



## HCCPS Newsletter February 2024

**History:** Historically the Commons were managed by grazing animals in accordance with Commoners' rights. This was overseen on behalf of the Lord of the Manors (LoM) by Manorial Courts held at The Full Moon and the Old Manor House for Hawridge and Cholesbury respectively. These courts were responsible for deciding when grazing could start and for dealing with any infringements etc. At that time most of the Commons were grasslands with a few stands of e.g. Beech and Elm trees. I was told by one elderly resident of Hawridge that control of bracken was carried out by burning (illegally!) - a local resident would just drop a cigarette on a day when there wasn't too much wind! Apparently, the local Fire Brigade attended but didn't need to intervene.

By early in the 1900s fewer people exercised their rights of Common and scrub, bushes and trees grew. According to Ann Reid, another old-time resident, Malcolm Stewart, a previous Lord of the Manors clear felled the Commons in the 1930's but, in the absence of sufficient grazing taking place, the Commons soon reverted to scrub etc. By the 1960's only one person continued to graze a few cows on Cholesbury Common – not enough to keep the Commons clear and just enough to create cowpats on the Cricket pitch! One local farmer pointed out that, if nothing was done to control the growth, the Commons would be entirely covered by bushes and trees by 2000 and eventually become Oak woodland.



*Berkhamsted Hunt on Rays Hill (1907?)*



*Cholesbury to Chesham Road at turn off to Rays Hill*

In the mid 1960's there were moves afoot nationwide to register Commons and to require people with Commons Rights to register their rights. At this time the then LoM was unable to manage the Commons in any significant way. By Law the LoM is only required to keep the Definitive Paths open. Access to all other parts of the Commons had been granted to the general public for Air and Exercise by Malcolm Stewart in the 1930's but the LoM was not required to keep access open. Malcolm Stewart had also put in place the by-laws which include limiting where horses may be ridden and the banning of cycles and other vehicles.

**Hawridge and Cholesbury Commons Preservation Society:** In 1967 there was sufficient public interest to manage the Commons in a way that would maintain access for the local community and to help local people establish whether they had Commons Rights. As a result, Hawridge and Cholesbury Commons Preservation Society (HCCPS) was formed to work with the LoM, owner of the Commons, to carry out these tasks. Establishing as far as possible who had Commons Rights was accomplished in time for these to be registered by 1968 as required. Any eligible householders who did not register their rights at that time lost them. Twenty-three households in Hawridge and Cholesbury continue to hold rights though no one exercises them at present.

For many years, the main work of the Society was in physically maintaining paths and horse rides using local farmers' tractors and involving volunteers slashing and burning scrub. Eventually, the Society bought its own tractor and other equipment to carry out these tasks. Volunteers also maintained the ponds. Over the years contractors were employed to carry out work which the volunteers could not manage. Experts in their various fields were consulted and records kept of the species found on the Commons.



*Working Party – Morning tea*

In the late 1980's and early 1990's a management plan was formulated for the Commons which largely stands to this day. The woodland was not included in this plan and the advice at the time was that, if we were unable to manage it, it was best to leave it alone. However, over time the use of volunteers to carry out the physical tasks became less viable. Issues such as Health and Safety regulations meant that organising Working Parties became more of a chore, volunteers were usually older, fewer people wanted to drive the elderly tractor to keep the rides and paths open and Forestry Commission advice that fallen wood should be left as habitat rather than burned made Working Parties less attractive to some of the volunteers. The use of a contractor became a much more practical option and we have been fortunate to have James Jolliffe to carry out works on the Commons since then.

**Change:** Over time the role of the Society has changed from being primarily hands on to control vegetation growth. Now, by using a contractor to carry out this work, we can turn to other initiatives. There is still some manual work but our role now includes maintaining the website; writing for Hilltop News; fundraising; organising events; gathering species records; clearing litter; applying for grants occasionally; liaising with H&C School to interest the children in the wildlife; mentoring Duke of Edinburgh volunteers; maintaining species records; coming up with fresh ideas.



*Grass cutting*

From the inception of the Society, other ways in which the Committee sought to involve the local community were in having membership subscriptions, newsletters and an annual event where people could meet their neighbours and welcome newcomers. Initially these were bonfire parties, then summer parties at various venues, community picnics and informative walks and talks. These activities have continued with modifications. We developed a website [hawridgeandcholesburycommons.org](http://hawridgeandcholesburycommons.org), send out Newsletters by email and we continue to try to keep local people informed of what is happening on the Commons and why, by these means and by regular articles in Hilltop News.

Needless to say, over the years there have been various disputes between conflicting users eg between the horse riders and the cricket club; people infringing their boundaries; and differing views on how our Commons should be. However, these have not surfaced for some time fortunately.

**Conservation:** We have been fortunate for the last 35 years to have Christine Stott as owner of the Commons. She has maintained much more interest and involvement in the Commons than most of her predecessors; has handled local disputes; and been proactive in conservation of the Commons for the wellbeing of their wildlife as well as the interests of human users. Her work has been recognised by experts and the Commons are designated as a County Wildlife site. Over the last ten years or so Christine has worked, in accordance with a Forestry Commission plan to manage the woodland, for which she takes sole responsibility. This has been particularly challenging at a time when Ash Dieback has hit.



*Tree felling*



*Moth release by David Dennis and Peter Bygate*



*Ringling of Tawny Owl chicks by BORG*



*H&C School children planting native daffodils*

**Community support:** We are fortunate to have the support of the community in general and have steady income from subscriptions which have not increased for 10+ years (£10 per individual and £20 per family). In addition, we receive annual sponsorship for our Hilltop Villages Calendar which almost pays for its printing. The sale of calendars and our cards also make a significant contribution to help pay for the contracting work.

Over the years we have had the help of many individuals running and participating in Working parties; setting up and maintaining the website; those with expert knowledge of flora and fauna who have added to the species records and given talks or led walks; designing the calendar; photographers providing images for the calendar and cards; running a pre-Christmas stall using Cricket Club facilities; giving donations; becoming Committee members to help oversee all of this, etc. etc. HCCPS has a proud tradition of working with the LoM/owner to maintain the Commons for the benefit of all who live here – humans, flora and fauna alike. The model set up by our predecessors 55 years ago of involving the community in playing our part in this work has served us all well. Our predecessors would be envious of what we are now able to accomplish to keep diverse habitats on the Commons using modern machinery and, with the help of new technology, to keep our community informed about the wonderful resource we have on our doorsteps. The current committee would welcome suggestions for activities which might further enhance our enjoyment of our Commons.

Lindsay Griffin