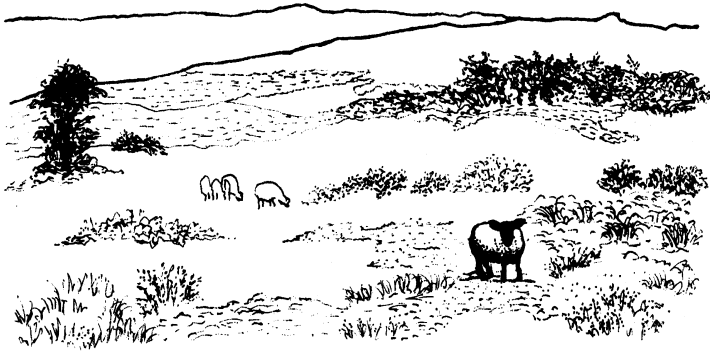


Heathland on Shotover

Lowland heath is a nationally important habitat in decline and under threat. Shotover's small area of heather is one of the best examples of lowland heath in the county.

Should we keep it or lose it?



What is heathland?

Heathland is a man-made habitat that has developed over countless years through continuous cattle and sheep grazing.

Dry sandy soils tend to be infertile, acidic and of no use for growing crops. For thousands of years, since the original forest was cleared, the only productive use for these poor areas was as 'rough' grazing. The only natural vegetation that could thrive in these conditions was heather, gorse and acid grassland. The grazing would have been managed to prevent the return of forest, allowing heath to develop, and with it all the associated heathland diversity. This is dry lowland heath, and should not be confused with the upland heather moorland on the peaty soils of Scotland and Wales.

The decline ...

Unwanted by 'serious' farmers, the dry heaths were considered wasteland and put to other uses. They would be given to the commoners (Nettlebed Common), used for military exercises (Sandhurst), given over to golf courses (Frilford Heath) and airfields (Heathrow): and ironically, ending up as some of our best nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (e.g. Shotover!).

Heaths used for common grazing were important for some local economies in England, and became part of our cultural heritage: the only remaining evidence today is the heath related place names such as Tackley Heath, Ipsden Heath and Eaton Heath. Although Oxfordshire never had a large area of heath, there were many scattered patches throughout the county.

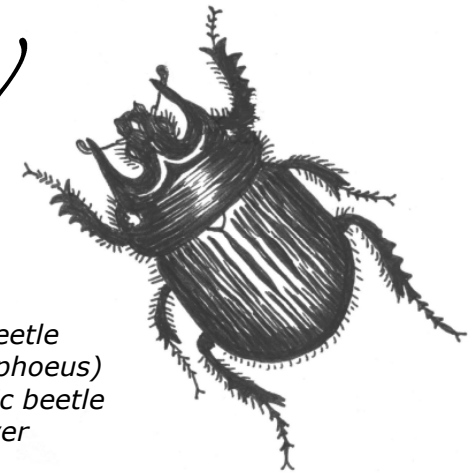
Now that agricultural development has undermined the role of heath in local economies, England has only one sixth of the heath that existed in 1800. Some has reverted to birch forest and some made arable with chemical fertilizers.

... on Shotover

On Shotover, the once extensive heather was gradually ploughed up in the early 20th century to 'improve' the grass, or to grow crops: generally without much success. For example, corn was tried on the Plain, and an attempt was made to grow potatoes near the car park.

Old aerial photographs of Shotover suggest that heather may have almost disappeared during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. However, over the past 20-40 years areas of heathland have been restored to form the heart of our heath today.

SW
Shotover Wildlife



Minotaur Beetle
(Typhaeus typhoeus)
A heath-specific beetle
on Shotover

x2

Why restore heath on Shotover?

Through wide ranging species survey work by *Shotover Wildlife*, it has been shown that the existing heather on Shotover still supports a good heathland ecology, and remains a considerable asset to local biodiversity. Shotover's heath supports Common Lizard, Grass Snake and small mammals, as well as invertebrates, mosses and other plants that are rare in Oxfordshire.

The county Biodiversity Action Plan for heathland suggests that Oxfordshire could double its area of heath by reversing the invasion of scrub. Shotover can make a significant contribution to this aim. This is also in line with Natural England's concern for the national decline and neglect of heathland habitats.

However, the expansion of heath must be viewed in context of the surrounding ecology, and requires careful planning. For example, heather is commonly adjoined by acid grassland, a habitat which is just as scarce and threatened as the heather itself.

Heather propagation research

A new initiative to restore heath on Shotover began in 1999. The initial survey work by *Shotover Wildlife* showed that many heath specific plant species still remain, and highlighted the very poor biodiversity of areas of neglected heath that had reverted to birch woodland. Careful observation has shown that there is still a very active invertebrate fauna (notably beetles, bees and wasps) for which heath and Shotover are particularly important.

Applied research by *Shotover Wildlife* has greatly improved our understanding of the germination efficiency of sown heather seed, and contributed to the development of improved techniques for growing heather from cuttings.

With the help of students from Wheatley Park School (Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme), many hundreds of new heather plants have been grown, and planted on the hill to extend Shotover's heath.

In 2001 *Shotover Wildlife* won a second Oxfordshire Special Conservation Award (OSCA) for its collaborative projects on heather research and heathland work on Shotover.

Shotover Country Park is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI): it is also a much loved public asset with unrestricted pedestrian access.

Wildlife conservation in these circumstances has to be a balance between the optimum for wildlife and that which is acceptable to the visiting public.



Shotover Wildlife is a voluntary organisation founded to research, record and communicate the significance of Shotover Hill as an important area for wildlife. *Shotover Wildlife* coordinates species surveying and research, conservation management, assists with student projects and runs identification courses.

Chair: Ivan Wright
Tel: 01865 874423

enquiries@shotover-wildlife.org.uk
www.shotover-wildlife.org.uk

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Reptiles Birds
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Leaflet written by Ivan Wright.

Cover picture: 'Ling' Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*)

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HEATHLAND on SHOTOVER

