

## Introduction

History is said to have a habit of being repeated and this is true of the management of Westleton Common. Originally a habitat created by Neolithic Man, as he worked his way from today's mainland Europe into this county. Clearing woodland and then grazing and managing the land he created what today we call the 'Suffolk Sandlings Heaths' of which 'Westleton Common' is a remaining fragment.

His descendants continued to manage the land building our village of Westleton, for which the common would have been a vital source of fuel, raw materials and grazing land for their stock, the common was even then managed by the villages for the village use, as it still is today, although we have seen in its recent history other uses for the land and its raw material.

Westleton Common like so many other local heaths fell into decline as an open Heathland, with the advent of enclosed grazing fields and other fuel sources. With its easy access of raw materials the main area of the common was quarried, removing in parts, the landscape created in the Neolithic Age. When the common no longer became viable as an economic proposition to its owners and came on the market, the village took the unique opportunity to purchase the land and recommence with its daily management.

The purchase of the common was only possible with the support of The Heritage Lottery Fund, under leadership from Mr and Mrs Caines of Westleton the residents, along with grateful assistance from Suffolk Coastal District Council (SCDC) made a successful bid and the future management was secured by a Stewardship Grant from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (defra).

In the first year of ownership and the renewed management of the common, the parishioners of Westleton have developed a 'steering group' along with a strong support group. Although a management plan has been written by the Suffolk Sandlings Project and SCDC, little of the flora, fauna and resident wildlife was known about. The group therefore decided that in order to proceed with any future management a better understanding of the common is required and survey work commenced and continues to be undertaken using the skilled local knowledge of parishioners.

Work parties meeting on a Saturday morning have carried out manual management work, as detailed in the original management plan and after fresh survey work agreed that no unknown habitat might be destroyed in carrying out the work. As a better understanding of the common occurs with this research, the thoughts as to further management develops and will be brought forward to the steering group and funding bodies for approval.

The parishioners of Westleton are proud of the common which is open to the public, although because of its position used mainly by the village residents. The aim to maintain open access across the land and increase its value in conservation of Suffolk's wildlife remains the main objectives, owned and managed by the village. The present ownership will continue to make this land secure and safe for the future.

I am very grateful for the tremendous support which Suffolk Coastal District Council Warden Service and the Suffolk Sandlings Project managed by the Suffolk Wildlife gives us. The steering group and those other valuable interested parishioners have created a strong group and established the way forward for the common's management, in reality we have recreated what would originally have occurred when the land would have been owned by the local squire with rights to be used by the local commoners who would have managed the land in similar circumstances when Westleton Common was used not for leisure and wildlife conservation but for the need to live.

By owning our own common we will maintain the right for public access, something we see being taken away in the name of conservation in neighbouring villages and will be able to help maintain our Suffolk wildlife and landscape in the management we carry out. This village historically managed the surrounding heaths since a settlement first appeared, although during the recent century this management dwindled there is no reason why the future management should.

Simon Moss, Chair Westleton Common Steering Group 2003 – 2004