

Long-term objectives for the Ilketshall St. Andrew & St. John Commons

Analysis of the questionnaire distributed to households in the two parishes in November 2020.

140 questionnaires were distributed to households in the two Parishes in November 2020. A total of 32 responses were received, representing a response rate of almost 23%.

All of the questions were on a 5-point scale. The analysis below is on the basis of 1 = “unimportant”, “strongly disagree” etc, and 5 = “very important”, “strongly agree” etc. The average figure has been calculated for each question.

1. How important are the Commons to you?

Score: 4.81. This figure is clearly very close to 5 (the maximum possible). Clearly, for majority of the 32 people that completed the questionnaire, the Commons are very important.

2. How important were the Commons in influencing your decision to live in the area?

Score: 3.51. The Commons were not a *particularly* strong reason for people choosing to live in the area (although for some people, the Commons became important once they did move into the area). In addition, for at least two people, they did not *choose* to live in the villages; they were born here!

3. How concerned or interested are you about how the Commons are managed?

Score: 4.58. This was the 3rd-highest score; clearly people are concerned about how the Commons are managed.

4. How often do you walk on one or more of the Commons?

Score: 3.70. A significant number of people who responded to the questionnaire do walk on the Commons regularly or very regularly. Some respondents noted that they were no longer able to, but used to.

5. An objective for the Commons should be to provide a habitat for promoting wild bird populations.

Score: 4.12. This score – being above 4 – indicates that the majority view is that people responding to the questionnaire *do* agree, or strongly agree, that an objective of the Commons should be to promote wild bird populations.

6. An objective for the Commons should be to provide a habitat for promoting wild animal populations.

Score: 4.12. This question scored the same as Question 5. The score indicates that the majority agree, or strongly agree, that the Commons should provide a habitat for promoting wild bird populations.

7. An objective for the Commons should be to provide a habitat for wild flowers, insects and butterflies.

Score: 4.66. This was the second-highest score on the questionnaire. Respondents therefore suggest that the highest-priority objective should be to provide a habitat for wild flowers, insects and butterflies.

8. An objective for the Commons should be to provide a source of grass and grazing.

Score: 3.39. In comparison to the previous 3 questions, this is a comparatively low score, indicating that the respondents do not regard the provision of grass and grazing as an especially important objective.

9. the Commons should be primarily viewed as an amenity for villagers and others to walk, walk their dogs, enjoy open space, etc.

Score: 3.64. This is a comparatively low score, indicating the respondents do not consider the Commons to be primarily an amenity for villagers for walking, enjoying open space, etc.

10. an objective for the Commons should be to make a contribution to meeting climate change commitments by increasing the number of trees.

Score: 3.48. This is a comparatively low score, indicating that the respondents do not consider that making a contribution to meeting climate change commitments by increasing the number of trees should be a priority objective for the Commons. However, there was a sharper dispersion in responses to this question than with other questions; some respondents “strongly disagreed” while others “strongly agreed”. Some reasons for this were provided in the additional comments that some respondents provided, reproduced below.

11. the Commons should reflect the fact that they are not primarily used for grazing any longer, are an amenity for villagers and others, and should become more like parkland (and therefore like Becks Green, perhaps).

Score: 2.89. This is a low score; the average score is close to respondents “neither agreeing nor disagreeing”. The overall view is that respondents do not want the Commons to be more like Becks Green, although some comments (see below) indicated that additional tree planting *would* be appropriate, even if not in the style of Becks Green.

Comments:

- 12. Is there anything not mentioned above that you would like to see happen to the Commons in relation to their management? Please include any views and suggestions below, or attach a separate piece of paper with your comments.**

The following comments were added to the questionnaires, in response to Q 12. There were 18 questionnaires with comments added, which have been numbered below:

1. “re Q6. The grasslands of the Commons are already contributing to climate change mitigation by being a carbon sink. Tree planting on meadows is entirely inappropriate when looking at the biodiversity crisis in parallel with the climate crisis. Looking at tree-planting/regeneration, in the context of the wider parish and habitat connectivity e.g. hedgerows linking copses/woodland would be much more appropriate than planting on the grassland habitat of the Commons.
Re Q7. I don’t agree that Becks Green is parkland. It is moderately species-rich meadow like the other Commons.

Re grazing generally. Grazing can complement the current hay-making/Commons management if done as aftermath grazing. It can be a win-win for wildlife and local grazing needs.
2. “To be managed in a better way, ditches to be cut out regularly, and make the village a better place to live.”
3. “Under Q8 the Commons should not be used for hay-making. If they are to provide a source of grass they should be grazed by animals.”
4. “Plant more trees. Cut hedges in spring. Also hedge lay as a trial on perimeter hedges. Some views of other people who have not replied.”
5. “I agree that they should be used for an amenity but NOT become a parkland. Graze cattle and horses by all means but do not fertilise to make hay better – it will NEVER give good hay.”
6. “Please do not turn the Commons into parkland and do not add trees. These are against the historic nature of the Commons. Please do not provide dog poo bins for the same reason.
7. “The Commons should reflect the needs of the residents in the village i.e. limited hay crops, walks, natural open spaces, a good variety of different habitats for wildlife, both flora and fauna. But caution should be used, that they are not turned into public open spaces that could be abused. The beauty of the Commons are their remoteness, and once this is lost, would probably be impossible to recover.”

8.

“1. Although I do not own a horse or ride any more – there are many riders who cross the common using the road. Would it not be safer and more enjoyable for horses and riders if a small narrow strip on one side of the common road could be used by them for a canter or safe byway?

2. I love to see the wild flowers of the Commons every year and wonder if larger areas could be left uncut for longer. It always seems as if the grass is cut when the flowers are at their best – this may be intentional – but it would surely benefit insects and bees/birds if it could be left uncut for longer?

3. I am enormously grateful to live and walk in such a beautiful area and would like to thank all those involved with creating and maintaining the Commons.”
9.

“In relation to Q8: it would be nice to see farm animals grazing the Commons, as the Wildlife Trusts do.

There is a small segment of Common on the opposite side of the road to Chris Colyer’s parcel. This includes a small neglected pond. It would be nice if this could be included in your management. I did advise Adrian years ago but it has remained unadopted.”
10.

“Thank you all for your work in keeping our village looking good.”
11.

“The grassland should be maintained. Tree planting should only take place when it enhances existing copses, woodland, or to replace dead mature trees. This unique habitat should be preserved.

There should be an educative function to managing the Commons – not just for children (although this is extremely important) but also for adults. Are there links with local schools/environmental groups? (post-Covid, obviously).”
12.

“Trying to find a balance of views is a difficult thing. Perhaps Dominic Cummings may help!”
13.

“As you will see, I haven’t answered Question 4. I have lived here many years and walked the Commons most days with my dog. Unfortunately I can no longer take anything but short walks and am delighted to see that benches are gradually appearing. Wonderful!”
14.

“I have only been a couple of times (moved into the area about 3 weeks ago!) but it’s a wonderful space and amenity. I can’t wait to see it in summer!”
15.

“It would be helpful if new residents to the village who back onto Common land and have rights of way across (i.e. a driveway) are given information regarding repairs, etc.”
16.

“We deeply appreciate all the hard work carried out by the LMC Board and volunteers. All are wonderful and contribute so much to our villages! Fantastic work.

17. COMMONS FUTURE MANAGEMENT

Future Tree planting

We do not agree that Becks Green should be compared to 'parkland' (No deer!). It does however benefit from small copses that create good habitat and great diversity, without detracting from the common land being open and unhindered. [NB We must never lose this historic characteristic. Mass planting would be quite wrong.] However even such copses require serious management and control to prevent them being overgrown by blackthorn and bramble – the two most invasive problems we suffer from, overall of our commons. Control doesn't happen naturally. It's hard work or expensive.

If we could only manage both these, we already have some very good areas where a few further trees could be planted, viz:- Great Common far N.E. road – side copse, Sue Zeitlin's copse, East corner opposite School House, especially the copse by Blacksmiths cottages, Little Common division with Peardyke, Peardyke's far corner, some pond perimeters, and Mill Common's perimeter blackthorn and S.E. corner wetland.

To succeed in this, cutting under the trees, existing and proposed, needs to be done every three or four years, to control the blackthorn and bramble – to date, too big an undertaking on top of all the existing work, carried out so brilliantly, by the volunteers of the LMC.

Money and Finances

The cost of maintenance of the commons is currently achieved only by government grants largely for 'grassland', it's imperative that we keep to whatever rules we can of these to get them. Otherwise haymaking will be the only other source of funding. And in case this becomes necessary we must try and improve the non-'high value' grass now – viz by:

- a) rotational generous mucking, area by area, over several years (closing the relevant walk for say 4 months). Argument:- if grazed, commons would be being mucked naturally but not as well spread as by Gerald's spreader!
- b) paying to persuade sheep farmers to graze (and underwriting any rustling), - this is absolutely essential opposite the Village Hall/Great Common Lane (the ONLY answer) and really good for other areas.
- c) More frequent topping preferably by flail and spot spraying as of this year. I believe our grass could be much improved. Blacksmiths West has excellent grass.

Wildflowers.

I do not believe our 15 years of trying to increase the wild flower diversity has been successful (apart from Little Common East side). Our land is too heavy and we have too many thistles, dock, plantain and buttercup. So we now need to move the emphasis to improving the grass, in case the grants dry up."

18. "Where quotation marks have been used I am quoting from the 2005 management plan drawn up by SWT.

Q8. So long as commoners have rights to the hay crop which they wish to exercise, even though there is often dissatisfaction with the quality, the LMC should continue to facilitate the hay cut at the appropriate time of year.

Grazing would be good. It would recall the traditional practices on 'this ancient land use pattern'. It would fertilise the grass in an acceptable way. Perhaps the LMC could cover that expense.

Q9. I am uneasy about the word PRIMARILY. Of course the Commons are an amenity to be enjoyed by the community. However, the Commons are a County Wildlife Site funded by Natural England and the RPA. This carries wider responsibilities. The Commons have 'a high wildlife value' and villagers must accept that it is an environment to be conserved. They are a habitat for small mammals, birds (many on the red list), pondlife. On Great Common for example people and dogs should stick to the existing pathways to avoid disturbing nests. 'Great Common is a semi-improved grassland the open nature of which make it important for skylarks.'

Q10. I do accept that climate change is an urgent matter and that the government does give financial support for tree planting.

However, we are funded by Natural England to maintain 'grassland commons' both semi and unimproved. The open Commons have 'a high visual appeal.' The 'open grasslands give the parishes a UNIQUE sense of place.'

Except in hedgerows, planting trees would change this unique landscape. Would Natural England countenance this change? Would you wish to lose our distinctive and wonderful landscape?

Q11. See response to Q10.

Thanks for the questionnaire and the opportunity to give our views."

Rod Apps
28 December 2020