

Barnham Cross Common – A self-guided walk

Welcome to Barnham Cross Common, a classic 'Breckland' Heath which has been much restored in recent years: thanks to funding from Plantlife and Natural England, the area has been fenced and grazing has been reintroduced to maintain an open habitat with disturbed ground - which is vital for many of the area's special plant species. The Common remains open to the public though and is managed by Thetford Town Council for both people and nature: we hope you enjoy your visit.

The Brecks were once predominantly open heath that stretched from Red Lodge on the A11 to Castle Acre in the north. This was largely maintained by grazing, rabbit warrening and areas of 'breck' where cultivation (breaking the ground) took place. In the thin poor soils crops only grew for a year or two, then the cultivated areas were left 'fallow' for a few years before another crop was attempted. Species that live in the Brecks are adapted to cope with these changing conditions.

The Common totals over 86 hectares, almost 70 of which are designated as Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its chalk and acid grassland heath. The wide variety of soil types here (chalk, sand, flint, gravels and peat) here shows the story of this landscape through the last ice age. The wildlife reflects this variety of soils: almost 13,000 species of plants, animals, birds and insects have been found here, of which over 2,000 are of conservation concern.

This walk is approximately 2.5 miles, with a shorter option of around 1.5 miles. The ground can be slightly uneven in places, with some trailing roots and stems in places. There are kissing gates and steps on some steeper slopes. See **map overleaf** for the route.

1. We start in a shallow dry valley. Ahead is a bank and ditch running diagonally across the site, from which scrub has recently been cleared. This is an anti-glider ditch, dug in the dark days of World War Two when invasion by Nazi forces was expected at any moment: it served to prevent gliders full of troops landing on what was at the time a completely treeless plain. *For the shorter walk, head towards the road here, cross over (beware of fast traffic) and turn to your left, then walk parallel to the road back towards the start.*
2. The south-west of the site has a stripy appearance which is clearly visible during the growing season and on aerial mapping. This reflects the underlying soil, where strips of windblown sand have settled to fill the gaps between small ridges of chalk: the latter were caused at the end of the last ice age. They are known as 'peri-glacial' features, which mark where the glaciers stopped during the last ice age (Late Devensian period, around 20-10 thousand years ago). Greater knapweed and small scabious like the chalk here; blue harebells and the reddish-brown sheep's sorrel mark the sandy stripes.
3. Tucked away in an area of trees is the site of the franchise cross that divided the Liberty of Bury St Edmunds from that of Thetford, from which the site gets its name. It is also sometimes called a plague post. A modern standing stone marks the spot today, after the original was destroyed during World War One, when the army was training in the area.
4. Beware fast-moving traffic – including vehicles overtaking – as you cross the A134.
5. The south-eastern part of the site includes large areas of wetland near the River Little Ouse - keep to the left of the lush vegetation here and stay on the dry sandy heath which makes up most of the eastern side of the Common. The acidic sand here formed part of the river terraces and deposits, which are exposed in places when you reach the river itself.
6. Remains of sand and gravel quarrying can still be seen across the north-east of the site in the form of small hillocks and hollows in the ground.

For more information, or if you would like to join our conservation volunteers who help look after the site, please contact Mark Webster: 07553 388 551 / markwebster@thetfordtowncouncil.gov.uk

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