

STOW BEDON FUEL ALLOTMENT CHARITY

A SHORT HISTORY

Introduction

Information is very limited as regard the Stow Bedon Fuel Allotment, but from what is available, here is a short history.

1813 Enclosure Act

During the 18th and early 19th centuries the enclosure movement took place and in this time the Stow Bedon Enclosure Act 1813 was passed by government. The Common land prior to this date was managed by communal exploitation and regulation, namely the church wardens and overseers to the poor. The Act replaced this by a system of private land management, but also made small allowances for the needs of the poor.

At the time of the Acts construction, the churchwardens lay claim to 60 acres of land for the poor to cut fuel. In the final Act this was reduced to 30 acres. The 1813 Act set Trustees the power to regulate cutting of fuel or let grass, of which profit would from time to time be laid out by them in purchasing fuel, to be distributed amongst the poor. The first Trustees included; the Lord of the Manor, the Vicar, Churchwardens and Overseers of the poor of Stow Bedon.

The Site in 1813 and Early Management

There is very little documentation of this period, but from what there is, a reasonable picture can be deduced. Before the 1813 Act was made, the commons of the parish of Stow Bedon were regulated by the churchwardens and overseers to the Poor. A memorandum of 6th October 1773, written in the back of the overseers account book, states that “no firs shall be sold off any of the commons belonging to Stow Bedon for two years and no brakes shall be made till the day after the Hingham Fair, which happens in October”. In a further memorandum of 6th April 1775 it certifies that Mr Laveridge on consideration of a piece of common waste land, called his yard, to giving laying round to his horse, agreed to give said officers one shilling per annum.

From this and the fact that the commons to the west of the parish being known as the Great Heath at the time, a picture can be deduced. With the order not to cut firs (fuel wood) it would be presumed that the commons ability to supply was exhausted and a brake was made to allow stools of cut firs to recover. The letting of the yard to Mr Laveridge for his horse could suggest poor grass was present on the commons, this also implies that trees and shrub species were of limited abundance.

Moving on to the 1832 Charity Commissions Accounts for the Fuel Allotment, they state that “this very bad land is let for £8 a year”, what the purpose of the let

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was for, it does not say. From the evidence at hand it would suggest the main use was grazing, with the site being a heath land type.

The same Charities Commissions Accounts states that “the £8 rent was laid in coals which are distributed amongst the poor settled in the parish, proportional according to the number in the family. The quantities vary from 3 to 7 numbers of bushels a family”. Whites Directory show lettings of £12 a year in 1845 and 1854, increasing to £14-10s-0d in 1864. This suggests that the heath land landscape remained, the land being let for grazing and/ or shooting.

It is interesting to note that the poor were given coal in 1832, at a time before the railway had come to the parish. This would mean that all the coal would have been transported by horse and cart, probably from Thetford. With the number of households receiving reaching 20, taking an average of 5 bushels at 80lb per bushel, it is probable that three and a half tons of coal was given out in that year.

The Railway

In 1865 an Act proposed by Bury St Edmunds and Thetford Railway was finally gained, this Act included a short branch line from Roudham junction to Watton. With this the Thetford and Watton Railway was born. The route proposed ran through the western side of the Fuel Allotment and took up approximately two acres. The land was sold to the Thetford and Watton Railway in 1868 for £63-12s-3d. The railway ran for almost 100 years before the Beeching report confirmed the closure of the line, the last passenger train from Thetford to Watton ran on 15th June 1964. In 1986 the old railway line, part of which runs through the Fuel Allotment was made a permissive public path, which now forms part of the Great Eastern Pingo Trail.

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Between the Wars

The management of the Fuel Allotment during the inter war years, ran with consistency. The trustees changed from time to time and the land was let in the same way, grazing and/or shooting. Snapshots of the accounts in 1929 are as follows.

Trustees 1929

The Rev Charles Millard	The Rectory	Rector
Mr C W Crawford	The Whews	Farmer
Mr J H Dodman	Church Farm	Farmer
Mr J Warren	Prince of Wales Public House	Publican
Mr J W Watmorgh	Cherry Tree House	Farmer

The rent for the year was £17, the tenant being Major Henry Jones. Coal was distributed to 29 recipients at a cost of £19-5s-0d, the price of coal at the time being around £2 per ton.

It is interesting to note that parishioners would complain to the parish council at that time. From the parish council minutes book 3rd April 1923, it was proposed unanimously that; Crows Lane being a Public Bridle Path, had become so overgrown it was practically un-passable, that the tenant Major Jones be written to requesting undergrowth from hedges be trimmed back to make the way clear.

Post War to Present day

During 1946 the RAF took aerial photographs of the whole of Norfolk, they are now kept at Norfolk Aerial Photographic Library Gressenhall. Looking at the photographs that include Stow Bedon Fuel Allotment, there appears very few trees compared with what there is today. Today the site is woodland with a few open areas containing a scattering of mature oaks, birch and crab apple, the vast majority of the birch which now dominates is 45 years old or less. With little management since 1946 the heath land type that was, has reverted to woodland.

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So where are we today?

The land which forms Stow Bedon Fuel Allotment is now awarded Site of Special Scientific Interest status (SSSI). Throughout the site, damp and water filled depressions are found, which are known as 'pingos'. They were formed at the end of the last ice age, around 10000 years ago, and support a variety of open-water and fen communities. The ponds are also important breeding grounds for dragonflies and a population of amphibians. The site also consists of mixed secondary woodland. In the wetter places alder and birch trees are found. The drier part of the land supports a more healthy type of woodland with birch and oak occurring over acid grassland. The woodland is beginning to develop a good diverse structure, as occasional tree falls permit the growth of younger saplings. This piece of woodland helps support breeding woodcock, redstart and tawny owl and notable insects are dependant on the dead wood.

In February 2001 the trustees entered a Wildlife Enhancement Agreement with English Nature, who helps with the funding of conservation work. The work aims to; restore the open condition of some pingos to create a range of shaded and un-shaded pools, maintain the structural diversity and species variation of the secondary woodland types, maintain the bird species which breed in the woodland and maintain the notable species dependant of dead wood.

Work carried out so far includes; clearance of invading scrub and canopy from two of the pingo areas, restoration and replanting of a section of hedgerow and control of invading bracken, to allow wildflowers and grasses to re-establish. The work not only improves the wildlife diversity potential, but also improves the game conservation on the land. Early indications from an ongoing butterfly survey, which started in 2002, show that numbers are increasing. The site has shown 20 species so far, including white admiral, purple hairstreak, common blue, holly blue and ringlet. Apart from the occasional hire of a digger all the work carried out on the site is voluntary. Much of which is by young people of the Wayland community gaining their service section for the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, silver and gold.

The Stow Bedon Fuel Allotment Charity continues to help with heating fuel to this day. With modern heating systems wood and coal is generally not required, so help is given towards heating bills. With help from English Nature funding conservation work, this generally allows all the moneys raised from the rent to be paid out as fuel grants.

Information compiled by Mr P Childs October 26th 2010 (Fuel Allotment Trustee)