

Nature Notes 19: Footpaths in Swannington, Alderford and Little Witchingham

I have recently been appointed as **Parish Councillor with an interest in footpaths**. We have over 37 in Swannington alone, outlined on a map kindly circulated recently with the Pilgrim. Pam and Jez Smith are making an effort to walk all of them and are building up a series of guides to them on the Swannington web site: <http://www.swannington-news.org/Pages/Walks.html>



Bracken on a path over Alderford Common

I decided to concentrate first on those paths on the Parish Council's own land, the commons. Starting with **Alderford Common the path from the south-west corner of the common (Station Road) to the marl pit** was completely impassable due to bracken that had collapsed across it. This is an important route for Winch's Way as it forms an alternative to walking along and round a dangerous corner on Reepham Road. Clearing it is challenging but with help from residents in both lower Swannington and Ugate we are clearing a 2-3m wide strip of bracken which we hope will revert to a grass sward which would be much easier to maintain.

On **Ugate Common** both parishioners and visitors have expressed concern about the number of trip hazards along the path by the stream. When I originally cut this path in the summer of 1987 to form an alternative route for pedestrians to avoid paths churned up by intensive horse use, I simply cut a straight line near the stream to minimise the effort needed to hack through the dense scrub. During the following winter

I found the route I had chosen crossed several wet patches.

Gary Bailey, helped by other parishioners, very kindly laid **board walks** over these wet patches. They were later covered with wire mesh to make them less slippery. Over 25 years of heavy use these lengths of boardwalk have understandably worn out and the wire rusted, requiring ever increasing maintenance to keep them in a safe condition.

The scrub I had such a difficulty cutting through has now grown into mature woodland with very little vegetation beneath the canopy. There is therefore now lots of scope to re-route the path by creating "by-passes" round the wetter areas. If we did this, the board walks might no longer be necessary.

Please let me know what you think about this idea. The Parish Council needs to know the views of the parishioners, for whom the commons were historically created, before taking any further decisions.

We could try and clear some of the trees and scrub from the areas between the bypasses and the stream. This would both improve views across the meadows on the other side of the stream and restore more wet grassland, in which two of the of the rarest plants on the Common: Pugsley's marsh orchid and cross leaved golden saxifrage, used to grow but from which they have since been shaded out. Once while taking a guided tour round the site we stopped in one of these patches of wet grassland and a harvest mouse hopped out of its nest straight into the hands of one of the visitors. **Again, the Council would very much appreciate your views.**

Some parishioners have suggested it would be a good idea to have some paths on the commons made suitable for wheelchair access, as is provided on many other commons in the county. How do you feel about that? Such paths need not look intrusive, but we would need a special grant as they are not cheap to lay.

If you have any comments about any of the paths in the three parishes e.g. where you feel finger posts or way-marker posts need replacing, please do let me know.

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Acrobatic harvest mouse (Guardian.com)