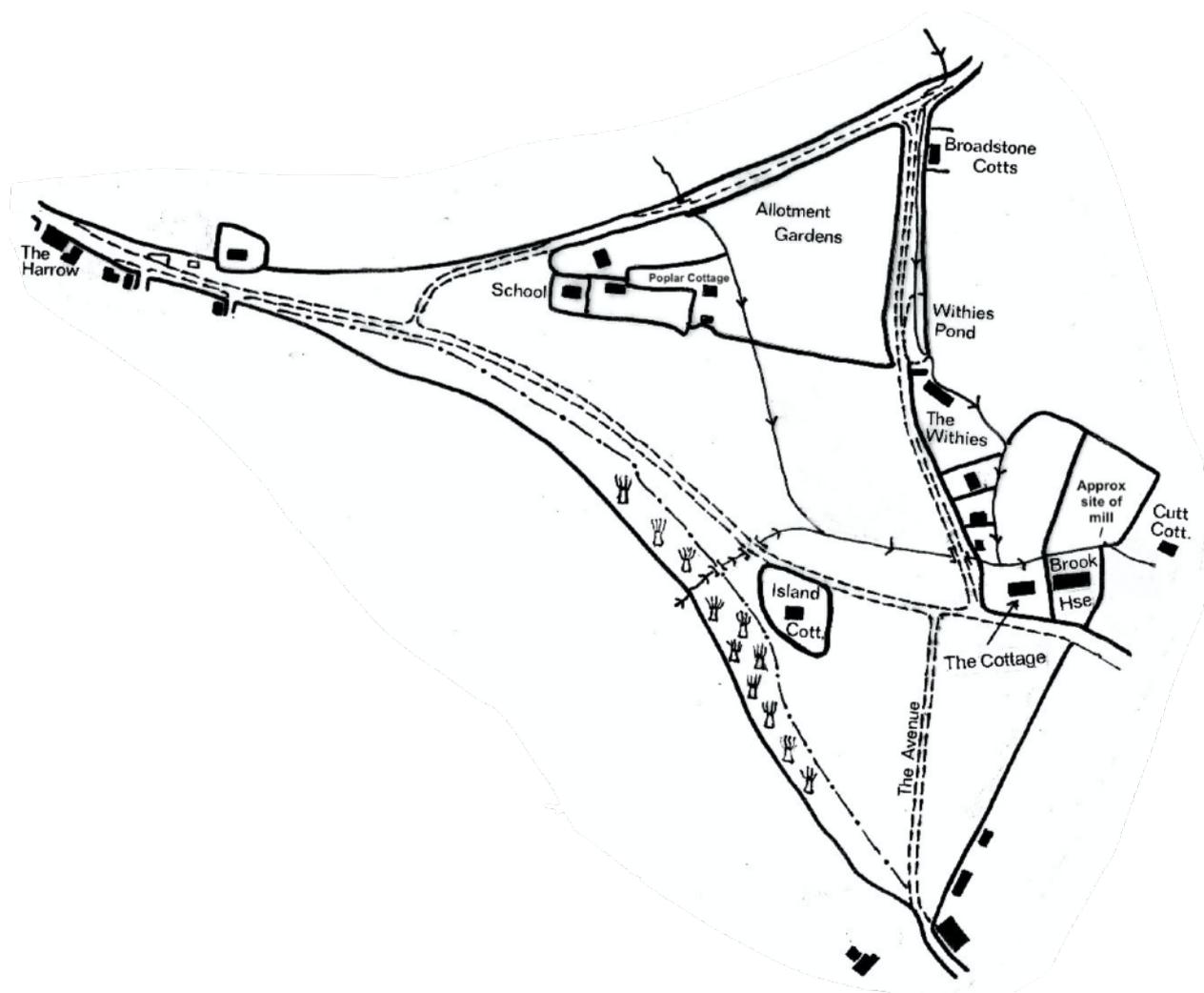


Compton Common

Compton Common is an area of about 30 acres of rough grass and woodland. It is the remnant of a much larger area of wasteland, the Pease Marsh, which once stretched from Compton to the Old Portsmouth Road.¹ The Common was the waste of the manor of Westbury.



Contrary to popular belief, commons are not public land but are privately owned, usually by the lord of the manor to which the common belongs, an arrangement that has existed since time immemorial.

¹ See also www.compton-history.uk/enclosure.pdf

The lord or lady of the manor still retains ownership in many places, although Compton Common is now owned by Guildford Borough Council. Whilst it is wasteland, various individuals had (and often still have) prescribed rights over common land that prevented the owner from using the common as he may have wished. The most frequently encountered of these rights is that of grazing, although the rights to take wood for fuel (estover), to cut turf for fuel or roofing (turbary) and to take fish (piscary) are also claimed in some places.

Until the twentieth century, these rights were a vital part of the household economies of many villagers because the common supplied grazing and fuel for those who had little or no land of their own. The common rights were attached to certain houses (rather than being owned by individuals) and, although they are still current in many places, they are seldom exercised today. There are no registered common rights over Compton Common.

Manor courts regulated common rights quite strictly and, in many places, those who took what was not due to them were fined. Owners of rights guarded them jealously because they were often a very valuable part of their income. It has been estimated that, in the eighteenth century, the pasturing of just one cow on a 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% - 20% of his earnings.²

Wood pasture - a lost landscape

Areas of common, such as that at Compton, are the ancient remnants of open land and most of them existed in the period before the Norman Conquest. Indeed, it is believed that the majority of these historic areas of land have never been cultivated.

² Danae Tankard, *Houses of the Weald and Downland*, Lancaster, 2012.

Compton Common is an area of wood pasture, which is grazing land with trees, and is a comparatively rare and unusual landscape type. The trees on a wood pasture are traditionally cut for fuel and whilst the grassland was maintained by the grazing of domesticated animals. The trees were cut as pollards to keep the regenerating shoots away from grazing animals. Although the common is currently in a poor condition, there remains plenty of evidence of this ancient management technique.³



Compton Common was maintained by grazing well into the twentieth century.

Compton Common was grazed until the 1960s and the cattle maintained open grassland with views from the village down to the Withies Lane. Unfortunately, after grazing ceased, the grass reverted to woodland. The Edwardian postcard shows the open aspect of the common which, apart from the buildings, is as it must have looked for over a thousand years. Its appearance today is an illustration of how landscapes can alter dramatically in response to changing social and economic circumstances.

³ For more information about wood pasture, see Oliver Rackham, *Woodlands*, London 2006.

There were dozens of veteran pollards, the majority of which have been lost over the last few decades. Some died of Dutch elm disease in the early 1970s and older villagers will remember the hollow elm trees that once stood on the common opposite the Withies.



This postcard of the Withies from the 1900s shows three pollards on the far left of the picture. The third from the left was a venerable hollow elm that succumbed to Dutch elm disease in the early 1970s.

Ash Die Back is now taking some others but the majority of the trees died of neglect: the regular cycle of pollarding was broken and the trees split because their branches grew too heavy for the trunks to support. Fortunately, there is still a good number of pollards that would benefit from careful maintenance.

Guildford Borough Council has owned the common for several decades but it has never had a consistent management plan for the land. Councillors come and go according to the four-year electoral cycle and this lack of continuity has contributed to a corporate ignorance of the common's ecological and historic importance. However, the countryside officers employed by the council over the years are well aware of its significance and they

do have a plan that they work to when resources allow. Unfortunately, despite their work, knowledge and enthusiasm, the lack of political will to fund any maintenance has meant that no serious, long-term management has been undertaken.

The common would, perhaps, be better served if the borough council were to pass the responsibility for its management to the Surrey Wildlife Trust as Surrey County Council has successfully done with its countryside estate.

The Lop and Top charity

The largest group of pollard trees stand near the Black Path on the southern side of the common, although there is also a row of large pollarded willows between the Withies Pond and Broadstone Cottages.

Pollarding exploits the regenerative powers of trees - when cut, new shoots soon sprout and every seven to ten years a crop of poles can be cut and the process repeated. Coppicing, a similar technique that involves cutting the trees at ground level was used in enclosed woodland. In areas where animals were grazed, however, the trees were cut at about 10 feet from the ground to prevent cattle eating the new shoots.

In 1667 Sir William More of Loseley granted these trees to the rector, Edmund Yalden, "*for the benefit of the poor forever*". It became his task, and that of his successors, to allocate the crops of wood from the trees as what was to become known as the Lop and Top charity. The charity continued to thrive until at least the late nineteenth century: the rector, Hugh Gillett, recorded in the parish register that new trees were planted in 1878 and 1882. These are the smaller trees, about 2 feet in diameter. Some of the veteran trees are up to about 5 feet in diameter, hollow and ancient, quite possibly dating from Edmund Yalden's time. Sadly, as we have seen, many of these

venerable specimens have died due to disease and neglect. Perhaps the time has come for some new pollards to be established.



A pair of pollard trees on Compton Common.

Squatter settlements

The value of the common encouraged the unauthorised use of the land and, not only were cattle grazed unlawfully in many places, but also squatters occasionally took a piece of the land and erected a house for themselves.

As time went on, the growing population gave rise to more ‘stealth’ building. Faced with the problem of dealing with an



During the mid nineteenth century, Brook House was converted from a squatter's cottage that had been built some time before 1742.

Image by Sally Gorton.

illegal settlement, the manor court might order the offending dwelling to be removed. However, in many places, such houses were permitted to remain and the occupant was granted a formal tenure by the lord. The squatter thus became a legitimate tenant of the manor.

In return, he was subject to the customs of the manor and had to make an annual payment to the lord. This arrangement could be of benefit to both parties for the lord would now gain an income, albeit small, from an otherwise unproductive piece of land whilst the squatter gained secure legal title to the land.

Encroachment onto common land became increasingly frequent from the sixteenth century with more and more little houses and settlements appearing. The practice was widespread and, during the later part of the century, the illegal erection of cottages became to be regarded as a growing problem. The population of England was rising and an increasing demand for housing meant that many people made whatever provision they could, which frequently meant enclosing a piece of common land or roadside waste on which to build a home. To modern eyes this seems quite audacious; the squatter would simply enclose a piece of land in a suitable place and erect a dwelling on it.

Typically, these unlawful plots were taken from the edge of the waste where, it was hoped, the infringement would be less noticeable. Sometimes a squatter may have been a little bolder and enclosed a small island, snugly surrounded by the common. These islands and bites from common land are the characteristic indications of this activity.

Compton Common has several examples of houses that originated as wasteland encroachments. The Cottage, Brook House, Island Cottage, Poplar Cottage and the dwellings that stood to the east of the school until the 1960s appear to have started life in this way. They are all shown on Rocque's map of

Surrey (c.1760) and appear as characteristic bites along the boundary of the common or as 'islands' in the middle of it.



An extract from Rocque's map of Surrey showing the houses on and around the edge of Compton Common.

Documentary evidence dates the granting of the lease on The Cottage and Brook House as 1742, that of the dwellings by the school as 1729 and Poplar Cottage as 1805. The lease of Compton Cottage and Brook House quite explicitly refers to an "*inclosed parcel of the waste land*".

The allotment gardens

This ground was originally a part of the common. The minutes of the Vestry Meeting, (the precursor of the modern Parish

Council) record that on 20th November 1832 it was agreed to "*inclose a certain peice of land on the lower common*" to be allotment gardens to alleviate poverty amongst the working population. ⁴

For more information about the allotment gardens and provision for the poor see www.compton-history.uk/allotments.pdf

The Withies Pond and Compton mill

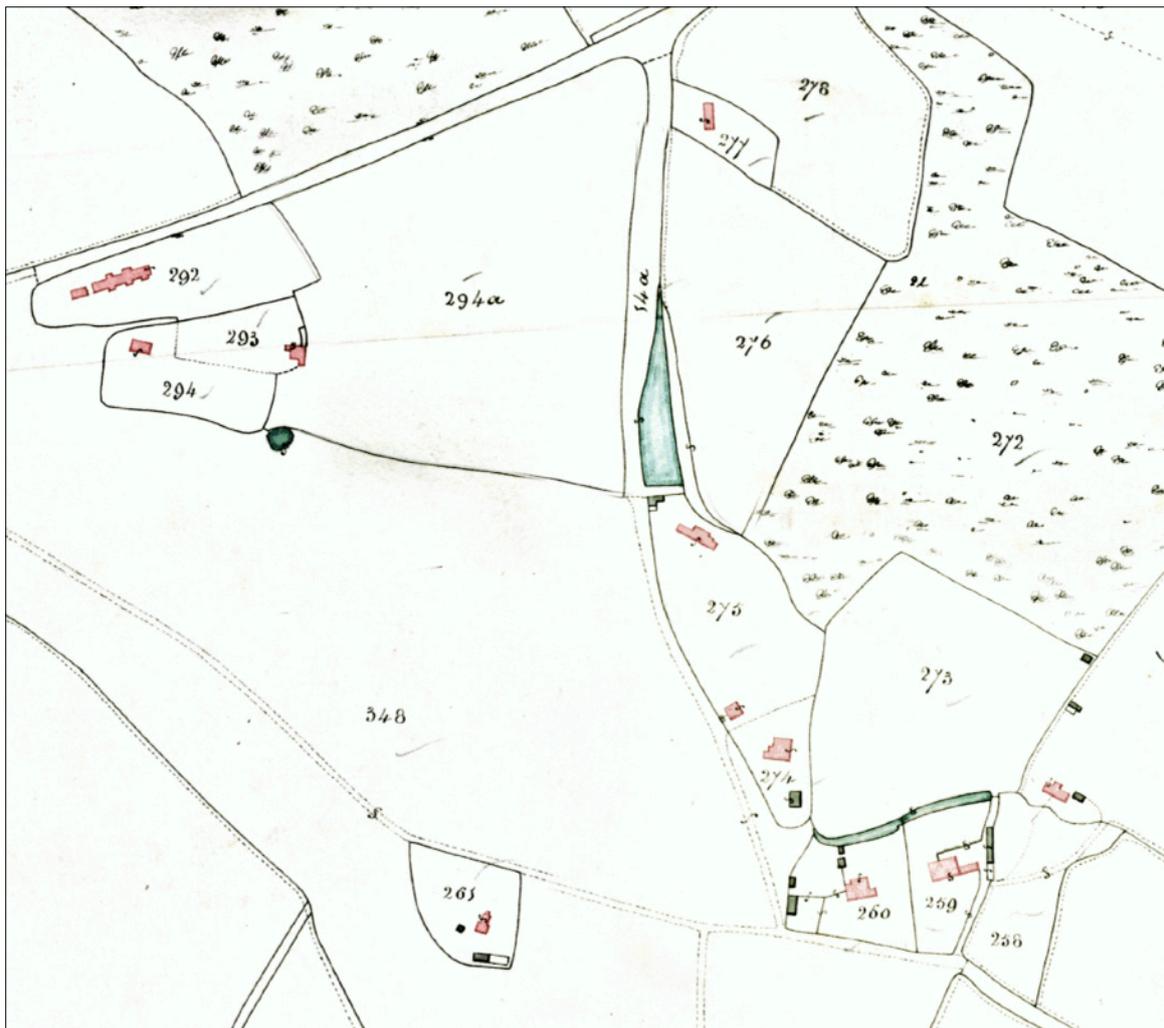
In its heyday this pond was fed by all the water that originates in Bummoor Copse and it was one of a series of ponds, remains of which still exist in the moors. It appears to have been a part of a water supply system that was designed to supply a mill that once stood behind Brook House in New Pond Road.

The pond seems to have had a chequered history: although it is marked on the 1839 tithe map of Compton, when it was considerably larger than it is now, it is absent from the 1872 edition of the Ordnance Survey map with only a stream flowing through the site. The edition of 1895 shows that the pond had been reinstated but a new ditch had been dug which took some of the water across the meadows from Broadstone Cottages to Mellersh Farm, by-passing and thus reducing the flow of water to the pond.

During the 1960s and 1970s the Withies Pond was virtually empty and there was talk, typical of the time, of having it filled in. The feeder stream, that flowed in front of Broadstone Cottages, had been culverted and was reduced to a trickle. The ditch and pond were restored in 1995 by the Elizabeth McAlmont Memorial Trust and there is now a regular supply of water.

But what evidence is there for the existence of the mill? In 1951, J. Hillier wrote that he had: *“obtained authentic confirmation from an old Compton resident that the pond behind the Withies Inn once supplied a mill which stood behind The Bear but it was pulled down a hundred years since, and no trace remains”*.⁵

Mr Hiller’s informant appears to be correct because the pond and its stream are evidently man made: they do not occupy the lowest land and, if left to its own devices, the water would flow



An extract from the 1839 tithe map of Compton. The mill had gone by this date but it stood where the track that passes by Brook House (plot 259) meets the stream. There is still a drop in the water level here.

⁵ Old Surrey Watermills by J Hillier, pub. Skeffington, 1951.

across the meadows from the Moors towards Mellersh Farm. After leaving the pond, its present course is through a man-made cut through higher ground to the east of the cottages in Withies Lane. In the garden of The Cottage, it joins other streams that run from various parts of the valley and across the common. The mill was sited downstream of the meeting place of these streams.

The Bear was rebuilt as Brook House in the mid nineteenth century and the mill was powered by the brook that runs through its garden and on past Cutt (now Tudor) Cottage. There is still a considerable drop in the level of the brook in the garden of Brook House and it is this that reveals the site of the mill.

There is also a clue in the name: *Cutte* is a Middle English word for an artificial water channel that is often found in conjunction with 'mill' in place names, such as Cutmill in Puttenham.



Philip Gorton, June 2021