



## **The Chilterns Conservation Board**

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### **PRESS RELEASE**

#### **Chilterns Commons Project Launch**

The Chilterns Conservation Board is launching an exciting new project to preserve and promote a vital part of our natural and cultural heritage.

Commons have been at the heart of communities since the Middle Ages and hold generations of history in their landscape. They're important wildlife refuges, home to many species that cannot survive elsewhere in our intensively-farmed countryside. They're also fantastic natural playgrounds for walking, picnics and playing on.

However, commons are under threat. Today, there is increasing demand for land from agriculture, housing and commerce, but ironically, the biggest threat to commons is neglect.

The Chilterns Commons Project launched on 30 September with £400,000 of Heritage Lottery Funding. The four-year project will help improve the natural environment of commons in the area, spread the word about the value of commons and get more people involved in studying and caring for them.

A new Commons Project Officer, Rachel Sanderson, is in place at The Chilterns Conservation Board to advise and support those interested in helping the Commons Project. 'This is a fantastic project that everyone can get involved in,' says Rachel, 'We'll be running training schemes for landowners and committed volunteers to equip them with new skills to help them with practical work for habitat conservation and restoration on commons, or train them in wildlife or archaeological survey techniques.' Funding for professional works to improve wildlife habitats and historic features on common land is also available as part of the Chilterns Commons Project.

The real value of commons lies in their importance to the public as open green spaces at the heart of communities. We need to use them, study them, cherish them and most importantly, maintain them so that we don't lose these amazing, varied landscapes for good.

Get involved with the Chilterns Commons Project. To find out what's going on at your local common visit: [www.chilternsaonb.org/commons](http://www.chilternsaonb.org/commons) or email: [rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org)

## Notes to Editors

1. The Chilterns Commons Project is supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, Chilterns Conservation Board, The Chiltern Society and other partners. The Project aims to encourage people to make the most of commons for walking, playing and enjoying the outdoors. It also aims to inspire and enable people to get involved with caring for commons and studying them. The Project will launch on 30 September 2011 and run until July 2015. For more information contact Project Officer Rachel Sanderson on 01844 355500 or [rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org)
2. The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated in 1965, covers 833 sq kms (326 sq miles) stretching from Goring, in Oxfordshire, to near Hitchin, in Hertfordshire, and has a resident population of 80,000. It is one of 40 AONBs in England and Wales.
3. The Conservation Board was set up following the passing of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000, to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and increase awareness and understanding of the Chilterns AONB. The Board, which also aims to foster the social and economic well being of local communities, is supported by all local authorities in the area and by Natural England, The National Trust and The Chiltern Society.
4. For more information about the AONB or the Conservation Board, phone 01844 355500, email: [office@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:office@chilternsaonb.org), website [www.chilternsaonb.org](http://www.chilternsaonb.org) Twitter [www.twitter.com/chilternsAONB](http://www.twitter.com/chilternsAONB)

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Commons:**

### **1 What is a common?**

Commons are designated areas of land with restrictions as to what can be done on them. Registered people other than the owner of the common can also have certain rights over the land.

These restrictions can be draconian, for instance, to erect any kind of structure on common land you have to have the permission of the Secretary of State. Also, no-one but the landowner (or his representative) can drive a vehicle on a common.

Other rules can seem strangely arbitrary, for instance, everyone can pick blackberries or gather mushrooms on a common, but it is against the law to pick flowers or collect firewood.

The history of Commons goes back centuries and in most cases they were the 'waste of the manor', ie. the areas of land that were deemed too poor, too difficult to work or too far from the main estate to be useful to the Lord of the Manor. This land was then given over to certain local residents for use in subsidising their livelihoods – for animal grazing or firewood, for instance. This permission became known as Commoners Rights.

### **2 Who owns commons?**

Commons are not public property and all have an owner. Many are owned by local authorities, some by private individuals or companies, others by wildlife organisations. In the Chilterns, 25% of common land is owned by the National Trust.

### **3 What are Commoners Rights and who has them?**

Those who live on or near a common do not automatically have Common Rights. Common Rights are attached to particular properties or landholdings and the Rights are for the use of that holding only. Only those Rights that were registered in the 1965 Commons Act are still valid.

There are six generally recognised Common Rights:

- Pasturage – the right to graze a specific number and type of stock which can include cattle, sheep, ponies and horses, goats and geese
- Estovers – the right to collect firewood, small timber and bracken
- Piscary – the right to fish in ponds and streams
- Pannage – the right to turn out pigs to eat beech mast and acorns on the ground in the autumn
- Turbary – the right to dig peat or take turves for domestic fuel
- Right of common in the soil – a right to take sand, gravel, chalk and clay

## **4 What can I do on a common?**

We all have rights of access on foot to common land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Everyone can walk anywhere on a common, but it is against the law to ride a bike, motorbike or quad-bike on a common. Only the landowner (or his representative) can drive a vehicle on a common. It is also against the law to ride a horse on most commons, but this varies on some commons. If a bridleway crosses a common then horse and bike riders should keep to the bridleway.

We can all fly a kite, build a den from fallen wood or have a picnic on a common, but it is against the law to light a fire or camp overnight.

Everyone can pick blackberries or gather mushrooms on a common, but it is against the law to pick flowers, collect firewood or cut down trees. Only householders with the right of estovers can collect firewood or small timber.

## **5 How many commons are there in the Chilterns?**

Today, there are nearly 200 commons in the Chilterns covering more than 2000 hectares. They vary enormously, some covering more than 100 hectares of rolling woodland and meadow, others are no more than a grass verge or a village pond.

Much of common land is protected wildlife habitat.

There are a range of habitats including

- rolling chalk downland (eg Dunstable Downs, Warden & Galley Hills common in Bedfordshire)
- large areas of open grassland (eg Berkhamsted, Chorleywood, and Box Moor commons in Hertfordshire)
- ancient beech woods (eg Nettlebed & District commons in Oxfordshire)
- mixed deciduous woods (eg Naphill and Marlow commons in Buckinghamshire)

## **6 Why are commons special?**

Many commons have special designation for their wildlife habitats because they are home to plants and animals which are no longer common in our countryside. This is because many of our rarer species require low soil fertility which depends on long-established habitats and traditional management practices that have disappeared from much of the more intensively farmed and forested land.

## **7 Why do our commons need to be looked after?**

Commoners who exercised ancient rights such as grazing livestock, gathering wood or digging for clay, had a profound effect on the way Chilterns commons look now, even if those uses stopped years ago. Many of these activities, such as cutting bracken, may no longer seem relevant today. However, it's very important that we replicate their effects to conserve the character of commons.

On most commons, grass, wood and bracken would have been regularly removed with the result that soil fertility remained low. In contrast, modern farmed countryside is high in nutrients as they are added in the form of artificial fertilisers or slurry to boost production. The result is that the intended crops flourish, but a wide variety of flowers and insects cannot survive under such productive systems as they are out-competed by the more vigorous crops. On commons, significant addition of nutrients is far less likely to have happened, so in general a much greater number of interesting species may still survive as long as the competition from dominant grasses, scrub and bracken can be controlled.

Commons need to be looked after, ie managed, if they are to be a valued place for people to enjoy, for wildlife to flourish and for history to come alive.

## **8 How do I find out whether an area of land is a common?**

All common land is recorded on registers held by the county or unitary council, and these are open to the public.

The Chilterns Commons Project has a copy of the parts of the registers which cover the Chilterns so you can also contact us. [rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org)

If you'd like to find out more about the Chilterns Commons Project, please contact Rachel Sanderson on 01844 355525 or email [rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:rsanderson@chilternsaonb.org) or write to The Lodge, 90 Station Road, Chinnor, OX39 4HA.