

Commons Coordinater Report

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Hay making on Thrandeston little green continues to prove problematic. Management of the green has been the topic of conversation with several parishioners this summer. Some have enquired why we choose to cut the grass so late, and some have questioned why the hay cutting is proving so difficult to arrange when it has never seemed to be a problem in the past. I hope this report will explain the issues.

We are unable to cut the hay before 15th July, on part of the green, under the rules of the stewardship agreement that Thrandeston Parish Council has with Natural England. Dividing the hay cut into two parts is totally impractical for any contractor, so it was decided that the whole area would have to be cut after 15th July. As a result the hay has gone passed its best by the time it is cut and therefore is of poor quality. Most hay producers would be taking their second cut at this time. The late hay cut means that there is secondary growth in the base of the hay, resulting in old dead grass going flat with new growth being present underneath, making it difficult to cut. The areas of ground that make up the green are small, undulating and covered in molehills, this along with numerous obstacles to negotiate i.e road signs, trees, low overhead cables etc make it an unattractive proposition for any contractor with large expensive modern farm machinery and offers no return in the value of the hay. All these things have made it very difficult to find any contractor willing to take on the job, or even tender a quote.

This year the hay making has been a long drawn out process. We are fortunate that we have had a dry period since 15th July and 6 Heston bales of worthless hay have now been removed from the green and are awaiting disposal. As a result the contractor is not willing to carry out the work in the future. It was not possible to get the baler to some of the grass so I raked it up and removed it manually. Not a job that I particularly relished especially at this time of year when my own work load is very heavy. No doubt we will run into this problem again next year! This was never an issue before the green was entered into the Stewardship Agreement as some of the smaller areas of grass were managed by local residents.

We have to accept that the green has been placed into the Stewardship Agreement and as a result will continue to present logistical problems to the Parish Council for its duration. For many years the hay cut on the green was carried out, free of charge, by local farmers as a good-will gesture, the Mortlock family, my late father and Mr Matt Bird being three of them. This practice was only practical as the farmers in question could cut and bale the hay at a time that fitted into their own hay making season in June so the hay was of reasonable quality and had a little value to them. By mid-July farmers are usually busy with the harvest.

The Stewardship Agreement was set up in the interest of conservation and oxeye daisies and other wild flowers have appeared in some areas of the green and orchids have also been seen, this is all good news. However they have come at a price both monetary and environmental as we also have thistles and other pernicious weeds establishing. It can be argued that the overall income from the stewardship including the marsh more than covers the cost of the management of the little green. The fact still remains that management of the green under the terms of the Stewardship is costly for the village. Even more relevant is the fact that it is now much more difficult for the Parish Council to implement work efficiently because of the understandable lack of interest from contractors, along with parts of the green being impossible to access with a baler. A valuable lesson must be learnt from the situation, in which we find ourselves, regarding Thrandeston little green. Before any future agreements are entered into, on behalf of the village, it is imperative that The Parish Council establish a comprehensive management plan and accurate costings and quotes are acquired for any work to be carried out within the agreement and are presented at a Parish Council meeting.

Things are less problematic on the marsh. The remarkably wet spring has been followed by an equally remarkably dry summer. The conditions are now favourable to get machinery on to the marsh to clear up the debris left following the initial capital works carried out at the start of the HLS Stewardship Agreement. I am happy to do this as soon as my workload allows, in the next few weeks while the ground remains dry. Cattle are grazing on the marsh. To date Mr Ling has not erected a fence; the ditches are not running so now present less risk to the cattle. Goff has watered the trees that were planted by the Parish Council earlier this year, to help them through the dry spell. They are looking healthy but if the dry weather continues they will require watering again.