

# COMMON LAND AND CULTURE



Commons are an enduring part of the rural landscape. They derive from a time when most resources were shared, and were the life-blood of local communities for the best part of a millennium. Such sharing was based on legally recognised and defensible rights, which continue to be celebrated through traditional rituals and customs.





Common land provides resources such as pasture, fuel, animal bedding, and building materials. The practice of sharing led to the development of local traditions. These ensured that a collective memory of rights would persist; they re-asserted such rights to prevent their loss, and they helped establish rules to ensure communal resources could be shared equitably.

Commons were generally overseen within local manorial courts. A small number still operate today. Danby Common has been administered by the Danby Court Leet of '13 true and just men' since medieval times. New commoners are still summoned to be sworn in at Danby Castle.

Pixey and Yarnton Meads in Oxfordshire are lot-meadows, where strips are allocated by drawing balls from a hat. These bear the names of families living locally in the 1200s.

Pannage, the practice of depasturing pigs on acorns and beech mast in autumn, was mentioned in Domesday, and still exists in the New Forest where it plays an important part in local ecology.





○ Villagers of Great Wishford still assert their common rights annually in a ceremony which was described as '*ancient, time-out-of-mind*' in the 1500s.

○ The Commons Act of 2006 repealed the Commons Act of 1285 – some of our oldest legislation concerns commons.



○ Beowulf, the first book in English, written in the 8th century, describes folk-rights reminiscent of modern common land.

○ Common grazing in Scotland can be traced to sub-divisions of the landscape prior to the establishment of parishes in the early 12th century.



○ Some common land mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 survives today.

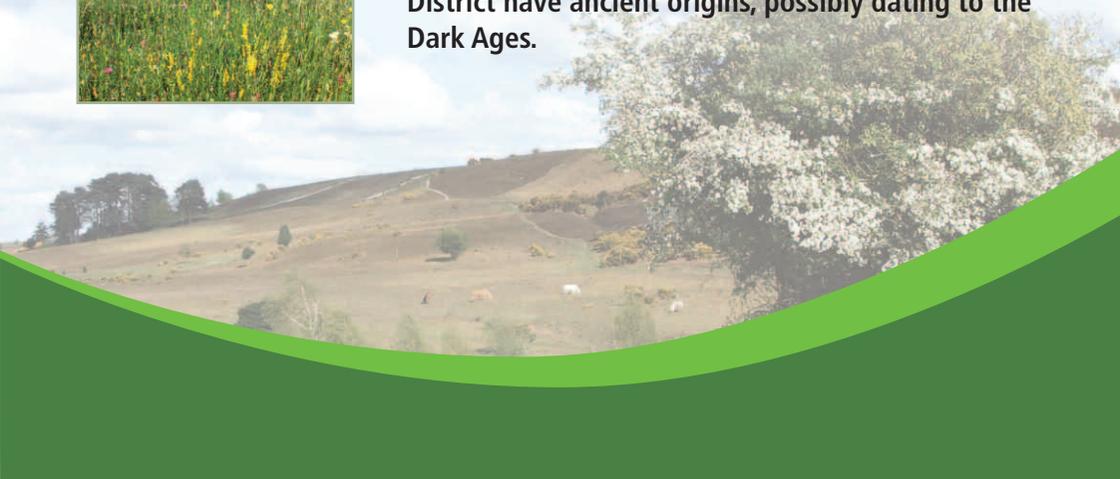
○ The Saxon Laws of Wessex cite penalties suggestive of early disputes about common land.

○ The Tudor risings which opposed inclosure of the commons, led to thousands of people being killed.

○ The last rural rebellion took place in 1869 and concerned a violent attempt to prevent loss of the commons.



○ Unique ear and fleece sheep marks in the Lake District have ancient origins, possibly dating to the Dark Ages.



**There are seven main common rights: pasturage (the right to graze); pannage (pasturing pigs on acorns); turbarry (taking peat for fuel); piscary (fishing); estovers (collecting sticks, heath and bracken); and the rights to minerals, or animals for food. The unfamiliarity of these terms reflects their modern rarity. It is mainly the right to graze that remains a vital component of rural economies, especially on hill farms. Whilst there are fewer practicing commoners – only 8,000, compared to nearly all rural dwellers at one time, the environmental and recreational importance of commons means that they matter to more people than ever. The cultural traditions associated with such an ancient institution remain key parts of their interest.**



*Keeping commons alive by active grazing*

[www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk](http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk)

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**Our vision is of thriving commoning communities across Great Britain and beyond making real contributions to economic, cultural and environmental wellbeing**

