

Hick's Farm - February 2010 Update

What's happened so far?

The Buildings

In 2007 a study was undertaken to assess the feasibility of converting the farm buildings to an Environmental Education Centre and an operational base. Plans were drawn up and costed and met with general approval. However, the current financial situation is preventing further progress on this element of the project. It does, though, remain a longer term aspiration if funding can be sourced.

The Land

The holding is almost 50ha in size, most of which is pasture. This was entered into an Environmental Stewardship scheme in 2008 which means that funding is available for management work. Following discussion between council officers, the tenant farmer and the land agents a plan has been developed for the future management of the land.

What's happening now?

Phase 1 of the management began this winter and should be completed by spring 2010. There are two key elements of this work:

- 1) the reinstatement of 1.3km (almost 1 mile) of hedgerow that was removed in the 1950s and 60s.
- 2) stock fencing to divide the land into smaller fields and to protect the newly planted hedges.

Why are we doing this?

Grazing

The Council currently has a herd of almost 50 cattle along with 6 Exmoor ponies and 5 goats. These animals are used to manage some of our most valuable countryside sites.

We began grazing management at Hengistbury Head in 1990 using Galloway cattle and have recently added Shetland cattle to the herd. This breed has proved to be especially effective in the management of our heathland sites. Two years ago we entered into the Dorset Urban Heaths Grazing Partnership (DUHGP) with neighbouring Local Authorities and other organisations such as Dorset Wildlife Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Natural England. A key aim of the partnership is to bring as much as possible of the local heathland into grazing management using traditional native breeds.



Shetland cattle



White Park cattle

If this is to be achieved, more cattle will be required. These can either be continually bought in or we can start our own breeding programme. We have successfully reared our first 4 Shetland calves at Hengistbury Head. Hick's Farm gives us a great opportunity to establish a viable herd of this very rare breed. Surplus animals that we rear can be leased or bought by other partners to graze their sites.

Other cattle such as White Park are also being considering. This will be a significant contribution to the survival of these rare animals.

Wildlife

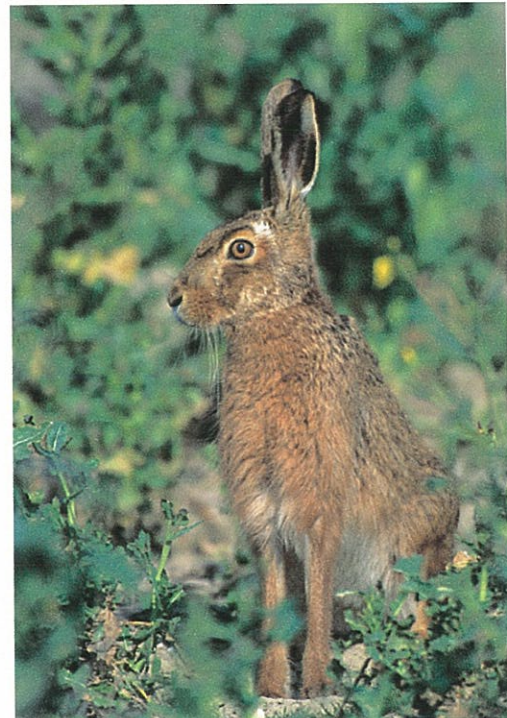
Because the land at Hick's Farm has remained relatively undisturbed with little public access, the wildlife value has remained high. For example, it is the only place left in the borough where brown hares can be seen, otters frequent the river and kingfishers are a common sight. In the winter, wading birds such as lapwing, snipe, curlew, redshank and green sandpiper are attracted to the wet meadows.



Kingfisher



Lapwing



Brown hare

This is a special place for wildlife and the management proposals will enhance its value. The new hedgerows will provide additional cover for hares and will help ensure their survival here. They will also provide nesting sites and a food source for many birds and small mammals.

Each year some of the grass will be left ungrazed to provide a hay crop. This will benefit insects including the typical grassland butterflies, meadow brown, gatekeeper and small skippers along with a whole range of other invertebrates. It will also provide ideal hunting habitat for barn owls which we are hoping to attract back to the site as a breeding bird.

What next?

The second phase of the management work will begin next winter. This will include further hedge planting and work to enhance the habitat for wetland birds. Shallow ponds will be created and an observation hide is planned. There will also be some access improvements. These will very much take into account the high wildlife value and the presence of cattle with calves. For example, hares are very sensitive to disturbance and would quickly disappear if there was unrestricted access for the public and their dogs. Instead, it is preferred that people are encouraged to use the hide and that there are regular opportunities for groups to be guided around the site. We want people to be able to enjoy and appreciate this special place without compromising its specialness.

Stuart Clarke
Countryside Policy Officer