





CARING FOR  
**WALTON  
HEATH**





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## Foreword

Areas of lowland heathland, of which Walton Heath is one, have been diminishing in Great Britain as a whole to an alarming extent – only 15 per cent of the lowland heathland which existed in 1800 still exists today - and there is now a National Plan with clear objectives to reverse this trend. Since the 1940s, the heathland cover of Walton Heath has reduced significantly in common with the national trend.

Walton Heath Golf Club owns the freehold of the heath which is subject to the public's rights to take air and exercise (generally referred to as 'common land'). The Club wants to regenerate and conserve the heath for all who know it and enjoy it.

Walton Heath occupies a very special place in the golfing world and its two courses are among the finest in the country. Their reputation has attracted many championships, and most of the greatest names in golf have played on the heath. The special quality of the courses owes much to their design, but arguably even more to their open heathland character - indeed, the heather is their predominant feature. Heathland requires a great deal of care and attention if it is to survive, and it is as vital to the Club as it is to other users and all those interested in the unique habitat it provides that it is conserved.

This pamphlet describes the history, nature and importance of lowland heaths in general and Walton Heath in particular. The ecology of Walton Heath as it is today is described, including the flora and fauna currently on the heath and those that may return and thrive if the heath is regenerated. Finally, the actions being taken by the Club are set out together with the policy which will guide its stewardship in the future.

The Board, on behalf of the Club, wishes to acknowledge and thank all those bodies who have advised on or otherwise influenced the Club's stewardship principles: English Nature, the Forestry Commission, the Surrey Heathland Project, Dr. A-M. Brennan (Ecologist), Reigate & Banstead Council, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Plateau - Surrey Archaeological Society, Tadworth & Walton Residents' Association, and last but not least the Club's own Green Staff, Green Committee and Ecology Advisory Group.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian W. Meaby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

B.W. Meaby  
Chairman of Walton Heath Golf Club



*Surrey Heathland 1762*

## The History of Heaths

Lowland heaths were originally open areas of land that were created by man over several thousand years as he cleared the land of trees and heavily grazed it with his livestock. This denuded the ground of those grasses and shrubs that were high in nutrients, leaving those that were less attractive to livestock – acid grasses, gorse, broom and in particular plants called heaths or heathers. Heaths are now fully recognised as a unique and increasingly rare habitat inhabited by flora and fauna that have adapted to survival in these conditions.

However, heaths are inherently unstable with a tendency to revert to poor woodland if not directly managed by man, whether through grazing or other means. This is because some wind-blown seeds from deciduous trees take root in the heather and grow. Their leaves are rich in nutrients and when deposited create conditions in which further trees, grasses and scrub flourish at the expense of the heather and other heathland plants and shrubs. The heathland could be heading for extinction unless the process is checked.

A hundred years ago the South of England had large areas of open lowland heath. Since then, with almost no grazing and minimal active management, there has been a substantial decline in land areas covered by heaths, to the point in 2001 where Surrey has only one sixth of its historic heaths remaining. This pattern has sadly been repeated nationally, particularly in counties such as Norfolk and Dorset previously renowned for their large open heaths. The heaths have been largely lost to woodland encroachment, though some areas were cultivated for crops during war time. During the last twenty years, there has been a greatly increased understanding of the ecology of heaths and the relatively undervalued resource and unique habitat they provide. With the full support of English Nature, concentrated efforts have been made by local organisations to restore and conserve them.

# ROUND STORY

■  
*Surrey  
Heathland  
1985*



## The Status of Lowland Heath Today

The global resources of lowland heath have gradually dwindled to about 250,000 hectares. Of this, the UK has 58,000 hectares and the County of Surrey, once renowned for its open heathland, has only 3,060 hectares remaining. During the last 40 years Surrey has become the most heavily wooded county in England with over 20 per cent of its area covered by woodland.

Within the Borough of Reigate & Banstead, there now remain only two areas that can be described as heathland, Reigate Heath and Walton Heath, whereas 80 to 90 years ago much more of the area was open

heathland.

Lowland heath is clearly indicated as a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and there is a National Habitat Action Plan to maintain and improve by management all the remaining heathland in the UK. This also calls for the re-establishment by 2005 of a further 6,000 hectares of heathland with particular emphasis on the key lowland heathland counties of Surrey, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon, Suffolk and Norfolk.

In Surrey, the County Plan seeks to ensure that all existing heathland is maintained and enhanced by appropriate management and to recreate at least 200 hectares of heathland from woodland or other land by 2005 - where possible, linking together or enlarging existing sites. As will be seen, Walton Heath Golf Club's continuous work in heather and heathland restoration is making a significant contribution to the Plan.

## A Brief History of Walton Heath

Walton Heath is one of the largest remaining areas of open heathland within the M25 and, unusually, a heath that lies on clay soil (not sand). In common with most of the lowland heaths in the South of England, Walton Heath was created by man between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago, as the land was cleared for grazing flocks and herds. A part of the heath was occupied by a Roman Villa that was fully excavated in the 19th century and, when the Normans arrived in 1066, it was an open treeless heath. The Normans created the Manor of Walton-on-the-Hill, building a small castle in the village (now recognisable only from the mound or motte) and leaving the open heath which offered grazing for the livestock of some of the local people. The common land of the heath was extremely important for grazing and the gathering of turf, peat, bracken, heather and gorse for fuel, building materials, bedding and other uses, right up until the end of the 19th century.

From 1067, the Manor was owned by no fewer than eight Kings and Queens of England and little changed on the heath for the next 800 years, though by the late 1800s Walton-on-the-Hill was no longer an agricultural society in need of extensive grazing and turf. At the beginning of the 20th century, the heath was still totally open and practically free of trees, as all of the historical photographs show.

*The heath - early twentieth century*





Until that time the freehold of the Manor Lands, which included the heath, was owned privately. Then, in 1971, the members of the Golf Club bought the freehold and with it the heath and responsibility for its stewardship. Since that date, increasing consideration has been given to the gradual restoration of the heath, which has accelerated in recent years as its ecological importance has become better understood and more widely recognised both inside and outside the Club.



At about that time, heathland became recognised as ideal ground for the newly popular game of golf, as it provided similar conditions to those found on the original seaside links. Many courses were constructed on heaths throughout the country, including two on Walton Heath between 1902 and 1913. Walton Heath Golf Club quickly became very well known in golfing circles. King Edward VIII was captain in 1936, prominent figures such as Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George were members, and its professional for 46 years was James Braid, winner of five Open Championships. The Club has been, and still is, the venue for many famous matches and championships, including the Ryder Cup in 1981. Fortunately, golf and heathland are almost entirely compatible and the creation of golf courses has generally led to the preservation of heathland that would otherwise have been lost. It is not coincidental that the only two remaining heaths in the Reigate and Banstead Borough have golf courses on them.

The use of part of Walton Heath for golf resulted in little change to the open nature of the landscape up to the Second World War. Then, as a result of the lack of manpower available to control the growth and spread of saplings, there was a rapid regeneration of deciduous trees across the entire area. This was not vigorously checked after the war, hence the spread of trees gradually shaded out the heathland plants, which need plentiful light and sun to prosper. As described previously, the annual fall of leaves and the resulting nutrients also enabled more grasses and scrub to flourish, resulting in further loss of heather cover. By the 1960s much of the heath had been populated by deciduous trees.

# WALTON HEATH TODAY

## An Ecological Survey

From a survey of Walton Heath made for us by the much respected ecologist, Dr Anne-Maria Brennan, we know that until very recently there were 22 hectares of woodland on the heath and only 14 hectares of pure heath. This worrying imbalance needs to be redressed, not only to restore more land to heath but to reverse the gradual encroachment of woodland and grass, and hence the deterioration and loss of the heath that remains.

The rest of Walton Heath consists of approximately 60 hectares of typical heathland acid grassland and three small wetlands, of which the largest is the remains of Pintmere Pond. The woodland is described by Dr Brennan as scrubby and of poor quality; it is dominated by silver birch in all stages of its life cycle, with few good quality or specimen trees. If significant progress on restoration of the heath is to be made, then the root of the problem - the spread of deciduous trees and in particular birch - must be addressed.

## Trees and the Heath

In fact, most of the woodland is in five specific areas that are covered by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) imposed in 1986. All trees in these areas cannot be touched and, as a result, they have not been managed and are now overgrown with poor secondary woodland. It is understood that the TPOs were imposed by Reigate & Banstead Council partly to preserve visual amenity and partly in an attempt to reduce noise levels from the M25 which was being constructed. They were instigated as a result of public feeling created by the felling of some trees between the courses and the motorway (with the intention of creating new golf holes, which were never constructed).

As previously stated, there was at that time insufficient understanding, even by ecologists, of the nature and importance of dwindling areas of lowland heathland, and the overwhelming 'green' sentiment prevailing was to save trees at all costs. The Council's action reflected the views of that time, and indeed the issues of preserving trees, visual amenity and reducing noise levels remain high priorities which have to be taken into account in any actions taken today.

Ideally, heathland should have very few trees and these should mainly be in copses of pines. Not only is this the way to conserve heathland, but it maintains the open aspect which in the case of Walton Heath gives it a unique visual amenity worth preserving in its own right, particularly as it lies within a designated Area of Great Landscape Value. The majority of trees that

exist today on Walton Heath are deciduous trees that have grown up since the 1940s which, if not vigorously controlled, would rapidly dominate the heath for the reasons explained earlier.

The worst culprit is the dominant birch, not only because of the shading and leaf fall but because of wind dispersed seeds, resulting in the profusion of seedlings and saplings all over the heath. The oak is now dominating in a few older areas of woodland where the first generation of birches have completed their life cycle. Provided they can be contained in these areas, the oak and also the rowan will do minimal harm to the major expanse of the heath. Hawthorn trees provide important homes for birds and insects and are an accepted part of the heathland habitat. The heath has several very good examples of older hawthorns which will be carefully maintained.

The Scots pines are the trees which are most compatible with the long term regeneration of the heath. There are several good copses of older pines which will be maintained as they have minimal detrimental effect on the heathland floor below them.

## Heather, Grasses, Plants and Shrubs



The heather on Walton Heath is mainly the common variety of *Calluna vulgaris* often known as ling, together with dotted patches of bell heather (*Erica cinerea*). Heather is a relatively fragile plant and needs to be managed

*Bell Heather in bloom*

so that it can withstand the constant invasion by the more aggressive grasses, plants and shrubs to which it is subjected. Heather is also adversely affected by any trampling by foot or hoof, particularly in periods of drought or after a heavy frost. Also, when denied access to direct sunlight heather struggles to survive and quickly deteriorates.

The grasses that exist on Walton Heath are mainly (about 85 per cent) heathland acid grasses known as bents and fescues (*Agrostis* and *Festuca*). These are the fine-bladed grasses that cover the greens, tees and fairways. They are not the threat to the heather that other wide-bladed grasses such as the meadow grasses (*Poa annua* and *Poa trivialis*) and Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*) represent. The wide-bladed grasses can compete with the heather for territory and if the soil nutrient levels are enhanced then these grasses may dominate, leading to rapid decline in the heather cover. Due to the increased nutrient levels caused by the spread of deciduous trees, these wide-bladed grasses have seeded in certain areas and there is the constant threat of further invasion. As the wide-bladed grasses need a higher level of nutrient to survive, this is particularly apparent on the areas around the deciduous trees where falling leaves have fertilised the soil and created the conditions for these grasses to thrive.

The fine grasses on the golf courses are managed at the lowest possible nutrient levels, and every effort is made to avoid grass seeds blowing into the heather. As a general rule, fertilisers are not used at all on the fairways or semi-rough and indeed Walton Heath has possibly the lowest rate of use of fertiliser of any golf course in the country.

Gorse, broom and bracken are all natural heathland plants but, if left unmanaged and allowed to spread widely, they present a further threat to the heathland as they suppress heather growth. If the gorse is allowed to spread too far then it is prone to establishing high levels of nitrogen with a further undesirable rise in nutrient levels.





## Birds On The Heath

A number of the typical birds of lowland heathland are still present on Walton Heath, notably about five pairs of tree pipits, two pairs of stonechats, some nine pairs of meadow pipits (many more passing through on migration), about 10 pairs of skylarks and several pairs of linnets. Tree pipits, skylarks and linnets are all listed as 'Red Alert' species of 'serious conservation concern', signifying that their numbers have dropped nationally by more than 50 per cent in the last 25 years, almost certainly due largely to loss of suitable (or suitably managed) habitat.



Walton Heath is also rich in certain other species such as green and great spotted woodpeckers and sparrowhawks whose basic habitat is woodland, but these species are doing very well in Surrey woodland generally and will not be seriously affected by the restoration of the heath.

Amongst the specialist and thus sadly rare heathland birds that might be expected to return to Walton Heath once it is restored are, roughly in the order that they might appear:



*Top Left: Male Yellowhammer*

*Top Right: Female Hen Harrier*

*Above: Meadow Pipit at nest with young*

*Below: Tree Pipit*



**Nightjar:** a migratory bird which inhabits, in small numbers, many of the West Surrey heaths and which will discover suitable habitat very quickly; it needs the odd bare patch amongst the heather on which to lay its eggs, and likes a mixture of ages of heather.

**Woodlark:** two or three pairs still breed on nearby Headley Heath (which is suffering similar encroachment by scrub, but is now being actively restored by the National Trust) and several have been seen recently at Walton Heath.

**Yellowhammer:** another 'Red Listed' species which was quite common on Walton Heath until fairly recently and which is still present only two miles away at Headley.

**Hobby:** the most striking of British falcons, which is now doing well on West Surrey heaths such as Thursley and which will be assisted by the retention of the Scots pine copses.

**Dartford warbler:** the bird of the southern heaths, which is also doing well at present in West Surrey, but is rather sedentary and thus comparatively slow to re-colonise; it needs gorse as well as heather and likes a mosaic of age structures, creating interfaces between vegetation heights thought to cause concentrations of insects.

**Crossbill:** breeds in West Surrey and will again be helped by the retention of Scots pine.

**Great grey shrike:** a winter visitor, which has been visiting increasingly rarely in recent years, again due to disappearance of suitable habitat.

**Hen harrier:** a rare bird of prey which needs deep heather for its communal roosts, the nearest of which at present is probably at Thursley.

Restoration and extension of the lowland heathland habitat should also allow the existing heathland birds, notably tree pipits and stonechats, to increase their numbers considerably on Walton Heath.

## Insects, Animals and Fungi

Heathland areas support more than 5,000 types of invertebrates and the lowland heathland in Surrey is extremely important in this context, especially for insects and spiders, and many characteristic and unusual species occur. Some of these, such as dragonflies, moths and spiders, are well known; many others, such as the wide range of hymenoptera (ants, bees and wasps), are less known except to specialists. Surrey is the richest county in Britain for this group with dozens of rare species on its heaths, so much so that the county's heathland is being used for the re-introduction of rare species by English Nature under its Species Recovery Programme.

Surrey is also one of only three counties in the British Isles which support all of the native heathland reptiles and amphibians, although the rarer species remain vulnerable. Any heathland therefore holds a position of paramount importance in the conservation of our indigenous herptiles, such as adders and lizards. Having due regard to all conservation objectives, all land management activities should take particular account of this situation.





Walton Heath supports sustainable populations of rabbits, field voles, wood mice and weasels, with a small but quietly expanding population of roe deer living in the woodland on the perimeters of the heath. Fungi are abundant on lowland heathland and Walton Heath also provides a range of conditions in which a varied array of species/varieties can thrive many of which, both large and small, are intimately associated with the specific heathland flora. They are a very important component in maintaining balance in the ecology of the heath.

# THE WALTON HEATH INITIATIVE

**Trees** After consultation with English Nature, the Forestry Commission, Surrey Heathland, the Tadworth & Walton Residents' Association and the Reigate & Banstead Council, the Council was officially approached, and agreed on 13 September 2000 to vary the TPO in the centre of the heath (W4 on the map) to allow the felling of some - but not all - of the trees for the purposes of heathland restoration. The objective is to create a natural heathland habitat with a more open aspect by transforming 2.4 hectares of poor woodland cover into a combined area of 7 hectares of restored heathland. This will allow room for the rapid regeneration of heathland plants and shrubs. (As a matter of historical interest, this TPO area contains significant parts of the original golf course, which were in play until shortly before the Second World War).

The trees being felled are mostly secondary woodland and are all of poor quality, the great majority being birch. Those to be retained include the very old yews (previously entirely hidden and choked by scrub), a few good specimens of oak and some well established

*Scrub woodland before and after clearance*



pine, as well as a patchwork of hawthorn that is an important feature. The effect on the visual amenity in terms of a heathland aspect will be dramatic, opening up historic views right across the heath in almost every direction.

Previous measurements showed that this woodland had minimal effect on motorway noise levels from the nearby M25, mainly because the sound generated by motorways does not travel in straight lines. (Having travelled up and out from the motorway cutting, the sound then ‘bounces’ down from cloud layers or other atmospheric conditions, reaching the ground at varying intensities in different places, depending on the cloud cover and other weather conditions).

The potential benefit of at least some tree clearance in the other areas covered by TPOs will be considered in due course, in consultation with all parties concerned. Each TPO will need to be considered separately because of their different locations and, in some cases, because of the visual amenity they provide in screening the motorway and/or the Dorking Road. Those trees nearest to the motorway may also give some small degree of noise protection – the extent to which they do so is to be carefully monitored – and, due to their position on the periphery, they do less damage to the heath. However, it is likely that, even if they remain as areas of woodland, they would benefit from some management in the

interests of the better trees within them and of those who wish to walk on the paths through them.

The other trees on the open heath are being managed in the best interests of the heathland. This generally means retaining small copses of pine and occasional good single specimens of other trees, but gradually removing most of the birch which causes so much damage.

## Heather and Grass Management

Walton Heath Golf Club has been actively working on heather regeneration for many years and a more extensive programme of heather regeneration and management was started in 1998. The benefits of the current regeneration programme are already evident as young heather is now growing again where only grass was evident before. Extensive areas of the acid grassland are now being scarified and turf stripped, to expose the heather seed and encourage germination. The height of the heather is also being taken down in areas where it has grown too long and 'woody', to encourage the younger plants hidden within it. A heather nursery has been established for the development of heather turf and seed stock and the nursery will be ready to supply its first product in the near future. With a clear view to the long term regeneration of the heath, a 10-year plan for heather restoration has been established, with the intention of increasing heather cover as quickly as is sustainable.



Discussions with the specialists advising Walton Heath Golf Club have produced a number of suggestions as to the best ways to reduce excess nutrients and control invading grasses. Further experiments are being made during 2001/2002 using differing techniques to establish which are the most effective. A further programme of bracken and gorse control will also be included in the same period to produce a more sustainable balance in the context of the entire heath.

This increased management is expected to bring great benefits and allow further space for the expansion of planned habitat for heathland flora and fauna with the potential for the desired consequential increase in biodiversity.

*Regenerated heather (2 years old)*



*A typical bunker with heather face and surrounds*



*Turf stripped to expose heather seed layer*

## Other Actions

The heath is a complex and fragile habitat and over the next five years there will be an expansion in areas defined as 'ecological corridors'. On specified areas of the heath, these confer greater protection from damaging influences and will allow the heathland species to thrive and spread as desired.

The heathland mosaic of flora requires a delicate balance of management to avoid being either over or under managed. The green staff of Walton Heath Golf Club have many years' experience in managing the ecology of heathland and are well qualified to ensure that the mosaic is carefully enhanced to the benefit of all. The continuous training of the staff is essential in ensuring the success of a long term programme of restoration and certain members of staff have designated responsibility for the practical applications of ecological management plans.

For many years, a continuous dialogue has been maintained with a wide range of local and national organisations that are specifically involved in heathland management, conservation and restoration. Experience has shown us that this exchange of ideas, experiences and techniques is invaluable and it is another important aspect of the Club's management of the heath.

# The Club's Policy for the Heath

The Club's policy is to restore and conserve the heathland of Walton Heath thus fostering the flora and fauna that depend on the unique habitat. The Club will continue to be advised by the best available expertise and will consult with all other parties that benefit from the heath and have an interest in its conservation; in particular it will consult with the local community through the Tadworth and Walton Residents' Association and the Reigate & Banstead Council.

The Club accepts that this commitment to the ecological management of the heath is time consuming, expensive and ongoing. Supporting the wider ecological imperative to restore and conserve lowland heathland is not only most rewarding in its own right, but is in the best interests of the Club and all others who use and enjoy the heath.