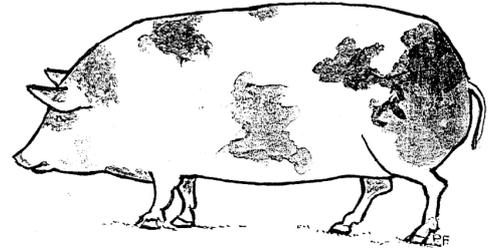


The Enclosure Of Mortimer Common 1801 - 1806

The growth of towns during the 18th century and the rising national population - from five and a half million to nine million - caused anxiety about food supplies. New industries demanded transport, which at that time depended on an ever-increasing number of horses. The horses ate even more than the humans and it has been said that the internal combustion engine was invented just in time.

Bringing areas of wasteland such as Mortimer Common under cultivation was seen as one solution. The local landowners were in favour of enclosure and a meeting was held at the Horn Inn (now the Railway Inn) on 13th November 1801. Enough signatures were obtained for a bill to be presented to Parliament.

Not everyone was in favour. In many parts of the country where the agricultural pattern was based on open fields divided into strips, the wastes were used for the villagers' cattle, sheep and pigs, which ran free and grazed on the rough pasture. By 1800 Mortimer did not depend to this extent on its common, but there were many cottage dwellers who relied on their ancient right to dig gravel and cut furze and peat.



The Vicar of Mortimer, Dr James Morgan, opposed the enclosure. He tried to persuade Richard Benyon, the Lord of the Manor, to abandon it: "*The poor are numerous and have from time immemorial cut fuel on the Common without restriction. Under these circumstances I feel myself irresistably called upon to support the cause of the Church and the poor, neither of which have any other person to look to.*"

His was a lone voice and the Enclosure Act was passed in 1802.

Three commissioners were named therein: Thomas Davis of Horningham, Wilts, John Trumper of Harefield, Middlesex and William Bushnell of Aston, Berks. £2 12s 6d was paid to them for every day spent on the job. They appointed a surveyor to draw up a map of all the common land in the parish, including The Warden, Hale Green and several strips of roadside woodland. Upon this map were marked the plots into which the Commissioners divided it all.

There were encroachments on the common where squatters had built themselves cottages in clearings which they had made. Areas which had been settled for twenty years or more were exempt from enclosure and were clearly shown on the map; the rest were allotted to the Lord of the Manor, who could then charge rent at 6d or 1s per annum. None were evicted

but they had to pay. There were also itinerants on the common, but they evaded the surveyor and carried on as before, as they still do.

Nine plots were sold at auction to pay the expenses, and seven were set aside as parish gravel pits. An allotment of 100 acres (about 40 hectares) was for the poor of the village and we know it today as Burnt Common. The income from it still goes to local charities. The twenty acres set aside for the annual fairs is today our most valued open space. The horse fairs were held there until after the First World War since when it has been the village recreation ground.

The plots were enclosed by banks and ditches, still to be seen at Silchester Crossroads and many other places. The new owners were directed to plant quickset hedges on their banks but many did not do so. The landowners of the village were allotted plots of enclosed land in proportion to their existing freeholds.

The largest one went to Squire Benyon and is still known as Benyons Enclosure. Indeed all those of any size were named after their new owners; Mowbrays Piece, Stockwells Piece and Budds Firs, for example, all appear on the Ordnance Survey maps. College Piece was of course allotted to Eton College.

As part of the enclosure the old roads across Mortimer Common were straightened and some new ones made. Victoria Road, then called Wharf Road, was intended to provide easier access to the Kennet and Avon Canal, but canal trade declined and Ufton and Padworth parishes did not continue the road.