

Many open green spaces that we take for granted today still exist because in the past they were preserved from enclosure and development by both legal and illegal resistance. This pamphlet briefly discusses the fight to save two such spaces in South London: Sydenham Common & One Tree Hill. A rousing tale of legal shenanigans, rioting, intrigue and violent death...

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# rights of common



The Fight Against the Theft of Sydenham  
Common and One Tree Hill.

Betty O'Connor



*Dedicated to Michael Bradley  
and the 'disorderly multitude'.*

## PERSONS CLAIMING RIGHTS OF COMMON

*"The law condemns the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common,  
But lets the greater villain loose  
Who steals the common from the goose."*

Many if not most of the open spaces - commons, woods, greens - of any size that remain today in South London, still exist because they were preserved from development by collective action. Whether by campaigns or by legal action, or by rioting, tearing down fences & re-opening up enclosed land. This pamphlet briefly discusses two spaces in South London: Sydenham Common & One Tree Hill (with a brief look at Hilly Fields).

Between the 16th & the 19th centuries, much of the open land in England was enclosed, fenced off from public access or use, usually by rich landowners for agriculture, or sold off for house building. For hundreds of years, local people had traditionally benefitted from customary rights of use on common land, mostly grazing of animals and wood for fuel, but also often sowing of small plots on the fringes of commons for market gardens or feeding themselves. Commons and woods were vital in many places to the survival of large numbers of people.

But despite its name, common land was rarely if ever, land held 'in common': it was almost always land owned by the Lord of the Manor, on which over time other people had come to exercise some rights of use. Traditional rights of access to the commons were always a battleground, not a happy interdependence between landowner and tenants, there was constant struggle all over the country over who got to take what from the land. Common rights often had no legal weight, they were part of an unwritten social contract, a remnant of feudal society's complex web of inter-relations and obligations.

Gradually, as capitalism developed, slowly replacing a society of vertical social obligations & custom with one based entirely on profit, landowners were starting to replace traditional land use with intensive agriculture, which led to the clearing of woods and wastelands & the exclusion of the poor from the commons.



Those deprived often lost traditional ways of making a living, or in many cases ways of topping up incomes as labourers or craftspeople: *"In an increasingly legalistic age, an unwritten agreement counted for little in the face of the new law ..."*

This process caused massive upheavals especially to the lives of the poor, whose existence had become much more precarious since the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s took away much of the church-based charity system that provided a safety net for the old, destitute and the sick. Enclosure often formed a kind of rolling process, a vicious circle, where people expelled from most of the land would be forced to gather in smaller less secure, often squatted, communities on the fringes of woods and fields, more dependent on what open land remained and often becoming seen as a threat in the area due to their desperation. Which in turn provided part of the rationale for enclosing more wasteland and removing their houses.

### **The Great North Wood**

The area on the slopes of the hills that runs from Norwood to Brockley was until the 18<sup>th</sup> century largely still woodland, the remnants of the old Great North Wood. This wood, a natural oak forest that had once stretched from Croydon to Camberwell, had broken up by the Seventeenth Century, into smaller woods and commons, including Penge Wood, Gypsy Wood, Dulwich Wood, Forest Wood (or Forest Hill), and Westwood (or Sydenham Common).

Into the late 1700s many of these woods and Commons were still inhabited by the very poor, squatters with nowhere else to go, and outcasts like gypsies, (hence Gypsy Hill), or were haunts of robbers and smugglers who used green lanes through Norwood and Peckham to bring contraband up from the coast. On top of demand for land for development and more intensive agriculture there was also pressure to clear these 'undesirables' out, a useful by-product of enclosures.

A lot of land was also reserved for hunting, the privilege of the rich, and the lower classes were banned from catching many animals, reserved for hunting by aristos. Draconian laws restricting access to game and land passed in the Middle Ages were renewed under the

Stuart kings, such as the Game Act of 1671, reserving hunting for the rich and titled, banning the poor even the possession of nets, snares, or certain types of dogs. As the poor's diet was often short of legit meat, poaching was always widespread. In some areas it transcended an individual survival technique & grew into mass collective resistance, where large numbers would go disguised to poach en masse. In South London, Dulwich Wood (much larger then than the woods of that name that survive) was a royal playground: locals were ordered to *"forbeare to hunt, chace, molest or hurt the king's stagges with greyhounds, hounds, gunnes or any means whatsoever"*.

The mass upheavals caused by enclosures were not pushed through without resistance. Many attempts to shut off land were fought, often by large numbers of people, and often violently. There were armed rebellions (as in Norfolk in 1549), riots, mass outbreaks of trouble, for four hundred years. Many battles were won and many lost.

### **Sydenham Common**

One battle that was ultimately lost was that over Sydenham Common, also was known in early medieval times as Westwood or Westwood Common. The name Westwood derives from the area being the western part of the parish of Lewisham, and heavily wooded; in fact Westwood was a remainder of the old Great North Wood.

Sydenham or Westwood Common covered the area between modern Sydenham and Forest Hill. Bounded in the Southwest by today's Westwood Hill & Crystal Palace Park, in the Southeast it reached to Mayow Park and Sydenham Road; to the north to where Honor Oak Park and Forest Hill Road now lie. For centuries it was split between coppices of farmed timber (enriching the Lords of the Manor, in turn the Abbots of Ghent, Priors of Shene and Archbishops of Canterbury) and open tracts where locals and parishioners of Lewisham had 'Common Rights' to graze cattle & gather fuel.

After Henry VIII acquired Westwood in 1531 during the dissolution of the monasteries, the coppice system was gradually abandoned to allow more mature woods to grow for use by the navy - crucial to the wars waged by the Tudor monarchs. These were felled wholesale in the

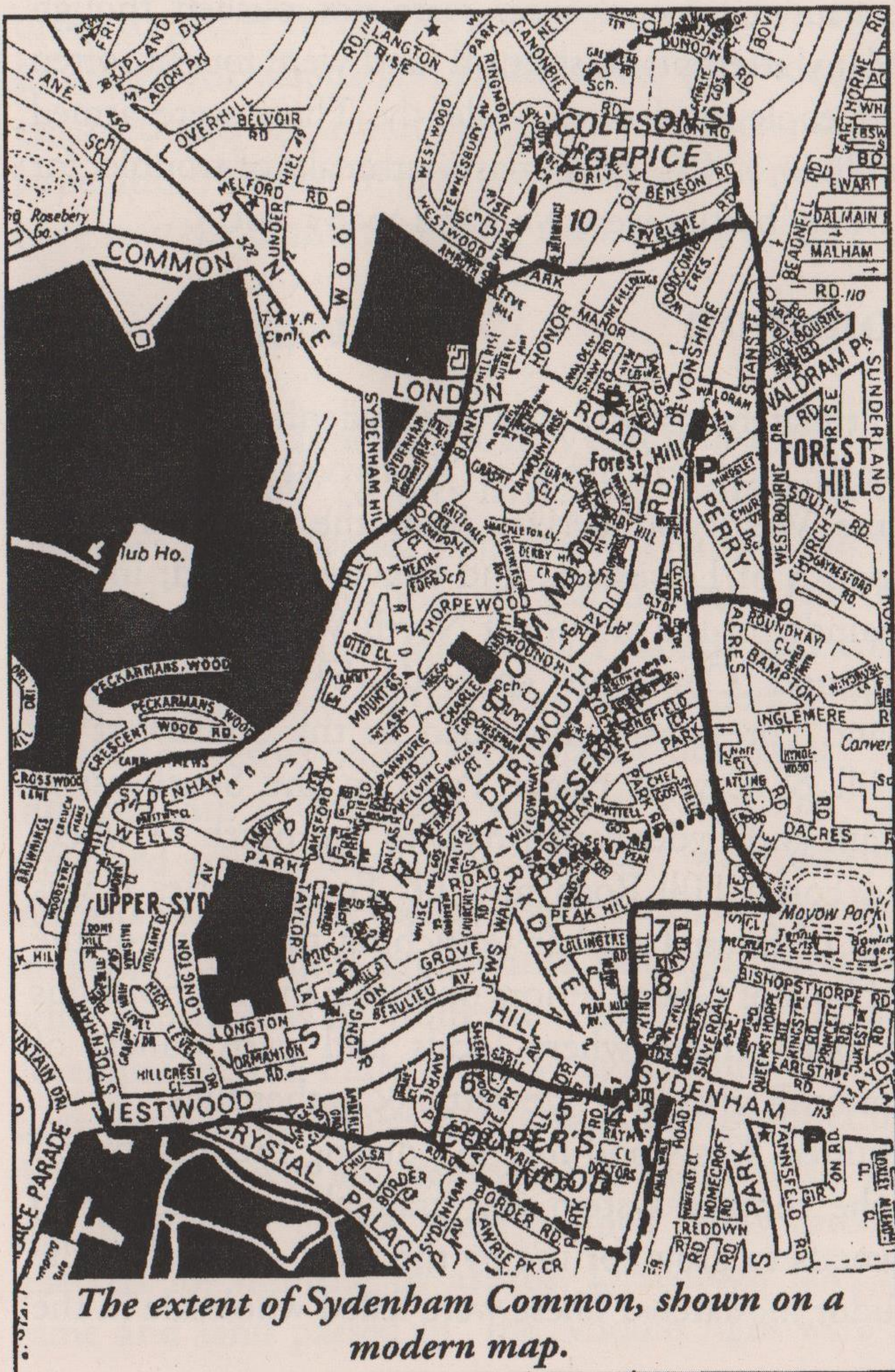


sixteenth century, leaving a stripped common, apart from two main wooded areas, Coleson's Coppice and Coopers Wood.

The open land was a strong temptation to potential enclosers. The battle against enclosure began in 1605, when Henry Newport, a Lewisham gentleman and Yeoman of the King's Household (ie a royal hanger-on) persuaded king James I to lease him 500-600 acres of the Common, and attempted to fence a large part off for 'improvement'.

*"Unjustly taken from them"*

Many inhabitants of Lewisham were small farmers or



*The extent of Sydenham Common, shown on a modern map.*

husbandmen who relied heavily on the free pasture available on the common. At this time there were also large numbers of squatters on the common, encouraged by the lack of restrictions there on grazing of animals. They supported themselves almost entirely by raising pigs, cows and sheep: it was said that "above 500 poore householders with wives and manye children greatly relieved by sayde Common and would be

*utterly undone yf yt should be unjustly taken from them."*

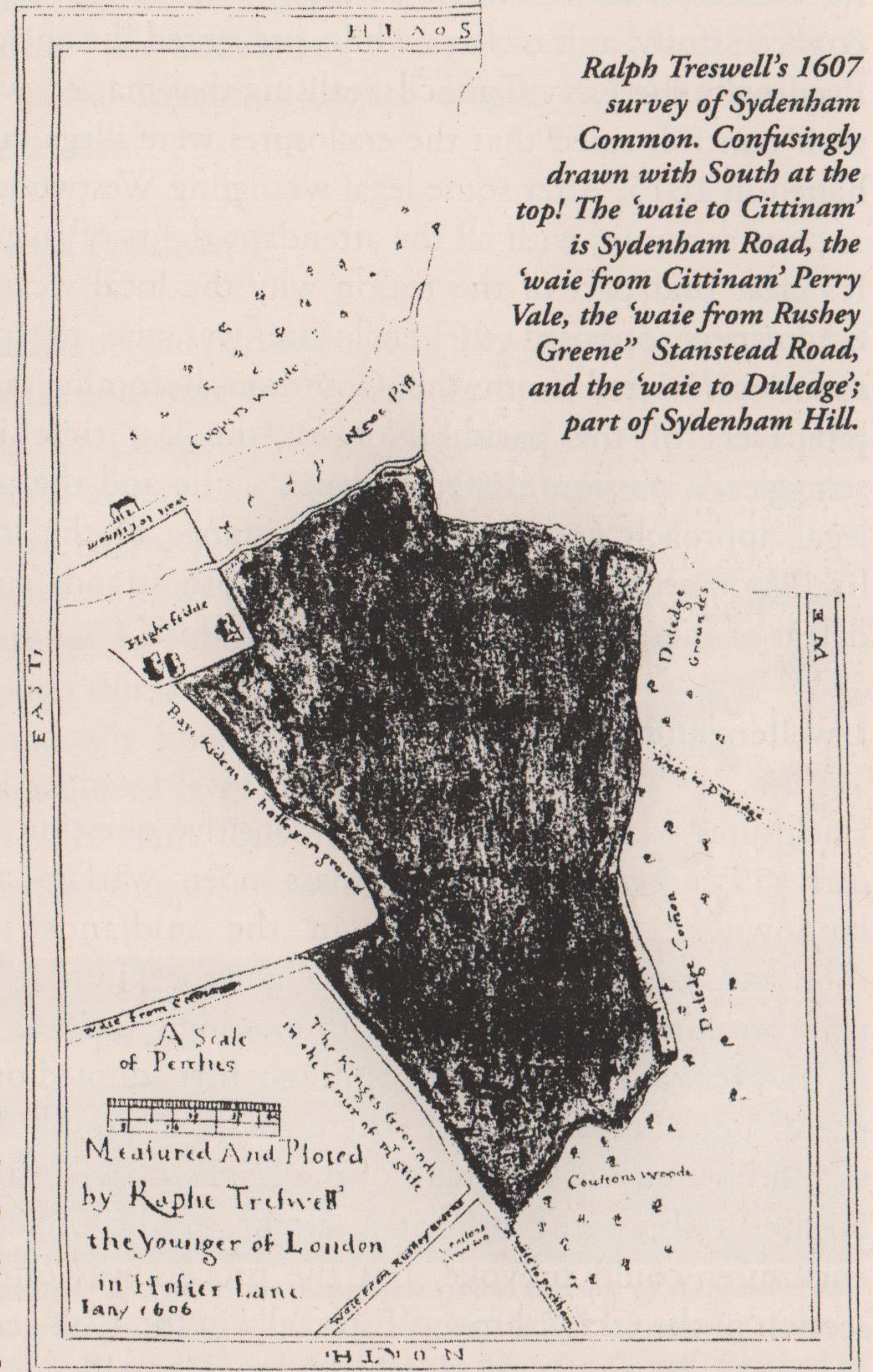
Locals led by the vicar of Lewisham, Abraham Colfe, tried legal methods of challenging this, going to court. The parishioners fired off petitions in all directions, initially prompting the Barons of the Exchequer to rule against Newport's designs.

After years of inconclusive legal wrangling however, in 1614 Newport and his allies, Innocent Lanier and Robert Raynes, two more Officers of the King's Household managed to obtain a lease on 347 acre of the

Common for sixty years. In October a court was held to inquire into the matter; the jury ignored the complaints of the residents of Lewisham and found against them.

Newport, Lanier and Raynes then tried to violently evict the poor and enclose the Common.

*"Presently the patentees began to make ditches about the common and drave out and killed sundry of the cattell of the inhabitants."*



*Ralph Treswell's 1607 survey of Sydenham Common. Confusingly drawn with South at the top! The 'waie to Cittinam' is Sydenham Road, the 'waie from Cittinam' Perry Vale, the 'waie from Rushey Greene' Stanstead Road, and the 'waie to Duledge'; part of Sydenham Hill.*



Abraham Colfe and a hundred locals marched en masse to petition the king at Tottenham Cross in 1614; the king put it in the hands of the Privy Council.

Meanwhile some of the more unruly residents of Sydenham had taken up direct action – tearing down the fences and filling in Henry Newport's ditches. Every time the enclosers men' put fences up again crowds gathered to break them down. Innocent Lanier's servants attacked women collecting wood, drove off more cattle and burned furze used as fuel by the inhabitants. The locals fought pitched battles & successfully, at least for a while, prevented the enclosure taking root. Eventually the Privy Council, realising that matters were getting out of their control, ruled that the enclosures were illegal and ordered them halted in 1615. After some legal wrangling Westwood was declared an ancient common with all the attendant rights of custom.

It's clear that part of the reason why the local vicar and some other landowners opposed the enclosure was the prospect of destitute squatters evicted from the Common becoming a burden on the ratepayers of the parish! Not for the last time in anti-enclosure struggles, a tension existed between Colfe and the parishioners more legal approach and the violent resistance of the local poor, whose livelihood were directly threatened. Both strands contributed to the defeat of the enclosure, for this time at least.

### Levellers and Diggers

Enclosures were a very politically sensitive question at this time. The early 17th century brought mass open warfare against enclosing landowners: most famously in the midlands in 1607, where thousands of the landless poor fought the militia, destroying fences, and breaking open enclosures. Interestingly this was where the names of Levellers & Diggers were seemingly first adopted or used to describe these poor rebels. Later these names would assume political significance in the aftermath of the English Civil War.

So not only were authorities afraid of the violent response that enclosures could provoke, but the process was often opposed by a section of the establishment. Especially in the 17th century, the king & certain sections of the nobility sought allies among the rural

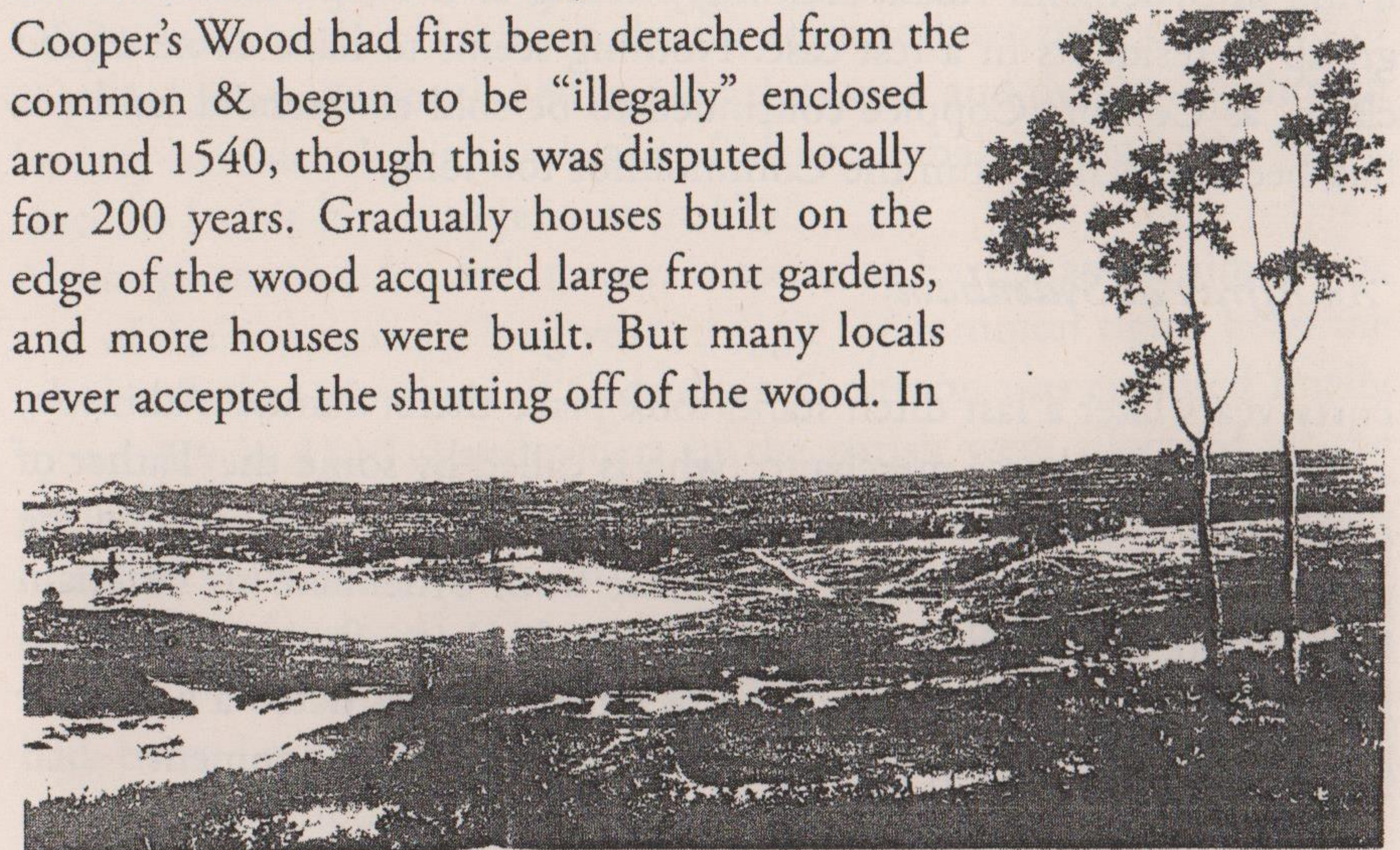
population in struggles against the rising merchant & improving classes. Pressure could sometimes be put on the authorities, to stop or reverse enclosures. Also some among the upper classes and gentry bought ideologically into their role as protectors of the poor, as part of a paternalist, vertically interdependent society opposed to ruthless destruction of social ties.

Others of the gentry were afraid of the social upheaval that too-extreme exploitation could bring. On a basic level too, many well-off local residents might have economic interests in common land themselves, that bigger landlords were attempting to trample on. Many of those with written or verbal 'common rights' might be quite well off landowners or tradesmen.

### *"Thrown Down and Prostrated"*

The victory of Colfe and the parishioners of Lewisham seems to have prevented large-scale enclosure in Sydenham until the 1750s, when trouble broke out in Coopers Wood, the southern corner of the common, (just south of modern Westwood Hill, between the railway line and Lawrie Park Avenue).

Cooper's Wood had first been detached from the common & begun to be "illegally" enclosed around 1540, though this was disputed locally for 200 years. Gradually houses built on the edge of the wood acquired large front gardens, and more houses were built. But many locals never accepted the shutting off of the wood. In



*James Pringle's painting of Sydenham Common (from the top of Kirkdale) in 1812, at the time of its final enclosure. The dog on the left is running down Kirkdale; behind it can be seen the reservoir for the Croydon Canal, finished in 1807, which ran from New Cross to Croydon.*



1754 "persons claiming right of common" several times threw down fences surrounding the Wood and asserted rights of access and gathering fuel etc. One target of these agitators was George Thornton, landlord of the Greyhound Inn in Sydenham, a tenant of the western part of Coopers Wood; his fences were "thrown down and prostrated". (There's still a Greyhound Inn there, at the junction of Kirkdale and Westwood Hill).

A year later, in 1755, there was a legal case in the Exchequer Court involving the denial of common rights to collect wood in Colson's Wood or Colson's Coppice, the area north of the old Common. This is now an area bounded by Ewelme Rd, Horniman Gardens, Devonshire rd, and Dunoon rd. One John Anderson sued the owner Thomas Hodsdon, who had prevented him from exercising his common rights in the Coppice. The Hodsdon family had bought up many acres of Sydenham land since 1713, they were wealthy wine merchants, with an eye on possible future development. Hodsdon's cousin had leased 17 acres of land adjoining Colson's Coppice to a brickmaker, clearly intending to begin a house building program in the area. John Anderson was no poor cottager, though; he was a well-to-do merchant living in Sydenham Road, seemingly acting as the representative of a group of residents in a test case. Nothing seems to have come of the claim, as Colson's Coppice continued to be sold as freehold land: it had been detached from the Common for too long.

### *"An Affray at Sydenham"*

Forty years later a last ditch stand took place there. Samuel Atkinson, a Tooley Street cheese merchant, (who is called by some the 'Father of Forest Hill') bought the estate, & between 1787 and 1789 created the present Honor Oak Road, a new route from Sydenham to Peckham Rye, (where there had only been a track before) as a first step to opening up the wood for building. In 1789 he had constructed a house for himself, and was selling plots on the new road for development.

Those who still maintained that the wood was common land didn't take this lying down; but the enclosure of the Wood was to end violently. In October 1792, the *Times* reported the death of Michael

Bradley, who had a cottage at the Bell Green end of Sydenham Road. He and others had set out to assert a right of way:

*"It appears that this Bradley and others belonging to Sydenham Parish, went a few days since on a piece of land called Colson's Wood, to ascertain their rights of commonage, which have been held upwards of 200 years. A Mr Atkinson met the deceased and his associates, and asked them their business; they replied, there was a footway across, which right their fore-fathers had enjoyed and so would they. Atkinson said they should go no further - and the first man who did, he would shoot."*

Michael Bradley stepped forward and Atkinson then shot him.

*"The Wednesday following, Atkinson purchased the right of this wood and pasturage, consisting of 52 acres, out of Chancery for £350 - and has since enclosed it. The Coroner's Inquest sat on the body of Bradley on Friday and Saturday, the 19th and 20th of October, at Sydenham, and brought in their verdict, Manslaughter, against one Atkinson... The man was shot in the leg by a pistol, which fractured the bone, and a mortification ensued. The deceased has left a family and four children..."*

Despite this verdict, Atkinson doesn't seem to have been convicted of anything, since he continued to own the estate and develop it, though he may have decided it wasn't a good idea to remain living in the parish since he let his house to tenants in 1793.

Although the case caused uproar, it seems to have marked almost the end of the two century-long year struggle for common rights here: the whole of what remained of Sydenham Common was enclosed finally by an Act in 1810. Landowners in the parish were allocated all the remaining common land, with the power to enclose it. Even after two hundred years of building and clearance, there were still five hundred acres to be developed. The main beneficiary was William Legge, the Earl of Dartmouth, the largest landowner in Lewisham. (The family had been Lords of the Manor of Lewisham since the seventeenth century: Dartmouth Road and the Dartmouth Arms in Forest Hill are named after their title.)

The only remaining part of the old common which still remains a green space is Sydenham Wells Park, which had become a popular spa



of sorts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Large numbers of people came to drink the spring's waters (apparently foul tasting but good for you!). Later the healthy aspects of the Wells declined, giving way to binge drinking: it became popular to mix the 'waters' with other liquids (brandy, mostly); rowdy behaviour was rife. In 1651, the Commonwealth government ordered: "*all that come to drink the waters at Lewisham to behave themselves peaceably at their utmost peril.*" There were complaints about the "*rabble of Londoners*" flocking here. The Wells were eventually closed down in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One reason Sydenham Common was targeted for enclosure was its annual popular fair, which was resented by the gentry & posher residents for the 'lowlife' it attracted. This is a regular theme with proposals to enclose in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, not only for profit but control of open spaces, which often could be used for unruly gatherings of the poor, not only fairs and makeshift dwellings, but later for political rallies and demonstrations. In 1766 the Sydenham fair was moved to Kent House Fields. It was later suppressed in 1836, as were most of the old popular local fairs in the early nineteenth century.

### **From Subsistence to Recreation**

As the century went on the nature of struggles over space began to change. In the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries lords of the manor had mostly attempted enclosures in a drive towards 'improvements' in agriculture, & a more profitable exploitation of resources on the land.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, and London grew in size, pressure over large areas of open woodland and heath increased. In common with other large cities, the capital absorbed increasing numbers, especially working people, often crowded into badly built housing tightly packed together. From the 1830s on, the pressure was for land for development, mostly for housing. The rapid expansion of railways also ate into open land.

Correspondingly, the resistance to enclosures and development from commoners with traditional rights or interest in commons for economic reasons, gradually transformed into struggles for open space for recreation. The subsistence economy that supported the poor had been undermined by rural enclosures: to a large extent they had been

driven from the land into the cities. As throughout the century, factory reform and economic growth reduced working hours, 'leisure' time for working and middle classes became an issue. Particularly in the rapidly expanding city, green space for after work activities became important.

The interest of middle class people in the welfare of the poor, factory workers, etc and doing good works on their behalf, also led in 1865 to the setting up the Commons Preservation Society, a committee of mainly wealthy socially conscious activists, to oppose enclosure of commons and green spaces nationally. The CPS was involved in many of the battles to save green spaces in South London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through lobbying and court battles. They were instrumental in getting the 1866 Metropolitan Commons Act passed, which protected land that could be shown to have been the focus of common rights in the past; this had a positive legal effect in preserving much of what open space remained.

### **Hilly Fields**

One of the many spaces the Commons Preservation Society helped to save was Hilly Fields. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was open grazing land. In the 1870s much of Brockley's farm land was already being sold off for building. When plans were announced in the mid-1880s to build on Hilly Fields, a local committee was formed to try to save at least one section of it as a public park. It was very much a coalition of the great and the good: magistrates, businessmen, etc. and included Octavia Hill, who was very influential in setting up social housing schemes for the poor. They got together with the CPS, and other similar groups to negotiate with the owners of the Hilly Fields and to persuade the London County Council and the District Boards of Greenwich & Lewisham to buy the land to keep it open. The LCC agreed to pay half, Greenwich Board said they'd put money in, but Lewisham refused to spend any money on it! No change there then.

Although there were some problems raising the cash and some small plots were developed by builders, in 1896 the purchase was completed and the park was laid out.



## One Tree Hill: The Golf War

If the process of saving Hilly Fields was peaceful and respectable, the same couldn't quite be said about the struggle for another local open space.

One Tree Hill, in Honor Oak, had always been an open space, a traditional gathering spot for locals, more recently for recreation. 'Rolling down One Tree Hill' is referred to in Gilbert and Sullivan's *'The Sorcerer'* as a disreputable Victorian pastime!

The Hill marked the on the border of the two parishes of Lewisham and Camberwell (previously it also marked the boundaries of the counties of Kent and Surrey). Many visitors also came to enjoy the view of London from the Hill, easier in those times as the hilltop was less wooded.

Such a spot, a distinctive hill, especially marking a boundary, tends to gather myths; some historians used to assert that One Tree Hill was the spot where Boudicca's rebellion was crushed in battle by the Romans (somewhat dubiously; the battle probably took place in the midlands). Queen Elizabeth I was also supposed to have drunkenly knighted the 'one tree', or Oak of Honour that gives the hill (and Honor Oak) its name.



*One Tree Hill, from the East, in 1905.*

A number of old footpaths ran across the hill, from Forest Hill to the Brockley Road and Peckham Rye.

### *"A Spirit of Unrest"*

In Autumn 1896 One Tree Hill was suddenly enclosed by a golf club, who had bought it from the previous owners, and erected a six-foot fence around it. Locals were understandably annoyed. A local "Enclosure of Honor Oak Hill Protest Committee" was formed, which met from August 1897 in the Samuel Bowley Coffee Tavern, Peckham Rye. twenty-three original members rose to about one hundred and fifty, including members of the Camberwell and Lewisham local Vestries (precursors to today's Borough Councillors). They got support from the Commons Preservation Society, and began a laborious process of collecting evidence about traditional access to the Hill, whether there were any traditional common rights etc.

Unfortunately this process did unearth the fact that despite what was widely claimed, One Tree Hill had never been part of Sydenham Common, kyboshing any claim for common rights there. Meanwhile regular public protest meetings, in Spring-Summer 1897, many held in the open air on Peckham Rye. But according to committee member Councillor John Nisbet, "*a spirit of unrest, at what was termed the slow methods of the Executive, began to show itself amongst a small section of the members...*"

At a meeting of the Committee, a resolution to defend the hill by pulling down the fences was defeated. But in late August, the Golf Club prosecuted two lads who had broken down part of the fence and 'trespassed' on the hill, and children who wandered through a broken section to pick flowers were also attacked by a fierce guard dog belonging to a security guard watching the grounds.

Further failed attempts to get the Committee to authorise direct action against the fence led to a resolution at a mass meeting on October 3<sup>rd</sup> on the Rye, which condemned the Club's prosecution of the two 'trespassers', who had just been convicted & fined and voted for the removal of the fence the following Sunday.

On this day, October 10th, supposedly as many as 15,000 people assembled at One Tree Hill; after apparently waiting a while in vain for



a suitably appointed demolisher to arrive, a section of the crowd in Honor Oak Park pulled down parts of the fence. The crowd then rushed onto the hill from Honor Oak Park and Honor Oak Rise. "The hill was soon covered with a disorderly multitude, and it was quickly found necessary to reinforce the police who had been posted to keep order." Some of the crowd attacked the house of the grounds keeper, and only the



FIRST MEETING ON ONE TREE HILL.

arrival of more cops kept the rioters at bay. The more constitutional element attempted to take control, starting a meeting and denouncing the "unseemly and riotous conduct taking place...an appeal was made for quiet and more orderly conduct...the crowds, after singing 'Rule Britannia', dispersed..."

Although the Protest Committee disassociated itself from the violence, two former

members, Mr Ellis and Mr Polkinghorn, who had left the Committee, frustrated with its slow progress, and three friends, publicly went to pull down a section of fence at Honor Oak Rise, on October 16th, stating they'd been instructed to do so on behalf of the public (which seems a reasonable defence!) Their names and addresses were taken – the Golf Club promptly sued them in the High Court for trespass.

### "A Lurid Glare upon the Upturned Faces"

The following day, Sunday October 17th, a very large crowd gathered, obviously expecting trouble. Estimates vary from 50,000 to 100,000 people present., which may be slightly exaggerated. They were faced by 500-odd police, some mounted, patrolling the hill, who fought off several attempts to demolish the fence and rush the hill, mostly at the south side, overlooking Honor Oak Park. At least 12,000

people were said to be hemmed in here, many of who stoned the cops, charging them several times and being charged in return. "Late in the day a furze bush was fired, and this cast a lurid glare upon the upturned faces of the packed mass of onlookers." Ten people were nicked, two of whom got sent down for a month, three for fourteen days and the rest fined. The following Sunday, the 24th, thousands again gathered at the Hill, though there was no trouble.

The Protest Committee condemned the rioting, issuing appeals for order. They maintained the way forward lay in its inquiries into rights of way over the hill, and in its attempts to persuade the Camberwell & Lewisham Vestries that the enclosure should be reversed. The Committee's investigations had revealed several rights of way across the hill: at an inquiry in January 1898, the Joint Committee of the two vestries voted to go to court to challenge the enclosure.

They sought advice from the Commons Preservation Society. This process dragged on, into 1899; meanwhile the Golf Club had obtained a court judgment for trespass against the five members of the "One Tree Hill Commons Rights Defence League". The South London Press called these men "the extremists – the irregulars – of the one Tree hill Movement..." and claimed that the more respectable committee had refused to let them see any of the evidence they had collected, to help in their defence.

Over the next few years, though the riots never revived, the process of



The One Tree Hill Golf House is attacked



negotiating for a sale of the hill ground on, with Camberwell Borough Council putting pressure on the owner of the Hill, J. E. Ward, to sell the land. Ward dug his heels in, asking for a huge amount for the land. Eventually the London County Council stuck a clause in their 1902 General Powers Bill, for a compulsory purchase – leading to the Hill being bought for £6,100 in 1904, and re-opened to the public.

In 1997, a hand-crafted centenary bench was put up to remember the anti-enclosure protests, though it has since vanished.

It is still a very lovely open space now, definitely worth a visit/picnic, with its occasional great view of London through the trees that have grown up since the enclosure riots. In the spirit of the miscreants who rolled down the hill and the anti-enclosure irregulars who ripped up the fences, it was from here that the Association of Autonomous Astronauts tried to launch their independent ventures into space in 1999.



*The summit of the Hill in 1905.*

### **You Win Some, You Lose Some...**

Why did one struggle lose and one win; why is there no Sydenham Common, but One Tree Hill remains?

The battles were fought in different climates. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the landowners and so-called improvers had more or less free rein economically, politically and socially, and could get away with more. While more wealthy opponents could go to court, for most of the people directly affected violent resistance was the only option, and in the end the rich folk doing the enclosing had more violent means of repression at their disposal. Not to say violence didn't work at times! Whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially by the 1890s, many working class people in London had experience of mass movements and political organising, which people could put to good use. Also a strong middle class element had emerged, which believed in good works to improve the lives of the poor and working classes, and that green spaces were important for everybody's leisure and free time. Partly this was down to a fear of working class revolt. Individuals like Octavia Hill, and many of the great and good involved in the Commons Preservation Society, perceived a definite threat from the mass of the unruly and immoral poor. They felt that the poor's possible attraction to violent radical ideas could be not only neutralised by good works, but that many could be educated to become respectable. As well as decent housing, classes, and proper religious and political instruction, properly managed open spaces for recreation (orderly and restrained of course!) could play a part in 'civilising' the lower classes.

It's also true that the extension of the vote to some working men in 1867 and 1885 meant that opposition to enclosures had a wider political clout, as Radicals and Liberals were often now elected on to Vestries, bodies, which had a lot of say over the development or preservation of open space.

These battles are only two examples of a process that went on for centuries and as the more recent struggle against development in part of Crystal Palace Park shows, in some forms is still continuing.

It remains important not only to remember the spaces that have been



stolen, like Sydenham Common, and cherish the spaces that have been saved, like One Tree Hill; but also to fight for the places we love when the developers come to call in the future.

*Betty O'Connor July 2008*

This text is based on a talk given at the Brockley Jack pub in Brockley, South London in June 2005 as part of the Brockley Max Festival. Shorter accounts of the Sydenham Common and One Tree Hill anti-enclosure battles also appeared in the pamphlet *Down With the Fences: Battles for the Commons in South London*, published by Past Tense in 2004. This pamphlet is out of print but the text is available at <http://www.alphabettthreat.co.uk/pasttense/downwiththefences.html> A larger account of struggles against enclosures and an examination of the politics of open spaces in the London area is planned...

### **Sources/Further Reading**

*The Story of the One Tree Hill Agitation*, John Nisbet. Nisbet was a Secretary of the Enclosure of Honor Oak Hill Protest Committee, and a Camberwell Borough Councillor; this consists of his Final Report in 1905.

*Executive Committee Reports of Proceedings*, Commons Preservation Society.

*Commons, Forests and Footpaths*, Lord Eversley.

*The London Green Way*, Bob Gilbert. Walks on the edge of London and open spaces and how they were kept open.

*The One Tree Hill Anti-Enclosure Movement*, Sonia Richmond. A University Thesis, which can be read in Southwark History Archives.

*Sydenham & Forest Hill Past*, John Coulter.



Published in September 2009 by

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