

**CLEE LIBERTY**  
**Draft Management Plan 2020-2030**



Produced through the Our Common Cause Project which aims to support the centuries-old heritage of upland commons in four of England's most significant cultural landscapes through enabling collaborative management, reconnecting people with commons and improving public benefits. The Project has funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, alongside funding from partners.



Prepared November 2019 by Catherine Landles

## INTRODUCTION

As part of the project “Our Common Cause”, discussions were held in 2018 and 2019 to develop a future vision for Clee Liberty common. Gathering thoughts, opinions and statements of fact from the owners, commoners and other stakeholders, the aim has been to deliver a vision that will enable consensual management of this precious common. (See vision on following page.)

This emerging Management Plan is based on conversations, activities and consultations which were carried out during the development phase of Our Common Cause between the Clee Liberty commoners and active graziers, Clee St Margaret Parish Council, as the owner of the common, Natural England, Historic England and members of the local community. Other relevant organisations and groups have also contributed, including Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Shropshire Ornithological Society, Shropshire Council, Butterfly Conservation, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Abdon & District Community Wildlife Group, Arbor Vitae Environment Ltd and Fearn Heritage & Archaeology.

The aims of this management plan are:

- To achieve the shared vision
- Ensure compliance
- Guide management of the site over the next ten years

We accept this is a working and evolving document and remain flexible and open to relevant adjustments.

Bracken encroachment is a major management issue on Clee Liberty. During the development phase, Clee St Margaret Parish Council applied to Natural England for funding of a PA2 Feasibility Study: Bracken Management Plan. Our Common Cause also made a financial contribution towards the study. The study (attached) was carried out by Arbor Vitae Environment Ltd to assess the current status of bracken on the common and to guide and inform future management. Entering a Countryside Stewardship scheme was also explored, and a Higher Tier application submitted (awaiting decision as of 7/11/19). Scheme details and aims attached.

For the purposes of this management plan, we have assumed that the Countryside Stewardship agreement application will be successful. If unsuccessful, the Parish Council has stated that their intention to work towards the plan would remain.





**Continuation of commoning**, maintaining livelihoods and farming in an environmentally sensitive and sustainable way.



**Gorse and bracken managed** - bracken (some scattered, some dense), interspersed with acid grassland.



**A wealth of wildlife** thriving on the common; upland birds, insects and reptiles.



**Responsible visitors** enjoying the common for quiet pursuits, recreation and walking. Improving education and interpretation to increase understanding and encourage respect for the hill.

# Our Shared Vision for Clee Liberty

A healthy hill for land, life and livelihoods.

This shared vision represents the ambition of the Clee Liberty Commoners & Graziers, Clee St Margaret Parish Council, Natural England, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Historic England & Shropshire Wildlife Trust.



**Historic features** such as Nordy Bank, understood, accessible and in good condition.



**Healthy livestock** (sheep & ponies), and appropriate stocking levels to maintain priority habitats.



**Enhanced landscape** with great views and colour, e.g. heather, whinberries, and associated wildlife.



**A variety of habitats in good condition**, comprising acid grassland, heathland and mire on top of the hill. A mixture of flowers and grasses, wet flushes, pools, scattered trees or small clusters, western gorse and associated wildlife.

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## DESCRIPTION

Clee Liberty Common comprises 225 hectares (540 acres) of grazing land lying between the village of Clee St Margaret and Clee Burf, the lower of the two summits of Brown Clee. It lies wholly within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).



In addition to its primary role as a working common, Clee Liberty is open access land and is known for its scenic views. Situated on the lower slopes of the Common, Nordy Bank is an important Iron Age hillfort and a designated Scheduled Monument by English Heritage.

Clee Liberty has always been an agricultural working common and is crisscrossed by footpaths and bridleways, including the Jack Mytton Way (long-distance bridle route) and the Shropshire Way (long-distance footpath). It is popular with walkers and naturalists for its wild and unspoilt nature. Visitors are always welcome, but the local community is keen to protect the common from the trappings of tourism, therefore facilities are minimal.

Clee Liberty is one of Shropshire Wildlife Trusts designated (non-statutory) Wildlife Sites for its botanical and ornithological interest. It represents one of some 600 sites considered to have key interest for wildlife. It is important for a variety of habitats and associated species, including:

- Wet flushes - star sedge, sphagnums, matt grass, heath woodrush, hare's-tail cotton grass, purple moor grass, marsh violet, marsh valerian, devils bit scabious, reptiles (common lizard), amphibians, bog pondweed, creeping forget me not.
- Acid grassland – spring sedge, harebell, heath grass, early hair grass, heath bedstraw, violets (common, dog and early), tormentil, heath milkwort, fairy flax, hairy lady's mantle
- Heathland/wet heath on hill top – heather, bilberry, cladonia lichen, small heath butterfly
- Scrub, bracken, gorse, rush pasture, water horse tail, flea sedge, diocedus sedge, quaking grass

The ecological status of the site has been well documented over the years with several specific reports being produced:

- A study of the Common's bryophyte communities (Callaghan, 2014) revealed that a number of nationally scarce species were found, including: *Brachydontium trichodes*, *Ditrichum flexicaule* and *Hamatocaulis vernicosus* with the latter not only nationally scarce but also awarded full protection under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- A detailed botanical survey of Clee Liberty (Handley, 2013) mapped main vegetation communities and recorded plant species from within 10 monads, made up of 4x4m or 2x2m quadrats.
- Recent reptile surveys on Clee Liberty (Arbor Vitae, 2019) found a small population of common lizard *Zootoca vivipara*, believed to be restricted to deep gully channels which are densely vegetated in the upper reaches of the Common.

Clee Liberty is one of three Shropshire Hills upland commons participating in the Our Common Cause Project. Operating in four areas of upland England, the project is working to make common land more relevant to 21st century life by encouraging people to enjoy commons, whilst responsibly managing them to preserve their natural history and ensure they remain accessible to all. The project also aims to ensure the continuation of grazing on these areas.

## MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES/OBJECTIVES

- Maintain the historic status of the common as a resource for the graziers. Ensuring the practice of commoning continues (sheep, ponies, cattle).
- Appropriate livestock numbers/stocking rates applied, in line with available grazing and to improve and maintain priority habitats.
- Conserve and enhance flora and fauna – the management plan will take into account the priority habitats and associated species. Care has been taken for many years, and will continue, to avoid any interventions which would interfere with nesting birds. We are similarly concerned to protect butterfly habitats, where appropriate. In addition to Acid Grassland Habitat, we have a variety of interesting flora, mostly concentrated near the wet flushes at the top of the common. These areas are not affected by any of our management methods.
- Provide a space for recreation and enjoyment of nature for both our local community and the wider community.
- Protect Nurdy Bank Iron Age Hillfort (Scheduled Monument) and other historic landscape features - tracks & holloways, industrial archaeology
- Management of bracken and gorse, taking into account the priority species
- Contribute to Shropshire/UK Carbon Neutrality by planting trees where appropriate

## WORK PROGRAMME

ACTIVITY	TIMESCALE
Implement the Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship scheme, detailed as follows...	2020 - 2030
Restore and/or maintain populations of priority upland bird species by appropriate water level management and providing the grassland habitat and sward structure suitable for feeding and nesting	2020-2030
Control the spread of, or remove, existing dense stands of bracken to maintain or restore biodiversity value and protect archaeological sites	2020-2030
Provide a method of stock control to help habitat management or to protect environmental features	2020-2030
Contribute to the extra costs of fencing on difficult sites, to help habitat management or to protect environmental features	2020-2030
Control bracken using mostly mechanical means but chemicals where necessary, to restore or maintain high value natural habitats and their associated wildlife,	2020-2030

protect archaeological features and help maintain and enhance the character of the landscape	
IF OCC SUCCESSFUL OR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING THROUGH GRANTS/ SCHEMES	
Purchase bracken equipment – weed wiper, flail topper, bracken crusher	Year 1
Purchase sheep dipping unit	2020
Carry out any relevant sheep dipping training	2020
Agree coordination of, housing and maintenance for the sheep dipping unit	2020
Through my Eyes – sharing learning - collaborative meetings between various stakeholders	November 2020 – July 2021
Take the Common to Town - Outreach into urban locations close to each commons area	2020 – 2023
Public events and activities	August 2020 - summer 2023
Historic Landscape project - research, investigation, survey and recording. Led by Fearn Heritage & Archaeology. Year 1 - Understanding the Iron Age landscape: Year 2 - Understanding the Medieval development of the common: Year 3 - Focus on the industry, quarrying and lime production	Years 1 - 3
Butterfly & Moth project – Raising awareness, understanding and involvement and conservation management. Led by Butterfly Conservation	Years 1 - 3
Wheatear and Upland Bird Monitoring project. Led by Leo Smith with volunteer support from Abdon & District Community Wildlife Group	Years 1 - 3
Commons for All - John Muir Award – outdoor education on commons for disadvantaged young people	Throughout the life of project (June 2020 – October 2023)
Resilience Fund – funding for small scale projects/activity for all participating commons	Throughout the life of project (June 2020 – October 2023)

### Owner(s) and Commoners

Clee Liberty Common is owned by Clee St Margaret Parish Council and managed together with Clee St Margaret Commoners Association. There are 45 properties with Rights of Common attached to them. Of these, there are two current active graziers with approximately 1600 sheep between them but with rights for up to 3500 sheep and a small number of cattle and horses.

## **History**

The common was originally part of the manorial waste of Clee St Margaret, and in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was gifted to the Parish Meeting by the Lord of the Manor, James Thursby-Pelham. Prior to this there was significant quarrying and mining activity on Clee Liberty, and the mineral rights to the Hill are still retained to this day by Mr Thursby-Pelham's heirs.

## **Designations and policy context**

- Clee Liberty lies wholly within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Given to the Shropshire Hills in 1958 by central government, this designation places the Shropshire Hills as one of the finest landscapes in the country, equivalent in beauty to a National Park. The main purpose is to conserve and enhance the landscape while retaining it as a place where people can work and live.
- Mapped as a 'severely disadvantaged' area from RPA. These are areas where the natural characteristic of the landscape (e.g. geology, altitude, terrain) makes farming more difficult
- Nordy Bank is an important Iron Age hillfort and a designated Scheduled Monument by English Heritage, covering approximately 5ha.
- The industrial archaeology (quarrying/mining site) is a SHINE site (Selected Heritage Inventory for NE)
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust designated (non-statutory) Wildlife Site for its botanical and ornithological interest.

## **Current management**

Aside from grazing, the primary management activity is control of bracken. Approximately 120 hectares of the Common are covered in bracken, with varying levels of density. The principal management activity over the last 60 years has been to try and keep the bracken under control. Methods have included cutting, aerial spraying, crushing and weed-wiping.

There are approximately 40 properties with Rights of Common attached to them. Of these, there are two current active graziers with approximately 1600 sheep between them but with rights for up to 3500 sheep and a small number of cattle and horses.

## **Current condition and vulnerability**

- Heavily grazed
- Bracken encroachment
- Overgrazed gorse, resulting in topiary effect



### **Relevant reports and documents**

- PA2 Feasibility Study: Bracken Management Plan. June 2019. Arbor Vitae Environment Ltd. And bracken map below.
- Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship scheme application/agreement.
- Historic Landscape Survey of Clee Liberty Common. July 2019. Fearn Heritage & Archaeology.
- Ian Cairns Bracken Management Report Proposals, September 2019.
- Rob Rowe's Clee Liberty Survey Results 2019
- Our Common Cause Project: Biodiversity data collation and coincidence mapping for the three Shropshire Hills commons. Dave Green, 2019.
- 2019 Bird Survey results – awaiting report from Leo Smith/Abdon & District Community Wildlife Group

