

DRAFT Coombegreen Common
Management Plan 2015
For consideration by Birtsmorton Parish Council



Janet Lomas
Janet.lomas@farming4wildlife.co.uk
07827 970600



INTRODUCTION

The Vision

This plan assumes the following vision for Coombegreen:

A tranquil, working landscape of open grassland which has been created by consistent management over hundreds of years by grazing livestock resulting in rich biodiversity, with views to the west to the Ridge and east to the Cotswolds, which provides enjoyment to the local community and visitors.

Background/Description

The area of Coombegreen common is 19.7 hectares (48.67 acres), and is owned by Mr Dawes of Birtsmorton Court, and is managed by Birtsmorton Parish Council. It is part of the common land unit CL9, known as Castlemorton Commons, and is adjacent to Hollybed Common. With all these commons being in the same common land unit, it means that those with common rights on any part of CL9 has common rights over the whole of CL9.

When an application for the Higher Level Scheme was submitted on the commonland unit CL9, the Castlemorton Commons, in 2010, Coombegreen was left out at the eleventh hour, because there were mapping errors at Coombegreen. It is a requirement of all Natural England's grants that land entered into any of their schemes are correct on their mapping system, the 'Rural Land Registry'. The Higher Level Scheme on the Castlemorton Commons gives financial incentives to graziers based on the number of stock they have on the land under agreement. This has naturally encouraged grazing on the CL9 commonland under HLS agreement at the expense of Coombegreen.

This distinctive feature of Coombegreen, loved by the local community and visitors who enjoy the common, is the hill with magnificent views where there is a wooden seat, where there are some mature oak and a plaque on one of them "To commemorate the Coronation 1937"; extensive old quarrying pits and holloways which have been described as marl pits of medieval origin or earlier; a network of grass tracks with a short sward for easy walking; the species-rich grassland, with marshy flushes, anthills supporting wild flowers, and four rare species of thistle; turtle dove and other bird life. In the past, horses were boxed in and caused damage by using the uphill track as a 'gallop', but recently only local horse-riders use the common, and do so respectfully.

Removal of tall dense scrub near the road has been organised by the Parish Council and undertaken by a local contractor, but not regularly enough to reduce its vigour. Topping of thistles has also been organised, and takes place twice yearly where anthills allow. There has also been very effective ragwort control by pulling plants, by volunteers.

Threats

Local commonland has historically been grazed by those with common rights, but the number of grazing livestock has fallen year on year, and for the past three years,

Coombegreen is only grazed by the sheep belonging to one farmer, Mr Shail. His sheep, approximately 500 ewes and lambs, also graze the adjacent commonland within CL9, and Coombegreen is now under-grazed. The capacity for stock on the common all year. This is resulting in changes in the vegetation and appearance of the common. The characteristic short sward of species rich commonland, which is very palatable for sheep, and supports unusual communities of grassland including rare plants, is now limited to small areas of Coombegreen. Reduced grazing pressure is leading to a taller, grassier sward over large parts of Coombegreen, where coarse grasses out-complete the delicate broadleaved plants; bramble develops, which prevent stock from eating seedling hawthorn, elder, ash and oak. These are the first successional steps to woodland, and there are already examples of small areas where this process is taking place on Coombegreen, often in the quarrying pits, obscuring these features which are part of the common's character and cultural heritage. (See area identified by blue box on Figure 1).

The Malvern Hills Conservators' Higher Level Stewardship agreement on Castlemorton, Hollybed and Shadybank Commons, which commenced in 2010, requires no supplementary feeding of stock in winter on land under agreement, which has resulted in an increase in this activity on Coombegreen, causing an increase in rutting and poaching, nutrient enrichment and associated weed problems on Coombegreen.

The grazier, Mr Shail, takes supplementary feed which is essential in winter for welfare reasons, onto the flat area shown as C in Figure 2. Ideally, stock would be supplementary fed on an alternative site to the common (on another, improved grassland holding, or indoors). In the recent past, conserved forage (around 12 small bales of hay) have been taken onto the common daily in winter, and plastic buckets containing a 'lick' product which provides concentrate feed and minerals is taken onto the common once a week, which sheep consume over the week. Transport of feed is by tractor and trailer from his holding, Lodge Inn, along Coombegreen's south boundary to area C. Last winter, Mr Shail sometimes crossed Coombegreen from the main road, causing damage to the well-walked grass track. Mr Shail is not a young man and, troubled by ill-health, is unsure how much longer he will graze the common, which brings into question how Coombegreen will be managed in the future.

Mr Shail's sheep are lured along roads towards preferred grazing on managed lawns at Ryecross and elsewhere, with increased risk of road traffic accidents. Mr Shail spends many hours every day hefting his sheep. If he gives up, it seems unlikely that his family will continue bearing in mind poor economic returns, lack of infrastructure, and the high demand in labour.

There is a case for maintaining grazing on the common irrespective of market returns on the basis that it provides a public benefit. Agri-environment funding is available to provide a financial incentive in many such cases.

Piles of rubble intended for private track repair, wheelbarrowed horse muck collected from private horse-grazed paddocks, tree prunings and garden waste (intended for burning) and dumped apples are found on the common, variously creating minor local eyesores, causing nutrient enrichment and weeds, and risking the health and safety of grazing livestock.

The following summarises changes in vegetation without additional management.

2015

Grazing animals and occasional mechanical scrub management is controlling spread of localised dense scrub.*

Creeping thistle problem is being controlled by topping twice annually.*

But low stocking density is allowing coarse unpalatable grasses to invade; bramble is developing over quarrying pits and are becoming widespread in low or large clumps.

2015-2020

Scrub and thistle problems may be fairly static if managed as in 2015.

Other areas of the common will have more areas of dense scrub development, and low bramble will be forming over more widespread areas where coarse grass dominates.

Coarse grasses will increase and dominated areas will become more widespread.

Thistle problem may be similar to 2015.

2020 onward

If scrub management levels of 2015 were in place, and if grazing was discontinued, the bramble and the scrub problem would accelerate and be very difficult or very expensive to maintain. Woodland clumps would soon form, and hawthorns would become widespread over the common in a short time. Some areas would become inaccessible to walkers. Species diversity in the grassland would be severely reduced. Quarry pits would be hidden under bramble/scrub/trees.

“*” : see recommendations table below.

CONCLUSIONS

- In the short term, more management of scrub is required to prevent long-term change to the commonland landscape, and harm to the sensitive grassland habitats.
- An alternative to damaging supplementary feeding of stock on Coombegreen, and the process of getting feed onto the site by tractor is necessary.
- Sheep numbers grazing the common are not adequate, and now coarse grass ingress is a problem which sheep grazing alone is unlikely to overcome; additional grazing by cattle would be a solution.
- Missing out on applying for the Higher Level Stewardship in 2010 has left Coombegreen disadvantaged: the Conservators' HLS has led to a reduced number of stock grazing Coombegreen and increased supplementary feeding there.

Note: A suitable stocking density of 1 livestock unit per hectare for this grassland type would be desirable, (one cow = 1 l.u; one ewe = 0.15 l.u). This would amount to 133 ewes with lambs, or 20 adult cattle. However, in the short term, more livestock units of stock would be beneficial, with a larger proportion of cattle than sheep to encourage grazing of the coarse grasses and browsing by cattle, without overgrazing the sensitive short turf, such as 50 sheep and 20 cattle.

AIMS

- To re-establish a working common, for sustainable management for the future.

Objectives

Short-term

1. To halt move towards increased scrub and tree cover;
2. To manage scrub and weeds in the short and medium term;
3. To limit damage by tractor access and supplementary feeding;
4. To improve grass palatability and grazing conditions so that other graziers are encouraged to graze livestock on Coombegreen;

Long-term

5. To identify funding to finance the infrastructure required, and incentives for graziers for the medium term.
6. To agree a system of management which is sustainable in the long term, to secure the vision for Coombegreen.
7. To work with owners and commoners of CL9 (the Castlemorton Commons) to examine joint solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ANNUAL WORK 2015-2020 – SEE FIGURE 3

AIMS TO MEET OBJECTIVES 1-4	ACTION	TIMEFRAME	RESPONSIBILITY	FUNDING SOURCE	PRIORITY	NOTES
Update paperwork in case Countryside Stewardship is considered.	Get the Rural Payments Agency's Rural Land Register mapping corrected.	Now	JL			Underway.
Consider precept on the rates by the Parish Council to pay for scrub management.						
Reduce rutting	Consider Mr Shail's suggestion that he leaves haylage in top corner of C area, so that he doesn't need to take the tractor onto Coombegreen every day. (The haylage bales would need to be fenced from stock). An alternative vehicle used for transporting feed would reduce or remove damage by rutting (eg. John Deer's Gator, Mule).					
Reduce enrichment/nettles	Ask Mr Shail to limit spread of supplementary feeding outside existing species-poor 'sacrificial area C'. Ask Mr Shail to avoid feeding stock on banks or inside pits, where nutrients collect, and where weed control is difficult.					

AIMS TO MEET OBJECTIVES 1-4	ACTION	TIMEFRAME	RESPONSIBILITY	FUNDING SOURCE	PRIORITY	NOTES
Reduce vigour of creeping thistles*	Improve timing of topping thistles. Discuss with Matt Gardner. Top at stage just before flower bud burst (around end of June). If topping for second time, do so before plant senescence begins.					
	Consider weed-wiping as additional method of weakening roots systems.					See Glebe Contractors quotation.
Reduce spread of bramble from hedges	Ask neighbours with managed hedges to cut brambles and suckers spreading onto Coombegreen from their hedges.					
Do not weaken native character of Coombegreen.	Remove sycamore in scrub on hill, see Figure 3. Prevent planting of non-native shrubs and trees.					
Remove bramble/elder/hawthorn scrub.*	Continue scrub control on roadside and hill, but carry out the work annually. Extend this work to areas of scrub in pits and around existing hawthorns/young trees, shown in Figure 3, and light bramble where it is forming elsewhere in grassy areas.					

AIMS TO MEET OBJECTIVES 1-4	ACTION	TIMEFRAME	RESPONSIBILITY	FUNDING SOURCE	PRIORITY	NOTES
Maintain shrub habitat for bird life and insects, and also to provide shelter and shade for stock.	Retain individual, established hawthorns, young ashes and oak tree. Retain some gorse.					
To manage infrastructure, and create wetland habitat.	Maintain roadside ditch (by Foxhills), and consider pond creation by Washlow (pond creation by road not recommended because of drawing sheep to the roadside). Avoid dredging stream which may reduce marshy flushes/wetland flora.					
To prevent ragwort	Voluntary help which has been very successful, to continue to control ragwort. (If ragwort is left uncontrolled, it will deter graziers).					
To help weed control.	Voluntary work parties could help remove spear thistles. See information on thistles.					There is a concentration by 'Washlow' entrance.

If the increased work input above is implemented, there should be considerable weakening of bramble, scrub and weeds over the next five years, even if the grazing reduces further. Whether or not Mr Shail continues to graze Coombegreen over the next five years, during this time planning should take place to put in place additional measures to encourage graziers, ideally by 2020, if the desirable characteristics of Coombegreen are to be maintained in the long-term.

AIMS TO MEET OBJECTIVE 5	ACTION	TIMEFRAME	RESPONSIBILITY	FUNDING SOURCE	PRIORITY	NOTES
Liaise with MHC and their report on Castlemorton Commons.		Report due February 2016. But liaison should be ongoing.	AONB unit.	N/a	High	
Consider fencing and off-highway grids as part of a bigger scheme with Castlemorton Commons.	Will need agreement of Landowner, those with common rights over the whole Common Land unit, Secretary of State through S38, those with easements across the common.	2-3 years from start to finish.	MHAONB unit prepared to help, but owner/Parish Council and MHC will have to spearhead the scheme.			Hopkins Grids, which are simple drop-in grids at c. £4,000 for 9 foot, non-highway spec grids fitted. Then add fencing costs. Might mean not grazing some areas of the common.
Consider fencing and off highway grids on Coombegreen only.	As above.	As above.	MHAONB unit prepared to help but owner/Parish Council will have to spearhead the scheme.	Small amount of money available for grids under Country-side Stewardship? See notes on costs.		See above. Temporary electric fencing for cattle (one strand) is more effective, less costly and less visible than electric fencing for sheep. No capital payment available for

Consider on-highways cattlegrids.	Will need cooperation of WCC highways and landowner for by-pass gates. Also agreement of Sec. of State for Transport.	Up to 4 years from start (depending on the need for a public inquiry).	Because of the costs of this project, the only reasonable funder would be the Heritage Lottery Fund.			temporary electric fencing under CS. This option would mean that grazing could take place over the whole common. But costs of such a project (up to £40,000 per grid) plus the possible costs of a public inquiry, make this option very difficult to fund.
Look into the licensing the grazing to graziers without common rights.						
Consider an application for Countryside Stewardship to incentivise graziers.	Consider joining with current Conservators' scheme to help with admin burden.					

Notes for consideration on Countryside Stewardship – Higher-Tier (5-year agreement with Natural England)

Scheme introduced in 2015 for 1st January 2016 start dates of first agreements. Having some teething problems, and Natural England need to be consulted regularly, in order to assess the suitability of the Higher Tier to Coombegreen management. The scheme will undoubtedly evolve yet.

Queries:

- Would an application be encouraged by Natural England? (Under the current scoring system, this looks doubtful, but this may change).
- If there is doubt, would the designation of the common as Site of Special Scientific Interest make it eligible?
- Could an agreement, for example starting on the first available date in 1/1/2017, have to run for the scheme's normal five years, or would NE consider allowing it to end early, if a joint application with Malvern Hills Conservators covering the whole area known as Castlemorton Commons could be made?
- Would Natural England allow the flexibility of management in the scheme to accommodate the graziers' needs (and encourage additional grazing)?
- Are the £3,600 annual payments (which could be paid to graziers to encourage grazing), worth any constraints created by being in an HT agreement?
- How much would the payment for control of scrub be £260/ha for the whole of Coombegreen (potentially one-off payment of £60/ha, £5,200)?

Annual payments

GS6 Management of species rich grassland: £182/ha/year page 100 of CS Manual.

SP6 Supplement for cattle grazing: £45/ha/year page 224 of CS Manual.

SP5 Shepherding supplement: £7/ha.

Capital work (one-off payments)

SB1 Control of invasive plants supplement: £260/ha (one-off payment, with work required to maintain scrub control for 5 years)

Implementation plan (if required by NE): £1,100

LV1 Cattlegrids: £835/item (not on public highways or public rights of way).

Coombegreen Common

Management Plan 2015

Figures 1, 2 and 3

FIGURE 1: Features of Coombegreen

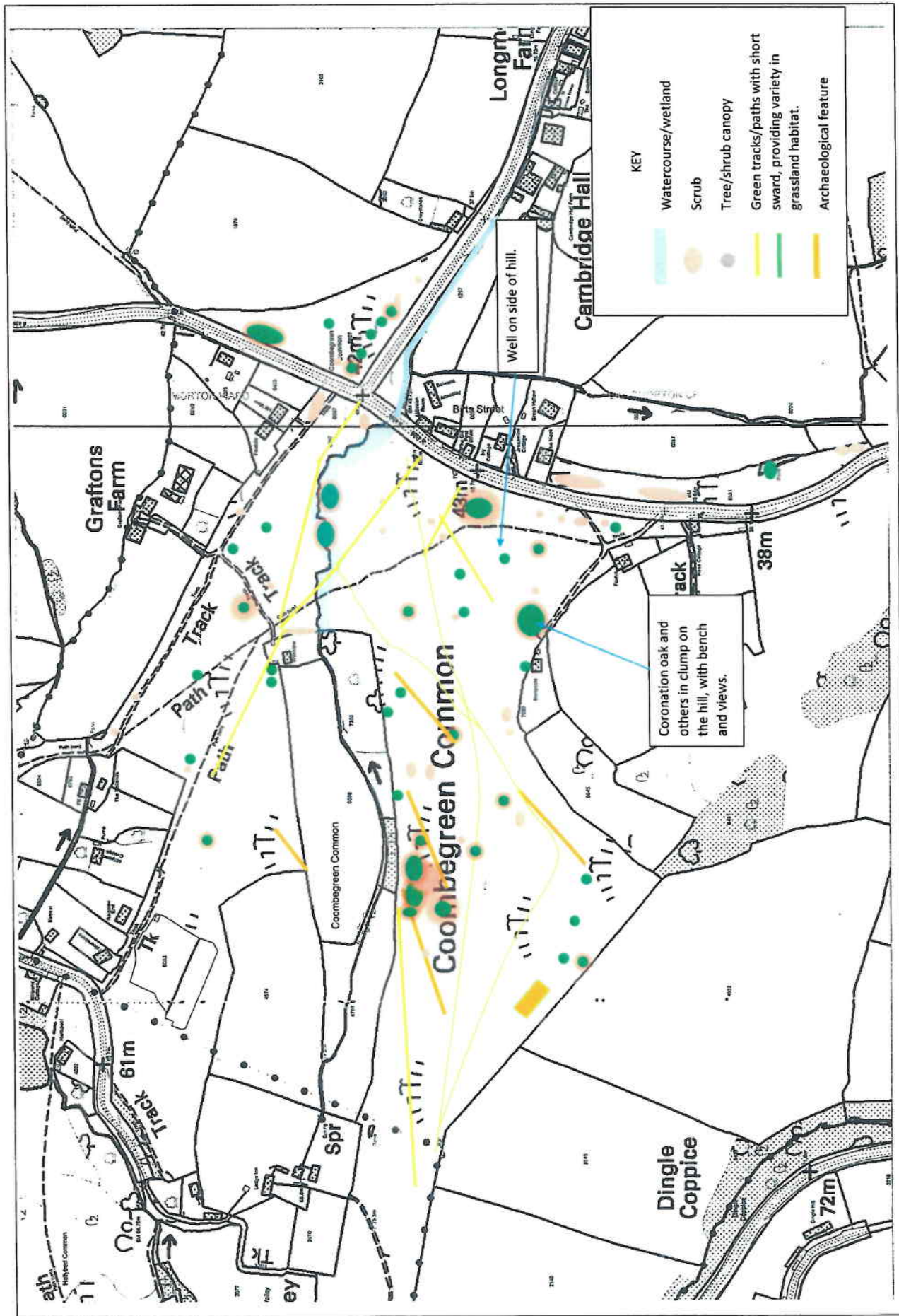


FIGURE 2. Boxes show grassland, highest value (A1, declining to A3) and least valuable = C; and main threat to biodiversity/landscape.

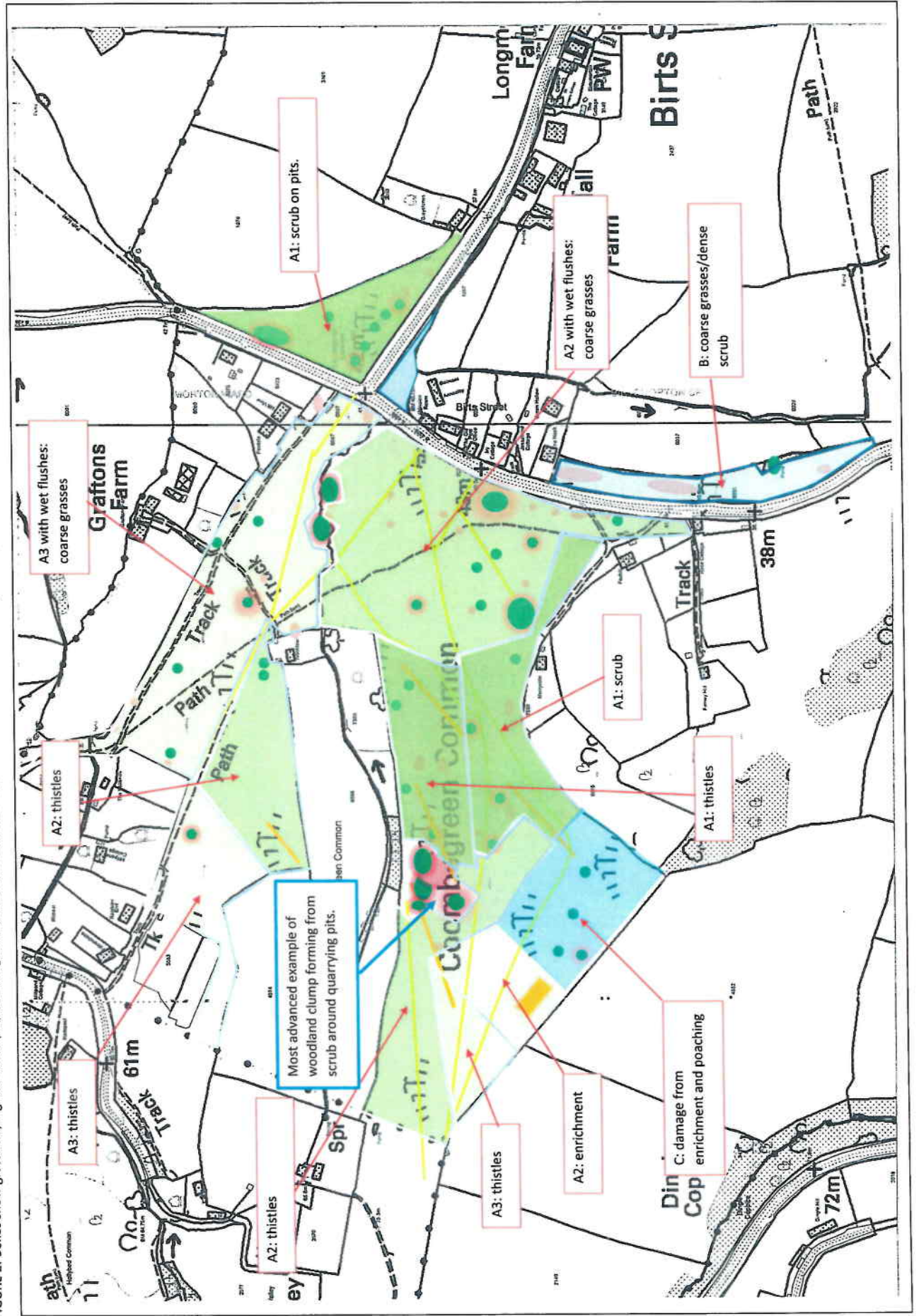


FIGURE 3: Recommendations for work for 5 years (arrows point to examples).

