

Ilketshall St. Andrew and St. John Land Management Company

Progress Report on Annual Management Plan for March 2020 – February 2021.

November 2020

Section numbers refer to Sections within the Annual Management Plan March 2020 – February 2021, which is available on the Commons website (ilketshallcommons.co.uk)

Section 1. General.

Section 1.1. Long-term management of the Commons.

The LMC undertook to initiate consultations amongst its stakeholders to identify the features of the Commons that they would like to see enhanced and established on a long-term basis. The Covid-19 pandemic has prevented meetings of stakeholders for that purpose, but the LMC has made a start by circulating a questionnaire. The results from that questionnaire are not available at the time of writing (deadline for return of 15 December). It is intended to use the results of that questionnaire for further consultations, which will include meetings when current restrictions on meetings are lifted.

At the time of writing, the LMC is awaiting an invitation from the Rural Payments Agency to extend the membership of the HLS/ELS scheme, which appears to have been delayed as a consequence of the pandemic.

Section 1.2. Incursions and encroachments.

The Commons have not suffered from any incursions in the year to date.

The LMC has initiated action (including the use of solicitors in one instance) against two encroachments onto Common land, and will continue to pursue these. An estimate from the LMC's solicitors of the costs of pursuing legal action through the full court system was £30,000, but it is obviously hoped that any disputes can be settled without such costs being incurred.

As indicated in the LMC Newsletter circulated to all households in the two villages recently, the LMC will be making a start on liaising with property owners adjoining the Commons to establish the agreed boundaries of the Commons.

Section 1.3. Funding.

As at October 2020, the total net assets of the Land Management Company were approximately £67,000.

The long-term future funding of the Commons (as with all agricultural activities in the UK) was very uncertain at the time of writing of the Annual Management Plan. It is now even more uncertain as a consequence of the pandemic, but the consensus in the media is that future funding will be even more limited than previously anticipated.

Given the volatility in the financial markets, the LMC has not yet made any investment into alternative assets as a way of securing above-inflation returns on its funds.

Section 1.4. Communications.

A website for the Commons has been created (ilketshallcommons.co.uk) which is regularly updated. Statistics on usage indicate that it is frequently visited, and feedback from various sources has pointed to its usefulness.

Section 2. Grass.

The annual hay cut was completed in July 2020, slightly later than has been the norm. Due to the exceptionally dry weather in the early part of the summer, the yields were lower than they have been in previous years.

Section 2.1. Un-cut Areas

The requirements of membership of the HLS/ELS scheme regarding the cutting of the grass (including the 10% un-cut areas) have been followed, and which were set out in the Annual Management Plan. To avoid confusion regarding the “un-cut” areas, it is proposed that these will be referred to as “over-wintering areas” in the future, since these areas *are* cut – but not at the usual time of late June/early July, but rather after 28 February the following year.

Section 2.2. Harrowing & Rolling

The Annual Management Plan committed to a trial harrowing and rolling plan on Great Common, and this was undertaken. The conclusion at the end of the work was that it had not been a success; despite the use of various pieces of equipment and depths, sufficient thatch could not be removed without also removing significant quantities of grass.

Section 2.3 Control of Weeds

The Annual Management Plan committed to a spot spraying programme of thistles on the Commons, and this was undertaken in May 2020. Although this appears to have resulted in there being fewer thistles, it is probably the case that a further spraying programme will be required in 2021.

A lack of resources at the appropriate time of the year meant that the intention to pull Ragwort from the Commons (and Great Common in particular) did not occur this year. At the current time, it is intended that the work will be undertaken at the appropriate time next year.

Section 3. Hedge and Scrub Cutting

Early October saw the start of the annual programme of hedge and scrub maintenance in line with the Management Plan. At the time of writing the vast majority of the work has been completed with just a few roadside locations outstanding. Fortunately the works undertaken, where access is required from the commons, were completed before the heavy rains arrived.

Section 4. Other Works.

The Annual Management Plan included the intention to have a survey undertaken of the ponds on the Commons. This was undertaken in June/July 2020, and the Report is available on the website at <http://www.ilketshallcommons.co.uk/assets/docs/PDF-Docs/Pond%20Survey%202020.pdf>. The Report is extensive and difficult to summarise in a few sentences, and therefore people are urged to read it for themselves. However, it is notable that the rotational pond restoration has resulted in increased Great Crested Newt populations (as well as other wildlife benefits), and the report urges that pond margins are kept clear to keep them accessible, visible and sunny. The report also identified the presence of the Norfolk hawk which was recorded both on 15 June and on 20th July at Blacksmith's Common Pond 10. It is considered Red Data Book 1 Endangered on the GB Red list and a Schedule 1 list that affords it special protection.

More generally, the majority of the ponds are in good health with a broad range of wildlife and plant species. Where a pond is not in good health (due, for example, to the presence of *Azolla filliculoides*) the recommendation is that no specific actions should be taken. The Report endorses the work undertaken on the ponds over the years, and recommends their continuation.

The intention going into the future is for selected ponds to be surveyed every 3 years. This will provide a useful record for future maintenance as recommended by independent specialists.

The work of cutting back 20% of the wetland area on Little Common east was undertaken in early September whilst general strimming around information boards, bench seats, selected access points and pond fronts was undertaken on 3 separate occasions throughout the growing season.

Cutting permissive pathways was undertaken on 5 occasions throughout the growing season.

Additional oak bench seats have been installed on Great Common south, Mill Common and at Becks Green.

October and November has seen the cutting of saplings and willows from ditches on all the commons.

Section 4.2 Other Planned Works

It is intended that maintenance works will be undertaken to some incursion and drainage ditches. The likely locations being Great Common Lane, Tooks Common Lane and at The Mardle. In addition work may also be required to reinstate the incursion ditch adjacent to

the village sign (Tooks Common Lane) where it has been damaged by sugar beet harvesters. This work was not anticipated and therefore not in the budget.

One more bench seat is to be made and installed on Great Common north.

The clearing and cutting of fallen trees will be undertaken on Mill Common and Blacksmiths Common with the resultant cordwood being sold and delivered to parishioners. Some general scrub maintenance and clearing of fallen deadwood might also be undertaken. These activities are only possible should restrictions associated with Covid-19 permit.

Section 5. Other Expenditures, and total anticipated expenditures in 2020.

At the time of writing, it is expected that the total expenditure by the LMC in the period covered by the Annual Management Plan 2020-2021 will be within the estimated range in that plan – in other words, £11,000 - £15,000. No significant additional expenditures, beyond those outlined in the Annual Management Plan, are anticipated at this stage.