

## The proposal to graze cattle in Whitewebbs Park

This article is concerned only with the proposal for Whitewebbs. Conditions are different in Forty Hall and Trent Park. There are issues specific to the proposed area in Whitewebbs.

**An on site meeting with the proponents of this scheme has been arranged for Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> July at 5.30. Meet at the Café to address these issues.**



The proposed area is approximately 8 hectares. It comprises the following distinct zones:

1	Ancient woodland and established mature trees along Cuffley Brook and the southern boundary	3.0 hectares
2	Large areas of young but well established trees	1.0 hectare
3	Large areas of thick brambles	1.0 hectare
4	Grassy area with young trees 3 – 5 years old	2-3 hectares
5	Grassy area with very young trees 1-2 years old	
6	Cuffley Brook and the old course of the new river	



The variety of vegetation in the area – seedlings, established young trees, thick bramble, grass with young trees, fissures in the clay

As can be seen from the map there are several well established footpaths through the area. The zone appears to include the bridleway in the south and part of Flash lane. The footpaths have been maintained by the relatively heavy traffic of walkers. Some limited strimming has taken place in the past as preparation for the Mayor’s fun run.

Other than footpaths there is no access to the area. In an emergency there is no access for vehicles.

## **The soil**

The soil is heavy clay which is waterlogged for the period from October through to March / April. Drainage has been neglected and the eastern part of the field is prone to flooding.

## **Fauna and Flora**

Through benign neglect this area has been undergoing a process of natural rewilding over the last thirty to forty years. This has resulted in a rich variety of grasses and many wild flowers. Jays have been busy planting oak trees and other species are to be found – hawthorn, blackthorn, willow and maple. To maintain the open areas there is a case for controlling the extent of this natural tree planting to ensure that butterfly and other insect habitats are retained. The area hosts many species of birds including green woodpeckers. There is evidence of the presence of adders.

There is concern that Cuffley Brook is threatened by pollution, possibly from activities in Crews Hill. Fresh water mussels have declined but kingfishers are still to be seen, as are damsel flies and bats. Munjacs hide in the brambles.



The Brook is at risk from Himalayan balsam which has spread downstream from the aqueduct area.

## **Grazing**

Mention is made in the proposal document of the role of grazing by large herbivores in our ancient landscape – clearing space, disturbing the ground, fertilizing the earth and spreading seeds. There is some debate about this and much is speculation. It is thought unlikely that these large herbivores grazed intensively like modern cattle.

If cattle are allowed to graze throughout the growing season in small areas like this there will be no improvement in biodiversity. In this field grazing is limited to 2 or 3 hectares and even six cattle would prevent the grasses and flowers growing to the point where they would support butterflies and other wildlife in their current profusion.

It might, perhaps, make sense for some grazing in March and in September. If larger cattle such as English Longhorns and Galloways were used they might be able to tackle the ever increasing area of brambles. In the Wyre Forest Shetland Cattle are known to tackle Himalayan balsam.

## **Conflict with other park functions**

Since the closure of the golf course and Covid this park has become very popular for walkers and runners. There always has been a very strong contingent of dog walkers but this group has grown in size over the last two years.

It is well known that there can be problems with walkers, runners and dogs (on or off lead) and cattle. Many people have cited examples of parks where cattle and people co-exist but on investigation these are large areas with lots of open space and in many cases some physical fencing. These cows will not be fenced but will use a GPS collar to provide virtual fencing. The only guarantee with technology is that at some point it will go wrong. NoFence indicates a margin of error of up to 5 metres. While this would not matter in a thousand hectare park, in a tight, confined area such as Whitewebbs with its very limited lines of sight this could be critical.

Redpol.org states “For conservation grazing sites with public access, particularly where community involvement is important, cattle without horns and of medium size, like the Red Polls, seem less of a threat to people unfamiliar with livestock.”

Note “seem less of a threat”. The statistics for injury and death by cattle are not always clear but there is no evidence that one breed of cow is potentially less harmful than another. In areas such as Midsummer Meadow in Cambridge cattle and people have shared the big flat open space for centuries.

Advice such as let the dog go and wave and shout at the cattle are not guaranteed to work. In Whitewebbs there are no fences or boundary walls to leap over if one feels at risk.

There may or may not be a danger but if people feel that there is they will not use the park, especially if they have children and dogs.

### **Animal safety**

This field is full of hidden hazards. The clay soil has many large fissures often hidden by grass. The Brook is subject to sudden depth rises in wet weather. If a cow damages itself or is caught in part of the brook with steep sides there is no prospect of getting farm or rescue vehicles into the field. I understand that up to ten cattle a year can fall into the River Cam from Midsummer Meadow. There, there is an arrangement with the Fire Brigade to do the heavy lifting. No such facility exists in this part of London even if they could get into the field.

This field has a great deal of biodiversity. Unless the cattle can deal with the encroachment of brambles they are likely to do more harm than good if they graze throughout the April to September period.

We do need to manage the growth of young oak trees if the open areas are to be preserved but this could be done quickly and easily by volunteers with secateurs. The mix of trees and open areas provides a balance of habitats for a wide range of wildlife – from deer to insects.

Work does need to be done on the drainage of the field – clearing the ditches.

This is also an area for human use – walking, running, enjoying the wildlife, relaxing. The presence of cattle will deter people.

There is also the issue of safety for the cattle. Access to the field should an animal be injured is by foot only.