogged soils with heath, grassland, marsh, scrub, and woodland communities containing a wide variety of species many of which are now swamped by uncontrolled secondary regeneration - a subject addressed within this Management Plan.

Management options for the Common's future

Habitats

Ditchfield Common contains remnants of open, formerly more extensive, habitats including acid grassland, bracken, heather, invading birch, willow, aspen and gorse. A full list of species is attached as Appendix C.

Managing green open space in urban / sub-urban areas such as Ditchfield Common is always a balance between the interests of wildlife and the needs of the community as more wildlife is found in areas which are not intensively managed, though keeping the common near the front of the church 'tidy' is obviously important to the village. However, simple actions can be undertaken which will enhance species diversity.

Without the traditional practices of grazing and fuel gathering - neither of which is a viable option to-day - Ditchfield would have become entirely wooded if no alternative management method (grass cutting) had been introduced and therein lies a delicate balance. Many like the present partially wooded nature of the common but without continuous work any hard earned 'thinning' would soon be lost. Additionally, the effort and resources necessary to fundamentally alter the common's appearance would be prohibitive both in money and time and thus a 'light-handed' and sustainable approach to future management needs to be found.

When drawing up this Plan, realism had to play a large part both in what could be practically achieved by a group of volunteers and the budget availability from LEPC. While it would be 'nice' to embark on a wholesale rejuvenation of the Common, that path is neither sustainable nor realistic.

What is essentially proposed is a simple and undemanding plan aimed at conserving and monitoring what already exists, which will be well within the limited human and financial resources available. To this could be added some small scale improvements and, possibly (depending upon LEPC's views) a few capital projects, e.g. parking restrictions and traffic management. Permanent interpretation boards were considered and rejected as being unhelpful and difficult to usefully locate at the present time.

Grasslands - ecology and cutting

Ditchfield Common is largely composed of a mixture of grasses and herbs which exists on acidic soils or substrates - the northern and southern areas - while the area to the east of the Church is more varied resulting from the infilling of former scrapes with material from unknown sources but possibly with a higher chalk content than elsewhere.

From a consultation, in October 2012, it became clear that many present favoured a cutting regime which differentiated between different parts of the common, with some being cut more regularly whilst allowing other parts to take on a more natural appearance. There was also a feeling that some parts of Ditchfield Common should look 'neat and tidy', and certainly where the area in the front of the church is concerned it is a valid point of view since the church is, in many ways, a focal point for the community.

An interesting dilemma - to 'open up' grassland (i.e. to reverse the wood / scrub secondary regeneration) or to 'consolidate' by maintaining, in good condition, those areas now open. Realistically, with the manpower and financial resources that are likely to be available, the latter course appears to be the more obvious choice. If, allied to this, a planned programme of grassland edge gradation was introduced - mown at the front, flailed in the middle and coppiced on the back edges, the illusion of more open space will be achieved together with a small incremental increase in actual grassland area and a range of differing habitats.

At the same time, scrub and bracken management techniques could be developed to encourage butterfly colonization. Dependent upon the general management requirements, scrub, brambles and bracken growth should be regularly monitored with some removal or thinning as appropriate.

The recent grass cutting regime has proved to be less than satisfactory in some areas with inappropriate machinery being used on occasions. In the past, a cutting contract was

issued and then allowed to run its course with minimal intervention. However, LEPC now believes that any future grass cutting contract needs to be regularly monitored, re-assessed and altered, as necessary, to reflect changing circumstances and needs.

Grass cutting is, generally, best done in summer and not left until the autumn, with the 'arisings' (cut grass) lifted to avoid a build up in the soil fertility - to avoid creating a mat of dead grass 'thatch' which tends to favour a small range of species like dandelions, daisies, catsears and yarrow at the expense of many wild flowers and finer grasses. Craneflies and worms are the main invertebrates – great food for starlings.

The aim of any new regime would be to enhance the wild life interest / habitats on the common whilst leaving areas, such as between Church Path and the church, cut more regularly for activities like the village fete. If the Common was still grazed, different locations at different times with differing sward heights would result. There would, also, be a wider variety of plant species. Since future grazing is unrealistic, a cutting regime to reflect the result of grazing will be considered thus giving the common a more 'natural' rather than 'urban' look.

Consideration will be given to the possible introduction of appropriate species using established plants (plugs) rather than seeds as a dense grass sward can prevent the seeds germinating. For example; Yellow Rattle is a useful plant as it is parasitic on grass so, in time, will naturally help to weaken the tougher grass allowing wildflowers to thrive while Knapweed is an important nectar plant for butterflies. As the grasses become less competitive, caterpillar food plants such as Birdsfoot Trefoil and Lady's Smock can be introduced allowing fauna diversification.

Historically, many owners cut the small grass banks in front of their properties and LEPC would encourage continuation of this practice. However, there are larger areas of the common, outside a number of properties, which have been cut as though they were lawns and this will be discouraged in future as these areas (previously omitted from the grass cutting contract) are brought within the contract's remit.

There is, however, one major issue that requires addressing. LEPC is concerned that the practice of dumping garden rubbish including unwanted plant material and hedge / grass cuttings still persists and should cease as this can allow invasive 'foreign' species to pollute the Common which takes valuable resources - both in time and money - to remove.

It is, therefore, proposed that initially the area to east of the Church, except for a parking strip along the surfaced entry track, the 'triangle' opposite the Forge and the whole of the southern section should be cut twice a year with 'arisings' lifted but at different times to allow differing sward heights. The northern section and the immediate surrounds of the church require more regular cutting but not as regularly as at present and certainly without gang mower use which has created the 'scalped' look and denudes very quickly particularly when parked on. The larger areas that are currently cut by individual households would be included in any new cutting regime. Extending the length of time between cuts will allow plants to flower and seed - there is, currently, a dearth of wild flowers on the majority of the Common.

Scrub and bracken

Scrub is an important habitat for wildlife, though as it matures and gets tall and leggy, its importance tends to decline. There are three areas of scrub growth - by the Culver

Graphics site on the northern part of Ditchfield, along the steep bank by the SE corner of the churchyard and between the churchyard and the Forge. The wild area between the Forge and the southern part of Ditchfield could be the subject of a mini-Management Plan once more survey work has been carried out in the area.

Wherever possible, graded scalloped edges between tall scrub / trees and grassland - the area by the church wall is a prime location - help to create micro-climates which are particularly good for invertebrates and reptiles, both of which bask in still, warm sunny patches. Lightly managing the scrub in the other two areas will create further new growth, diversity and will provide the graded edges thus giving 'interest' to the landscape.

Bracken could become a problem in some areas and this needs to be factored into the annual management regime. Bracken, however, offers a varied habitat for many species of flora and fauna so in some areas it will be retained and allowed to spread though kept under control. Invasive species like Japanese Knotweed or Himalayan Balsam will need to be eradicated as soon as they are identified.

The Bucks and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Office have not carried out any detailed habitat mapping survey work on Ditchfield Common. Thus it is unknown, at this stage, precisely what type of grassland, or woodland, actually exists and these would be good subjects for local field surveys by suitably trained volunteers possibly from the Chilterns Commons Project of the Chilterns Conservation Board, the Lane End Conservation Group, or other interested parties.

Woodland and tree maintenance

The woodland areas include oak, cherry, sycamore, ash together with some birch regeneration with a largely bramble under-storey.

It is proposed that where mature or semi-mature trees are to be found - mainly behind the graveyard extension and along Church Road some clearing of the dense younger trees and scrub would be beneficial by increasing the life expectancy of these older trees and thus allowing them to be more fully appreciated. This would involve a selective thin out leaving the best oaks, cherries, sycamores etc. with space to develop. Permission from the Forestry Commission for a felling licence would be required but should not present any problems in obtaining.

The observation has been made that Ditchfield is really three commons with little commonality and / or visual connectivity - opening up 'sight lines' would do much to correct this impression. This could be achieved partly through limited thinning but more so through coppicing of the poorer trees including ash, birch and the weaker sycamores.

Coppicing is a technique which has not been widely employed on Ditchfield in the past and is something that volunteers can carry out on a 7-10 year rotational basis depending on tree species. Whether there is any commercial value, bearing in mind the available potential quantity and quality, is a matter for debate. However, local sales of firewood would generate local interest if enough existed. Any such sales could also help future financing even if at a low scale!

At a recent (September 2012) Commons Day on Moorend Common, an argument was developed for creating a coppiced buffer zone along Church Road. A similar approach might be considered for that stretch of Church Road between the Forge track and the

southern grassland. This would provide a more open view line from the road and across it - commons, after all it can be viewed two ways - for the residents outwards and the passer-by inwards! Coppiced edges benefit woodland more than ungraded ones both visually and environmentally, with re-growth of edge coppice / scrub to thicket creating good habitats for nesting birds and bats etc. It would also make that section of Church Road lighter and less intimidating and could improve road safety by potentially reducing the incidence of branches falling onto the road.

The area surrounding the large pond on the common's southern section should, LEPC believes, have a lower priority and could be left as a minimal intervention area, apart from clearing a few poor quality trees on the boundary and the opening up of one or two former paths from the triangle by The Forge around the pond.

Two other areas also require some consideration: the collapsing clump of trees by Little Acorns, including a leaning holly tree, whose removal would increase the grass area in that location whilst retaining the existing tree screen, and the area immediately between the churchyard extension and The Forge which is in a very poor and collapsing state.

Prior to any work being carried out, a detailed examination, and marking, of all trees would take place and any proposed works be carried out over a period of years rather than at one 'fell swoop'. Further, as part of the longer term management, it would be beneficial to note the health and condition of all notable / specimen trees with regular inspections - annual duty of care surveys - similar to those carried out on Moorend Common.

Water Courses and Ponds

It would be beneficial, for future management plans, to carry out a detailed 'wetlands area' survey of all water features - both permanent and ephemeral, together with a record of plant and invertebrate species by wetland area.

Ponds are relatively ephemeral features and from time to time may need some removal of marginal vegetation and accumulated silt to maintain them as open water bodies and to enable their special wildlife to thrive. It is often desirable to give some of them plenty of light by local tree clearing - the large pond on the southern section is a case in point - both to improve their bio-diversity and reduce the incidence of leaf litter into them.

Car parking

Car parking in Lane End, like elsewhere, is a problem and one that is increasing. It is, sadly, inevitable that with the increase in cars, more of the common could become an unofficial car park. Most local residences have two or more cars with limited space to park them. Add to that the number of visitors and space becomes even more critical; over the past few years, the spread of parking on all parts of the common has become much more noticeable. There is, unfortunately, no simple solution. The Village Hall is heavily used and has limited parking of its own; the main Lane End car park is often full to overflowing which results in Church Path and the tracks leading the church becoming the overflow. On occasions, it becomes so crowded that emergency vehicles would find it almost impossible to access properties by the church.

LEPC is fully aware of the problems and will be consulting with local residents and other users as to the best way forward with the aim of ensuring that Ditchfield Common does not become an overspill / uncontrolled parking area and that the Common remains an open space amenity for the Parish. LEPC believes a strong case exists for additional

designated parking areas - possibly using bunds or similar - for residents' parking. This will, in no way, limit visitor parking to those properties. Whatever solution is finally arrived at, it must be by agreement with all the major stake-holders on the common - residents, the church and village hall.

Track maintenance

Track maintenance is probably one of the thorniest problems that faces LEPC in managing Ditchfield Common with as many suggestions as to what could / should be done and by whom as there are potholes!

Ditchfield Common has four principal tracks - Church Path from the B482 towards the church with a branch down to Church Road, the surfaced track from Church Road opposite the allotments to the east of the church, the track to The Forge and the track from the Forge down the southern part of the common to join Church Road near Panleigh Cottages. Whilst it would be easy to treat these four tracks with one solution, LEPC believes that this is not the best way forward and they are thus considered individually.

The surfaced track from Church Road opposite the allotments to the east of the church is currently in good condition and the only issue here which LEPC will need to keep a close eye on is the condition of the bollards at the entrance installed to prevent unsuitable vehicles from accessing that part of the common.

Church Path is very heavily used by those attending the church, visiting the churchyard, users of the Village Hall and local residents. The church has a right of access over this and the adjoining tracks. Some want the surface improved so that it safe to walk and drive on, others think the actual approach to the church is 'disgraceful' and 'lets the parish down' while others, still, want the track untouched to slow traffic and reduce Church Path's attractiveness as a 'rat run' between Church Road and the B482. This latter aspect could be tackled by the occasional closing of the installed gates by agreement. Once 'short-cut users' begin to realise that this is no longer a viable option, usage and track damage should decrease.

There is a widespread feeling that LEPC should not only pay for any improvements but should allocate funds, annually, for its maintenance. Unfortunately, this latter approach is not sustainable. LEPC owns a number of similar tracks and if it were to take on Church Path maintenance, others would expect the same treatment for their tracks.

Historically, Church Path has been maintained on a 'needs must' basis which, while being relatively low cost has not, and does not, address the underlying problem of the track's current actual state. The presence of a concrete edged manhole cover does not improve the situation since storm water run-off is scouring out the track lower down towards Church Road creating a lip of growing proportions.

The Forge approach is heavily used by vehicles servicing Meakes and its important business and has been maintained by Meakes Forge on an ad hoc basis. LEPC only owns part of this track - up to the land retained by Mrs. Taylor, the previous owner - and then from the Jolly Blacksmith to the bottom of the common. Mrs Taylor has also retained a right of access over the track from Church Road all the way down to the other end.

Whilst the track leading down from the Jolly Blacksmith to the southern end of the common is less heavily used than Church Path, the surface condition gives rise for concern

particularly as another manhole is creating scour to the point that some drivers avoid the track altogether and drive down the grass - an unacceptable practice. The bottom part, adjacent to Church Road, has become something of a rutted track.

In the immediate short term, LEPC's aim is to achieve improvements to the tracks in a cost effective and appropriate manner - i.e. not tarmac, and to look at possible courses of action such as talking to statutory authorities about their manhole covers and getting advice on possible treatments for the surfaces of the tracks. LEPC is minded to allocate some funds for advice and then to assess both the methods and costs involved in consultation with the residents and other users, i.e. Church and Village Hall.

Bonfires

LEPC has agreed that, for the foreseeable future, permission for bonfires would not be withheld unreasonably provided that prior consent had been sought and appropriate health and safety etc. measures put in place.

Byelaws

LEPC does not wish to become too prescriptive over managing Ditchfield and is currently loathe to introduce Bye-laws. However, this decision will be kept under review depending upon the use, or mis-use of the common.

Funding

The Common will, inevitably, require funding in addition to the money currently spent on grass cutting and this is a subject that needs very careful consideration.

As Council's legal responsibilities grow, and pressures on their finances increase at a faster pace, money spent on 'non-productive open spaces' can be seen as a luxury and thus the need to find outside sources of finance - whether it be sponsorship, commercial or a combination of all - becomes ever more pressing. LEPC, in addition to owning Ditchfield Common, also owns a large part of Moor Common, the whole of Moorend Common and is responsible for three areas of allotments and the maintenance of the parish playing fields.

The main source of future financial support for Ditchfield is something about which LEPC is concerned. Ditchfield will be very dependent upon either outside contractors or residents' endeavours for even the smallest of tasks of 'coppicing' or thinning. LEPC's involvement with the Chiltern Conservation Board's Commons Project is providing valuable guidance on how to attract volunteers, train and involve them in the Common's future management so that they will be able to carry out the smaller everyday tasks – small-scale thinning, species recording etc. as well as offering funding towards essential tools and training. The use of volunteers will be critical and it has to be accepted that this will be a challenge and will not be solved in the immediate short-term.

LEPC is minded to allocate an annual sum towards the common's maintenance. For larger scale or specific works, alternative funding streams will need to be found - for example from the Chiltern Conservation Board or Wycombe District Council - while smaller works could be funded by local residents or community partnerships.

Funding is currently available through the Commons Project for practical work on Ditchfield Common and also for events. Community events can be used to help promote the new Management Plan - for example guided wildlife walks 'Get to know the wildlife on Ditchfield

Common' led by a species expert who can explain why the scrub is good, the advantages of different lengths of grass, the merits of the pond or wooded bits etc - particularly aimed at children who, after all, are going to be the next custodians of our open spaces.

Ditchfield Common Working Group

LEPC is delighted that comments from the consultation demonstrated a strong interest in revitalising the Ditchfield Common Working Group.

Community

Getting more people - of every age and interest - aware of, and involved in, Ditchfield Common will be a fine balancing act, though fundamentally important if the Common is to be part of the community and its life. To some, the Common is a haven of peace to be enjoyed; to others it is, undoubtedly, a 'boring' unwelcoming place with a lack of facilities, car parking and interpretation. Some feel that there should be more 'amenity value' with the grass cut more regularly and dog poo bins, i.e. - a more 'urban' place; others make the valid point that it is a countryside common requiring minimum human intervention. The answer lies somewhere between all these points of view.

Undoubtedly, Ditchfield has the potential of being a huge outdoor classroom for all ages and perhaps it is that that should be the guiding principle for the future. To achieve it will require a lot of effort and time. Consideration might, therefore, be given to 'employing' (in the volunteer sense) an 'educational / countryside interpreter(s)' to drive this crucially important element of Commons management through schools, local businesses, amenity and specialist groups, health groups etc. so that more people can 'Discover Ditchfield' for themselves - so that it becomes more than just another 'open space' but an important part of village life.

The 'physical health' of the common is also important. Future, long-term, management should, in large measure, be informed by ecological and habitat surveys, and recording. The information gained should give a more accurate and informed picture of the existing conditions thus allowing long-term mini-management plans to be developed - for each part of the Common. However, as part of management, consideration should be given to long-term 'revisit' intervals, methods of recording and ease of information accessibility.

LEPC looks forward to working with other interested parties, such as the Lane End Conservation Group, Lane End Village Hall, Holy Trinity Church and a reconstituted Ditchfield Common Working Group, to help maintain the common in accordance with the Vision and to create an open space that reflects our pride in Lane End.

Appendices

Appendix A - map

Appendix B - list of birds recorded in or over the graveyard extension and common due south of Claybrook over some 25 years up to April 2012

Appendix C - species recorded for Ditchfield Common and held by Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre