

DCAF report March 2019. Reference the Pebblebed Heaths. By Gordon Guest.

Clinton Devon Estates ran a drop-in session on March 7th for stakeholders to discuss their long-term aims for the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths (Woodbury Common) and the heaths management.

Clinton Devon Estates prime concern is to manage the habitat of plants and fauna and wildlife, protecting this as much as is possible from human interference.

They also wish to continue making large parts of the heaths open to the public.

They also need to continue to share use of the heaths with the military and Royal Marines.

Clearly, there can be tensions between some of these aims.

In February 2018, Clinton Devon Estates ran a workshop at Budleigh Salterton, which Sarah and Gordon attended. Since then Clinton Devon Estates has continued to collect evidence. An aspect of evidence has been collecting details of car parking numbers in some car parks and some face-to-face interviews in car parks.

From this information, Clinton Devon Estates has produced a statistical analysis that currently shows some 400,000 people use the heaths annually. This compares with Knightshayes National Trust property near Tiverton of 180,000 annual visits.

At the drop-in there was a large room with a long line of tables. Arranged around the tables were data on each carpark, formal and informal. This formed a map, an aerial photograph, car park photographs, and one to two sides of A4 of written information on each car park.

This information included options of closing a car park, making it bigger, realigning car park to improve access, and readjusting car parks in relation to visitor numbers. E.g. improving busy car parks, potentially closing less busy car parks. Part of the scheme was to re-orient which parts of the heath public walked on, rode horses on, and where accessibility was possible without conflict with the military.

Clearly, a substantial amount of work and data collection had gone into each car park analysis. It was emphasised this was a twenty-year project and would be reliant on s106 funds from housebuilding. There was concern that the further expansion of Cranbrook, the 10,000 houses in Cullompton and the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan would all substantially increase the local area population and thus the expected upward usage and demand to use the heaths by the public.

Whilst I was there representatives from the police were there also. It was useful to hear their comments, including which car parks had no crime and which had heavy crime and were used for anti-social or drug use. An option presented was to create one or two totally blue badge car parks. Whilst in principal this sounded a good plan I asked the police about this. They were very concerned at the potential location of these as in both cases it meant blue badge holders would be crossing a busy road to access the heath land, which they were against. (The location of blue badge car parks not the idea of blue badge car parks).

Gordon made many comments about general access, horse riding and scooter access based on discussions at DCAF.

Roger and Kim, staff at the event, were left with the option to ask Gordon to organise an event where several persons in a range of mobility scooters attended a site visit on the heaths with

Clinton Devon Estates personnel. Through driving scooters around on the heaths and in and out of the car parks, personnel could see at first hand the issues.

Copies of the Power Point presented in February 2018 were given, as were some of the paper handouts from 2018 reference scooter accessibility. These had photographs of earth bunds, gates that were too small, erosion gulleys, large boulders and padlocked metal barriers, which impeded access.

An observation for DCAF members is that the new countryside Park at Dawlish, which DCAF visited, was joint funded by several local authorities. Clinton Devon Estates are clearly looking at that funding model to assist with the heaths.

Drawing on experience from across the UK, Clinton Devon Estates argued the biggest challenge was protecting plants, fauna, habitat and wildlife from huge volumes of human walking now and in the future.

If there is a future site visit for scooters it would, of course, be open to any DCAF member.