



Charlton King's Common Dry Stone Walling Project

This project is one of the largest dry stone walling projects in this country in recent years. The bulk of the funding came from Europe through Natural England – if it had not been spent on an environmental project in England it would have gone back to Europe to be spent on rural projects on the continent! The European grant could only meet up to 80% of the cost, but the balance of the funding, eventually around 25%, had to be found locally.



The whole project is to restore 1260m of the historic dry stone boundary wall along the Southern boundary of Charlton Kings Common, along the Cotswold Way National Trail. This wall is not just being restored for aesthetic reasons; it will form part of the boundary that will facilitate a more sustainable grazing regime on Charlton Kings Common.

The grazing regime is designed to maintain the 'unimproved limestone grassland' which is one of the two reasons for the site's designation as a Site of Special Scientific

Interest (SSSI). A more sustainable grazing regime is one of the conditions for raising the status of the management from Entry Level Stewardship (ELS), to Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), which will increase the level of funding available for managing the site.

The project has provided periods of employment for up to 20 dry stone wallers at different stages of the project and training for another 11 trainees, of whom 5 reached Level 2.

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Lovers of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common and of Cotswold dry stone walling owe a huge debt of gratitude to the following for enabling this project to proceed:

- Natural England, with funds provided by the European Union
- National Grid through Cotswold Conservation Board
- Gloucestershire Environmental Trust, with funds provided by Cory Environmental
- Summerfield Charitable Trust
- Cheltenham Borough Council
- Cotswold Way National Trail
- An anonymous charity
- An individual FOLK member
- Gloucestershire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
- Cotswolds Estates & Gardens
- Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester

Dry Stone Walling project



Phases 1 to 3 completed around 850m from the West end of Charlton Kings Common, with the exception of 69m along the top of a quarry, where the face of the quarry had fallen away. The latest Phase 4 is close to completing the 410m to the South Eastern corner of the Common and the missing 69m along the top of the quarry that had to be missed in Phase 3.



At the South Eastern end the wall will include both a gate and a stone stile where the Cotswold Way National Trail enters the site.

The wall also features a badger gate, designed to allow badgers to use their traditional routes between Hartley Farm and the Common (so they are less likely to try digging under the wall), but prevent rabbits from getting through the wall.



Visits to Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common

FOLK and Cheltenham Borough Council's Community Rangers have hosted and facilitated visits to the site for groups ranging from schools to the University of the Third Age (U3A) and for various special interest groups from botany and bird watching to ancient and industrial archaeology.

Visits are sometimes just guided tours, others involve the visitors in contributing to the conservation work on the site.



CBC Community Ranger Wayne Sedgwick addressing a group of students from Cheltenham College during a visit that included guided walks and conservation work.

Charlton Kings Common in the 1950s

Higher Level Stewardship

Michael Hickey was a well known and respected local botanist who sadly died in 2005. Amongst the papers now held by his widow is a study he undertook in the 1950's for his final year assignment at St Paul's College in Cheltenham. In this he defined a methodology for undertaking an ecological survey to find out and draw conclusions on what effect other flora, soil, shade and density of shade have on orchid colonisation, survival and well being in a selected area. Luckily he then conducted the survey and his chosen area was almost entirely on the lower slopes of Charlton Kings Common, mainly within 250' and to the south of Daisybank Road, though extending West and South on Leckhampton Hill as far as Tramway Cottage, up to the Lime Kilns and East into Mountain Knolls Wood, but did not include any of the area of the Common above or beyond the wood and golf course. The results were collated and presented in the final document, a copy of which I have been able to review.

Whilst some of the survey methods and techniques would not be acceptable by present standards, the results may well help and inform future management of the grassland, and will form a base line from which to work. Three survey methods were employed:

1. A general survey to identify species present in the herb layer, with results presented as a species list (though for the grasses the final list is representative rather than complete) and a map showing the general trend of orchid distribution over the whole of the study area, together with notes of areas of tree shade and shelter, thin stony soils and erosion, grass density and exposure to weather.
2. A modified version of the quadrat chart system where the size of the quadrat varied with reference to the distribution of the orchid species (from 15' x 6' to 6' x 3') with results presented as charts showing the accurate distribution of orchid species in the chosen study areas, together with more general plotting of other species present. For some of these

areas there are also bar charts showing the relative percentage rates of all plants found.

3. A 200' linear survey plotted and presented as graphs showing a general picture of plant vigour and dominance, slope aspect, elevation and exposure, soil pH values, grass height in spring or summer, position and height of orchid species.

The actual field work was undertaken in 1956 and 1957. From the initial review of the data several interesting observations are apparent: the list of plants found in the herb layer closely mirrors that drawn up in 2002 following the formation of FOLK, though there are a few surprises (possibly misidentifications as current flora suggests some plants listed are not present in the county). Some of the areas studied have changed out of all recognition, having been open grassland and now secondary woodland/hazel coppice with most noticeably white helleborine replacing pyramidal orchid.

Whilst there is a map included in the document showing the position of the plots included in the detailed surveys, many of the tracks shown have moved or become disused over the years, and other obvious landmarks such as the incline slope are not shown at all. In addition, areas shown as open grassland and/or quarries are now in woodland or dense scrub and will not be easily recognised. However, efforts will be made this summer to relocate and then resurvey the original 6 plots that were studied in detail and the five 200' lines, but only if they are on the Common area (Mountain Knolls Wood will not be included). Further soil pH testing will also be undertaken (this will be required under the Higher Level Stewardship agreement anyway) and I anticipate that some areas will have become much more acidic as the tree and therefore humus levels rise. If successfully resurveyed, the results will be included in a future issue of the newsletter. If you remember seeing Michael doing the surveys, please get in touch as you may be able to help us to identify the exact locations!

Serena Meredith

Scrub: Undesirable Invader or Essential Companion ?

An ongoing task in my suburban garden is to prevent seedlings of trees becoming saplings. This is easy in the case of the spring flush of Ash and Alder in the lawn, when mowing is all that is needed, but can be a struggle when larger Ash or Holly, and even Horse Chestnut, emerge from hiding beneath a shrub. But my burden is minute compared to that of work parties on the two Commons. For these volunteers and pressed men the removal of scrub, the name given types of vegetation dominated by shrubs or bushes with few or no trees and ranging from scattered individuals to close-growing thickets, is one of their most time-consuming and strenuous tasks.

Without the sterling efforts of these groups, then species such as Ash, Blackberry, Blackthorn, Gorse and Hawthorn can convert an area of the Commons' grassland into an impenetrable mass of bushes, with virtually nothing growing beneath them, in a very few years. This process was well advanced when FOLK work parties began, but several acres of scrub have been cleared in recent years. If scrub is left alone, then it is likely that trees will soon invade, will overtop the shrubs and the area would become a wood.

The ability of scrub to invade and displace grassland has made it the enemy of many conservationists, but we should not overlook the possible nature conservation value of this habitat.

Or rather several habitats, as scrub comes in different forms, which differ mainly in the number of woody species they contain and in their longevity. The types of scrub valued for themselves are those that have many species of shrub, including some that are rare in the UK, and that change little over time. These are often found in situations, such as cliffs, mountains and sandy soils, where growth is limited by the soil or the climate, for example because of shortage of water or mineral nutrients or due to exposure to high winds or low temperatures.

The invasion of grassland by bushes is perfectly natural and must have happened many times and in many places in the UK over the past 10,000 years. However, in much of the UK nature conservationists now value the few remaining

relics of non-agricultural grassland more than they do the scrub and woodland that might replace it, hence the effort put into keeping scrub at bay.

When scrub develops in the absence of human interference, then it is likely to show a characteristic spatial pattern, with a gradual transition in the height and composition of the plant community as one passes from the short vegetation, possibly grassland, being invaded to tall scrub. This gradation provides a large number of micro-habitats that can support a rich variety of plants and animals.

Plants, invertebrates, animals and birds

One measure of the conservation value of scrub is that over 450 nationally rare and threatened species of plant, insect and bird, but not including reptiles, mammals or fungi, are associated with it or make use of it at some stage of their life cycle. Insects dominate this list, with different species using scrub for purposes such as: a source of plant food, ranging from pollen to dead wood; a location to catch animal food; shelter from inclement conditions; a nesting or egg-laying site; an over-wintering site, or a site to warm up in the sun after cold periods.

Many species will only be found in a certain type of scrub, of a particular age and condition and in an appropriate location. Birds will use both isolated bushes and blocks of scrub, for territory display, as nest sites, as a source of food, both fruit and insects, and for roosting in winter. Reptiles and mammals will use the same scrub for the same purposes as other animals. Few plants are specifically associated with scrub, but there are some that do well in light shade and a very few that are specialist parasites of bushes, whilst a few others gain protection from grazing animals.

Most of the scrub on the Commons consists of only one or two common woody species that have established in grassland that is no longer heavily grazed or on quarry rubble, whilst most of the boundaries between scrub and grassland are sudden and stark, without the rich transition zone.

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Scrub and grassland

This means that the associated flora and fauna is not rich, but scrub is important for some of the characteristic species of the Commons.

On the steep scarp slope the Tree Pipit, of which several pairs breed each year, favours areas with a mix of coarse grassland and trees or bushes, nesting in the former and using the taller species in their display routine. Prior to 2003 Grasshopper Warblers were frequently encountered in similar vegetation on the lower slopes of the eastern end of Charlton Kings Common, but the severe fire of that year destroyed this habitat and the species was lost from the site. On the lowest slopes, such as Daisybank Fields, banks of Bramble are excellent nesting sites for Bullfinch and Whitethroat, whilst Bramble and low scrub are widely used by Linnet, Willow Warbler and Yellowhammer.

A good example of the importance of scrub to butterflies is the Duke of Burgandy Fritillary. Females of this species preferentially lay their eggs on the large leaves of Cowslip plants growing in semi-shade, often that provided by invading scrub. Tussocky grass may be used as a pupation site.

A plant likely to be associated with scrub is the parasitic Ivy Broomrape, one of the species for which the Commons are designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. A possible place to find this species is in scrub that has a ground cover of Ivy.

Finding the right balance

These examples demonstrate that whilst the main nature conservation value of the Commons is their limestone grassland, scrub is an important habitat that also deserves to be conserved. Thus, it would be inappropriate to remove all the shrubby vegetation, just as it would be disastrous to allow scrub to occupy too much of the site. But scrub cannot be left to its own devices, as aging scrub may lack some of the features essential to some of the key species, and can develop into woodland. The answer is that scrub must be managed to maintain a dynamic, changing, system.



There are several components to this management. First, scrub must be prevented from invading species rich grassland. This can be done by using grazing animals, by the removal of young saplings by hand, by the killing of stumps by herbicide, or even by regular mowing, as in my lawn. The planned extension of grazing should help in this control of invasion. If scrub has already established in inappropriate sites, then it will need to be removed, with the stumps being killed. But areas to be cleared must be selected with care, as removal may only be worthwhile if the scrub is going to be replaced by some more valued type of vegetation. Where clearance produces no clear benefits, then scrub management is a better option than removal. Here there are several options. For example areas may be cut on some kind of rotation, to create a mosaic of patches of scrub of different ages, from young to degenerate, so as to favour as wide a range of associated species as possible. Alternatively, patches of scrub may be manipulated to create sheltered "bays" or graded edges. It may even be appropriate to allow scrub to naturally invade areas with little present conservation value. Whatever course of action is taken, there is sure to be a continuing need for work parties to tackle what is too easily called "*the scrub problem*".

Overall, therefore, we sometimes need to recognise the possible nature conservation benefits of scrub and manage it for these, rather than always seeing it as the deadliest enemy.

FOLK Work Party Report Autumn/Winter 2010/11



This winter's mini-ice-age resulted in the cancellation of several work parties in November and December. Conditions were better in January and we were able to install the electric fence at the western end of Charlton King's Common, so the cattle are now back on the hill.*

Last autumn, vandals in a car demolished fencing and our notice board in Brownstone car park. A FOLK work party braved very cold, wet and windy conditions to replace both the notice board and the fencing, thus saving Cheltenham Borough Council a considerable sum of money.

A few statistics for 2010

There have been 31 work parties completing 800 man hours of work, with an average of 7.2 members on each work party. This includes the hours worked by members of the Cheltenham & County Cycling Club on the jumps in Daisybank fields and erecting a notice board at the site. The graziers' time spent servicing the cattle is not included in these figures but amount to many more hours.

During the past year we have also benefitted from the assistance of a Community Service Team, under the guidance of Cheltenham Borough Council Ranger Wayne Sedgewick. They have completed 12 work parties with an average of 6 members per party, giving a total of 360 man hours. These have proved invaluable in clearing encroaching scrub from numerous sites on the hill.

We have welcomed several new recruits to our work parties in recent months. If you too would like to join us then the dates for the next few months are shown in the adjacent box.

Meet at Tramway Cottage Car Park, Daisybank Road at 9.30am. We provide the tools but wear stout footwear and bring your own gloves. If you require any further information please contact me on 01242 233116. We'll look forward to seeing you there.

Allan Wood

* Due to excessive rain the cattle have been temporarily moved to the arable reversion fields near Hill Farm.

Midweek Work Parties	Weekend Work Parties
	March 2011
	Sunday 27 th
	April 2011
Thursday 14 th	
Tuesday 19 th	
	Sunday 24 th
	May 2011
Thursday 12 th	
Tuesday 17 th	
	Sunday 29 th
	June 2011
Thursday 9 th	
Tuesday 21 st	
	Sunday 26 th

Contact FOLK

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Find the Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common on Facebook.