

THE COMMON MISCONCEPTION ABOUT COMMON LAND

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Last week, on my Heritage Walk around Pyrford, I mentioned that at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, the Manor of Pyrford (at that time held by the Abbot of Westminster), included all of what we would now know of as Horsell.

That might seem odd from a modern geographical point of view (Pyrford being to the south and west of Woking, whilst Horsell is to the north), but in ancient times the Manor included not just Pyrford itself, but also what is now Sheerwater and Woodham, linking up with the village of Horsell via the heath lands of Horsell Common.

In the early 19th century, when Pyrford was 'enclosed', for some reason Horsell was treated differently, and its common land remained open heath (possibly because by then Horsell's common meadows and fields had already been the subject of ad-hoc enclosure).

Enclosure was the process by which manorial lands – heath-lands, meadows and the large open-fields that since medieval times had been

In the early 20th century parts of Horsell Common were being encroached upon, set alight by vandals, and camped upon by members of the travelling community.

worked communally by all the manorial tenants – were consolidated and then divided up into the farm units we are more familiar with today.

As I say, in Horsell by the early 19th century, any open-fields and common-meadows had already been incorporated into the numerous small farms dotted around the village, but the poorer heath remained open waste.

It is a common misconception that common-land (such as Horsell) is not owned by anybody – that it is owned by all – but that is not true, and in the case of Horsell, it's Common has been in the hands of the Horsell Common Preservation Society since they purchased the freehold in 1966 for £1,634.

Before then the Common was owned by the lord of the Manor, the Earl of Onslow, but local tenants held certain 'common rights' that allowed them to exploit aspects of the Common

in certain ways (and at certain times of the year) – making the Common a vital part of the local community.

The importance of preserving Horsell Common had been recognised long before the late 1960's, and indeed Pyrford's Enclosure Act of 1806 specifically excluded the commons and wastelands within the Parish of Horsell so that it 'shall be and remain in the same state and condition as if this act was not passed'.

Unfortunately, over time, the state of the Common did not remain quite the same, and in 1904 a referendum was held locally to decide 'whether our Commons shall be preserved and protected' or 'left as now, to be the sport of incendiaries, the common receptacle of all kinds of refuse – and a camping ground for Gypsies'.

Not surprisingly, perhaps (being a referendum) the vote was inconclusive, but enough local people were encouraged to try to save the Common and in 1910 the Horsell Common Preservation Society was formed, with the good



Medhurst Series 5.

"HOW COMMONS ARE DISFIGURED"
G.P.O. Trunk Line across Horsell Common, Surrey.

There was concern too about development over and adjoining the common, which led in 1910 to the formation of the Horsell Common Preservation Society

Earl suggesting as early as 1920 that he should hand over the land to their committee, although it wasn't until 1947 that he formally leased the land to the Society.

After 1959, when the Preservation Society eventually gained charitable status, the idea of buying the freehold was raised, and since 1966 the actual 'estate' of the Society has increased from the original 748 acres, 2 rods and 15 perches, to over 850 acres as a result of land exchanges and the purchase of adjoining land.

In fact some of that 'adjoining land' includes the small part of Pyrford's common-lands that were not enclosed as a result of the 1806 Act, but kept in the hands of the local Poor Law Committee for the benefit of the people of Pyrford. The Common Society bought the land in 2006 for £19,000.



The land was still owned by the Earl of Onslow, but eventually leased to the Society, who allowed some commercial extraction of sand up until the 1960's.