

Commons Land: Is there Potential for Reducing Rising Energy Costs?

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As Abraham Lincoln almost said, “You cannot fuel all the people all of the time but you can fuel some of the people some of the time”.

In the Middle Ages there were no coal miners’ strikes because there were no coal mines; North Sea oil remained resolutely under the North Sea; the Russians had not yet built a gas pipeline and nuclear reactors were rather thin on the ground. **So how did people cook their meals and heat their houses?** Most of them used wood fires, a small minority cut and dried blocks of peat (also known as “turfs”) which is how the Broads were created.



Russian gas pipeline (energypolicy.columbia.edu)

For most people wood was the only fuel available so the rights to harvest it from common land were incredibly important. Managing this firewood for maximum sustainable yield, to be shared carefully and fairly by all with a right to it, was a central concern of commoners all over this country. Areas of common land were barricaded to keep out hungry stock (no posts could be driven into common land so fencing was

not allowed) and trees planted.

In time they were harvested by **coppicing** them (cutting them at ground level so that several stems regrew from the intact root stock) or by **pollarding**, cutting main branches from the trunks which were left intact to grow new branches. Because both the root stocks were left unharmed, regrown stems accumulate biomass faster than newly planted seedlings, so more carbon dioxide is removed from the atmosphere.



Regrowth from coppiced tree on Alderford Common



Pollarded trees in Epping Forest (essexviews.uk)

When Dead Man’s Hill (Swannington’s answer to the Himalayas) was cleared of trees they were logged, split and **delivered at cost price** (about half the full cost), to whichever parishioners asked for them. In Swannington , when trees have grown past the threshold size of “greater than 7” quarter girth at breast height” (about the diameter of an average telegraph pole) the right to harvest them, transfers to the Lords of the Manor. The parishioners do however still have the right to change how we manage the younger trees on the commons (with the agreement of Natural England) to yield a more sustainable harvest of firewood.

Using timber generated by recreating open spaces for parishioners to enjoy and restore biodiversity, together with sustainable management of existing trees could potentially help offset some rapidly escalating energy costs and may improve the carbon footprint of the parish but would need some interested parishioners to organize and plan it for the common good.