

MANAGEMENT OF BAILDON MOOR

I received an unsolicited email from a District Council officer in the Countryside Service about management of Baildon Moor, the content and tone of which was entirely inappropriate. This was conceded by the Head of Service, who described it as being “fired from the hip”, and offered me an apology. The email did, however, give me an insight into the type of thinking that this council officer has about management of the moor, and which may be shared in the Countryside Service. The council officer copied in the Chair of FOBM, and it is likely that this rancorous missive stemmed from a misguided correspondence between the two of them, indicating at least to me the relationship that there is with this member of FOBM.

Out of interest, I préciséd the content of the inappropriate email, and of the proposal to seek funding for management of the moor, to the Head of Conservation of a Wildlife Trust in the Midlands. This was his response:

“Your difficult time over the bracken on your local moor just shows how we need to get people thinking, instead of blindly following the dogma in all the manuals. I call it the bone-headed approach. If the manual said ‘jump over the cliff’, would you do it? If the moor can’t be grazed there seems little point in trying to control the bracken anyway - it’ll keep coming back, along with the trees. Furthermore, unless there are good populations of open ground species remaining, all they will get is a few acid grassland plants, as on a site near where I live. They’ll probably decide to start sowing plants then to increase species-richness, as I do in my garden! As for Higher Level Stewardship, it’s very prescriptive and target orientated isn’t it? Doesn’t seem to allow for the increasing approach of nature, partly because you only get paid for what you ‘do’.”

I do not offer this as an absolute substantiation of any particular position other than to indicate the disagreement that management of publicly owned commons provokes. My lukewarm response to the setting up of FOBM is in reaction to the “tidy-up/do something” attitude that I knew would be attendant at the initial meetings. It did not augur well for a considered opinion on the changing nature of the moor, nor was it much informed by the legislation that exists for registered commons. I have since learned that the motivation for action by FOBM is often based on misinformation.

Various works on commons require application for permission from the Secretary of State. The whole point of that process is that there is a transparency whereby objections can be made formally to applications for proposed works before they are carried out. If an application is not made - like the situation recently when the Smiths laid a track at the northern edge of the moor - then there is no opportunity for that external oversight to occur (the crushed building material they used was grossly contaminated with glass, metal, plastic, and other waste, and thus the track also constituted an illegal landfill). It is to be lamented that the District Council were unprepared to sanction the Smiths for this illegal work, in spite of the fact that the Smiths did not even inform the District Council of what they were doing, nor did the District Council have it remediated. The District Council point to the registered commoners when it suits them, but their differential adherence to commons regulation makes their approach highly inconsistent.

The central issue here is that the District Council has been treating the moor just like any other space in the public realm, applying reactionary management whenever someone complains. The unnecessary clearance of gorse is one example, and I would very much like to know whether it was the District Council that reduced the height of an island of shrubs and trees that presumably gave some householders a better view over the moor. It also has to be asked why it was that the bracken rolling took place where it did, if for no other reason than it is the area most in view. That is not a credible reason for moorland landscape management. And I would ask why recent drainage ditch works have been carried in the NW corner of the moor (without application?) when they appear only to serve the needs of a number of wide, mown tracks that have appeared there, which seem only to be provided for horse riders entering the moor from the Smiths.

In the longer term, what I fear is a situation that I have seen happen near Sheffield. The Wadsley Commoners group took a dogmatic view of the management of publicly owned commons, even though they had not been grazed for many years and naturally regenerating woodland was advancing out from the extant ancient woodland next to the commons (we also have this situation with Baildon Moor where part of the ancient woodland in Shipley Glen is actually within the registered commons).

This group were happy to rubber stamp a management plan that the City Council devised straight out of the manuals, and the consultation on the plan was poor because of its assumption that support from that group was deemed sufficient by the Council. The implementation of the management plan revealed the extent of damage to natural habitat on the commons, putting at risk the natural gains – especially in woodland birds – in a vain attempt to turn back the clock. In shock, local residents formed a Friends of Loxley and Wadsley Commons to challenge the management, eventually taking their case to the Scrutiny Committee of the City Council (I provided some of their expert evidence).

Fundamentally, it has to be recognised that there are a number of large commons in public ownership where common rights to grazing are no longer exercised, or to any great extent. Local people have thus got used to landscapes in transition that are no longer the "barren, wasted, blasted heaths" since Mother Nature has started to reclaim them. These local people resent the management pressures on commons to "turn back the clock", their preferences for landscape being more sophisticated than is commonly recognised. The high merit of public ownership should be that it takes off the burden of exploitative use, and allows land to have the virtues of providing a range of recreational, educational and restorative activities at a landscape scale, and which depend on that increasing characteristic of advancing naturalness.

Many "action" and "friends" groups have formed around commons across England - from Ashdown Forest in Sussex, Penwith Moors in west Cornwall, Wetley Common in Staffordshire, Norton Heath Common in Essex, Nomansland Common in Hertfordshire, to Hartlebury Common in Worcestershire – to counter management proposals on publicly owned commons, or commons in beneficial ownership such as with the National Trust. For many of these groups, it is a steep learning curve, made harder by the disdain in which they are regarded by those steeped in dogmatic management, and hampered by the fact that there is no clear vision or pathway for the virtuous public ownership of that common land.

It may have been thought, with this level of evidence of systemic causes, that the issue of governance of publicly owned commons would have attracted more attention than it has. It certainly was not reflected in the recent Commons Act 2006, which instead promoted the setting up of Commons Councils to more effectively apply management pressure. Natural England did note the public discontent on commons management since it commissioned one report, South East Commons and their Conservation Management (2005), and sponsored another, A Common Purpose: A guide to agreeing management on common land (2005), both of which sought to reduce conflict. However, neither allowed for any deviance in the prescribed management approach, and assumed that it was just a process of winning the public over.

In spite of misgivings about the processes described in A Common Purpose, it is valuable to see the five 'golden rules' that the guidance proposes should be adopted during the negotiations over commons management:

1. Common land is valued by many people for different reasons. What people value may differ but they are united by the strength of their concern
2. Progress is least likely when one interest in a common attempts to sideline the others, or forces change upon them
3. Regular communication amongst stakeholders is critical in building and maintaining trust and confidence between parties, and should start from a very early stage in the process
4. Lasting progress is most likely when:
 - a. People respect and try to understand each other's values and aims
 - b. People recognise that all perspectives are valid and that everyone will have things in common
 - c. They keep an open mind about what form any change should take, until they have properly explored the various options and the impacts on others
 - d. Any change brings benefits to the neighbourhood and wider interests
5. Complete unanimity may not be possible but a broad consensus should be the aim

If we have to come up with a management plan for the moor, if only to eradicate the off the cuff action that takes place now, then I recommend we ensure that these 'golden rules' guide the process.

Mark Fisher, 5 October 2009