

Annex 1

Technical Note from Kate Gamez, former senior reserve manager of Cotswold Commons and Beechwood NNR with extensive experience of conservation on Juniper Hill and around.

The field is of critical importance as part of a suite of open, species-rich grassland sites in the Painswick Valley, most of which are protected. In the 1940s 40% of the Cotswolds was covered in wild flower rich limestone grassland, today this figure is just 1.5% and still declining. What remains are a few isolated pockets of grassland which, whilst extremely valuable in their own right, are very vulnerable in isolation given the increasing pressures from recreation, climate change and the limited opportunities for increasing genetic diversity of species.

The field was reverted from arable in the late 1990s and has recovered amazingly well, having almost certainly benefited from the many years of extensive grazing, its immediate proximity to the species rich grassland at Juniper Hill and the thin, nutrient poor soils arising from its position on top of the Cotswold scarp. It was surveyed last year and there is no question that it would qualify as BAP Priority Grassland and should be registered as such. Part of the field was never ploughed and still supports extremely high quality calcareous grassland as good as any contained within the Cotswold Commons and Beechwoods National Nature Reserve. Many important species can be found on the field including hundreds of bee orchids, nesting skylarks (very much at risk since grazing management has stopped) and glow worms. With dedicated conservation management, such as that which Natural England are both capable and willing to provide, and further introduction of seed from nearby sites, the grassland could be restored to what it once would have been, a wild flower rich grassland, humming with life with scattered scrub, including native juniper, supporting insects, birds and mammals throughout the year. The location of the field as a crucial and sizeable (in the context of the Cotswolds) link between Bulls Cross, Frith Wood and Juniper Hill would mean that species on all these sites would be better protected, able to form more genetically robust populations and more able to move about and adapt to the increasing pressures associated with climate change. The loss of this field to bad management or disappearance under woodland, will close the door on a huge opportunity for organisations such as Stroud District Council to move beyond the rhetoric of environmental targets and strategies to do some real landscape scale conservation and achieve a meaningful positive change for some of the Cotswolds' beleaguered wildlife. It is also worth noting that some of the species that would benefit are rare at a national level, e.g. Duke of Burgundy butterfly, rugged oil beetle and juniper.

The field is also an important recreational resource for local people as an open, wildlife-rich area to walk through in a landscape increasingly covered by species-poor secondary woodland that has developed since the decline in grazing and traditional management in the area following the Second World War.

How should such a field should be managed? A reasonable vision would be to use some sort of traditional breed cattle (such as Belted Galloways) to graze it in a low intensity way i.e. low numbers for a longer period rather than lots of cattle for a short time. Cattle would be free ranging across the site for a few months a year, taking account of e.g. nesting skylarks, breeding reptiles etc. Some scrub would be allowed to develop to increase the heterogeneity and structural diversity of the site. The scrub would be managed mainly by cattle, possibly with some supplementary grazing by the sheep in enclosed temporary paddocks and some manual management by NE staff and volunteers. Juniper would be introduced to form part of this scrub, dramatically increasing the extent of the remnant population on Juniper Hill and making it far more resilient to factors such as wild fires, climate change and disease.

Would management by annual cutting offer an adequate alternative?

Most of the calcareous grassland that remains in the Cotswolds has survived because of its importance as a grazing resource for local people and it is for this reason that nearly all of it is common land. These grasslands have never been hay meadows (i.e. cut during the summer and aftermath grazed) and this can be seen in the presence of multiple anthills and species such as juniper that would not have survived being cut annually. Annual cutting is a very dramatic way to manage a grassland, suddenly removing all the sources of nectar, places for birds, reptiles and insects to breed, feed and seek refuge and leaving behind a uniform sward with little variety. By contrast, grazed pastures; have a ready supply of dung that supports myriad invertebrates and their predators such as bats and birds; develop a tussocky varied structure with habitats capable of supporting breeding and overwintering invertebrates such as glow worms; can support scrub that provides food and shelter for many species of breeding and wintering birds as well as cover and hibernation sites for reptiles and small mammals. Even though the field was managed as arable for some time, it has been grazed for more than 20 years and these benefits will continue to accrue the longer it is managed in this way. Also, the species present on neighbouring Juniper Hill are reliant on grazed pasture and will therefore be able to continue to colonise the field as long as it is managed using traditional grazing management. The other problem with annual cutting is that, from experience, it can be very difficult to find anyone locally willing to cut a small area for hay so in practical terms this would be very difficult to achieve.