

Ebernoe Common - Information for a Public Consultation regarding grazing of the Common; Sussex Wildlife Trust

History and Context

Ebernoe Common (the Common) has been used by local people at least since mediaeval times and probably much earlier and there is a long history of grazing on the Common. There was some grazing until World War II and a last record of pigs being turned out on the common in the early 1960s.

The evidence from written documents and maps shows that the common has been a mixture of forest and open, grazed pasture for centuries, with the tree cover expanding or contracting from time to time depending on the demand for timber and changes in grazing pressures as they reflected agricultural ups and downs.

The importance of the Common as a site for wildlife was recognised when it was notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1972 as a large ancient woodland and wood pasture. This importance was underlined in 2005 when the Common was also notified as a Special Area of Conservation under European legislation. Most of the site was acquired by the Sussex Wildlife Trust in 1980, and 73ha of the site was declared a National Nature Reserve in 1999.

As a registered common, Ebernoe is now open to the public by right, although since its purchase, the Wildlife Trust has always had an open access policy on the reserve. It is used and valued by local residents and is also visited by naturalists and others in small numbers from outside the area. There are no registered commoners.

Ebernoe Common is one of the core areas within the forests and commons of the West Weald. It has a cultural history going back centuries and provides a rare example of a virtually undamaged wood pasture common with a mosaic of grazed high forest and open grassland with glades, droveways (called rews in this part of Sussex) and shallow ponds for watering stock. The main interruption to this history of continuous use was the abandonment of the Common during the latter half of the last century. This break in management has now been ended by the restoration of the traditional wood pasture grazing regime.

The Common

Ebernoe Nature Reserve is 157.6 ha (390.4 acres) in size and includes 75.9 ha of Ebernoe Common. Much of the site lies on Weald clay, so water logging is frequent in winter or after rain and parts of the reserve can be very muddy and wet. The main access point is from Streele's Lane in the north, past the church, where there is a small car park. There are also eight pedestrian rights of way (footpaths) entering the reserve from all sides, but no bridleways¹. The public has a statutory right of access on the Common (under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) on foot, and it has been the policy of the Trust to allow open access onto all its land here, so the whole area is open to the public although visitors are encouraged to keep to the numerous paths and tracks.

In the recent past, management at Ebernoe has included maintaining footpaths, steps and bridges to allow access, and upkeep of fences and gates to contain stock.

¹ *Although not identified in the SWT report (as they were unaware) there is also a G-road that runs north from Pipers Lane to the church, where a D-road connects it with Streele's Lane. All new structures on rights of way must be authorised by the highway authority. However WSCC has no powers to authorise a structure across a G-road. Bridleway 3255 connects with this G-road near its southern end and then out to a wider network of bridleways and restricted byways around Ball's Cross, Kirdford and Mackerels Common. Jane Noble, WSCC*

There are several private rights of way across the reserve to adjoining properties. It has been roughly estimated that there are 2,500-5,000 visitors to the reserve per year, mostly local dog walkers but including 200-300 visitors coming on guided walks and other photographic, rambling and wildlife specialist groups regularly visiting, together with a small number of local school groups.

The existing grazing scheme

In 2001, following a successful application to the Secretary of State, some 35 ha of the common was fenced in order to re-introduce grazing. The reasons for wishing to re-instate a grazing regime were to restore the centuries-old wood pasture system and to control developing scrub on the areas of open grassland. Until this time, the Trust had been controlling scrub by mechanical cutting. This was not considered to be sustainable in the long term, and left behind a uniform cut sward. This contrasts with the diversity of height and structure left behind by the grazing and trampling of domestic stock which provides a range of conditions and habitats for plants, invertebrates and other animals and birds. The application sought consent for a ten year period, to allow the results of grazing to be assessed, and for the visiting public to see for themselves what it was like to have animals in the woods and pastures.

From 2002 the Northern section of the Common has been lightly grazed with cattle in May and again from late August until ground conditions are too wet (generally November/December). Grazing since 2005 has been by Sussex cattle, a quiet and docile breed. Since 2007, the Trust has grazed with its own Sussex cattle that are very accustomed to the public. They are also now used to fending for themselves in a woodland environment. Signs are erected to let the public know when cattle are present and there have been no incidents of which the Trust is aware and no complaints to the Trust during the times the animals have been on the Common.

Ebernoe Common has been extensively surveyed for its flora and fauna by experts over the last 30 years and the prevailing view is that grazing management will benefit many of the groups for which the Common is important.

Although many groups of plants and animals clearly benefit from the activities of grazing animals, there were some concerns about the effect on bats and the Trust has consulted with Natural England, the Bat Conservation Trust and the Sussex Bat Group in formulating its proposals. Natural England concluded that the proposed grazing regime is not likely to have a significant adverse impact on the key bat species. It has also been noted that the introduction of grazing by the Trust on the adjacent fields has directly contributed to a doubling of the population of one rare species of bat in the space of 10 years.

Grazing is now seen as a sustainable way of continuing a centuries old management practice on the common to perpetuate its nationally and internationally important wildlife interest. Over a period of some nine years the common has been grazed with a fencing scheme consented for a fixed term, and in that time there have been no reported problems in relation to public access.

Future grazing

The Trust has therefore carefully considered the options for management of the Common and has concluded that a permanent grazing scheme is the best way forward. One alternative would be to cease management of the glades and grasslands, which would lead to a decline and eventual extinction of many important species, and is not an option on this European designated site. The other option would be to return to a system of maintenance that relied on mechanical cutting. This would lead to the impoverishment of the flora and fauna that have survived down the centuries under a grazed wood pasture system. It would also result in the

compaction of the wet soils and, by using fossil fuels, would be unsustainable in the longer term.

The Trust has also carefully considered how this might be implemented in a way that facilitates improved public access, allows the animals the greatest freedom to roam over a wider area and at the same time ensures the recruitment of young trees. In putting forward their plans the Trust has been greatly helped by the recent acquisition of additional land on the edge of the Common that can be included in its future plans.

In formulating its proposals the Trust has been mindful of the need to provide for the welfare of the animals through observance of the five principles:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst (adequate, easily accessible food and water).
2. Freedom from discomfort (shelter and a comfortable and safe resting area).
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease (prevention, rapid diagnosis and treatment).
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour (sufficient space for the animals to move and feed naturally).
5. Freedom from fear and distress (freedom from attack or isolation).

The Trust's stock are checked daily by qualified staff or contractors and any injured or distressed animals promptly removed and treated. The animals are carefully chosen to be suitable for the grazing conditions and to be tolerant of people and their pets. Any animal that causes problems is removed, but at Ebernoe this has never been necessary as the Sussex cattle are remarkably docile and ignore people and dogs. There are natural ponds on the Common and piped water for watering stock in adjoining fields.

Currently the cattle graze in the northern section of the Common in May and again from August, with no grazing in June and July. The southern section is not currently grazed but the intention is that this area should be lightly grazed between June and November.

The intention will be to eventually graze the whole area throughout the spring, summer and autumn with cattle having access to the neighbouring fields on Butcherlands as well as the Common, following a period of further monitoring. Fencing and gates will be checked and repaired when necessary.

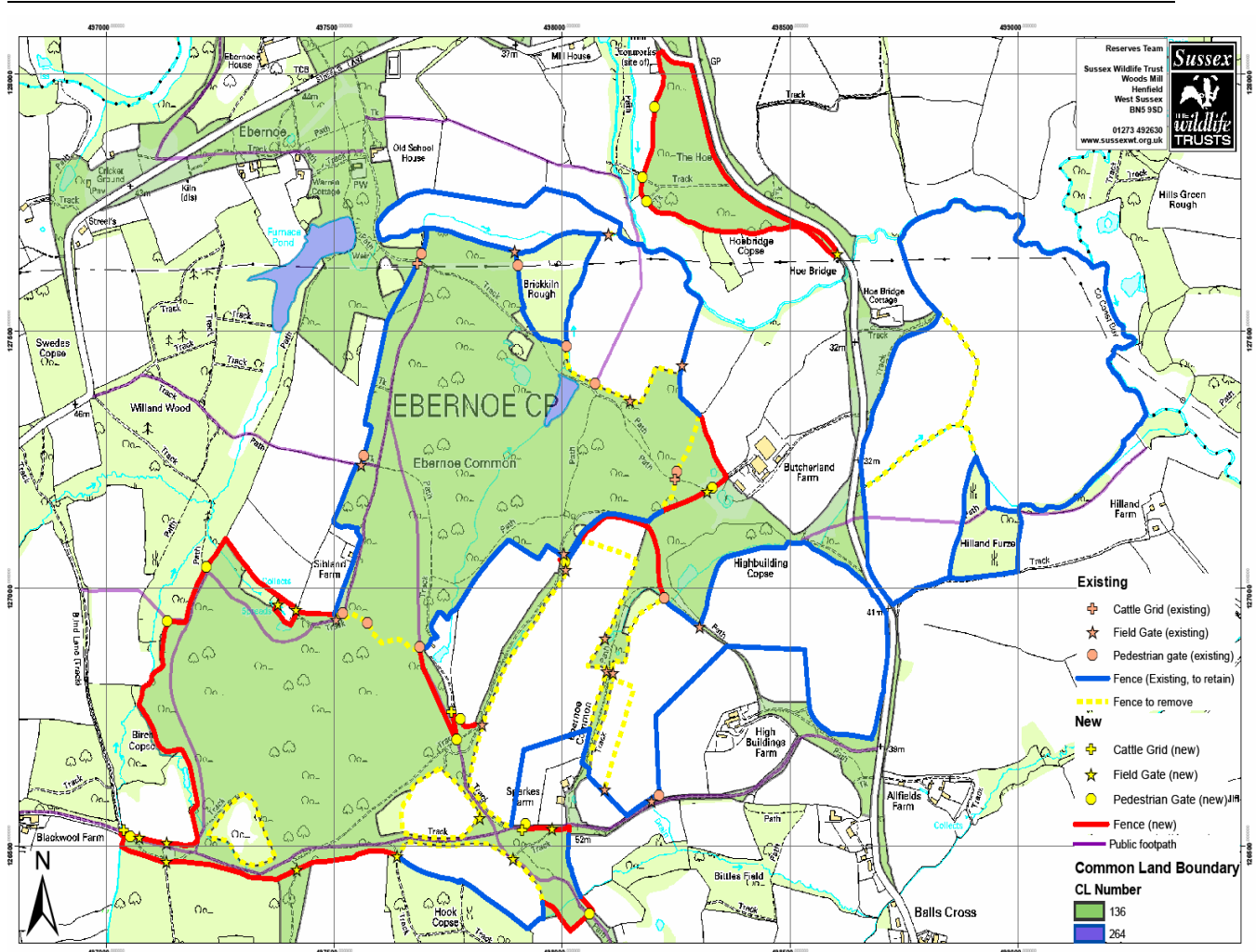
Any new fencing will be standard stock fencing using wooden posts and five strands of wire with barbed wire as the top strand. Gates will be pedestrian kissing gates suitable for use by push chairs or wheel chairs, and in some places there will also be field gates for access by vehicles for management. The existing cattle grid on the main entrance from the church car park with a pedestrian side gate will remain. New cattle grids are proposed on access tracks to other properties to avoid the need for opening and closing gates, and will also have pedestrian side gates. All the access arrangements proposed are shown on the accompanying map [*JN The map and further information will be displayed at the meeting*].

Further details can be found at:

<http://www.sussexwt.org.uk/conservation/conservation/page00019.htm>

Sussex Wildlife Trust October 2010

Summarised by Jane Noble October 2010



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Where appropriate, the Sussex Wildlife Trust would like to thank the following dataset providers: Natural England (RAMSAR, SAC, SPA, NNR, SSSI, ancient woodland, chalk grassland, vegetated shingle and saline lagoon data), East Sussex County Council (LNR, SNC), country park, notable verge and heathland data), Brighton & Hove City Council (DNCI & LNR data), The Environment Agency (grazing marsh, urban areas, and hydrological data), South Downs Joint Committee (chalk grassland data), and Or Francis Rose (gryll woodland data).

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