

Whitwell Low Common

This area of approximately forty acres seems to have been the part of a larger parish common which was exempted from enclosure under the early nineteenth century "Enclosure Acts" because it was decreed to have originated as "Manorial Waste".

On the 15th day of July 1824 eight owners of estates in Whitwell met to decide upon the management of grazing over the low common. The minutes of this meeting survive. There also exists a notice from the Lynn & Fakenham Railway Co. dated 4th August 1881 convening a meeting to be held at the Kings Arms Hotel, Reepham on the 18th of August at 7 o'clock in the evening between the representatives of the railway company and those Whitwell parishioners having "commonable" rights on the common. The purpose of the meeting was to appoint a committee to agree compensation for a railway line to be laid across the common.

In 1893 application was made by the landowners in Whitwell to the Board of Agriculture for a Provisional Order for the Regulation of the Common. There exists an interesting, detailed reply from the Board, but nothing further seems to have come of this move. In 1902 application was made to the Charity Commissioners to prepare a scheme to regulate the grazing rights on the common. This scheme was finally sealed and became operative on the 14th of March 1905. Its main provision was to set up the method of appointment of Trustees and to define their duties and responsibilities. The Trustees then made rules as to how many animals each entitled commoner was allowed to graze, fees to be paid, the product of which was to be used to pay a "hayward" who would be responsible for keeping open the drains and generally seeing that the common was used only according to the rules. One interesting point is the total omission of any right to gather fuel by the commoners. This point was brought out in a letter to the Commissioners from a Reepham solicitor of the time, D'Arcy Collyer. An annual list of Commoners was printed and some of these survive.

The number of commoners exercising grazing rights seems to have decreased steadily through the thirties until by the fifties to my knowledge only two commoners were making use of grazing rights. For many years there had been insufficient money to pay the wages of a hayward and the drains became silted up, the lowest grazing areas waterlogged and the higher ground overgrown with scrub.

In 1965 civil parishes were required to register areas of common and commoners having rights on common land to register these rights. Whitwell Low Common was registered by both the parish council and the Norfolk Naturalist Trust, but no commoners' rights were registered either individually or by the trustees for the Common: because of this omission any commoners' rights previously existing were lost.

On 13th January 1977, Mr. Settle Q.C., the Commissioner for Commons, sat at County Hall, Norwich to try to determine the ownership of some of the Norfolk commons. He expressed the opinion that although the scheme of management under the Charity Commissioners was still extant this had no bearing on the ownership of the land and so he placed the responsibilities of ownership on Reepham Parish Council.

A committee of the parish council consisting of the chairman and two members together with myself as sole remaining trustee under the Charity Commissioners' scheme has met to decide on a policy of management for the common under present conditions. Because Whitwell Common had been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest by 1954 and because the area is now covered by trees, scrub, and reed beds it seemed to us that the proper future for the common should be as a natural reserve where the wild life of the area could exist undisturbed.

However, in the world today, nature reserves have to be managed and protected. An expert in this field, Mr. J. P. Barkham of Booton, has accepted an invitation to join the management committee.

The committee has drafted the following statement of management policy:

1. Whitwell Common shall be managed as a wildlife reserve.
2. It has been registered as a Site of Special Scientific Interest – SSSI (1954).
3. There shall be no felling or lopping of trees except as decided by the committee for the good management of the Common.
4. There shall be no uprooting or removal of plants.
5. There shall be no removal of turf, sand or gravel.
6. There shall be no dumping of rubbish or other material.
7. There shall be no shooting on the Common or pursuit or taking of wild life including game and vermin.
8. An exception to rule 7. is the Lord of the Manor of Whitwell Symonds, Mr. J.A.B. Stimpson, who has the sporting rights over the common.

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