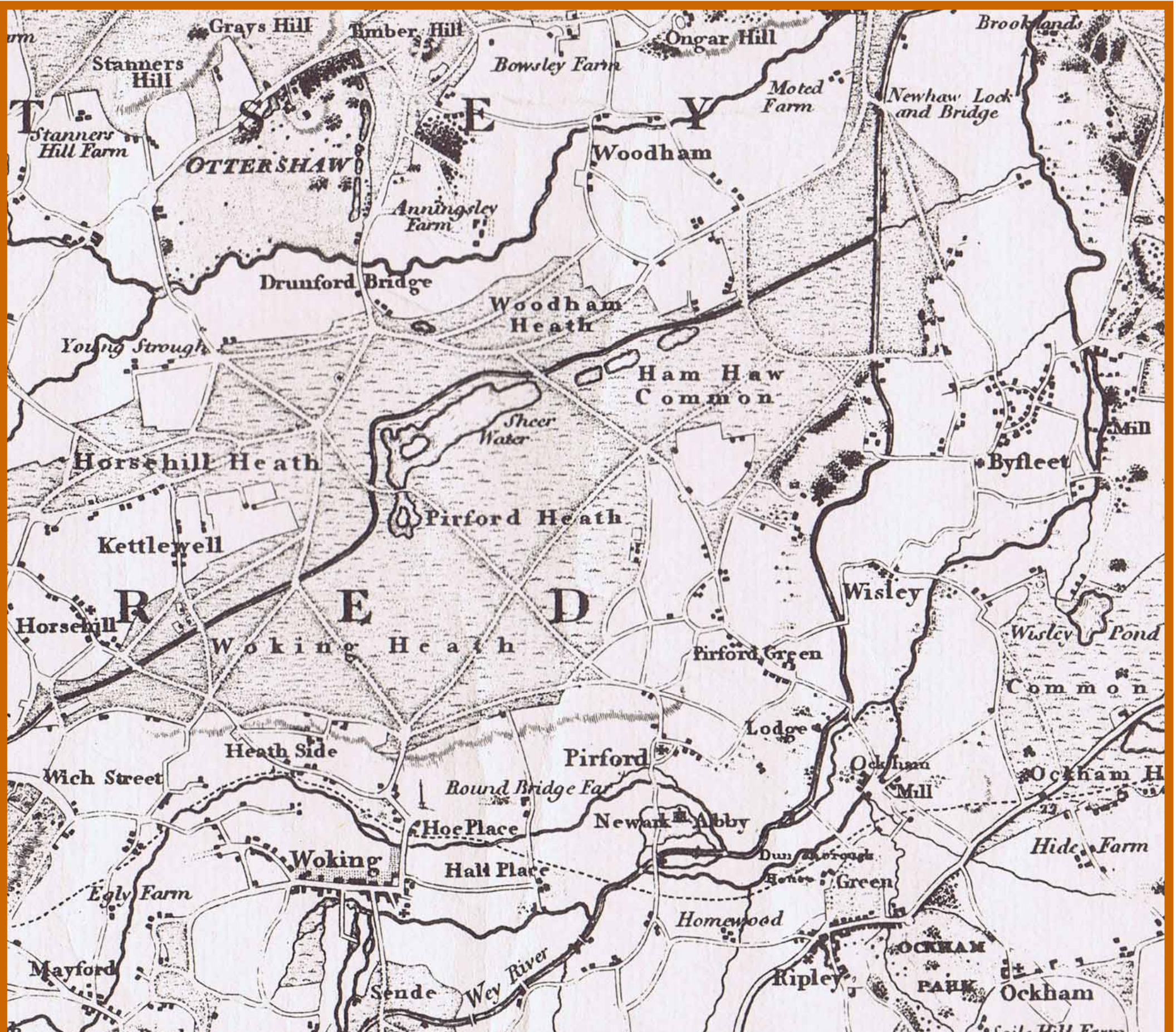


COMMON RIGHTS (& WRONGS)

Iain Wakeford 2014

Having looked recently at local farming practices and the encroachment of squatters and others onto the common land of the area, I thought it about time we took a look at what was known as local 'common rights'.



I touched upon it briefly three weeks ago when talking about local farmers grazing their animals on the common. Essentially anyone who had land elsewhere in the manor could graze a certain number of animals on the communal lands – not just the common wastes, but also the common meadows, such as the Sutton and Woking Broadmeads, Walsham and Toundesley Meadows in Pyrford and the meadows beside the Wey at Byfleet (part of which Taylor Wimpey now want to 'give back' to the village as a nature reserve, in exchange for being allowed to develop other Green Belt land in the village).

In Pyrford the meadows were traditionally cut

early in June and then sometimes again in late August or early September, before being opened to the cattle and sheep to graze until the 12th January when the meadow was again closed to grow that year's hay crop. During that period each owner or manorial tenant was allowed to put out one horse, two cows and five sheep for every acre they owned elsewhere in the manor, with a herdsman employed to look after the animals.

A similar arrangement applied to the common waste, although the term 'waste' can be misleading as it was an important part of the local peasant economy with very little actually going to waste. Bracken could be taken for

The common land of Woking knew no bounds, merging with Horsell and Woodham Heaths to the north, Pyrford heath to the east and beyond the common land of Byfleet, marked on this late 18th century map as Ham Haw Common.

bedding, Heather cut at certain times of the year and used as thatch or for brooms (along with the broom plant of course), and turves were taken for fuel. Any dead wood could be taken for the fire, with faggots of gorse being particularly prized as it was used to heat the local bread-ovens.

The parish also had a right to take sand and gravel to repair the local roads with many



'parish pits' still visible all over the local commons, but whilst the sandy soil could be used for public or even private use, it could not be sold for private gain. In 1813 Robert Donald (who owned the nursery at Goldsworth), was fined by the Manor Court as he had 'lately cut turf, sods and mould from the waste' and presumably used it for his business or simply sold it.

Apart from the living timber and the payment for 'pannage' (a rent paid to let your pigs out into the woods) the main value of the local common land was as a hunting ground (as part of Windsor Forest).

Unfortunately the free-roaming deer and other royal animals could be quite a nuisance to the local farmers. In 1674 Brookwood was the scene of what has been described as a 'mass poaching expedition' in which more than a hundred labourers were involved – mainly from Bisley and Pirbright complaining about the king 'causing deere to be put into Brookwood' from which they escaped and eat their crops

Almost a century later the problem was of a more human kind as in 1769 it was reported that 'there are not less than 500 gypsies, vagrants and smugglers who have taken sanctuary in a wood between Guildford and

In medieval times the large open fields were divided into strips, much like the fields off Floyds Lane at Pyrford shown here.

Naphill. All the farmers and inhabitants thereabouts have suffered more or less from these vagabonds who subsist chiefly by plundering people of their geese, fowls, ducks or whatever come their way.

Fourteen pieces of cannon mounted upon carriages set out on Saturday by order of Lord Albemarle who together with the neighbouring gentlemen are determined to dispose by force this nest of thieves from preying upon the honest farmers.



The commons were kept open by the grazing of animals, so that in the early 20th century you could stand on Reiden's Hill at Bisley and see the Garibaldi Crossroads at Knaphill.

THE SMART PEOPLE OF SMARTS HEATH

The Rev. Edward Westlake Brayley, writing in the mid 19th century, visited many places in Surrey whilst researching his Topographical History of Surrey, so he must have come into contact with many local people.

What he has to say about those from the Mayford area is quite interesting, as he writes 'to a traveller crossing the black and barren heath-lands in the early part of the year, from the neighbourhood of Ash and Pirbright, the

scene, on approaching Mayford, changes as though by enchantment; and instead of bleakness and desolation he sees the hills clothed with verdure, the fields cultivated, and the banks and hedges gay with violets and other spring flowers.

So pleasant is the aspect of this vicinity, that many respectable families from other localities sojourn here during the summer months. The working people, also are more intelligent and

better informed than the labourers on the western borders of the county'.

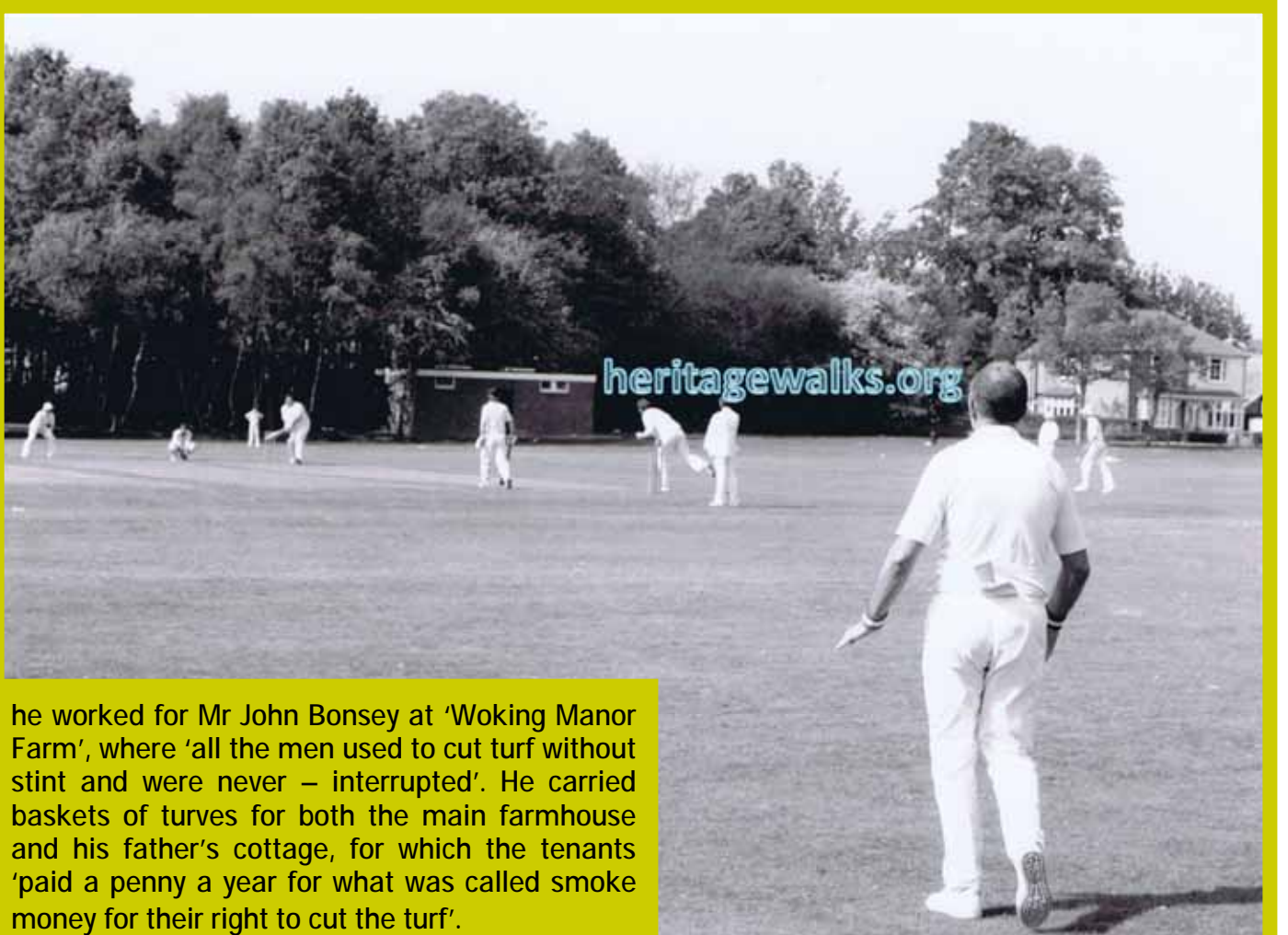
In case any labourers from the 'western borders' of Surrey should read this article I would like to point out that the views are purely those of the eminent Victorian historian and should not necessarily be taken to imply that this writer believes the natives of Mayford (or anywhere else in Woking) are more intelligent.



WHY WOKING COMMON WASN'T SUCH A WASTE

In the mid 19th century, when the Necropolis Company bought almost all of Woking Common (reserving just St John's Lye, above, for the benefit of the local 'commoners'), compensation had to be paid to those who had lost their 'common rights'. Evidence was given to Parliament by a number of local people, including John Baker Junior, a tenant of the Earl of Onslow at Woking Park Farm, who claimed that 'cattle were driven onto all parts of the common indiscriminately and were never interfered with by the other commoners or any other person connected with the manor' and that 'on one occasion some of his father's cows were out all the summer on the common and sheep were also sometimes driven out in the same way'. Baker also recalled seeing 'his father's men bringing stones and earth from the waste onto the Hoe Bridge Farm' and mentioned that his 'undertenants constantly cut turf for the use of the cottages on the Woking Park Farm' and he had 'sent his own horses to cart them in for them'.

Another witness, William Williams, a sheep-shearer from Guildford aged sixty, recalled that when he was seven until he was fourteen



he worked for Mr John Bonsey at 'Woking Manor Farm', where 'all the men used to cut turf without stint and were never – interrupted'. He carried baskets of turves for both the main farmhouse and his father's cottage, for which the tenants 'paid a penny a year for what was called smoke money for their right to cut the turf'.