



Wolvercote Commoners'

NEWSLETTER August 2017

What does Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) mean?

Wolvercote is a unique place and among the things that makes it so special are Port Meadow and Wolvercote Common. The history of these areas goes back to 885 AD when it is thought that King Alfred gave them to the Burgesses (Freemen, as they are known today) of the newly founded Oxford. The land has been grazed consistently since then, as shown in the Domesday Book of 1085. However, following many grazing disputes, a grazing agreement was drawn up in 1562 outlining rights to residents of the area and in fact, for some residents of the parish of Wolvercote, this agreement still stands*. In more recent years, when biodiversity and the organic movement came to the fore, the area was one of the few where the land was largely unaffected by the use of agri-chemicals. Consequently the areas, including Wolvercote Green, were registered as SSSIs (Port Meadow was also designated as a site of Historical and Archaeological Importance to protect the Bronze age and Iron age remains).

What does this mean and what is an SSSI? The official classification of an SSSI is: *Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are protected by law to conserve their wildlife or geology. For example the conservation of a biological SSSI usually involves continuation of the natural and artificial processes which resulted in their development and survival, for example the continued traditional grazing of heathland or chalk grassland.*

So what does this mean for the Wolvercote Commoners' Committee (WCC)? Our main role is the care of Wolvercote Common and Wolvercote Green (Port Meadow is managed by the Port Meadow Management Committee PMMC). Goose Green is also included although it is not an SSSI - it is classified Common Land and these 3 areas involve very different responsibilities. Port Meadow and Wolvercote Common require very little work for the WCC except to be vigilant about the area being abused (digging, bonfires, animal welfare etc.). The major responsibility is to maintain the level of grazing which is needed to keep the area in good condition. The only intervention is the annual 'topping' which is timed to maximise the eradication of thistles and promote secondary growth of grass. However, Wolvercote Green and Goose Green require constant care throughout the year. (You'll notice that we are always trying to promote our 'Work Days'.) Since Wolvercote Green has been fenced off and cows are now being grazed there this, together with regular WCC workday sessions has improved the area. In fact to such an extent that it is not only a SSSI but, following an inspection by Natural England, it was recognised as the 'perfect' example of a meadow. We have linked up with the Wolvercote Tree Group to manage Goose Green. This not only involves planting and the care of the trees but also keeping it maintained as an amenity and recreational facility for the parish.

The WCC was formed in 1929 to take over the management of the Commons when the Wolvercote Parish Council, which used to manage it, ceased to exist. Initially the WCC met every 4 months but now meets monthly as the work-load has increased considerably. An annual Environmental Stewardship Agreement (ESA) grant is received which covers a lot of the work that is undertaken. It is hoped that these grants will continue but nothing is guaranteed and consequently the WCC has to hold a healthy reserve.

* The act allowed grazing by 1,365 horses, 1,890 cattle, 6 donkeys, 48 ducks and lastly 1,192 geese. Although many households still maintain these rights, many forfeited them as they failed to register when the Commons Registration Act in 1965 came into being. Don't forget however, if you think you might have rights, the list is published on the Commoners' website (<http://www.wolvercotecommoners.co.uk>)

COMMONERS' TALKS

We continue our series of Commoners' talks in September with:
'Not Just Geese'
(Birds of Wolvercote Common and Port Meadow)
by **Steve Goddard**
7.30pm Thursday 28th September
in the Baptist Hall

RAGWORT

There has been a lot of ragwort on the Commons this year. It is poisonous to cattle and horses so, if you see any on your walks, please help by pulling it up. It's best to carry a plastic bag with you as it shouldn't be handled too much. Then disposed of it in your waste bin (not the recycling bin).



Don't forget Village Work Mornings second Saturday of every month

Meet outside the Village Hall at 10am (Bring gloves/wellies). Children welcome

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Chair: Angie Goff (01865 554040) Secretary: Mary Brown (01865 236897)