

The enclosure of the Pease Marsh

Peasmarsh is known to us today as the modern settlement that lies next to the Old Portsmouth Road between Godalming and Guildford. However, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Pease Marsh was a large, roughly triangular area of common land stretching from the Harrow in Compton to the Old Portsmouth Road. The majority of this land was the waste of the surrounding manors of Polsted, Loseley and Godalming upon which local people had common rights of grazing for their animals. It was enclosed for agriculture by an Act of Parliament of 1803 creating the landscape that we see today.



*An extract from John Rocque's map of Surrey (c.1760)
showing the unenclosed Pease Marsh*

The boundary between the manors of Polsted and Westbury is marked by a hedge bank and ditch that runs roughly north to south near the Avenue. To the east of this boundary, stretching as far as the railway line, is the new and distinctive landscape created by the Enclosure Commissioners who were appointed to define and distribute the new land holdings. The old tracks across the marsh were straightened and made a uniform width with wide verges. The new fields were made large and rectangular, bounded by straight, hawthorn

hedges with occasional standard trees in the hedgerows. It is a landscape designed on a surveyor's drawing board and more typical of the English midlands than the south-east counties. To the west of the boundary lies the unenclosed Compton Common, the waste of manor of Westbury.

The unenclosed marsh

“Pease Marsh, between Guildford and Godalming, contains 803 acres, partly loam, partly clay, and partly marl. Upon the skirts of this common are some brick kilns and clay is dug out for the purpose of making bricks. There are to be seen on some parts of this common such a number of anthills, that it is really dangerous to ride over it. From the total neglect of this valuable common, the cattle that depasture thereon are almost starved; it is, however, so much coveted by the inhabitants of Godalming and Guildford, that it would, in an inclosed state, find a rental of from fifteen to thirty shillings per acres”. General View of Agriculture of Surrey, James & Marshall, 1744.

The marsh was common land and, although it was in the private ownership of the respective lords of the manors, it had remained uncultivated because the commoners' rights prevented the owners from developing the land as they wished. The lord of the manor owned the common, or waste, but the commoners had rights to take the natural produce of the land such as grazing, peat or wood for fuel or acorns for feeding pigs. Consequently, although the waste of the manor was his own property, the lord of the manor had little freedom to use and develop it as he wished. The lord or lady of the manor still retains ownership in many places.

Manor courts regulated common rights quite strictly and in many places those who took what was not due to them were fined. Owners of the rights guarded them jealously because they were often a very valuable part of their household economy. It has been estimated that, in the eighteenth century, the pasturing of just one cow on the common could constitute as much as 40% of the income of an agricultural labourer, whilst the right to collect wood for fuel made up another 10% - 15% of his earnings.¹

William Cobbett was a great champion of commoners and here he describes a typical south-country common as it was in the year 1804. He conjures up a lively picture of people using the resources of the land with their animals wandering over the waste, much as they still do in the New Forest:

¹ Poplar Cottage – a wasteland cottage from Washington, West Sussex, printed in the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum magazine, Autumn 2007.

*“I used to go around a little common, called Horton Heath, on a Sunday. I found the husbands at home. The common contained about 150 acres; and I found round the skirts of it about thirty cottages and gardens. I remember one hundred and twenty-five or thirty-five stalls of bees; cows there were about fifteen besides heifers and calves; about sixty pigs great and small; and not less than five hundred heads of poultry!”*²

His description paints a picture of independence and industry that typified the life of the commoner. However, their way of life was not to everyone’s taste and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, agricultural commentators such as Arthur Young and William Marshall began to decry the commons as an inefficient use of land and to argue for their enclosure. Moreover, some of the larger landowners perceived the independent way of life of the commoners as a threat. Perhaps, due to their self-sufficiency, they were not as biddable as their betters would have liked.

The enclosure movement

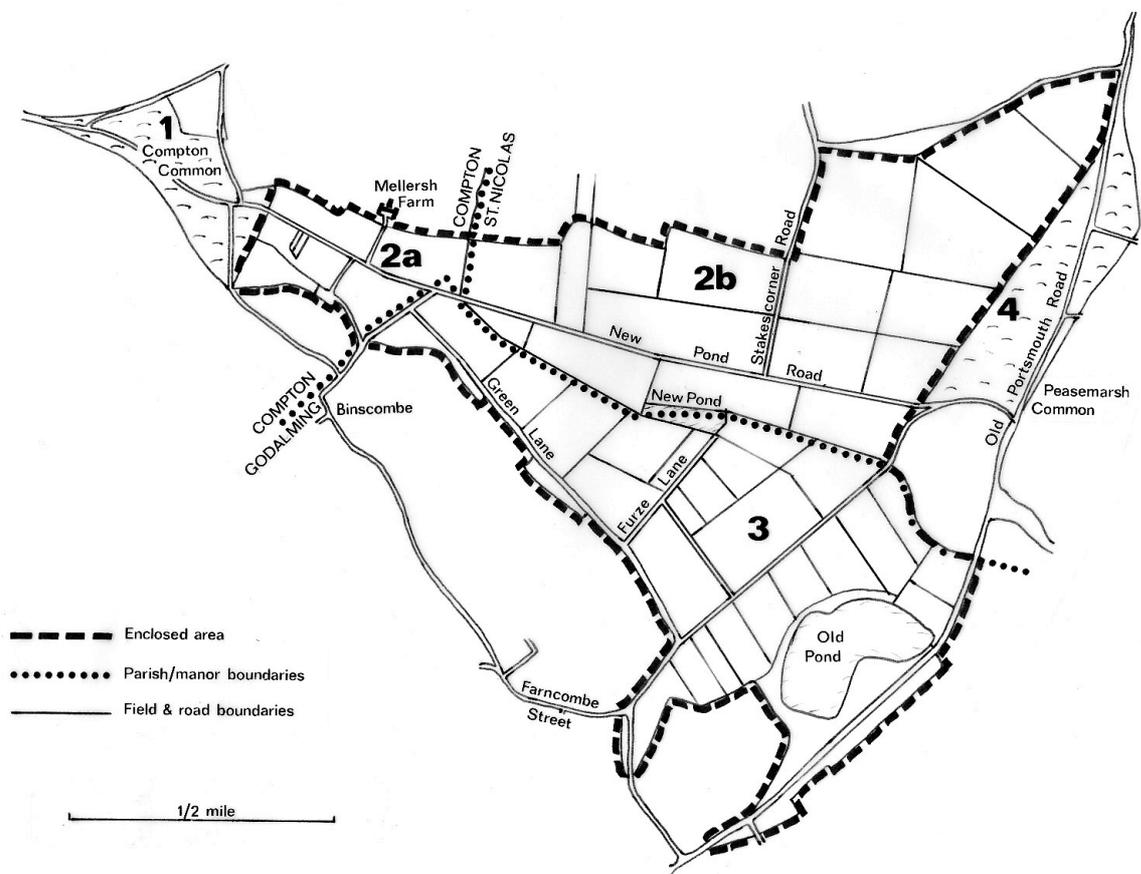
*They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common.
But let the greater criminal loose
Who steals the common from the goose.*

The agricultural changes which began in the seventeenth century and continued with increasing vigour through the eighteenth were unsuited to the landscape of feudal England. The old open fields with their myriad of individually owned strips and large areas of common land set aside for grazing were seen as inefficient and not adaptable to the new husbandry. The answer was the enclosure and re-apportionment of the land. The larger landowners of a parish would petition Parliament to pass a private Enclosure Act to authorise the division and redistribution of the open fields and common land. It was they who would receive the lion’s share of the land whilst some would be sold to cover the costs of enclosure. The remainder was allotted to those who lost land and common rights in the allocation.

Over the centuries, the lords of the Manor of Loseley had been major promoters of enclosure. In 1661, a petition was sent from Loseley to Parliament for an act to enable the “well ordering and governing of the common fields”.

² Letter to Mr Coke, Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register, 26th May 1821.

Almost a century later, in 1757, Sir More Molyneux attempted to have the marsh enclosed, again by petitioning Parliament. However, opposition from the holders of common rights was so strong that he was not successful. The tenants and freeholders of the local manors who had common rights on the marsh were bitterly opposed to enclosure and they sent their own petition to Parliament in response to that of Sir More Molyneux. They claimed that they had “ . . . for time immemorial been entitled to and have used and enjoyed a right of common for sheep and all kinds of beast without stint on every part of the said common marsh . . . called the Pease Marsh . . . at all times of the year at their free wills and pleasure”.



The Pease Marsh showing the new enclosures and how the common land had been divided between the various manors.

- 1 Westbury Manor
- 2a Polsted Manor
- 2b Loseley Manor
- 3 Godalming Manor
- 4 Brabeouf Manor

It was not until the blockades of shipping during the Napoleonic Wars raised food prices and created pressure to enclose common lands that acts authorising the enclosure of the marsh were passed in 1803. The marsh was then divided, drained and the common land made private. Those who lost their common rights were given small allotments of land as compensation.

For smallholders, these allotments were inadequate compensation. After the Pease Marsh enclosure, for instance, the tenants of houses in Farncombe Street were, typically, awarded less than a quarter of an acre in exchange for the right to graze cattle on the marsh. For those with no legal claim, only customary rights, there was no recompense at all. The contemporary rhyme sums up the popular feeling of the times.

The enclosure of Pease Marsh

The enclosures were authorised on the basis of the manor and the parish. Consequently, two Acts of Parliament were passed; one to deal with the Manor of Godalming and one for the combined manors of Polsted and Loseley. The commons of the manors of Westbury and Brabeouf were not included and the new fields stopped at their boundaries. This left Compton and Peasemarsch commons unenclosed, as they remain today.

The Acts of Parliament extinguished the old roads across the marsh and new ones were created by the enclosure commissioners. They built straight, wide roads the dimensions of which were defined in the Enclosure Award. They were usually made wide enough to accommodate the traffic of a muddy winter. The early enclosure roads were often much wider than those on the Pease Marsh because the macadamising of roads was becoming common, particularly in Surrey, and so roads were less inclined to become impassable in the winter. New Pond Road is a typical example of an early nineteenth century enclosure road.

The difference in the old roads and the new enclosure roads is easy to spot and the change is quite noticeable where the old roads cross the boundary into the newly enclosed area. At these points, the narrow winding roads suddenly become the straight, wide roads defined by the Commissioners.

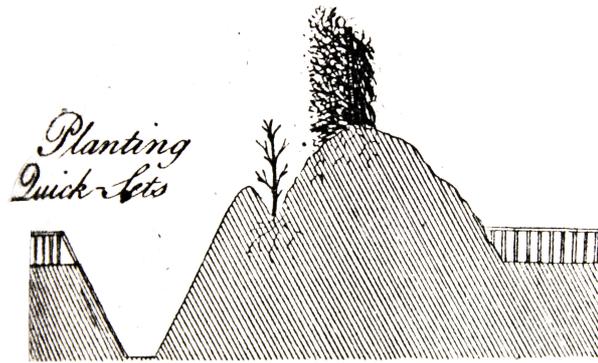
One of the effects of having separate enclosure acts and awards for adjacent parishes is the apparent lack of co-ordination of road plans. This



*Stakescorner Road by Sally Gorton.
An enclosure road created by the
act of 1803.*

often led to roads stopping suddenly at the parish boundary or junctions with difficult, acute bends. The Nook, the junction of Binscombe Lane and New Pond Road, is an example of this.

The Enclosure Acts required the new owners to hedge round their holdings quickly. The favoured and cheapest way of doing this was to plant “quickset” hawthorn hedges. These grew fast and, when cut and laid, made effective barriers to sheep and cattle.



*Planting quicksets
from Marshall's Agriculture of Surrey
1788.*

Standard trees, notably oak, were also planted at regular intervals along the hedges in order to provide a regular crop of large sized timber. These trees, now no longer harvested and replaced, can still be seen in the hedges along New Pond Road.



*The enclosed marsh viewed from the Old Portsmouth Road
railway bridge near Peasmarsh.*

Like the roads, the fields betray their origins in the drawing offices of the Commissioners by their straight boundaries and rectilinear shapes. Older fields, particularly those from medieval times or earlier, are far more irregular in shape and have a greater number of tree and shrub species in their hedges. The planning of the Enclosure Commissioners produced a pattern of squarish fields bounded by thorn hedges and standard trees, which is typical of the new agricultural landscapes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



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