

Risk assessment regarding grazing cows on Rushymeade, Pulloxhill

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Introduction.

Rushymeade is an area of 6.9 hectares on the slopes to the South East of Pulloxhill village. It is owned by the Parish Council, so effectively by the Parishioners of Pulloxhill. The land is designated a County Wildlife Site and classed as unimproved grassland, so it is important that the majority of the grass area is conserved. It has 6 public entrances spaced fairly evenly round its borders. Footpaths 11 and 12 run across it from the village, whilst footpath 16 connects these along the Northern boundary. Although originally 4 separate fields, the area is now effectively one large field, interspaced with sections of old hedgerow and areas of bushes, trees and scrub.

In order to maintain it, the Management Group get a local stock farmer to keep up to 12 female beef cattle on the land for 5 summer months each year. These animals are ideal grazers, able to consume the mixed grass vegetation whilst offering some control over encroaching bramble, blackthorn and thistles. Some mechanical topping of pathways and areas in danger of getting overgrown, is undertaken once the flowers and grasses have seeded.

Running the cattle on this site, all of which is open for the public to roam, can cause some problems with walkers who are not familiar with cows, especially if they have a dog with them. Cattle will often approach walkers, especially with dogs on leads. This can be mistaken for the cows threatening to attack, although this is very rarely the case. It is made worse if the walker holds onto the dog rather than walking away, or letting the dog loose so that the cattle follow the dog rather than the walker. In the extreme, there can be incidents where the walker holds onto the dog, which results in them getting knocked over by the cow which is actually trying to chase the dog away.

After some complaints, and an incident where a lady was knocked over by a cow whilst holding her dog, a review of alternative management practices was made and discussed at a public meeting organised by Pulloxhill Parish Council. The outcome was a significant vote in favour of maintaining the current method of management, but with an increased level of inspection to check the temperament of incoming cattle in the presence of dogs, and to improve public awareness of advice on how to behave near cattle, especially if walking with a dog, through signage before, during and after the period when the cattle are on the land.

The management methods considered, and conclusions were:

1. Ban all livestock. Not a reasonable option.

This would remove the problem of conflict between cattle and dog walkers. However it would introduce severe management difficulties for maintaining Rushymeade. We cannot keep the land as it is without cattle. Mechanical cutting alone is not a feasible option if we wish to keep all areas as they are now. Without cattle grazing during summer the land would quickly revert to brambles, scrub and bushes. This would make it largely impenetrable within 5 to 10 years.

2. Alternative stock to cattle. No reasonable option.

Horses alone would be very difficult to manage. We would need at least 10 and so have to deal with a large number of unfamiliar animals and similarly, owners. Horses are also likely to present at least as much risk to walkers and dogs as do cattle.

Sheep would be difficult to keep fenced in and no dogs could be permitted unless on a short leash. Even so the risk from chasing and worrying of the sheep by uncontrolled dogs would not be acceptable.

3. Continue with cattle but with no calves. It is very difficult to find such stock.

Finding a source of such cattle is not easy in this part of the country. There is an abundance of free grazing land available to the limited number of livestock owners, so both stipulating specific animal types and adding the problems we have with the ROW paths on our land makes Rushymeade less attractive than many people assume at first glance.

4. Separate Rushymeade into two or more grazing areas and fence PROWs. This would destroy the natural nature of the area.

This is an option which would require fencing of the main rights of way, and splitting of the grazing areas so that the cattle can alternate between them, leaving a part of the area free for loose running of walkers and dogs. Fencing the footpaths was considered a very poor option by most present. Although cost should perhaps not be relevant where public safety is concerned, it is estimated that typical stock fencing can be erected for between £5 and £6 per meter and access gates cost between £250 and £500 fitted. In the region of £9,000 minimum would be required to turn the land into something resembling an urban park. In addition, any such fencing and gates would have to be very secure against stock getting into the wrong area, where the public would not be prepared for their presence as they are on the land under the present management plan.

5. Status quo but checking of incoming cattle behaviour towards dogs, and provide better signage. Best option.

Rushymeade has been grazed every summer since 2002 by cattle, with calves at foot and in-calf so sometimes giving birth whilst on the land. Until 2015 we have not had any reported problems of actual attack to humans or to dogs. There was a problem in 2015 due to a newly introduced cow being exceptionally offensive in its behaviour towards dogs, and any owner close to the dog. The animal was removed, along with the cattle that came with it. The farmer who provides the cattle then brought alternative animals, most of which had already been on Rushymeade in previous summers. As an additional safety measure we now check the behaviour of all animals when delivered to the Rushymeade corral by walking amongst them with a dog. All the animals accepted must behave satisfactorily in the presence of the test dogs. If any animal shown unusually aggressive tendencies they would be refused access to the main area of land and taken away. This process will be repeated for all cattle entering Rushymeade in the future.

Also, more explanatory signs are now placed at each entrance to the land, warning walkers, and in particular those with dogs, that they should take particular care to prevent their dogs from approaching or disturbing the cattle in the field. If concerned by the presence of the cattle, they

should make a detour to avoid them, as advised by the NFU and the Ramblers Association. (Ref. 1)

Although this may not be popular with all users of Rushymeade, it is for approximately 5 months of the year. Access will not be restricted, but those who are nervous in the presence of farm animals are asked to look at the alternatives and consider if their freedom to use Rushymeade outweighs the requirements for management of the land if it is to be maintained as the area we currently appreciate.

These actions follow guidelines presented in Government and HSE guidance documentation, see References 2 and 3.

References

1. **NFU and Ramblers team up to provide advice and new signs for dog walkers.**
http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/news/nfu_and_ramblers_team_up_to_produce_advice_and_new_signs_for_dog_walkers.html.
31 August 2009
2. **Open access land: management and responsibilities.** Natural England.
<https://www.gov.uk/outdoor-access-recreation>. 27 March 2015
3. **Cattle and public access in England and Wales. Advice to farmers, landowners and other livestock keepers.** HSE Agricultural Information Sheet No. 17EW (rev. 1).
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