

History of the Esher Commons



The history of the Commons stretches back 6,000 years to the Neolithic or early Bronze Age when the first significant clearing of the original 'wildwood' began. This 'wildwood' probably covered the whole of

Britain and in the case of the Commons it was cleared for small-scale cultivation. The soil was easily worked for agriculture but soon became impoverished (podsolised) as the mineral and organic matter was washed out, leading to the appearance of heathland with heather, grasses and birch trees being the dominant plants.

Neolithic flint implements have been found on the Ledges and there is evidence of a settlement on Round Hill, Esher Common.

The open appearance of the Common would have been maintained by local commoners grazing their animals (mainly sheep) and occasionally burning the heath. Trees would have been harvested regularly for firewood. Little changed for many centuries.

However, by the 19th century heathland on these poor soils came to be regarded as unproductive and scots pine was introduced to the area for timber.

These trees grew well on the poor heathland soil and with the decline and eventual cessation of grazing, mixed woodland quickly spread to cover much of the Commons.



The Portsmouth Road and Copsem Lane provided routes into London for merchants transporting their goods and this led to 'Coal and Wine' tax posts being erected on all roads and byways where they crossed into the Metropolitan Police District. Importers had to pay dues (or a tax) to the City Corporation for the upkeep of the orphan children of London citizens. The white painted cast iron posts themselves date from the 1860s, some thirty years before the tax was discontinued in the 1890s. An example can be seen at the junction of Copsem Lane and Sandy Lane.

Black Pond on Esher Common was used as a water supply for the nearby Claremont Ornamental Gardens (now owned by the National Trust); the water was brought by pipe up from the pond, where a pony worked the water wheel that pumped it. The remains of the pump house can still be found on the north side of the pond. On the north side of Horseshoe Clump can be seen the remains of rifle butts, where the Victorian and Edwardians learned to shoot. It is believed they were abandoned after the First World War.



During the First World War, many of the pines were felled for pit props and for war use, and open heathland would have recovered to some extent. Following a large fire on Esher Common at the beginning of the twenties, more trees were planted.

In 1922 the major Commons came into public ownership when the Manors of Esher and Milbourne were purchased by the Esher Urban District Council from the Claremont Estate. The Commons subsequently came into the ownership of Elmbridge Borough Council following its formation in 1974.

During the Second World War, trees were again felled for the war effort and the Commons were used for army training and the siting of anti-aircraft guns. The remains of one gun emplacement can be found on the top of the Ledges. The Canadian Army used Oxshott Heath as a base and the remains of their baseball pitch can be seen below the south slope. The sand pit on Oxshott Heath was originally dug to provide sand for local brick makers. It then provided material for many of the sand bags used in Kingston Upon Thames during the Blitz.

In 1955, the Commons were designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by the Nature Conservancy Council (latterly English Nature, now Natural England), the statutory body for nature conservation. This designation increased the protection of the site and focussed attention on the tremendous variety of habitats found here.

Despite the SSSI designation, the A3 Esher bypass divided Esher Common in 1974. To compensate, approximately 36 hectares of exchange land became part of the Commons. The Ledges were added to West End Common, and the area including Middle Pond became part of Esher Common.

Running east to west across the northern part of the Commons is a 275,000 volt overhead transmission line belonging to The National Grid Company plc. This is a section of the West Weybridge to Chessington line.

The Elmbridge Countryside Team undertake work on all the Elmbridge Commons to ensure the variety of habitats is maintained, both for the enjoyment of visitors and for the benefits of wildlife.

In 2006, the Esher Commons SSSI Restoration and Management Plan was developed in partnership with Natural England with support from the Forestry Commission. This 15-year plan aims to restore former grass, heath and wetland habitats. 22.6 hectares are marked for restoration over a



five-year period. The first management works began in autumn 2006.



Other projects and contacts

Elmbridge Countryside Volunteers

Local volunteers meet for practical conservation tasks on the last Wednesday of every month.

Link Up with Nature

Curriculum based environmental education lessons, led by a member of the Countryside Team on a countryside site.

Guided Walks Programme

Themed walks led by a Countryside Ranger through the Elmbridge Countryside.

Countryside Newsletter

The Countryside Newsletter is produced three times a year and will keep you informed about all matters relating to the Elmbridge Countryside. If you would like to receive the newsletter direct to your home, either by email or paper copy, log on to the website and complete the on-line form or contact the Countryside Team.

To contact the Countryside Team about any of these issues or projects please call 01372 474582 or email countryside@elmbridge.gov.uk or visit www.elmbridge.gov.uk/countryside



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Being so close to London, Elmbridge Borough Council is fortunate to own and manage 14 countryside sites, which cover 550 hectares, for the benefit of wildlife and recreation. The largest area, the Esher Commons covers 360 hectares and is valued so highly it has been designated by the Government as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It was chosen for its wildlife value as well as providing a valuable green space for the local community.

In this leaflet you will find out more about the Esher Commons, its SSSI status, the best places to visit and how to access them. The history of the Commons will give you a fascinating insight into why the Commons look the way they do today, what they were used for during the war and the types of animals and plant life that call the Esher Commons their home.



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For people whose first language is not English, we will endeavour to provide this leaflet in a way which you can understand.

আপনি যদি নিজের ভাষায়, বড় হরফে, টেপ বা ব্রেইলে আরও তথ্য জানতে চান তাহলে দয়া করে আমাদের সঙ্গে যোগাযোগ করবেন। এই কাগজে আমাদের ঠিকানা ও টেলিফোন নম্বর দেওয়া আছে।

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اگر آپ کو مزید معلومات اپنی زبان میں، بڑے حروفوں میں، یا آواز کی صورت میں ٹیپ پر یا بریل میں درکار ہیں تو اس دستاویز میں دئیے گئے پتے یا ٹیلی فون نمبر پر ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

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nationalgrid National Grid owns the high-voltage electricity transmission network in England and Wales, which includes some 7,200 miles of overhead lines and 340 substations, and also operates the system across Great Britain. It has supported a number of nature conservation initiatives, including working with Elmbridge Borough Council's Leisure and Cultural Services Countryside Team to protect and extend the heathland habitat that exists beneath the transmission line that crosses the Elmbridge Commons.



Exploring THE ESHER COMMONS

Elmbridge Borough Council's Largest Countryside Site