



HorseTalk.net BRIDLEWAYS WATCH

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Riders in and around Chobham Common in Surrey are keeping their fingers crossed.

For five years.

So, too, are local residents, dog walkers not to mention ordinary walkers.

Surrey Wildlife Trust, which manages the area on behalf of Surrey County Council, want to surround the entire Common, which covers almost 1,000 acres, with permanent perimeter fencing so that it can be grazed by free-ranging cattle.

Riders, the Chobham Common Preservation Committee, the Chobham Society, the Chobham Common Riders Association and others using the Common say, No, No, No.



At a protest meeting in the local village hall only two people out of 130 present supported the proposal

Surrey Wildlife Trust say that large areas of the Common have been condemned by Natural England, the Government's adviser on the natural environment, for being in a bad condition. Trees such as birch, oak and pine, have been allowed to grow unchecked. Many acres of heather have been over-taken by grass, bracken and gorse.

Their solution: Fence the whole area and bring in free-range cattle.



Local riders say....

No. The costs of the proposal are out of all proportion. It is possible to restore and conserve the land without spending such huge amounts of money in any case, under Surrey Wildlife Trust's proposals, the cattle would only ever be on the land for five-months of the year. What's more the Trust has not provided any scientific evidence to support their proposal that widespread grazing would have any significant effect on improving the poor condition of the Common.

No. Letting cattle roam unchecked all over the Common is not only unsafe for riders, it is also even more unsafe for both dog-walkers as well as ordinary walkers. What is the point, they say, of the Trust proposing fencing-and-grazing if the net result is that people will be frightened to

use the Common in the future?

No. Installing perimeter fencing all around the common as well as allowing cattle to graze throughout the area would severely reduce riders opportunities to ride on the Common. There is also the question of gates. Will the Trust install the automatic fast-closing gates that slam shut in just 4 – 6 seconds? Will the gates only be installed in the perimeter fencing or will there be sub-sections and even more gates inside the total area? Where will the gates be located?

The Trust says that when they consulted local residents about their proposals, out of 200 questionnaires which were returned, more than 60-per-cent were unconcerned about permanent fencing.

Local riders say, "The questionnaire did not ask a direct question on permanent fencing."

They also stress that at a Public Inquiry in 1998 the Inspector ruled against permanent fencing.

Now, it seems, things may be swinging in the riders favour.

The Surrey Wildlife Trust are no longer talking about fencing the whole of Chobham Common and letting cattle graze the entire area. Instead, they are now talking about establishing four different enclosures and letting the cattle graze only those areas.

The Surrey Wildlife Trust are no longer talking about a permanent grazing programme. Instead, they are talking about an initial five-year programme during which time the grazing programme will be regularly assessed by an independent assessor to judge whether it is effective or not.

Officials from Natural England have even hinted in private discussions that they are no longer just talking about installing bridlegates full-stop. They are now saying that in co-operation with Natural England they will establish a series of gate trials on the Common so that both riders and non-riders can assess which gates are better and safer for riders and non-riders.

Says Diane Beach, the BHS Bridleways Officer for Surrey Heath and Woking, "We haven't won yet. But we are keeping our fingers crossed. On the face of it, both the Surrey Wildlife Trust and Natural England look as though they are prepared to work with us and listen to our point-of-view. That's all we can expect at this time."

"I know some people have said that we should have taken a stronger line from the beginning. But I've always felt it is much better for everybody to work together to achieve the correct result."

Is she keeping her fingers crossed?

"Oh, yes," she says. "For the full five-years."