

BLAXHALL COMMONS AND OPEN SPACES CHARITABLE TRUST

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

1. This report covers the period from 1 April 2023 to 30 March 2024.
2. Trustees

Current BCOST trustees are:

Karen Baker (Parish Council nominee),
Mark Oakley (Parish Council nominee),
Eve Rossor (Hon Secretary),
Rosy Thornton
Rodney West

Andrew Derrick and Mike Livesey resigned their trusteeship in the year under review, although we are grateful that both intend to continue their active involvement with the Trust. This has created two vacancies, which have been advertised. Toby Bushill and Michelle Flowers have kindly agreed to serve, and it is proposed that they be elected as Trustees at the Annual General Meeting on 13 April 2024.

The terms of office of Eve Rossor, Rosy Thornton and Rodney West will come to an end on 10 December 2024. Rosy and Eve have both indicated their willingness to be re-elected if required.

3. Stone Common

Renewed allotment or grazing licence agreements were signed as from 1 September 2023 for all the plots in current use, and all licence fees have been duly paid.

We are very grateful to Bruce Kerr, who has continued his late father's generous gesture of cutting the bracken on Stone Common free of charge. Machine shredding of the cut bracken by Mr Kerr's staff has meant no need for raking; it has been left on the land as mulch.

Work party activity over the year 2023-24 has primarily focused on management of the land to the west of Prevost's Path, in accordance with the Management Plan adopted in August 2022. Activities during the year have included:

- Maintenance and renewal of the hedging planted along the southern and western boundaries of the land in 2022 and 2023. This work involved clearing grass, brambles and bracken from around the hedge, filling gaps by replacing any dead saplings, and adding mulch. It was undertaken by volunteers, advised and assisted by Blaxhall Tree Warden, Joy Shaw.
- We have begun work on the removal of broken and redundant fencing, which may be hazardous to wildlife and walkers and which hampers the cutting of bracken. Materials are being retained for re-use where possible. There is a lot more work to be done on clearing fencing: further work parties will be arranged.
- Cutting down Alexanders (an invasive species) along Prevost's Path as well as along the southern boundary of the land, before they set seed.
- Clearing ragwort and other invasive vegetation around the fruit trees by the southern boundary and along Prevost's Path; mulching the fruit trees.
- Planting young gorse bushes, which it is hoped will establish themselves and attract linnets and other wildlife.

We are grateful to all the volunteers who joined our work parties in 2023-24, and especially to Stone Common residents who have taken independent initiative in regular tasks such as clearing ragwort, and mulching and watering the trees.

Laurie Forsyth of the Suffolk Flora Preservation Society has kindly offered to undertake an ecological survey of the flora present on the Trust's land at Stone Common. The survey was conducted on 30 March 2024, and Laurie will conduct further surveys over the later spring and summer.

4. Jasper's Pightle

We have continued with the regular maintenance of the Trust's land at Jasper's Pightle in accordance with the Management Plan. Activities taking place during 2023-24 included:

- Continuing bracken control: the bracken was cut mechanically by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust (with thanks to Ben Calvesbert), followed by hand-raking by volunteers.
- Maintenance work to the boundary hedge planted along the road in winter 2022-23 with the help of the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths AONB. This involved volunteers clearing bracken and other vegetation from around the hedge, replacing dead saplings, and adding mulch.

- Gorse maintenance: this work, scheduled for 2024 in the Management Plan, has begun. Older, 'leggy' gorse is cut back or rooted out, allowing the growth of younger and healthier bushes. Further work parties will be arranged to continue this work after the bird-nesting season.
- Commissioning a small wooden sign to indicate Jasper's Pightle; the sign has been erected near the bench installed in December 2022. We also received a small metal plaque commemorating the connection to Jasper's Pightle of the Walters family, including Jasper Walters after whom the pightle is named. The plaque has been attached to the bench.

5. Payment for electricity installations

In October 2023 BCOST received a one-off capital payment of £800 from National Grid in respect of the renegotiation of the annual wayleave for the pylons and electricity wires on Stone Common; this included a sum to cover the Trust's legal fees which were kindly waived in the Trust's favour by Mark's firm, Judge & Priestley, as facilitating solicitors.

This one-off sum was additional to ongoing annual wayleave payments of £110.32 from National Grid for the pylon and wires at Stone Common and £62.80 from UK Power Networks for the poles and wires at Jasper's Pightle. These receipts constitute a significant contribution towards the Trust's recurrent annual expenditure.

6. Other activities

Litter picks around the village took place in November 2023 and at the end of March 2024.

BCOST trustees joined forces with other community volunteers to help rake and tidy St Peter's churchyard in October 2023, and to help plant bulbs at the village playing field in November 2023.

BCOST had a presence, with information boards, at the Blaxhall Festival in June 2023 and at the Blaxhall Village Fete in August 2023. As part of profile-raising, especially with the large number of new people who have moved to Blaxhall in recent years and may be unfamiliar with BCOST, we have produced a leaflet about our history and activities which was distributed with Ebb and Flow in March 2024. The leaflet included a call for work party volunteers, and for donations.

For details of all BCOST activities, visit our website: www.blaxhallcommons.com

7. Finance and fundraising

Blaxhall Parish Council has agreed to provide BCOST with annual grant funding of £250, as a contribution to our costs in maintaining the publicly accessible green spaces at Stone Common and Jasper's Pightle, with the first grant to be paid in 2024. We are extremely grateful for this invaluable support.

After careful consideration, it has been decided no longer to provide employer's liability insurance cover for volunteers on BCOST work parties. (Volunteers on litter picks, which do not take place on BCOST land, are covered by Parish Council insurance.) Employer's liability insurance, although desirable, is not legally required for volunteers, and it was felt that its cost was out of scale with the Trust's resources, which could be better spent in other ways. Volunteers on Trust work parties will be warned that they participate at their own risk. This decision has lowered our annual insurance premium considerably, and leaves a deficit in our budgeted recurrent income and expenditure of only around £65, a sum we hope realistically to be able to raise by local fundraising.

As at 30 March 2024, the Trust held £3,644.81 in the bank plus £204.23 in cash, making a total balance of £3,849.04.

BCOST

March 2024