

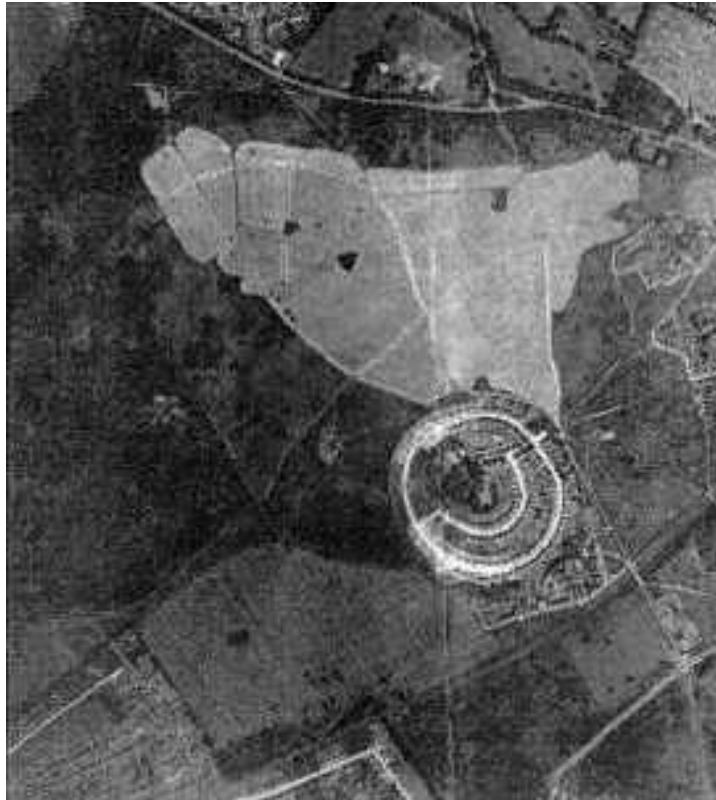


Epsom Common Grazing Project

In the summer of 1997, we began grazing an area of Epsom Common using cattle owned and managed by the [Lower Mole Countryside Partnership](#). The return of the cattle marked the end of a period starting in the early twentieth century when grazing disappeared from Epsom Common.

The disappearance of grazing started a process of succession where the largely open treeless landscape of Epsom Common was transformed into the landscape dominated by the developing woodland we see today. The progression to a single, uniform habitat of woodland has the effect of reducing biodiversity on the site. What we aim to achieve is a balance between woodland, scrub, grassland, open water and the important transitions between these habitats.

The aerial photographs below, taken in 1949, 1971, 1998 and 2003, illustrate how quickly woodland has encroached on the Common along with a map from 2016 showing the extent of grazing today. All the images are the copyright of Surrey County Council and copies can be obtained for a fee by telephoning 03456 009 009 (8am-6pm weekdays, excluding bank holidays)



1949 - note the light coloured ploughed and cropped area north of the circular Wells Estate



1971 - the Common remains relatively open



1998 - the open areas have been almost entirely encroached by developing woodland



2003 - open areas of habitat are reinstated through the grazing project



Area grazed by cattle in 2016

Why reintroduce grazing?

A large part of Epsom Common is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. A significant part of this nationally important designation is due to the site's importance as a breeding bird habitat. The rapid disappearance of scrub and adjacent grassland in recent decades has threatened the biodiversity of many flowering plants, birds, mammals and invertebrates.

Since the 1980s, we have used our own work force, contractors and volunteers to try and maintain a better balance between the various competing habitats. While initial clearance of woodland is an important part of the process of managing these areas, the long-term maintenance of the cleared areas is central to the preservation of biodiversity. The known benefits of grazing in helping to control encroaching woodland persuaded the Council to work in partnership with the Lower Mole Countryside Management Project to reintroduce grazing onto Epsom Common.

During summer 1997, two cows were used for the first time with good results, in a small section of what is now called Great Pasture. Today around 30 cows graze three separate areas with grazing introduced on to Horton Heath in 2009, followed in 2010 by Rye Meadow. We receive grant aid from Natural England to assist grazing on the site. Our overall aim now is to maintain the three areas of restored pasture woodland using the munching skills of our cattle and cutting ability of our volunteers.

Why cattle?

As the Common has been historically grazed for hundreds of years, cattle are very suited to grazing this site. Grazing is a sensitive way of maintaining the grassland without causing disturbance to other wildlife.

Cattle, in preference to other grazers such as sheep, create a varied structure in the grassland which is beneficial to wildlife. For example, taller areas of grass provide shelter for bird nesting/chick concealment as well as providing areas for insects to feed and

hibernate. Alternatively their hooves trample bracken and other undesirable plants as well as create areas of bare soil which allow plants to regenerate and insects to lay eggs. Even dung-pats provide habitat for invertebrates!

Mechanical methods are, by contrast, very sudden ways of controlling vegetation and do not give wildlife, particularly invertebrates, time to adjust to the change in habitat. Additionally, cattle are easier than ponies, goats or sheep to contain with temporary fencing which, in turn, allows good public access onto the site. Cattle are also far less susceptible to being frightened by dogs.

Animal welfare

In order to ensure the welfare of the cattle, checks are carried out on a daily basis. We check the cattle themselves to ensure they are in good health and, in the event of any problems, their owner is immediately notified. In addition, we ensure daily that the electric fencing and water supply on the grazing area is in good working order and that the cattle's mineral licks are in place. The checks are carried out by our staff from the Countryside Team and Ranger Service, and volunteers from the Epsom Common Association.

Surveying and monitoring

The effect of grazing on the biodiversity of the Common is monitored carefully in accordance with the Epsom Common Management Plan. From 1998 to 2012 the impact of grazing on plants was monitored through the use of quadrats surveyed every four years, which demonstrated a positive impact on plant diversity. Monitoring also includes butterflies via a regularly walked transect and also reptile monitoring to ensure the existing populations of Adder and Grass snake are thriving. In addition a photographic record is kept via a system of fixed photographic points. If you would like to find out more about how we monitor biodiversity across the Borough please call 01372 732000 and ask to speak to a member of the Countryside Team.

