

Picking pockets

Broom Hill, an improbable peak in flat mid-Suffolk, is under new management — as Britain's first official "pocket park". As an opening attraction there is the promise of extra primroses this spring.

The villagers of Coddtenham, whose forebears have for centuries enjoyed air and exercise on this three-acre beauty spot, became its owners when the parish council took possession late last month.

Rejoicing may have been confined to this small community of 500 people, but their parochial triumph has a wider relevance in terms of countryside protection.

For Broom Hill is the first phase of a national pocket park scheme backed by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and the chemicals company, Schering.

Pocket parks are modest in scale and aspiration. But they could add up to a considerable scattering of islands of popular habitat in a forbidden sea of intensely farmed private land.

The concept of an accessible play place, nature reserve, environmental studies area and village promenade, originated in a highly successful pilot scheme in Northamptonshire where eight pocket parks have been created since 1981. Other examples are spread around Wales, Cumbria and Avon.

The purchase of Broom Hill began, typically, with a local panic. Last spring, the villagers, who had traditionally roamed unhindered but without any formal permission on

The unlikelyst scraps of rural England are being transformed into mini-parks

the hill, heard it was for sale.

Fearing that an outsider might buy it and exclude them, they decided to bid for it themselves. Luckily for Coddtenham, the hill's owners, a Swiss farming consortium, gave them first refusal. Anxious villagers raised the money in three months and were backed by a 50 per cent grant from the Countryside Commission. The site was sold for "about £4,500". A team of 30 volunteers has already set

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to work to ensure that the hill's various attractions are kept in informal balance.

Now the hill will serve as winter Cresta run, dog walking area, and the only available open strolling place in a sea of agriculture. That ubiquitous village social facility, a lovers' lane, will be maintained.

Suffolk Wildlife Trust will manage the hill, an area of mixed woodland and acid chalk grassland with a rich plant community. An early

bonus should be a spring proliferation of primroses when choking undergrowth is hacked away.

"It's nice to look at a place that was in danger and realize that we saved it," says Mark Rose, who along with parish councillor Bernard Baker is one of the leading campaigners behind the project.

Pocket parks are distinct from any other category of protected land. Although they will have some existing conservation value or potential, they will rank below nature reserve status. They will differ from common land, which despite its name is not always invariably open to the public. But they will not usually contain swings and roundabouts and they will not be neatly manicured like formal urban parks.

Jo Rose, pocket parks advisory officer for Northampton County Council, says: "People were not very keen on local authority picnic sites or formal parks. They prefer to choose where they go. They told us: 'This is the bit we want to be saved and, if necessary, we will save it ourselves'."

Among the haphazard corners of derelict land coaxed into greenery is 4.5 acres of disused brickyards at Greens Norton, in Northamptonshire. The area seemed lost to possible development but in two months the village organized a successful rescue package. Its network of ponds and wetlands now contains the rare great crested newt.

In the same county, a pocket park was made out of 17 acres of railway cutting at Woodford Halse which had been earmarked as a site for waste disposal. It now contains four types of orchid.

Mrs Rose lists three criteria which pocket parks must meet. They must be in countryside or village as opposed to inner cities; they must have free public access — people must not have to join an association to visit them; and control and decision making must lie with the local community, either in the parish council or any formal body of villagers.

The pocket park is a challenge to local initiative. "Anyone can do it," says Mrs Rose. "First find a bit of land, then track down the owner." (In Northamptonshire start up costs have averaged between £500 and £750 where the land is leased.) "These are places set aside to enjoy. It's the people's decision — it's their heritage."

Gareth Huw Davies

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