

A combined approach to sustainable heathland management

Pippingford Park Training Area

The 340 hectare Pippingford Park Training Area, part of Defence Training Estate South East (DTE SE), is situated right in the centre of Ashdown Forest, East Sussex within the High Weald.

Ashdown Forest is a mixture of woodland and heathland that has evolved over time in response to historic land use. Ashdown Forest was originally enclosed for deer hunting in the 14th century by King Edward II and common grazing maintained the open heath.



Autumn mist in the valleys © Bob Kennedy

The Forest, as it lies within south-eastern lowland Britain, represents a very significant sanctuary for wildlife, which is reflected in the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation and Special Protected Area (SPA) designations. The area also significantly contributes to the landscape character of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), another designation which reflects the areas intrinsic beauty and celebrates the historical influences that have shaped this countryside (despite being described by William Cobbett in 1822 as "...verily the most villainously ugly spot I ever saw in England").

Pippingford Park Training Area is part hired estate and part MOD freehold. The freehold area was purchased from the Pippingford Estate in the 1950s following extensive military use of the land during the Second World War. The owners of the estate were, and still are, the Morriss family. DE currently works closely with the Morriss' to ensure the management of land maintains and enhances the wildlife and historical features that make the area so important. This management rarely conflicts with the present military land use of providing infantry and foundation training and the diverse habitats provide variation for the users.

The whole area has a rich human history dating back centuries and historical features are abundant within Pippingford Park. To the north east of the park the remains of iron-age fortification and Roman settlement are evident, in the centre of the largest block of heath an unusual circular earthwork is found, in the woodlands old charcoal hearths are visible and throughout the area there are old boundary banks and ancient trees. The High Weald was a primary area for iron production for over 2,000 years and the lakes at Pippingford Park were an important site for the industry once water power was harnessed in the 14th and 15th centuries. Much of the woodland present today was planted to meet the demand for fire wood, essential for the smelting of iron ore found in the area. Extensive pillow mounds (artificial warrens constructed for rabbit farming) are also present on the heathland as a reminder of past practices.

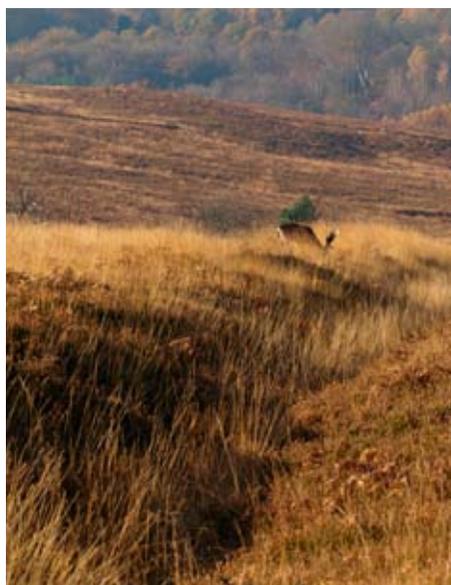
In 2006 Natural England's predecessor, English Nature, carried out a routine survey and deemed that the condition of a 100 hectares section of heathland was starting to decline, mainly due to the presence of purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea*. Previous mechanical management of the heathland was at the time considered successful, however over several years the build up of grasses in this lowland heath reached the point where grazing was identified as the only solution to this issue due to the uneven and in places boggy ground. As a result, in 2007 a grazing trial using Exmoor ponies on a small parcel of heathland was implemented, sanctioned by the Commander DTE SE and the Crowborough Camp Commandant.

The trial showed that the ponies did not substantively disrupt military training and it was therefore agreed to take the project to the next level. Lengthy discussions between Natural England, Richard Morriss (who is also the MOD freehold agricultural licensee) and DE took place until finally a draft plan was approved. This plan was a major component of a successful application for a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Agreement which commenced in 2008. The first work carried out under this agreement was a final helicopter spray of the bracken. Then the large task of fencing and installation of gates and cattle grids began. A combined approach was again put in place as Landmarc's rural team undertook works on the freehold land (through utilisation of MOD SSSI Improvement



Marsh Gentian © Bob Kennedy

funding) and Richard Morriss installed gates and associated fencing at the lakes on the western boundary of the area. The Pippingford Park Conservation Group raised concerns regarding the stock fencing and the potential issue of fallow deer becoming entangled and thus troop crossing points were placed where heavily used deer tracks were evident in an attempt to prevent problems.



Pillow Mound © Bob Kennedy

The site was thus prepared and in early 2009, following collaboration between Richard Morriss and Monty Larkin of the Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust, a string of 31 Exmoor ponies were turned out. The Trust's Exmoor ponies are an important conservation grazing tool in the wider county of Sussex where they graze invasive tor grass on the South Downs in winter months and are turned out onto the Sussex heaths in summer. It was hoped that using ponies on Pippingford Park would also create a micro diversity different to other areas of the Forest that are grazed by sheep and cattle. The impact of the herd on the heathland within a short period of time has been



Pony herd – first steps © Bob Kennedy

positive and the SSSI is now deemed to be in recovering condition. The positive impact of the agricultural licence and the HLS on the condition of the area was further enhanced by a programme of mechanical birch and rhododendron removal carried out by Richard Morriss. Birch clearance included a significant block adjacent to the southern lakes to reinstate the heathland running to the waters edge with the aim of protecting this rare habitat from irreversible change. Bird and dragonfly surveys are underway to gauge the effect of these works.

The scheme has not been without difficulties. One pony went missing and after much searching was unfortunately found dead in a large hidden gully whilst another pony arrived on his own accord. The pony had joined the Pippingford animals from another herd run by Monty Larkin on the adjacent Old Lodge Nature Reserve, and has remained ever since. Troop shelters within the grazing area have received unwanted attention from the herd as a location for shelter (gaining access when possible) and as a convenient scratching structure with resulting damage to down pipes. It was always recognised that teething problems would occur and lessons are being continually learnt. To aid stock handling and husbandry, negotiations between stakeholders are currently underway to agree the construction of a corral. Although the proposed structure is relatively basic, the location of the corral will be crucial, as the

animals must be driven to it with the least stress and without unnecessary complications.

Individual ponies are being monitored to ensure they do not become too 'attached' to military personnel and vehicles. The hard winter experienced in 2009/10 meant that a certain amount of supplementary feeding was necessary and this may exacerbate the potential problem of the ponies associating vehicles with fodder. Standing orders for soldiers to ensure excess pack lunches are not distributed to the animals are in place and the Lands Warden, Bob Kennedy, keeps a vigilant eye on proceedings. The hard winter has also resulted in the stripping of bark off gorse bushes and trees (possibly through a combined effort of the ponies and fallow deer) and some vegetation may require protection to prevent possible disruption to wildlife such as Dartford warblers *Sylvia undata*, a designated species of the SPA.

Stocking levels and the timing of grazing will need to be re-assessed in 2010 by Natural England and will take into account all the positives and negatives at this early stage of the project. This process will continue for several years until the true sustainable level is found. The grazing project was and continues to be an excellent example of stakeholder cooperation and despite some setbacks and initial problems, the condition of the heathland is expected to improve markedly over the coming years.

The possibility of extending grazing to smaller parcels of unenclosed land within the training area will also be investigated and the 2009 summer visit of the Conservation Group to the Ashdown Forest close-herded Hebridean sheep project gave all those present food for thought. The Forest shepherd Louise Amos and her assistant Susanna, ably demonstrated the potential of such a system.

As for the HLS at Pippingford, the grazing is just one part of this multi-objective agreement which transcends ownership boundaries. The wider estate is also rich in environmental features that support a varied biodiversity. This year, projects will look to further improve the management of the lakeside vegetation to support nationally important dragonfly populations. The woodland priority has been identified as removing the invasive rhododendron and bamboo and to manage large heathy glades for invertebrates. In addition, the protection of the rich historic environment is being prioritised and a survey is to be commissioned in 2010 to document and plan the management of further historical features. Thus improvements to the natural and historic landscape at Pippingford Park are set to continue. ■

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