

## 1.9 English town commons and changing landscapes

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### **ABSTRACT**

English Heritage has recently completed a project which investigated the archaeological content of English town commons. Commons in urban areas are under pressure and because their historic element is not understood it is unprotected. This paper examines the results of the project and argues that town commons should be recognised as a valid historical entity and a valued part of the modern urban environment. This is an essential first step towards successful informed conservation. It also promotes the view that landscape archaeology is about the fabric of the land as created and modified over a long period, in which our own activities are part of that continuum. This reflects the changing nature of archaeology as a discipline that is increasingly concerned with public understanding, along with land management and conservation.

### **KEYWORDS**

**urban, town, archaeology, earthwork, common**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A common is an area of land, in private or public ownership, over which rights of common exist. Right of common has been defined as ‘a right, which one or more persons may have, to take or use some portion of that which another man’s soil naturally produces’ (from *Halsbury’s Laws of England* [1991], quoted by

Clayden 2003, 10). There are six main rights of common: pasture (the right to graze animals); pannage (the right to feed pigs on fallen acorns and beech mast); estovers (the right to collect small wood, furze and bracken); turbary (the right to cut turf or peat); piscary (the right to fish) and common in the soil (the right to take sand, gravel, stone or minerals). Rights of common were usually held either by all householders of a town, just burgage holders (holders of freehold property), or freemen (possessing citizenship of the town). Over time, they tended to become restricted to senior members of the town corporation or to wealthier townsfolk.

English town commons have been largely disregarded by historians and archaeologists, even though their wildlife and recreational value has been recognised. Typically, they have no Conservation Plans and their historic environment content is unknown, and therefore delivers no conservation benefits. Those that have survived, despite urban expansion and other threats to their existence, are regarded locally as important places, 'green lungs' in cities and havens for wildlife. Although it is rarely recognised, they are also a reservoir of archaeological remains.

In 2009, English Heritage completed a project which investigated the archaeological content and Historic Environment value of English town and urban commons. An initial desk-based assessment revealed that nearly 320 English towns possessed commons at some time and that some level of survival still existed in at least 50 places. Site reconnaissance visits were made to these places, to record visible archaeological remains and, to assess their potential for more detailed work. At sites with the highest archaeological potential detailed topographical surveys of earthworks (mounds and ditches) and other visible features were carried out. Differential Global Positioning (GPS) survey was the method used. The research described here assesses the extent and nature of archaeological survival in this unique category of urban landscape.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was carried out by Mark Bowden, Graham Brown and the author. Contributions were made by many other individuals, and these are gratefully acknowledged. Particular thanks are due to David Field and Deborah Cunliffe.

The antiquity of English town commons has long been appreciated: 'When an American visitor asked Freeman, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, to show him the most ancient monument in Oxford, Freeman walked him out to Port Meadow' (Hoskins & Stamp 1963, 12). Despite this, the origins of town commons are lost in obscurity. Port Meadow, Oxford, is mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086), and the common meadow of Wilton, Wiltshire, is mentioned in a charter of King Edgar (959-975) (Haslam 1984, 127-8). However, it is possible that these are the first documentary records of an even older agricultural practice. Several charters claiming to establish common rights survive from the 13th century, but they merely confirm rights and practices which had probably existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Sudbury's commons, for example, 'given' to the burgesses (inhabitants of the borough with full municipal rights) by Richard de Clare in 1262, had the same acreage as the land belonging to the burgesses and St Gregory's Church in 1086, suggesting that de Clare's grant confirmed a practice already established by the 11th century (French 2000, 177, n38). Clues to the early origins of urban commons perhaps lie in

Figure 1. The distribution of English urban commons mentioned in the text (approximate scale of 50km to 1cm)



the natural landscape. The Greensands (a variety of sandstone), with their thin acidic soils, are of low agricultural potential, hence their use in historic times as commons. Limited evidence from environmental archaeology suggests that these geological zones were already developing as areas of rough grazing in the Bronze Age (Field 1998, 313-14; Graham et al. 2004).

## DEFINITIONS

The meaning of 'town' and 'urban' status is not universally agreed. Criteria commonly applied include: significant concentration of population; specialist economic function; the possession of trading rights; sophisticated political form; complex social structure and influence beyond the immediate boundaries of the settlement (e.g. Clark & Slack 1976, 4-5; Beresford 1998, 127-8). Some authorities stress that functions other than the agricultural should predominate (e.g. Everitt 1974, 29; Laughton & Dyer 1999, 26). An interesting facet of this last criterion is that the requirement to demonstrate that a place did not have an agricultural basis in order to qualify as a town tends to make the urban historian underplay, overlook or ignore the town common.

## PRE-URBAN LANDSCAPES

Town commons provide rich sources of archaeological remains because of their relatively benign traditional land use, which preserves the physical evidence of the past. Minchinhampton Common, Gloucestershire, has perhaps the earliest surviving earthwork on an urban common, a probable Neolithic burial mound known as 'Whitfield's Tump' (Smith 2002, 13-14). On Corfe Common, Dorset, eight well-preserved Bronze Age burial mounds, part of a more extensive linear cemetery, are prominent landmarks (Fletcher 2003, 8-9, 15). Similarly, on Petersfield Heath Common, Hampshire, there is a cemetery of 21 Bronze Age burial mounds, each standing up to 2m high. Westwood Common, Beverley, has rare Iron Age burial mounds, to which the project has added previously unrecorded examples (Pearson & Pollington 2004, 15-18, 48).

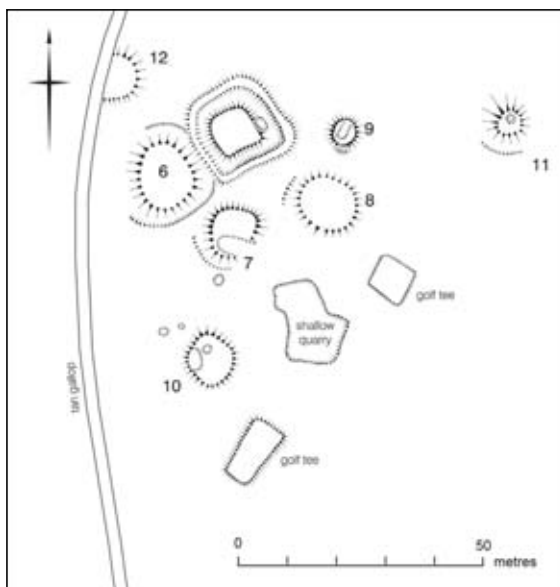
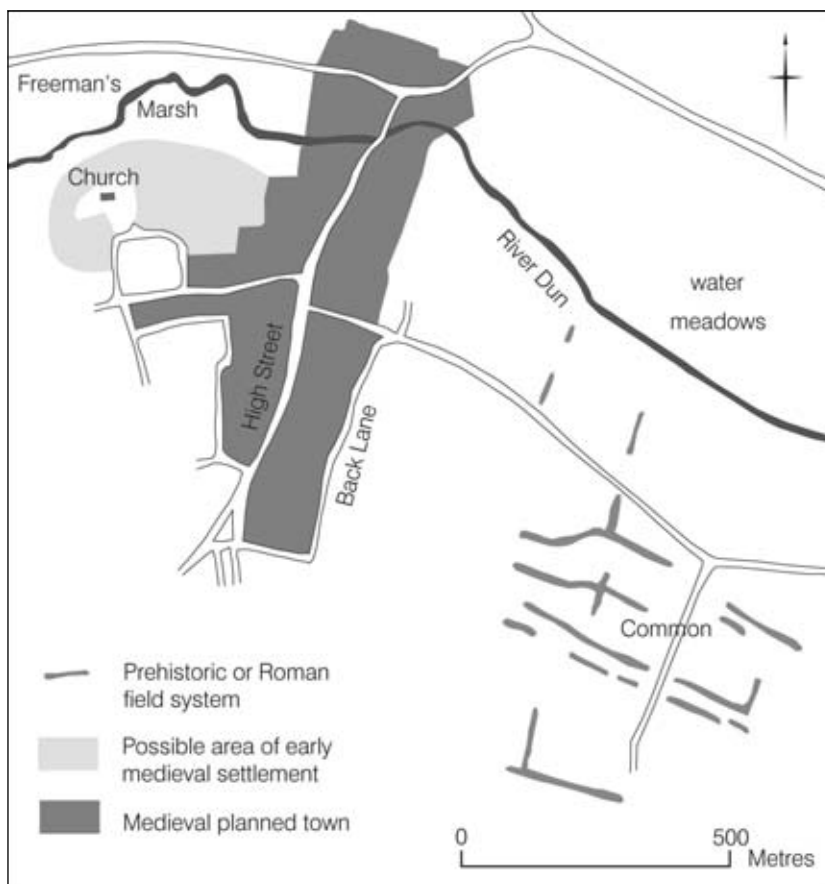


Figure 2. Rare Iron Age square burial mounds, surveyed on Westwood Common, Beverley (© English Heritage).

Figure 3. The layout of Hungerford town mirrors the alignment of a probable prehistoric or Roman field system surviving as earthworks on the town common (© English Heritage).



Extensive prehistoric remains are seen on other town commons. Biggleswade Common retains earthworks of Bronze Age burial mounds, a trackway, a field system and prehistoric or Roman-British settlement enclosures. There is also a probable Roman villa or temple complex. Crop-marks in arable fields adjacent to the common show that these are the elements of a wider prehistoric landscape, preserved through common usage from the medieval period onwards. Ironically, while cropmarks have been noted on aerial photographs and recorded, the earthwork remains surviving on the common had largely been overlooked. In some cases the presence of early remains can be seen to influence the layout of later urban space. On Hungerford Common the alignment of a probable prehistoric or Roman field system is followed by the general alignment of the common and the medieval layout of the town itself (Newsome 2005, 14). On Lincoln's South Common the Roman, Ermine Street was traced as a short stretch of agger (bank) and more of its route is delimited by a linear arrangement of small quarries resulting from robbed road materials. At right angles to this, fragments of an extensive field system are preserved. Interestingly the boundary of a medieval hospital, The Malandry, shares the same alignment. The implication is that South Common preserves not only the remains of a major Roman road but also a contemporary field system, the alignment of which, as at Hungerford, continued to have significance into the medieval period.

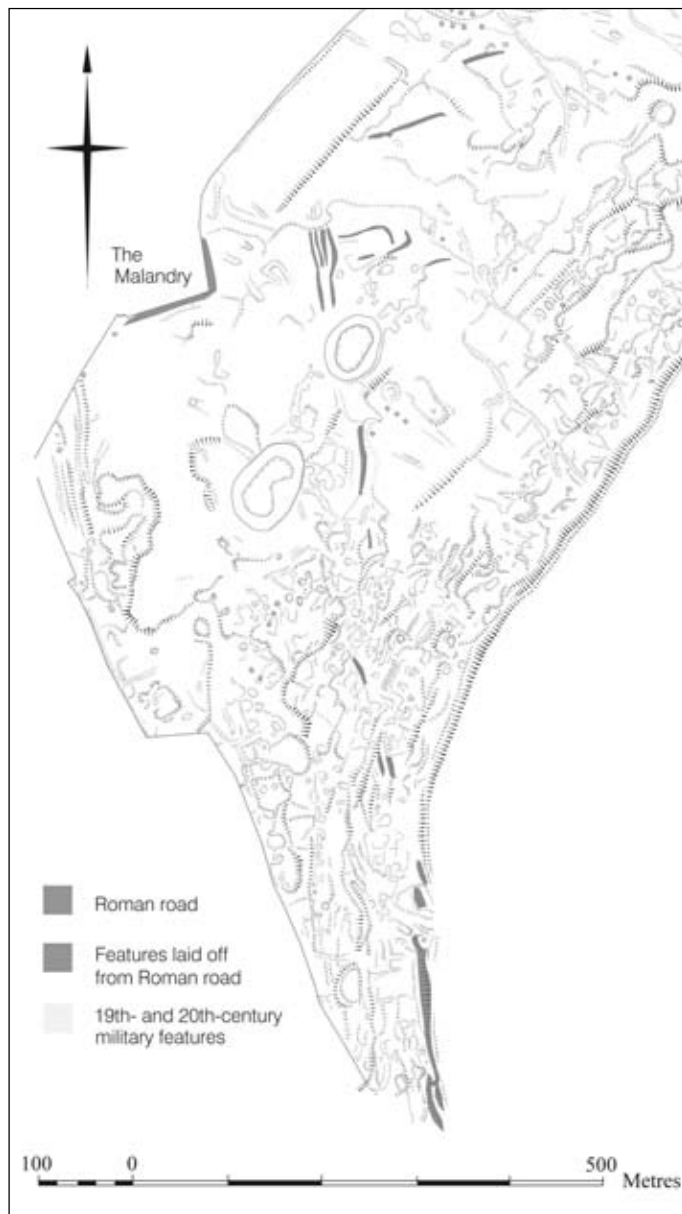


Figure 4. On the South Common, Lincoln, the route of the Roman Ermine Street is delimited by earthworks. At right angles to this are fragments of an extensive field system and the boundary of a medieval hospital, The Malandry (© English Heritage). See also full colour section in this book

## TOWNS AND AGRICULTURE

Prior to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, the separation between English towns and the countryside was less marked than it is today. Most 17th- and early 18th-century towns had small populations, occupied limited geographical areas and were immersed in the agrarian life of their rural surroundings (French 2000, 171). All historic English towns probably had one or more commons attached to them at some time because townspeople needed pasture for draft animals. These commons served as a municipal

pound in which cows could graze securely and in which horses and mares could be rested overnight when not employed during the day. Although archaeological remains associated with grazing are few, cattle pounds or 'pinfolds', for the temporary accommodation of stray animals occasionally survive. These were a constituent of medieval manors and early boroughs (towns with corporations), but examples existing today date from the 17th to 19th centuries. On Hampstead Heath, London, a circular brick-walled enclosure, with supports for its gate fashioned from the jaw bone of a whale, was built in 1787 to replace a pound removed by a man presented at the Manorial Court (Willmott Dobbie 1979, 3, 11, 33, 36). Stock ponds are also found, such as prominent examples on Westwood Common, Beverley, probably dating to the 19th century in their present form, though as established watering holes they could have origins in the medieval period. Longevity of use is evident from the deeply incised sections of track-way leading towards several of them (Pearson & Pollington 2004, 28-9).

Cultivation, above any other agricultural use, has left the most tangible evidence for agriculture on town commons. They were cultivated in times when food supplies could not be relied upon, during wars and other national emergencies such as crop failure. One key period was during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars against France (1793-1815). Cultivation earthworks of this period are typified by 'narrow' ridge-and-furrow, produced by ploughing with heavy horses, leaving parallel straight ridges alternating with furrows no more than 5m apart. The Hob Moor, York, was cultivated during this period and narrow ridge-and-furrow can still be seen across large parts of it. Kendal Fell, also cultivated at this time, has earth and stone boundaries, 1m or 2m wide and up to 0.6m high, delimiting an area of narrow ridge-and-furrow, with furrows 2m to 3m apart. Not all ridge-and-furrow found on urban commons represents short-term cultivation. In some instances its presence, or that of field boundaries, indicates that commons have expanded beyond their original boundaries or that their boundaries have been otherwise altered to incorporate former arable fields. On Stafford Common, for example, narrow ridge-and-furrow, field boundary

Figure 5. Ridge-and-furrow cultivation remains surviving on Stafford Common indicate the late addition of former arable lands to the Common (RAF aerial photography 1954 ©English Heritage, NMR).



banks and strip-lynchets (terraces between areas of ploughed land) represent former arable land. In this case it was granted to the householders and commoners of the town in 1801 to compensate for the enclosure of their historic grazing lands. The Pitchcroft, Worcester, similarly comprises two historically different elements, one of which, 'The Moor' (containing narrow ridge-and-furrow) was arable land added to the common in c1775 (Hodgetts 2003, 25).

A hay crop was an important product of many urban commons and the period of the year for which grazing was permitted reveals a common's use for this purpose. Traditionally, grazing was prohibited between Candlemas (2 February) and Lammas Day (12 August or 1 August after 1762). Since grazing rights precluded the construction of fences on commons, hay meadows were usually divided into strips marked by posts or stones. Stones surviving on Cricklade Common are probable hay apportionment markers.

The agricultural functions of town commons have declined over time and the advent of motorised transport, agricultural mechanisation and intensive farming systems has put an end to the traditional uses of most. By 1876, only 130 out of 2,300 ratepayers entitled to graze cattle on Stafford Common exercised their rights (VCH Staffs VI 1979, 210). Similarly, grazing of Bristol's Downs was in decline by the later 19th century, and by 1872 only 300-400 sheep were being turned out to pasture from a permitted number of at least 1,882. Grazing on Clifton Down ceased completely in the mid-late 19th century, while on Durdham Down it stopped in the 1920s.

## **ECONOMIC PRESSURES**

Economic incentives to 'improve' common pastures always were high, particularly prior to their appropriation by enclosure. Early examples of such works were recorded on Figham Common, Beverley, where there is a network of small drainage channels, some of which may date from as early as the 13th century (VCH Yorks VI 1989, 217; Pollington & Pearson 2004, 3, 8). Loss of common land to enclosure between the 16th and 19th centuries was dramatic in the well-populated south and east of England where the pressure for agricultural 'improvement' was greatest (Short & Winter 1999, 616-617) and, even in less favourable areas, reclamation and improvement of 'wastes' gathered pace in the century before 1850. Drainage systems were laid out across many town commons and surface channels, embankments, sluices and machines to remove water all survive as archaeological features. Subtle earthworks of underground drainage systems consisting of straight, shallow linear depressions leading to rivers can also be seen on some town commons, such as Southampton and Saffron Walden. Such schemes continued into the 20th century, being funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in the 1920s to alleviate unemployment, and using prisoner-of-war labour during First and Second World Wars (Bowers 1998, 71).

The archaeology of urban commons is never more closely inter-linked with the history of towns than when considering extractive industry, which has left most urban commons scarred by quarry pits and mounds. Urban commons have long been convenient sources of building materials. Easy availability of these materials fuelled town expansion, threatening the very survival of the commons from which they had been extracted. In Shrewsbury, Shropshire, the town common, named 'The Quarry', was almost certainly the source of materials for the town's buildings. The same is true of small pits on The Pitchcroft, Worcester where, in 1770, a brickworks was established specifically for the building of a new hospital. Dips and mounds at either end of Southampton Common also result from clay digging, where a brick-



maker's house with a kiln was built in 1712 (Southampton City Council 2007, 14-15). The extraction and processing of limestone on Kendal Fell was similarly inextricably linked with the creation of the modern town and the single surviving limekiln is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument (no. 34994) (Elsworth 2005, 11, 13, 29-32).

As a general rule early mining and quarrying was a piecemeal and small-scale process. It left remains such as those on Minchinhampton Common, Gloucestershire, where hundreds of small pits and mounds scattered across part of the common may be linked to 12th-century documentary references to inhabitants paying rent for the privilege of quarrying stone (Smith 2002, 34-35). On Kendal Fell, Cumbria, where widespread earthworks of shallow quarrying also remain, the common right of 'stone-getting' was important enough to be preserved following enclosure in 1767 (Elsworth 2005, 11-12). Irregular depressions, c1-2m deep, close to the eastern edge of Westwood Common, Beverley, were probably dug by town-folk to obtain clay and chalk for building, or other purposes, and could date from the medieval period. These early pits were eclipsed in scale by the Limekiln Pits and two unnamed quarries in the south-eastern corner of the common, which cover over 12ha (Pearson & Pollington 2004, 28).

During the 18th and 19th centuries the demand for rock and lime accelerated rapidly. Hardcore was needed for turnpike roads and railway lines, stone was required for walls erected under Enclosure Acts and lime for soil improvement. Deeper and larger depressions on town commons indicate co-ordinated and organised quarrying suggestive, although not necessarily proof of, this later date. The type of material sought and the geological composition of the area is reflected in the nature of the remains, with excavations for clay and other surface materials tending to be shallow and spread widely, whereas deep excavations were made to reach good quality stone and coal. Linear quarries, or rows of small pits following mineral seams also occur. On Minchinhampton Common, a limestone quarry cut in two by an 18th-century road and hollowed trackways may be the 'Rode Quarry' mentioned in 1516 (Russett 1991, 612). Here larger excavations associated with hollowed track-ways represent 19th- and 20th-century quarrying, the extent and scale of which proved extremely damaging to pasture and to the landscape of the common (Smith 2002, 33).

Figure 6. Small-scale quarry pits visible on Port Meadow, Oxford, as seasonal flooding subsides. These are typical features found on town commons throughout England.



As towns developed into industrial centres, urban commons became convenient 'empty' corridors for the routes of new canals, roads and railways. One example of many was the East Coast main line railway, constructed across Biggleswade Common in 1850, cutting it in two. Material for such road, rail and canal building projects was often extracted from the commons themselves. Hungerford Common, for example, has quarries that probably relate to the construction of the canal and railway nearby (Newsome 2005, 21).

## URBANISATION AND TOWN COMMONS

To a large extent the landscape archaeology of an urban common mirrors the economic and social circumstances of its adjacent town. Fluctuating fortunes of the town, changes in its demographic profile, changes in industrial activity and leisure interests, all have an impact upon the archaeological footprint found on the urban common. During the 19th century, one of the most remarkable social changes in Britain was the congregation of the majority of the population into large cities and the creation of the totally 'urban' environment which followed (Mellor 1976, 1, 109). As urban populations swelled and towns spread beyond their ancient boundaries, many of their commons were lost to building development, while others became 'urbanised', encircled by new streets and buildings. In Grimsby, the construction of the railway and the building of a new dock heralded a dramatic increase in the town's population that prompted housing development on the ancient East Marsh common (Gillett 1970, 213). In other towns, such as Dewsbury, influxes of immigrant workers led to illegal settlement on the commons. In some cases of urban expansion the layout of a former common is reflected in the street layout. In Nottingham, for example, the principle routes follow tracks and paths across the common (e.g. Carter 1983; Hoskins 1988, 224-228).

Piecemeal encroachment on town commons has frequently been permitted for the sites of public facilities. Recurring types are workhouses, isolation hospitals, prisons, gallows, schools, sports centres, cemeteries and mortuary chapels; indeed, the presence of any of these, or a barracks, in a modern town may be the best clue as to the location of former common land. Many of these institutions date to the late 19th century, although there are earlier examples, such as St Leonard's leper hospital at Sudbury, Suffolk, which was built in the 14th century and later used for the old and infirm. The hospital lay about a mile to the north of the town on the boundary of what became known as North Meadow Common (Hodson 1891, 268-274). Other examples are the lunatic asylum, built on the northern edge of Chapel Fields, Norwich, in 1712, and infectious disease hospitals, as at Lincoln (Brown 2003, 12).

During times of popular dissent people congregated on urban commons, so it was no accident these were often the places chosen as the sites for penal institutions and gallows. Wormwood Scrubs Prison, Lambeth, London, was built on common land using prisoner labour, in the 1880s. The west side of York's Knavesmire was the site of a gallows named the York 'Tyburn' in imitation of the famous London gallows of the same name. Crowds flocked to see the spectacle of executions there from the early 16th century onwards, including the execution of the most notorious thief-highwayman, Dick Turpin – in 1739. Southampton Common, Hampshire, was also the site of a gallows, and executions were carried out on Brandon Hill, Bristol, which was said to be a haunt of thieves.

## CHANGING SOCIAL VALUES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN COMMON LANDSCAPES

A requirement for provision of open spaces for public recreation in increasingly overcrowded and unsanitary towns emerged from the mid-19th century onwards. It arose from the misconception that disease was caused by air pollution, and open spaces were intended to provide reservoirs of wholesome air to purify the blood of the town citizens (Mellor 1976, 110). One effect of this was the transformation of large numbers of town commons into public parks or 'urban open spaces'. The deliberate laying out of parks and walks for public recreation in England was an idea with origins in the 17th century (see, for instance, Elliott 2000, 145) and the earliest recorded public park on an English urban common is at Moorfields, London, where in 1607 the moor was filled in, the ground level raised and two walks, bordered by walls and trees were laid out (Lambert 1921, 87). The activities that could take place in such spaces were limited to the sedate and the polite - manicured 'walks' were a means by which, through the 18th century, 'an increasingly urbanized society sought to retain contact with a retreating rural world' (Borsay 1986, 132). Ironically, this was happening at the time that towns were shedding genuine connections with rural life by enclosing their commons.

As town populations grew, urban commons became the sites of pioneering schemes designed to bring clean water supplies into towns. One such scheme took spring water from King's Meads, Hertford, to London via an aqueduct named the 'New River'. This remarkable aqueduct was begun in 1609 and originally extended for 39 miles (Page 1993, 137-138).

During the 19th century the governing bodies of towns began to show increasing concern over facilities for the health and recreation of citizens, partly due to compulsion (Mellor 1976, 110). An Act of Parliament (1866) compelled local authorities to provide sanitary inspectors and allowed central government to insist upon the provision of sewers and a good water supply (Woodward 1962, 463-465). Land for such works could be taken without agreement and was often appropriated from town commons. In 1868, for example, the East London Waterworks Company issued a notice to the commoners of Tottenham regarding land it was compulsorily acquiring (London Metropolitan Archives: ACC/1016/485). On Minchinhampton Common, an irregular stone-revetted platform is a disused reservoir built by the Stroud Water

Figure 7. The 'New River', a remarkable aqueduct 39 miles long, was built in 1609 to carry spring water from King's Meads, Hertford's town common, to London.



Figure 8. King's Meads, Hertford, under flood. This ancient common, as those elsewhere, provided a convenient corridor for urban infrastructure, in this case a fly-over carrying the A10 dual carriageway.



Company before 1922 (Russett 1991, 66) and a further reservoir built there is still in use. Water is also collected on large upland commons such as Wardle Common, Greater Manchester and Whitworth and Trough Common, Lancashire, where the water authority (West Pennine Water Board) has the right to collect water (Aitchison et al. 2000, CL165-166). On other urban commons deep wells were sunk. In Southampton, Hampshire, the city's population had outgrown its water supply by the 19th century and so an artesian well (in which a bore-hole is cut perpendicular to a synclinal fold of the underlying rock strata) was constructed on the common to meet the increased demand. Despite being sunk 420m deep the required flow of water never appeared, but the cover of the shaft can still be seen today.

Improved utilities were introduced into towns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when numerous agreements were entered into for the erection of telegraph poles, electricity cables, sub-stations and the digging of gas and water mains across urban commons. The benefits of these are still enjoyed by townspeople today. Less savoury utilities have also found a place on town commons, which frequently serve as a depository for sewerage and other waste. Lincoln's West Common and the Pitchcroft, Worcester, for example, have both been used as town rubbish tips, while sewerage purification works were established on King's Meads, Hertford; King's Marsh, Sudbury, Suffolk; Biggleswade Common, Bedfordshire; and Earlswood Common, Reigate, Surrey.

## **THE PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Town and urban commons may be viewed as historic and ancient landscapes in terms not only of their intrinsic value as relatively undisturbed resources for the study of ancient ecological systems and environmental change, but also as reservoirs of visible and sub-surface archaeological remains. In the case of Port Meadow, Oxford, extensive archaeological remains with five distinct phases of activity, discovered by aerial photography, topographical survey and excavation include at least six Bronze Age burial mounds and three groups of middle Iron Age farmsteads accompanied by ditched paddocks. Analysis of the archaeology of the natural landscape by earth scientists has provided further insights into the processes of natural change which prompted these settlements. A higher water table in the Iron Age than in the preceding period supported grassland communities similar to those which exist on Port Meadow today and evidence for winter water-logging, suggests that the settlements may have been seasonally occupied for summer grazing. Corroborative evidence was found in the form of plants of disturbed ground, characteristic of rural settlements and farmyards, that are no longer represented on the Meadow (Lambrick & McDonald 1985, 100).

Despite urban commons being converted into 'people's parks', the change is by no means universal. Port Meadow and Wolvercote Common, Oxford, are ecologically unique in their region because of the survival of their hay meadows. Their common status has protected them from ploughing, draining and the application of chemical fertiliser, allowing the continued evolution of grassland communities which developed through traditional management by farmers exercising ancient common rights. This ecological significance led to designation of these and adjacent smaller commons as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in 1952.

Because so many town commons are on valley floors they are prone to flooding, and the incidence of such flooding will vary naturally with climate change. However, panic measures to prevent or control

flooding may be damaging in themselves. At the same time it is anticipated that 'historic open spaces in urban areas will play an important role in ameliorating the effects of a hotter climate' (English Heritage 2008, 12). Biodiversity Action Plans are now in place for several areas, which include town commons such as Staines Moor, Surrey, and there are numerous local authority countryside management projects tackling habitat restoration.

The recognition of town commons as a valid historical entity and a valued part of the modern urban environment is a fundamental first step towards successful informed conservation. An important consideration for the future is maintaining the character of town commons as a different sort of urban open space, distinct from parks and public gardens. The fact that most are no longer working as agricultural commons should not mean that they are treated as urban parks. Their legal situation has been changed by the passing of the Commons Act 2006 which enables more sustainable management through 'commons councils', bringing together commoners and landowners to regulate grazing and other activities, and reinforcing existing protections against abuse, encroachment and unauthorised development. The act places much stress on the natural diversity of commons and their value as wildlife habitats, with much less emphasis on their historical and archaeological value; nevertheless, the historic environment should benefit.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methods used give an overview of the historic environment resource on English town commons. Desk-based work, combined with field reconnaissance, proved effective in locating and mapping archaeological remains in these landscapes. However, there is potential for survival in places which were not identified during the desk-based work and this study does not pretend to present a total picture of the surviving archaeological remains.

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