

BLAXHALL COMMONS AND OPEN SPACES TRUST

JASPER'S PIGHTLE, BLAXHALL, SUFFOLK



Jasper's Pightle, viewed from the NW corner July 2021

MANAGEMENT PLAN 2022-2026

Introduction

The Blaxhall Commons and Open Spaces Trust was established in 2015. The objects of the charity are:

- a) To improve the conditions of life and social welfare in the in the village of Blaxhall;
- b) To advance the conservation, protection, and improvement of the physical and natural environment in Blaxhall; and
- c) To preserve and protect the rights of access and use to the Blaxhall commons and open spaces for all residents and visitors

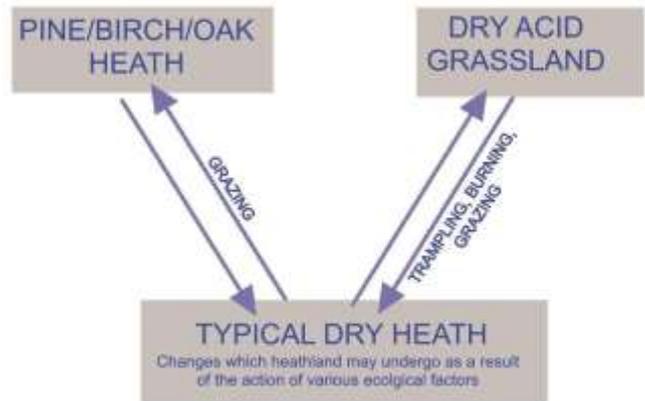
by acquiring , owning, providing, improving and maintaining land in Blaxhall, in particular common land, allotments or land over which local people have traditionally enjoyed access, for the benefit of residents and the wider public.

In 2020 BCOST received its first donation of land, consisting of about 6.5 acres of rough grassland adjoining Blaxhall Great Common. The land has not been used for many years, and has been invaded by bracken, which is damaging to biodiversity. BCOST aims to create a valuable area of rare acid grassland, rich in wild flowers and studded with gorse and brambles, providing excellent nesting sites and cover for birds and mammals. The Trust has renamed the land 'Jasper's Pightle', to honour the memory of the late former owner, Jasper Walters.

This Management Plan sets out the Trust's proposals for the management of Jasper's Pightle (2022-2026). It has been written by Rodney West, ecologist and BCOST trustee. The

Trust is grateful to Cathy Smith, Community Wildlife Advisor at the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, for valuable advice and guidance.

Blaxhall Heath



Heathland is a plagioclimax succession habitat. That is it requires grazing to deflect it from moving to woodland. In this case it is either grazing or fire that deflects the habitat.

Blaxhall Heath is one of the few remaining fragments of the once extensive 'Sandlings' heath of coastal Suffolk and is a good example of this type of dry lowland heath. The Sandlings habitat once stretched from Felixstowe to Lowestoft. As elsewhere in lowland England, substantial losses of lowland heath occurred in the Sandlings area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The heath slopes down towards a central valley through which a road passes, dividing the heath in two halves. The northern half has sizeable stands of mature and degenerate Heather *Calluna vulgaris* which support a variety of *Cladonia* lichens and mosses. Bell Heather *Erica cinerea* also occurs locally amongst a mosaic of heather and acid grassland. Bordering the road are large areas of Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria*, but elsewhere acid grassland is composed chiefly of Common Bent

Agrostis capillaris and Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* grasses with characteristic herb species such as Heath Bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*.

Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* dominates the remaining area, with scattered Common Gorse *Ulex europaeus* and Silver Birch *Betula pendula*. Similar heathland communities occur south of the road, although Heather is less extensive. To the northwest, short rabbit-grazed acid grassland contains a rich variety of herbs including Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Spring Vetch *Vicia lathyroides*, Common Storksbill *Erodium cicutarium* and Mouse-eared Hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*. There is some invasion of Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* originating from adjacent plantations, but management action has been taken in recent years to control this encroachment.

A Bridleway and Forestry Commission track links Blaxhall Great Common with part of Blaxhall village to the north and Tunstall Forest and the Sandlings Walk to the south. The land falls just outside The Suffolk Coast and Heath AONB.

The heath is of considerable historical interest, with a well preserved ancient bank and ditch along the southern boundary and a number of internal earthworks dating from the Iron Age. Of additional interest is a broad anti-glider ditch whose exposed sandy sides provide an excellent habitat for lizards, solitary bees and antlion. A number of heathland birds on the site including nightjar and tree pipit.

Blaxhall Heath was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1987. It is also designated a Special Protection Area (SPA) due to populations of woodlark and nightjar.

Blaxhall Common is managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT) on behalf of Blaxhall Parish Council.

Jasper's Pightle

Jasper's Pightle (NGR TM 37835 56346) contains many of the species mentioned above. Its ground sward is made up of a number of acid grassland species, like Common Bent and Sheep's Fescue and a rich variety of herbs including Bird's-foot Trefoil Spring Vetch, Common Storksbill and Mouse-eared Hawkweed. It was once part of the larger heath and still has an eastern boundary that connects to the larger Blaxhall Heath SSSI. On its southern boundary it is bordered by the Tunstall to Snape road (B1069) and on its northern boundary by a Forest Enterprises plantation of semi-mature conifers.

Soil type: Freely draining slightly acid sandy soils, potential for lowland heath. (source: Soilscales).

Approximate area: 6.5 acres (2.6 hectares).

Previously the land was used for pig farming, and some associated buildings remain. The Trust has raised funds to allow for the removal of asbestos from the site, but plans to retain the concrete remains of the former pig sties and tractor workshop and to let them 're-wild'.

The area at the west was used for a while as a camp site.

To the north is a Forestry Commission conifer plantation.

Assistance with bracken cutting has been received from Ben Calvesbert (SWT Meadows

and Heathland Warden), who manages Blaxhall Common.

BCOST's broad objective for Jasper's Pightle is to manage it as a heathland site (with no general requirement for standard trees or ponds).

Heathland restoration

Lowland heaths are generally found on poor acidic soils and often support rare plants and animals such as nightjar, woodlark and linnet, antlion and silver studded blue butterflies. In the UK only about 16% survives of the area that existed in 1800, although this represents 20% of the world's lowland heathland. There is a need to restore, re-create and link fragments of heathland to secure the future of the wildlife associated with them.

Tree and shrub species

Lowland heathland is monitored using five condition attributes: habitat extent; indicators of local distinctiveness; bare ground; vegetation structure and composition; and negative indicator species. (Natural England 2008).

- There is a fine row of trees, mostly large silver birch, planted in the post-war period by the Walters family. These form an important deciduous woodland edge habitat, and some of them may fit the criteria for ancient trees (for birch trees this means a girth of 2.5m or more at a height of 1.5m above the ground). A volunteer survey could record these on the Ancient Tree Forum website or via their app. (see resources).
- Between the row of trees and the Forestry Commission land runs a track with pedestrian access. Although not shown as a public right of way on OS maps, it is shown on historic maps. There is one Scots pine which has completely rotted at the base and is propped up precariously in the neighbouring tree. Annual tree safety checks would be prudent.
- If any tree maintenance work is carried out to the mature trees, Bat Conservation guidance regarding bat roosts should be referred to (see note below).
- It would be timely to remove the strand of barbed wire before it becomes hidden in the undergrowth.
- A small group of planted poplars are located just north of the pig sties. They are exhibiting signs of dying back. Standing deadwood is a valuable habitat for invertebrates and as a perch for birds. If there are no safety concerns the poplars could be retained. Alternatively, to reduce the risk, the dead boughs could be lopped leaving the trunk standing.
- Some scattered gorse is evident, particularly to the northwest. Aim to create a diverse age structure in the gorse by introducing 8-12 year coppice rotation, work for February/March.
- A generic target for heathland is less than 15% trees and shrubs on dry heath and less than 10% on wet heath. At present the scrub and tree cover must be close to this favourable marker. Ongoing management will need to include removal of saplings or cutting them to the ground before too established, and before they reach 8-10 years of age.

Pond creation

The uneven topography, with ruts and hollows is no doubt enhancing habitat diversity and may provide temporary wet hollows so should be retained where possible. While a pond would enhance habitat diversity, historic maps do not show the existence of a pond in this block of land, and with the free draining nature of the soil one may not prove successful. Pond creation is not currently considered a priority.

Buildings and associated structures

The buildings now having been made safe, the intention is to retain the roofless structures and allow the bramble and scrub to re-wild them. The concrete surfaces provide an ideal place for warmth-loving invertebrates such as the Tiger beetle as well as common lizards. Retaining some exposed surfaces through active control of the scrub would therefore be desirable. However, thick thorny scrub is also a useful habitat for nesting birds such as linnets (which due to substantial declines is a red listed bird and Priority Species). A balance therefore needs to be struck.

Bare ground

The target bare ground for lowland heath to be considered in favourable condition is 1-10%. Bare ground favours mining bees and wasps and reptiles such as adder and common lizard. Very little bare ground is visible at Jaspers' Pightle. Turf stripping is a good option for creating bare ground that is likely to persist for some years.

Grasses

Heathland in favourable condition would have a low coverage of grasses and at least two forb species occasional throughout the sward. Management to reduce grasses include burning and livestock grazing, but neither are being considered by BCOS. Turf stripping is an option but without follow-up grazing can lead to birch or bracken establishment.

Wildlife recording

Wildlife recording would be valuable on this site and could become a parish-wide endeavour. The record could be lodged with Suffolk Biological Records either directly or through i-Record. The i-record platform allows for groups to set up their own space for collective records and has a process for verification. iNaturalist is an app-based identification platform (see 'resources', below).

An Ancient Tree inventory could be prepared (as described above under 'trees'). See also 'resources', below.

Important considerations

Some of the more mature hedge trees may be providing **bat roosts**. Bats are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (amended) and Conservation of species regulations 2017 (amended). It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb a bat or group of bats in their roost or to damage or destroy a place used by bats for breeding or resting (roosts), even if bats are not occupying the roost at the time. Any tree surgery work should follow guidelines from

the Bat Conservation Trust (see 'resources', below).

It is illegal to damage or destroy the **nest** of any wild bird while it is in use or being built. Activities which can disturb wild birds, particularly during the breeding season include trimming or cutting trees, bushes, hedges and rough vegetation. As a rough guide, the bird breeding season is considered as from March to the end of August.

There is a possibility that **bracken spores** are carcinogenic. The H&S Executive recommends that a suitable face mask should be worn while cutting or working in spore-producing bracken (i.e. during late July, August and September).

Gorse *Ulex europaeus* is an important plant species and provides both structure and visual interest. It is a good habitat for bird species to nest. Traditionally, common gorse was regularly collected from common land for a number of purposes: it provided fuel for firing bread ovens; was used as fodder for livestock; was bound to make floor and chimney brushes; and was used as a colourant for painting Easter eggs. However, there were a number of restrictions on its collection; for example, in Oxfordshire, only the amount that could be carried on the back could be cut for fuel.

Gorse has a life cycle of around 30 years, throughout which the plant will become increasingly woody, resulting in gradual loss of structure and the inherent ability to produce vegetative regrowth. Maintaining existing gorse therefore involves management aimed at retaining the juvenile

to mature condition (the period at which regeneration growth is greatest). Rotational cutting on an ongoing cyclical basis should involve taking back individual plants to within 150cm of ground level, scraping through the trash layer with a rake to encourage seedling germination. Revisit two or three years later to check and deal with bramble or other weed invasion or unwanted regrowth. The cutting cycle can be five to eight years' rotation.

Bramble *Rubus sp.* The Bramble or, as many of us know it, 'Blackberry', is a thorny, fruiting shrub of the rose family, famous for its dark berries, which are relished by people and animals alike. It grows well in a variety of habitats, including woodlands, hedgerows, gardens, scrubland, cliffs, roadside verges and waste ground. Its dense bushes provide valuable protection for nesting birds and good habitat for a range of other small animals. White or pinkish flowers appear between May and September and juicy black fruits are visible throughout the autumn. Brambles provide an important source of nectar for Brimstone and Speckled Wood butterflies; fruits for Song Thrushes and Yellowhammers; and hiding places for Hedgehogs and Dormice. It is also good for breeding Nightingales. However, it is a thug and will grow out from the discrete clumps where it can be found at Jasper's Pightle. So the clumps need checking each year to make sure they have not 'advanced' into new lands.

ACTIONS for 2022

- **Mid-June** – Walk over the site and check there are no ground nesting birds present. If there are birds, delay cut until mid-July.
- **Mid-to-late June** – Cut bracken areas. Rake and remove litter. Stack either on the concrete floor of the old pig sties or burn at two sites.
- **July** – Check gorse bushes are well and vigorous.

ACTIONS for 2023

- **Mid-June** – Walk over the site and check there are no ground nesting birds present. If there are birds, delay cut until mid-July.
- **Mid-to-late June** – Cut bracken areas. Rake and remove litter. Stack either on the concrete floor of the old pig sties or burn at two sites.
- **July** – Check gorse bushes are well and vigorous.
- **Sept/October** - Check and trim bramble bushes.

ACTIONS for 2024

- **Mid-June** – Walk over the site and check there are no ground nesting birds present. If there are birds, delay cut until mid-July.
- **Mid-to-late June** – Cut bracken areas. Rake and remove litter. Stack either on the concrete floor of the old pig sties or burn at two sites.
- **July** – Check gorse bushes are well and vigorous. Choose two specimens and cut down (see management details above). Dispose of cuttings.

ACTIONS for 2025

- **Mid-June** – Walk over the site and check there are no ground nesting birds present. If there are birds, delay cut until mid-July.
- **Mid-to-late June** – Cut bracken areas. Rake and remove litter. Stack either on the concrete floor of the old pig sties or burn at two sites.
- **July** – Check gorse bushes are well and vigorous.
- **Sept/October** - Check and trim bramble bushes.

ACTIONS for 2026

- **Mid-June** – Walk over the site and check there are no ground nesting birds present. If there are birds, delay cut until mid-July.
- **Mid-to-late June** – Cut bracken areas. Rake and remove litter. Stack either on the concrete floor of the old pig sties or burn at two sites.
- **July** – Check gorse bushes are well and vigorous then choose two/three specimens and cut down (see below). Dispose of cuttings.

Resources

Bat Conservation Trust: [Roosts in trees - Bat roosts - Bat Conservation Trust \(bats.org.uk\)](#) [Natural England](#)

Bracken [Control Bracken management and control - TIN048 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](#)

Rehabilitation of existing priority lowland heathland and timescales to achieve favourable condition.

[\(PDF\) Restoration of existing lowland heathland - timescales to achieve favourable condition. \(researchgate.net\)](#)

Common standards monitoring guidance for lowland heath. JNCC 2009

[Common Standards Monitoring Guidance for Lowland Heathland \(jncc.gov.uk\)](#)

Natural England Publication: Lowland Heathland, a cultural and endangered landscape
publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/111041

Wildlife recording

[Suffolk Biological Recording Online | Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service \(suffolkbis.org.uk\)](#)

iRecord

[Manage and share your wildlife records \(brc.ac.uk\)](#)

This is a useful video: Setting up an iRecord activities for local groups - YouTube

iNaturalist

[A Community for Naturalists • iNaturalist United Kingdom](#)

NBN Atlas

[NBN Atlas - UK's largest collection of biodiversity information](#)

Ancient Tree Inventory

[Valuing and recording Ancient Tree Forum](#)

Farming in protected Landscapes, Grant funding

<https://www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org/managing/farming-in-protected-landscapes>