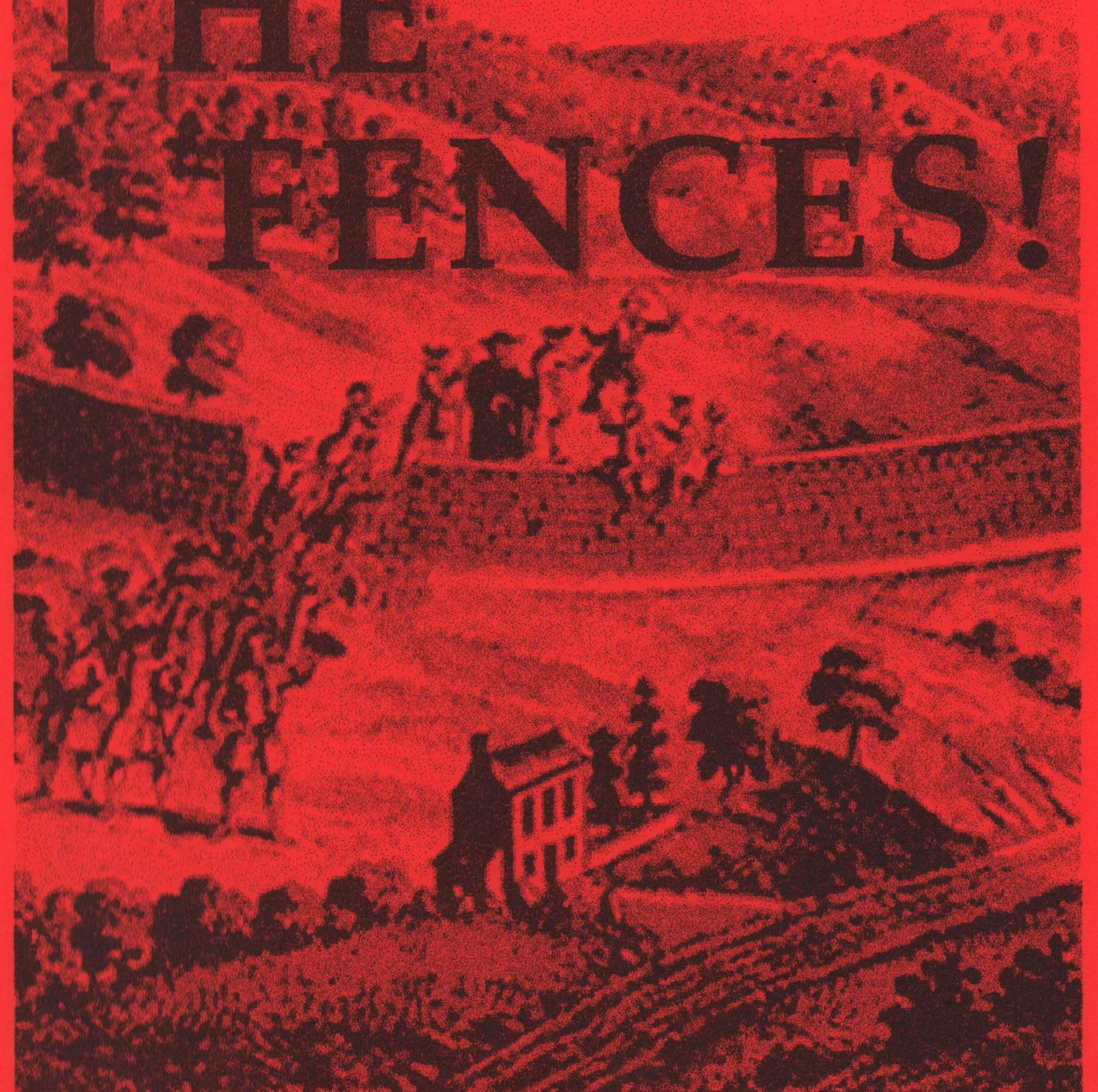


Most of the open spaces - commons, woods, greens - that exist in South London remain today because they were preserved from development by collective action. Whether by rioting, tearing down fences & re-opening up enclosed land, or by legal agitation, many of the commons & parks we know and love would have been lost if they hadn't been actively defended.

Past Tense Publications

504
P
—

DOWN WITH THE FENCES!



BATTLES FOR THE COMMONS IN SOUTH LONDON

Most of the text of this pamphlet was the basis of a talk at the South London Radical History Group in March 2003.

The South London Radical History Group is a self-organised, anti-hierarchical open forum. We organise talks and discussions ourselves, invite guest speakers and take occasional trips to other parts of the metropolis. History is a living stream not a closed book, and involves the struggles and issues of our own lives as much as the movements and events of the past. Our discussions have ranged from the past to the present and the future, and linked our experiences with others across the years.

We are constantly looking for speakers to come and talk at our meetings, so if you have an interesting subject you can talk about, or a historical walk you can lead, get in touch. We are only based in South London, we're not stuck there! Or bound by arbitrary borders.

If you want to join the mailing list, want more info, or to come and speak, get in touch.

**To contact South London Radical History Group (or the author of this pamphlet)
email: mudlark@macunlimited.net**

**Published by
Past Tense Publications,
producing glimpses of London Radical History
(among other stuff!)
c/o 56 Crampton St, London, SE17.**

DOWN WITH THE FENCES

**"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, or London as a whole, exist because they were preserved from development by collective action. Whether by rioting, tearing down fences & re-opening up enclosed land, or by legal agitation, much of the commons & parks that make life in the Smoke just about bearable wouldn't be there if they hadn't been actively defended.

"Who Steals the Common..."

Between the 16th & the 19th centuries, much of the open land, commons or woods south of the river was enclosed for development, usually by rich landowners or sold off for house building. In many of the commons, local people had traditionally benefitted from customary rights of use, mostly grazing of animals & wood for fuel, but also often sowing of small plots on the fringes of commons for market gardens or feeding themselves.

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 local people had come to exercise some rights. But these rights often had no legal weight, they were part of an unwritten social contract...

As time went on the 'commoners', those with acknowledged customary rights, could become wealthy individuals themselves. Thus later struggles sometimes developed into struggles between different local rich persons. Gradually, as capitalism developed, slowly replacing a society of complex vertical social obligations & custom with one based entirely on profit, the impetus was on for landowners to replace traditional land use with intensive agriculture. This demanded the clearing of woodland & the exclusion of the poor from the commons.

Those deprived not only lost traditional ways of making a living, or in many cases ways of topping up incomes as labourers or craftspeople; they were experiencing the change in class relations at first hand, losing everything but the ability to sell their labour... "In an increasingly legalistic age, an unwritten agreement counted for little in the face of the new law ..."

"Forbeare to hunt, chace, molest or hurt the king's staggess..."

This process of course did not take place without massive upheavals. Traditional rights of access to the commons had always been a battleground, not a happy interdependence between landowner and tenants. One of the biggest areas of dispute was poaching; especially in royal wood-



DEER HUNTERS (IE POACHERS), 1720

lands, the lower classes were banned from catching many animals, reserved for hunting by aristos. Game Acts, like that of 1671, reserved hunting for the rich and titled, banning even the possession of nets, snares, even certain types of dogs. As the poor's diet was often short of meat, poaching was always widespread. In many areas it transcended an individual survival technique & grew into mass collective resistance, as in Windsor Great

Park or Cannock Chase, where large numbers would go disguised to poach en masse. In South London, Dulwich Wood (much larger than the woods of that name that survives) was a royal playground: locals were ordered to "forbeare to hunt, chace, molest or hurt the king's staggess with greyhounds, hounds, gunnes or any means whatsoever". Well that's sorted then. No poaching here.

LEVELLERS AND DIGGERS

The first great wave of enclosures of the commons took place in the late

16th to mid 17th centuries. Pressures for greater profits had already led to the seizure of lands owned by the monasteries by forward-looking nobles & the rising richer peasantry. Kicking thousand off the commons, however, meant they kicked back. Already in 1549, there had been mass rebellion in Norfolk & elsewhere against enclosures. As enclosure increased, so did resistance to it. 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, & breaking open enclosures. Interestingly this was where the names of Levellers & Diggers were seemingly first adopted or used to describe these poor rebels. Later of course these names would assume huge political significance.

SYDENHAM COMMON: "Above 500 poore house holders... greatly relieved by the sayde Common."

As part of this wave of rebellion, a long anti-enclosure fight was beginning for Sydenham Common.

Sydenham Common no longer exists: it covered a large area between modern Sydenham and Forest Hill. The battle against enclosure began around 1605, as a local squire, Henry Newport, attempted to fence a large part of the common off for 'improvement'. At this time there were 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: "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."

After years of inconclusive legal wrangling, Newport and his allies tried to violently evict the poor and enclose the land around 1614. Locals apparently led by the vicar of Lewisham, Abraham Colfe, tried legal methods of challenging this, going to court & marching en masse to petition the king in 1614. But although the court in fact ruled the enclosure illegal, Newport wouldn't budge: this led people to adopt the preferred tactic of tearing down his fences and filling in his ditches. Every time he put fences up again crowds gathered to break them down. Their men "drave out and killed sundry of the cattell of the inhabitants." But the locals fought pitched battles & successfully, at least for a while, prevented the enclosure taking root. Eventually the Privy Council ruled that the enclosures were illegal & put a stop to them in 1615. Part of the reason why local

vicar and other landowners opposed the enclosure was the prospect of skint evicted squatters becoming a burden on the taxpayers of the parish! Colfe's more legal approach was obviously an attempt to tone down the violent resistance of local squatters. Not for the last time, legal and violent tactics ran in parallel.

BARNES STORMING

Around the same time, a similar process was underway on Westwood Common, in Barnes. The monastery that owned the Common had been dissolved in

1531; since then a struggle had been taking place between locals determined to maintain rights to common pasturing, while new landowners attempted to enclose land to improve it, ie increase its productivity and thus its profitability. In 1614 a new owner enclosed the whole common, digging ditches and removing cattle. 100 villagers marched to petition the king, and a court hearing eventually reversed the enclosure.

Enclosures were 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 against the rising merchant & improving classes. In this power struggle, pressure could sometimes be



**THE EXTENT OF SYDENHAM COMMON ON A MODERN MAP,
SHOWING HOW COMPLETELY IT HAS DISAPPEARED.**

put on the authorities, to stop enclosures. There was also an ideological divide: protecting the poor against too-extreme exploitation as part of a paternalist, vertically interdependent society opposed to ruthless destruction of social ties that could lead to mass upheaval.

RICHMOND PARK:

'diverse outrages and disorders'

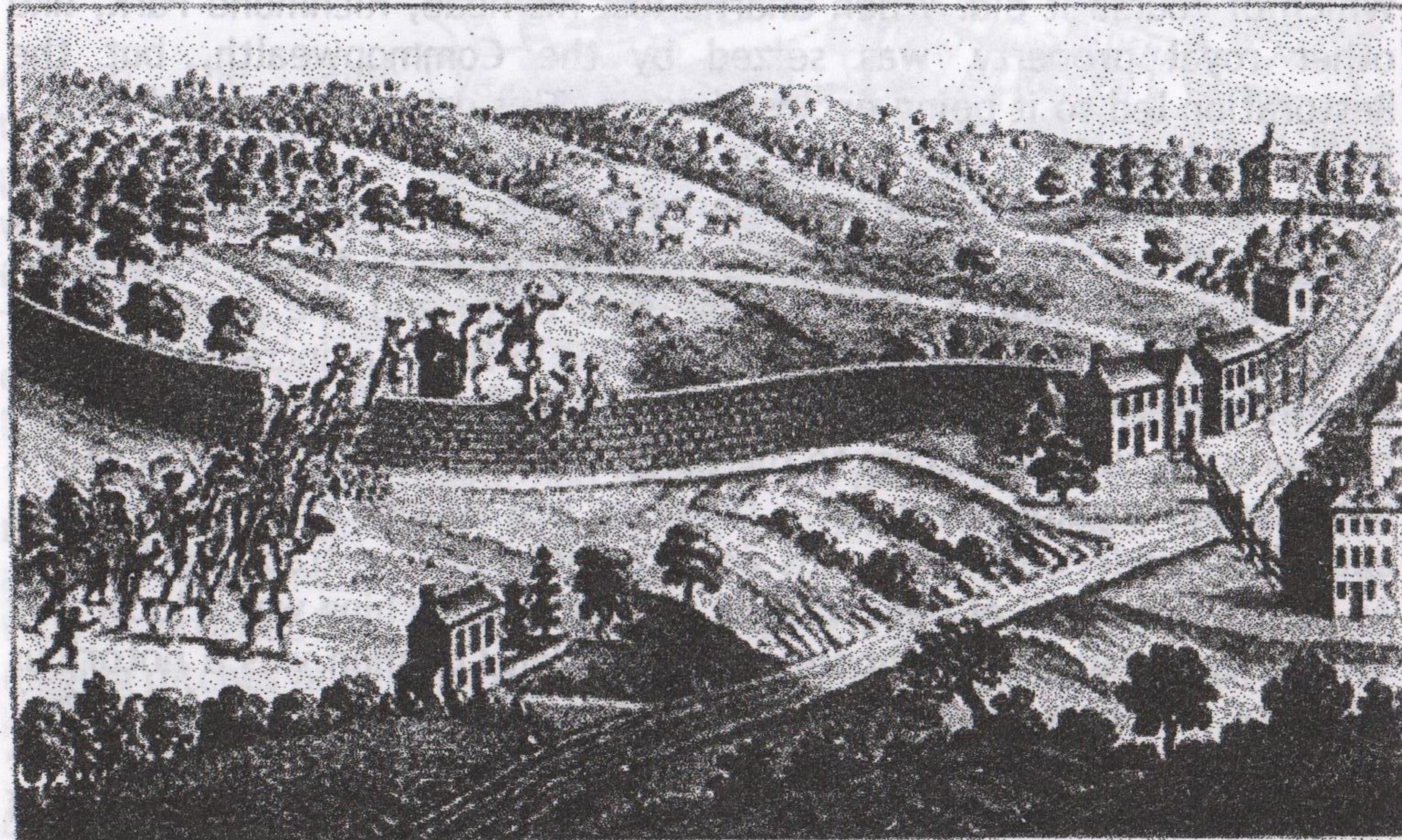
Ruling out some enclosures by lesser mortals didn't stop king Charles I from trying his hand at enclosure: always short of cash, he not only attempted to raise money through agricultural improvement, but was also fond of creating vast new hunting parks. In the 1620s he established Richmond Park by simply seizing common land from several parishes (Richmond, Petersham, Mortlake & small bits of Kingston and Putney Commons were enclosed) & even annexing property from wealthy landowners. Locals lost access to wood cutting & other fuels, to water supplies, grazing land. Even the king's supporters thought this a bad move: one advised him that such behaviour was likely to bring about rebellion. Which of course it did. When Charlie lost his head, Richmond Park, like other royal property, was seized by the Commonwealth, but the Restoration led to it being enclosed again. This grievance burned locally for over 100 years.

In the 18th century, the Park was farmed out to rich politicians & royals, who took the post of 'Park Ranger', which guaranteed a large income for them (around £6,500 a year, a huge sum then) and the crown. Prime Minister Robert Walpole (a master of using offices to increase his vast wealth) effectively held the position (his son was officially the Ranger), and resisted calls to allow access to the park. The park became a resort of the nobility and royalty, let in on a ticket or key system: commoners were excluded. Ladders over the walls were replaced by man-traps (ouch!) As the park was full of deer, rabbits and hares, poaching was a local way of life, especially as neighbouring Wimbledon Common was a notorious haunt of poachers, deer-stealers & robbers. The enclosure of the Park stepped up these struggles to bitter heights: between 1723 and 1725 there was a mini-war between deer-stealers & gamekeepers, involving arson of keepers' houses, and 'diverse outrages and disorders'. At least 2 poachers were executed. John Huntridge, landlord of the Halfway House Inn on the wall of the Park, near Robin Hood Gate, was charged with harbouring deerstealers, but he was acquitted, to popular acclaim. Walpole backed

the case against Huntridge - the landlord's acquittal was widely seen not only as a local matter but as one in the eye for the rotten system of patronage and legal extortion Walpole and his class exercised through their control of public offices.

"He was unwilling to leave the world in a worse state than he found it."

The next Ranger of Richmond Park was Princess Amelia, a particularly snotty royal. Under her Rangership, the simmering local hostility broke into the open. On May 16th 1751, a crowd of parishioners from one of the parishes expropriated by the enclosure, (as in Sydenham, led by the vicar - South London vicars must have been cut from a different quarry in them days!), broke into the park, claiming they were 'Beating the Bounds' of the parish (the old ceremony for marking out the boundaries). This was tantamount to asserting their rights of access to the old commons. Further break-ins followed. The agitation of the 1750s was led by T. Bennet, a shoemaker, & John Lewis, a local brewer & later printer. Lewis was a stropy character, described as being *"unwilling to leave the world in a*



PARISHIONERS, LED BY THE VICAR, BEAT THE BOUNDS OF THEIR PARISH AND ASSERT THEIR RIGHT OF WAY INTO RICHMOND PARK BY BREAKING DOWN THE WALL! PROBABLY 1751.

worse state than he found it." In 1755 Lewis forced his way through the gate, was kicked out, & brought a case against Princess Amelia. By 1758, he had obtained a verdict opening up the park's paths as rights of way; but folk start to wander the whole park, declaring it in common. (Initially carriages only were let in on a ticket scheme, but mass forgery of tickets resulted!) Lewis' printing business in fact went broke due to his legal campaign (any connection between this and mass forgery of tickets?), but in his poverty was helped out by Richmond residents who had a whipround to provide a small annual grant for him. Aaah!

SYDENHAM AGAIN

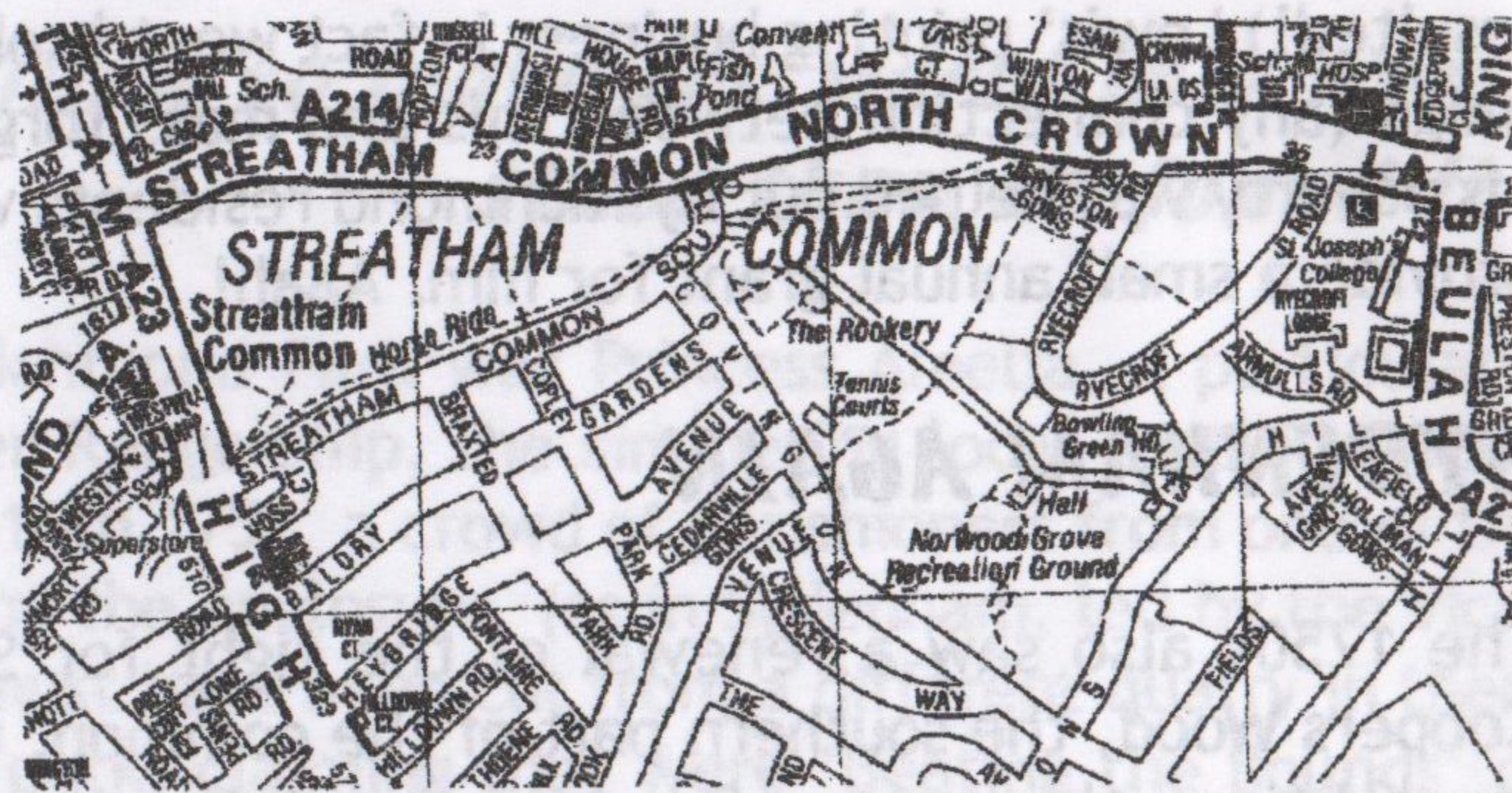
The 1750s also saw a renewal of the fight for Sydenham Common. In Coopers Wood, the southern part of the common, the commoners in 1754 several times threw down fences and reclaimed rights of access and gathering fuel etc. Cooper's Wood had first been illegally enclosed around 1540, an act disputed locally for centuries. One target of these agitators was George Thornton, landlord of the Greyhound Inn, a tenant of Coopers Wood, whose fences were destroyed. This seems to have been only one of a succession of such incidents in the Wood. A year later, there was a legal case involving the denial of rights to collect wood in Colson's Wood, the area north of the old Common.

Four decades later, a last ditch stand seems to have taken place in Colson's Wood. In 1792, Michael Bradley and others broke in to assert their traditional rights to cut wood, which had been held 200 years and more. Samuel Atkinson, who had enclosed the land, selling building plots on the new main road, met them & warned them off, threatening them. He then shot Bradley dead. Although the case caused uproar, it seems to have marked almost the end of a near-200 year struggle for common rights here: Sydenham Common was enclosed finally around 1812.

The 1790s to the early 19th century saw the next great wave of enclosures taking place in the London area. The long war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France increased pressure for land to grow food, as the country faced economic blockade. Commons were also appropriated for drilling of troops and citizen volunteer brigades: fear of invasion but also fear of a radicalised and hungry working class at home caused the gentry and better off middle class to arm themselves and their lackeys.

HERE COME THE MEN IN BLACK...

On Streatham Common, the local poor had long had the right to cut furze (gorse bushes) for fuel. The Lord of the Manor, the Duke of Bedford, began around this time to strip the furze to sell for profit, depriving the commoners of their customary rights. He also enclosed part of the land here... In response in 1794 a mob of local residents burnt the furze before he could collect it; simultaneously, "6 men dressed in black" drove up in a hackney carriage and demolished his paled enclosure. The sinister way this is described is worth relating to the climate of the times - respectable folk were terrified by Jacobin Terror in the French Revolution, and by reformers and fear of rowdy mobs at home. Home-grown radicals like the London Corresponding Society were getting crowds of thousands to mass rallies calling for political change and opposing war with Revolutionary France. Sadly a strip of land on Streatham Common was enclosed around 1880, despite opposition.



WE'RE WITH THE WOOLWICH

In May 1802 Woolwich Common was partly enclosed by the Board of Ordnance as a drilling ground for troops, and cottages and other small plots were cleared away and furze eradicated. The sale was voted for by the Board of Ordnance: the government paid £3000 for it. However a surveyors report in 1809 asserted that the Manor of Woolwich had always belonged to the Crown anyway! Local historian WT Vincent reckoned this a good deal for the Board, but his dealings in the Plumstead affair (see below) show where his sympathies lay. Gradually the Common was more & more encroached upon. A Woolwich Committee formed later which campaigned & negotiated to preserve access to the remainder: though it is still MOD property.

DOING THE SOUTH LAMBETH WALK

There are records of enclosures around 1806 for South Lambeth Common, around modern-day Stockwell tube station (squatters seem to have been evicted to make way for 'development' of the land). Around the same time, Croydon & Lambeth Inclosure Acts enclosed large parts of the old Great North Wood. In Norwood & Gipsy Hill, expelling the remainder of the Romany camps that gave Gipsy Hill its name. The Romany had long suffered constant harassment here from local authorities; in 1797, they fought a pitched battle with the constables between Penge & Norwood.

UNDERGROUND, OVERGROUND...

1812 saw the renewal of a long struggle on Wimbledon Common. In the 18th century locals had rights of access at certain times of the year, to cut wood & graze animals, & to cut peat & loam to sell, which had been the source of struggles between them & landowners for years. An attempt at enclosure in the late 17th century by the then Lord of the Manor had been prevented by a bloke called Russell. Around 1723 there was unrest in the area, when the Duchess of Marlborough bought the manor and attempted to curtail commons rights. Until the 19th century the many oak pollards on the Common provided winter fuel for many local folk. In 1812, the Lord of the Manor broke commons agreement by cutting them all down and selling the timber, causing protests. Effectively stripping the common of trees deprived commoners of their right to this wood. The poor of the parish were still allowed to cut furze in the winter, and freehold and copyhold tenants had the right to graze cattle. many disputes arose over gravel-digging and cutting peat and loam: Commoners objected to the Lord's wholesale pillaging of the Common.

Struggles over Wimbledon Common would break out again in the 1860s...

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF ANTI-ENCLOSURE STRUGGLES

As the 19th 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 huge numbers of people, especially working people, often crowded into badly built housing tightly packed

together. Further out, the suburbs were starting to appear, where better built houses were springing up for the expanding middle classes. These developments led to the disappearance of many commons, woods and fields around the city and many open spaces within it.

As the century went on the nature of struggles over space began to change. In the 17th & 18th 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. But landowners' power began to decline after the repeal of the Corn Laws (which had prevented imports of grain, to the profit of British landowners) in 1846: free trade in food struck at their control of food prices and hit the value of agricultural land.

From the 1830s on, the pressure was for land for development, mostly for housing, whether built by the landowner or the land being sold off. From the 1840s there was also the rapid expansion of railways: much open land and also poor housing was devastated in the laying of lines. Big South London landowners like the Spencer family saw opportunities in flogging off tracts of land for housing developments.

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 people's after work activities became important.

PARKLIFE

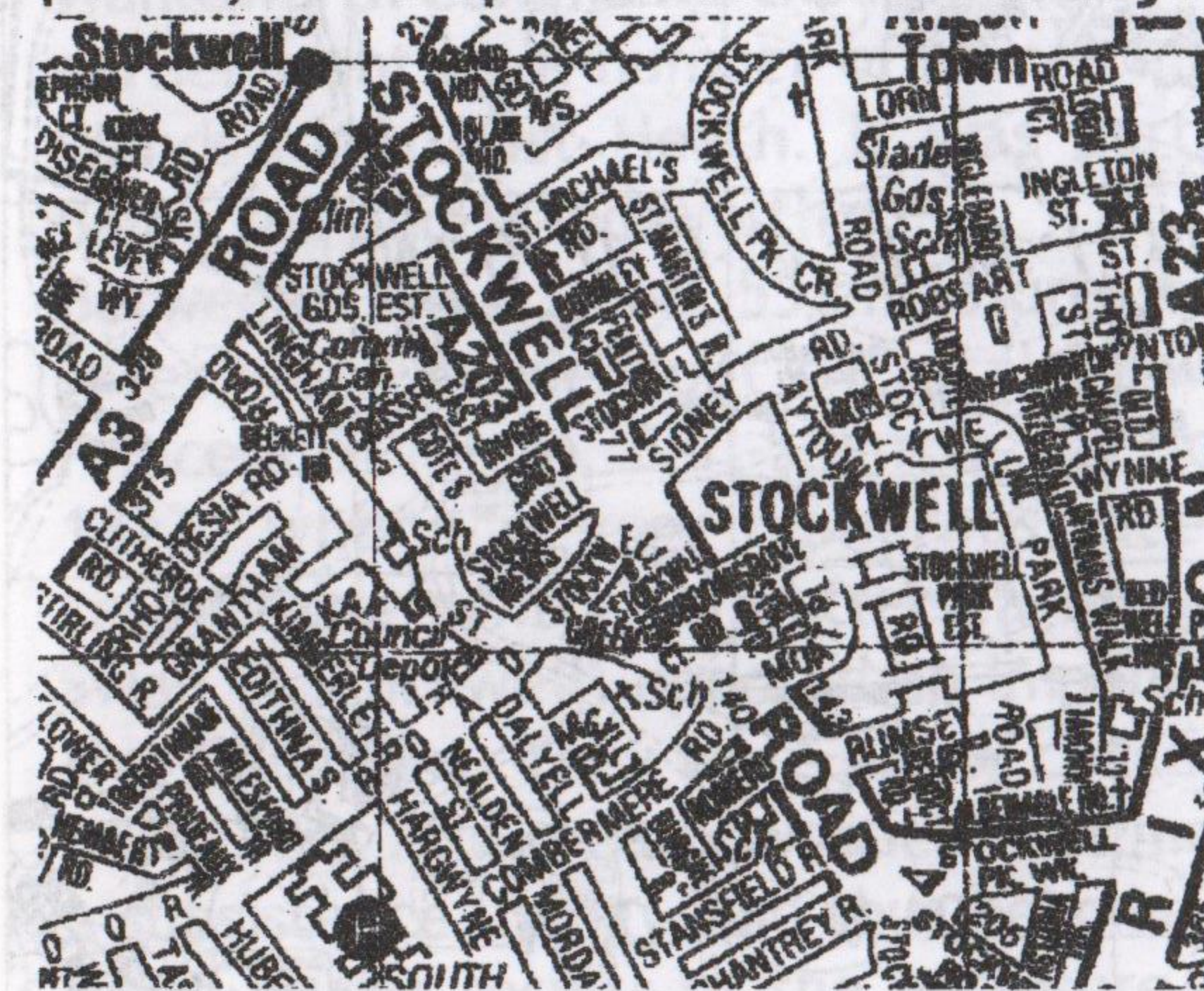
By the 1850s and 1860s, 'concerned social reformers' were articulating the need for urban parks, to relieve the stress and overcrowding of the city for the millions packed into built up areas. This led to the movement to create parks as 'lungs' for the city. One vision of this movement was that landscaped parks would improve the morals of the poor, by encouraging them to appreciate the finer things. A flip side was the conversion of some open spaces that were seen as trouble spots, meeting places for unruly plebs, into respectable parks fit for the middle and aspiring working classes. Some of the Committee that pushed through the creation of Victoria Park in East London, for instance, hoped that landscaping a pre-

vious haunt of Chartists and rioting radicals would have a gentrifying effect on the neighbourhood. In South London, Battersea Fields, until the 19th century a place of bawdy working class recreation, including animal fairs, stalls, drinking etc, became Battersea Park. Local vicar Reverend Fallon proposed building of the modern park to encourage the poor to reform and "become orderly". As part of this process in 1852 all persons 'trespassing' on the park with animals or barrows were ordered to be nicked. Kennington Common, long a mass meeting place for working class radicals(eg the last great Chartist rally in 1848), was also enclosed into a landscaped & policed park in the 1850s: again the vicar of local St Marks Church was instrumental in forcing through the enclosure. However this often only moved the 'disorderly crowds' elsewhere. In 1852, there were protests from the wealthy folk around Clapham Common about the class of people using the common, rowdy crowds having moved here from recently fenced in Kennington Common.

STOCKWELL GREEN

At Stockwell Green, the old green was used by locals for recreation - often rowdy. In the 17th Century Stockwell had been infamous as a smugglers' stronghold, and had a long history of defying authority. As the area got posher, more up market residents objected to the 'nuisance' caused by plebs on the green. In the 1850s, Barret, a local gent, bought it up, built railings & planted it. Locals broke down the fence to resume their partying. In 1855 a toffs' committee erected a new fence, excluding the public. Eventually a case went to court in 1874, but the green was built over and lost.

But the old spirit dies hard: in March 1990, as we rioted against Lambeth Council setting the Poll Tax, we danced and turned over cop cars in Stockwell Road, as anti-poll tax banners fluttered from the windows of the squat on the site of the Green. The Green will rise again!



THE 1860s...

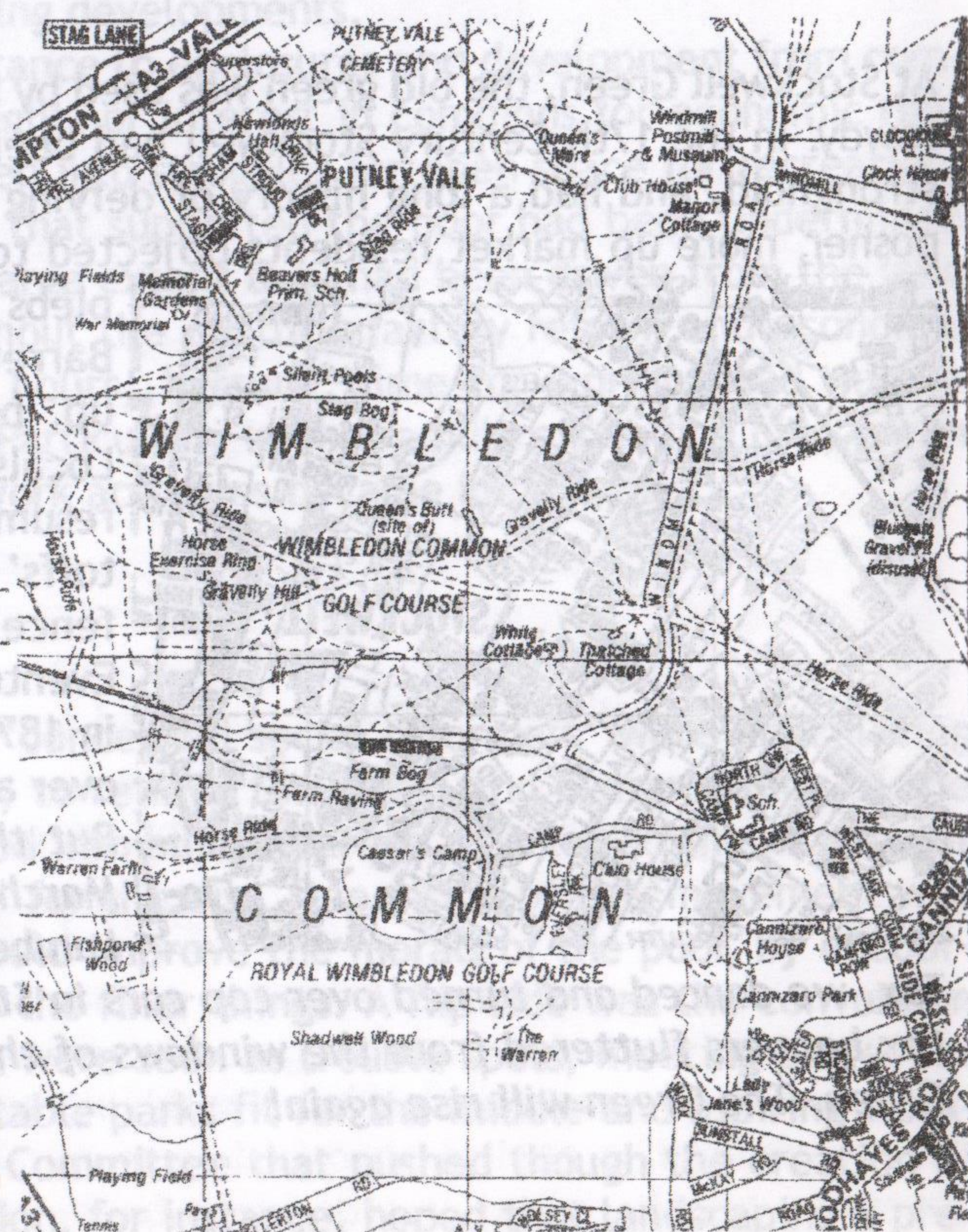
& THE COMMONS PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Crucial to many of the struggles from the 1860s was the passing of a General Inclosure Act of 1845, which meant two-thirds of the commoners had to agree to a common being enclosed, and the desirability of enclosure had to be shown when in the vicinity of a town. The Act opened the door for legal challenges to enclosures, and over the next twenty years, many green spaces were saved in this way.

WOMBLING FREE

The aristocratic Spencer family (ancestors of Princess Di) were Lords of the Manor in Wimbledon, Wandsworth, Putney and much of South West London. They were probably South London's biggest enclosers.

In 1864, Earl Spencer announced he had decided to sell 300 acres of Wimbledon Common & enclose the 700 remaining. It seems he had the idea that it should be made into a park. He claimed the land was "boggy" and "noxious mists and fogs" arose from it and "great nuisance was caused by gypsies" who camped on it. He was opposed by wealthier commoners, who refused his proposals to buy out their rights, claiming their consent was needed over any changes to the Common. Spencer claimed to be acting in the interests on local people, and didn't



feel the Commoners had any right to interfere with his plans for his land. Big mistake!

The Earl failed in his plans to buy out the Commoners: they formed a Wimbledon Common Committee, led by Henry Peek (of biscuit manufacturing family Peek Frean!), to fight the Earl in court. The struggle was very much led by affluent residents. In 1870 by asserting common rights they forced a settlement & Earl Spencer gave the land to a trust which managed the land 'for the public', to keep it open as a public green space.

Leading members of the Wimbledon committee were instrumental in 1865 in setting up the Commons Preservation Society, a committee of the great and good to oppose enclosure of commons nationally. The CPS was involved in many of the battles to save green spaces in South London in the late 19th century. While their actions were aimed at lobbying and court battles, they often went in tandem with more unofficial mass actions. 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.

PEEK AND SPENCER

Wandsworth Common is the remains of more extensive commonland which earlier went by a number of names including Battersea West Heath and Wandsworth East Heath. It was part of the wastes of the Manor of Battersea and Wandsworth.

Between 1794 & 1866, 53 enclosures reduced its size; most of the enclosures were carried out by local bigwigs the Spencer family (later of Princess Di fame). Earl Spencer's actions sparked protests in December 1827, when "a very numerous meeting of the most affluent and respectable gentry" of Battersea, Wandsworth and Clapham (held at the Swan in Stockwell) opposed an impending inclosure Bill for the 3 respective Commons. They were partly concerned at threats to their own livelihoods, but also greatly worried that many poor folk would be deprived of a subsistence living - and thus become a burden on the rates! (Much was made of the results of the enclosure of Bexley and Bromley Commons, where ratepayers had ended up paying the price...) The Bill was defeated, but small scale enclosure continued.

The situation in Wandsworth was made worse by the Common being split in 3 by railway lines in the 1840s, & the enclosure of 60 acres for an asylum! At some point in the late 1840s, a Mr Parsons and others broke fences

WANDSWORTH COMMON

**"E'en now the devastation has begun,
And half the business of destruction done."**

To the Inhabitants & Working Men OF WANDSWORTH & BATTERSEA.

Will you allow Bankrupt and Speculating Builders, Land Societies, Beershop Keepers, Railway Companies, Tailors, Gentlemen, and Noble Lords, to rob you and your children of their Common Rights and Footpaths, and the liberty of walking on God's earth, without a struggle? During the last thirty years enclosures have been made by the late Mr. W. Kellar and the late Mr. Wilson, the enclosure for the Telescope, the enclosures by the Railway Companies, the Patriotic School, the St. James's Industrial School, the enclosure by the Prison, the enclosure by Mr. Costeker and Mr. Smith, making a total of upwards of 200 acres! Most of these enclosures have been filched from the Common and resold at an enormous profit.

WHAT'S THE REMEDY? Down with the Fences! Preserve your Footpaths, show Lord Spencer and the Vinegar Men on the Board of Works, who have neglected their duty, that you are determined to maintain your rights like true Liberals and keep them like true Conservatives

Follow the Noble Example of Mr. Augustus Smith, who destroyed three miles of Fence on Barkhamstead Common; the Men of Winton who broke down the Fences erected by the Earl of Galloway; The Men of Buckinghamshire who broke down the Fences on Northall Common; the Men of Surrey who broke down the Fences on Shalford Common, and so Preserve their Rights!

Men of Battersea and Wandsworth, GO AND DO THOU LIKEWISE!

Cursed is he who removeth his neighbour's Landmark, and robbeth the poor of his inheritance and joineth land to land to increase his riches.

DOWN WITH THE FENCES!

**A POSTER PUT UP AROUND WANDSWORTH, IN 1870,
CALLING FOR DIRECT ACTION AGAINST ENCLOSURES.**

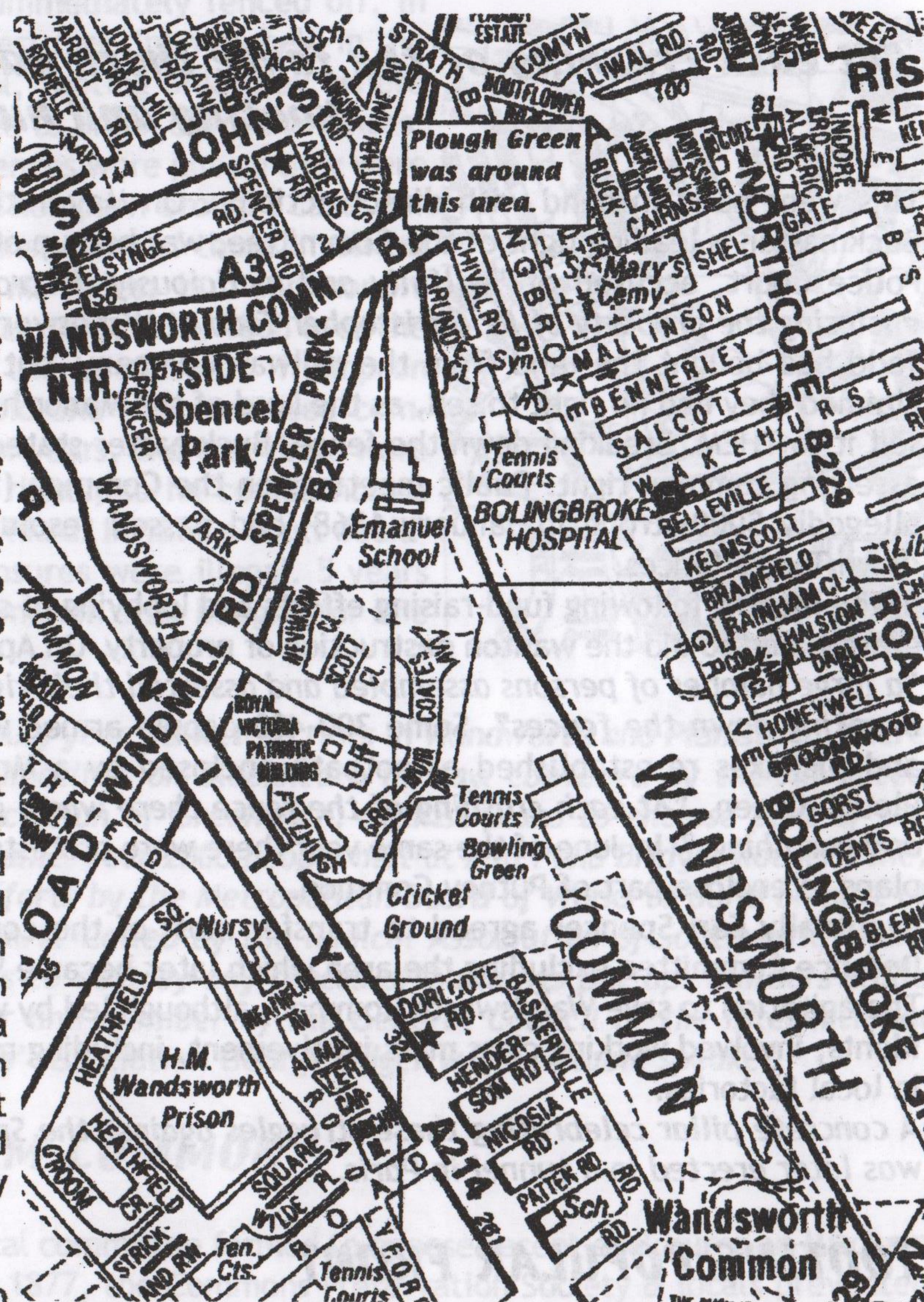
and were charged, but the case was dismissed, possibly on the grounds that they were asserting a traditional right of access.

Attempts by local people to preserve the Common against further encroachment began in earnest in 1868 when appeals were made to the Metropolitan Board of Works to take over responsibility, following the Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866, but this was initially unsuccessful.

The East Common was the centre of a fierce struggle in the 1860s.

Mr Kellar, who owned land on the Common south of Bellevue road, claimed he had to enclose it to stop gypsies camping there & ruining it, but it came out that he had supplied them with booze & then kicked up a fuss when they got pissed & had a rowdy party. Sneaky!

In 1869, 2000 people pulled down enclosure fences where Chivalry Road is now, and the



following year Henry Peek (see Wimbledon Common) got a Common Defence Committee (later the Wandsworth Common Preservation Society) together to save the land threatened with development by the Spencers. Large public meetings were held in Wandsworth, Putney and Battersea. The Committee fought an unsuccessful legal battle that April over Plough Green (now Strathblaine Road, Vardens Road, off St Johns Hill).

"At each crashing of the fence there was a great hooting and hurrahing."

This went hand in hand with direct action... On May 14th 1869, John Buckmaster, a leading light of the Committee, was had up at Wandsworth Police Court, accused of "wilfully and maliciously destroying a fence enclosing the property of Mr Christopher Todd at Wandsworth Common." Todd had bought the land from the railway Company, but campaigners claimed they had no right to sell, as the Lord of the Manor had no right to sell it to THEM. Breaking down the fence, Buckmaster stated that he was asserting common right. Public meetings on the Common (including one allegedly 5000-strong in January 1868) had passed resolutions to tear down Todd's fences.

In the months following fund-raising efforts and lobbying of support accelerated. And so did the wanton destruction of property. On April 13th 1870, "a large number of persons assembled and asserted their right of way by breaking down the fences". Some 300-400 people armed with hatchets and pickaxes re-established a footpath enclosed by a Mr Costeker at Plough Green. "At each crashing of the fence there was a great hooting and hurrahing." In June of the same year there were protests at Spencer's plans to enclose part of Putney Common.

Eventually Earl Spencer agreed to transfer most of the common to the Defence Committee excluding the area which later became Spencer Park. The agitation to save Wandsworth Common, although led by wealthier residents, involved working class mass involvement, including mass meetings in local factories.

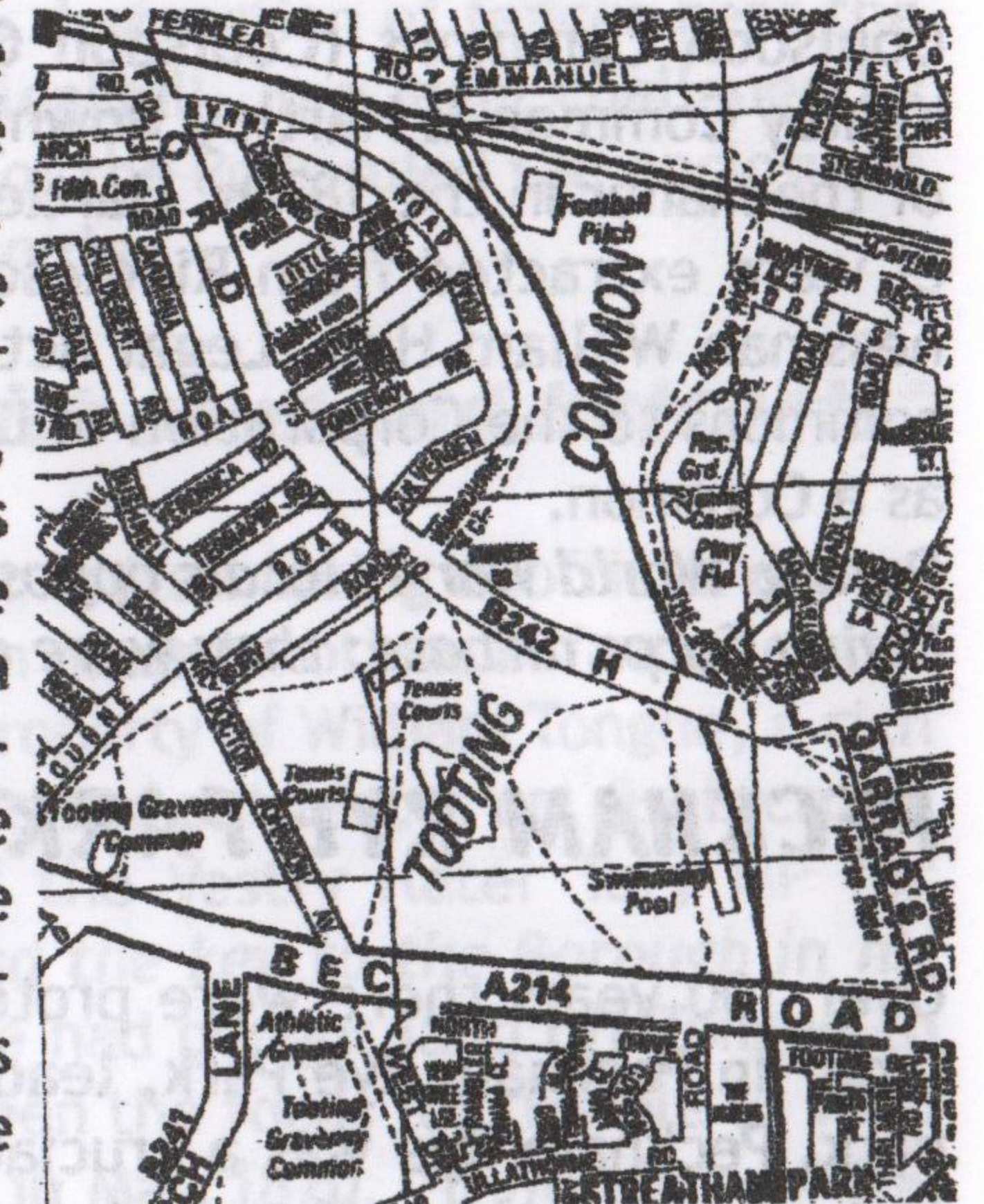
A concrete pillar celebrating these struggles against the Spencer family was later erected in a tunnel in Paris.

TOOTING POPULAR FRONT

In 1794 there had been 'local troubles' in Tooting: residents rioted when

landowner Lady Pitches fenced in the Village Green.

So local gent WS Thompson ought to have known better, when, having bought Tooting Graveney Common from the Duke of Bedford in 1861, he started proceedings to enclose the land. Thompson was originally thought locally to have opposed enclosure: for this reason other anti-enclosure locals didn't bid against him at the sale. He was a bit dodgy though: 25 acres were immediately fenced off. In 1868, a protest meeting was held in the Infant School, Tooting Broadway, where locals decided to break down the fences. Every time fences were put up they were torn down. Thompson brought cases for trespass against some of those involved, including a Mr Miles: but commoners filed a counter-suit in July 1868 over the legality of the enclosure. Thompson maintained no-one had exercised common rights for years, and that there were no freehold rights, so he could enclose whatever he liked. In 1870 a court decided the enclosures were illegal. 5 years later the Common was bought for the public.



1870 was a busy year. As well as riots in Wandsworth and Plumstead, there were mass meetings on Blackheath in May, convened by the Advanced Liberal Association of Greenwich, against plans to enclose part of the heath. The same year 2000 people met at Mill Pond Bridge, Rotherhithe, to oppose efforts by the Metropolitan Board of Works to build on part of Southwark Park. Called by the Radical Association of Southwark, there were threats to destroy any fences or buildings put up. Builders trade Union leader and member of the General Council of the International Workingmans' Association George Odger was a notable speaker.

MITCHAM COMMON

In 1868 a local committee formed to oppose recent enclosures on Mitcham Common. In 1877, the Commons Preservation Society & locals prevented the London-Brighton Railway from building across the Common, & defeated Croydon Local Board's plans for a sewage works there. The following

year another committee protested against the Lord of Manor's gravel digging operations. In 1890, there were protests against enclosures & gravel digging. These led to an Act to protect the Common.

COUL FOR CATS

Coulsdon Commons (Coulsdon Common, Riddlesdown, Farthing Down, Kenley Common & Hartley Down) saw enclosures by Edmund Byron, Lord of the Manor in the 1870s. Hartley Down was fenced off, and turf & gravel were extracted from Riddlesdown. Byron was opposed by local businessman William Hall. Legal action ended in Byron agreeing to sell the commons to the Corporation of London. In Feb 1883 they were dedicated as a Common.

During World War 1, locals opposed the use of Kenley Common for a Royal Flying Corps airbase: they were defeated.

PECKHAM RYE PARK

Over 100 years there were protests against encroachments on common land in Peckham Rye Park, leading to its purchase in 1868 for a public park. Peckham Rye was a crucial local space for mass radical meetings, including meetings of striking gas workers in 1889, and rallies held to organise demos and riots in the One Tree Hill struggle (see below).

PLUMSTEAD COMMON:

"A Series of Wild and Violent Riots"

Plumstead Common belonged to the Provost and Scholars of Queens College, Oxford. Freehold tenants had enjoyed rights of cattle-grazing, and collection of gravel, turf, loam etc for centuries. It was a wild and picturesque place, loved by locals, especially kids. Troops had been allowed to exercise here in the 19th Century, leading to *"the present ruinous condition of the remoter half"* (WT Vincent). In 1816 two plots of land were enclosed where Blendon Road and Bramblebury Road are now. In the 1850s an area between The Slade and Chestnut Rise was sold. There were *"distant rumblings"* in Parish meetings, but no more. Some small plots enclosed on the fringes of the Common were given to poor widows to keep them out of the workhouse, according to Vincent (more to cut expenses to

the ratepayers than from generosity possibly). From 1859 however, the College aggressively pursued a policy of excluding freeholders, asserting they were practically the owners of the waste land. Various encroachments were made, reducing the Common by a third: in 1866 the whole of Bostall Heath and Shoulder of Mutton Green were enclosed.

This led to local outrage, meetings of residents of East Wickham, and the forming of a protest committee, led in March 1866 to the forcible removal of the fences around the Green, and also destruction of fences near the Central Schools around Heathfield and Bleakhill. In a legal challenge by Manor tenants to the College, the Master of the Rolls ruled the enclosures on the Common and Bostall Heath out of order.

"A party of women, armed with saws and hatchets"

'Illegal' encroachments continued though - often facing unofficial demolition by locals. The Plumstead Vestry even passed motions in favour of the demolitions! The main targets were the property of William Tongue, a rich local builder who had bought the land here and put fences up, & his crony, magistrate Edwin Hughes, Chairman of the Vestry (later Tory MP for Woolwich). Hughes was said to have *"had the key to the Borough in his pocket"*, a very powerful man locally. He had bought land off Tongue to add to his garden. Tongue had already been the focus for trouble in 1866 over his enclosing ways. On a Saturday in May 1870, *"a number of the lower class, who were resolved to test their rights"* demolished fences and carried off the wood. *"A party of women, armed with saws and hatchets, first commenced operations by sawing down a fence enclosing a meadow adjoining the residence of Mr Hughes..."* Fences belonging to William Tongue were pulled down. There was talk of pulling down Hughes' house as well. Hughes called the coppers, and some nickings followed. The next day 100s of people gathered and attacked fences put up by a Mr Jeans. When the bobbies arrived many vandals took refuge in the local pubs.

From 1871, the military from nearby barracks took over large sections for exercises and drilling, as Woolwich Common was too small and swampy: the squaddies soon trashed the place, stripping all the grass and bushes and brambles. Protests followed, but nothing changed.

In 1876, Queens College decided to lease the greater part of the common permanently to the army for extensions to the Woolwich Barracks/parade grounds. Local people, including many workers from Woolwich Dockyard, objected to the plans; notices appeared around the town in late June call-



John de Morgan.

ing for a demonstration. The main organiser of the demo was John de Morgan, an Irish republican & agitator, who had been involved in struggles against enclosures in Wimbledon (in 1875) & Hackney. De Morgan seems to have been a charismatic (or self-publicising) and provocative figure, a freelance editor, orator & teacher, who had been driven out of Ireland for trying to start a Cork branch of the International Workingmens Association (the First International). He had long been a Secularist and Republican, but fell out with some radicals and other Secularists. He had founded a Commons Protection League.

"I Never saw a Scene So Disorderly and Lawless"

On July 1st over 1000 people held meetings in the Arsenal Square and the *Old Mill* pub, marched up to the north side of the Common (around St Margaret's Grove) and peacefully tore down fences. Again fences belonging to Edwin Hughes and William Tongue were destroyed - the crowds now had added grudges against them. Both had recently been involved in crushing an 1876 strike by local carpenters and bricklayers over pay and piecework, making them doubly hated. Tongue had brought in scabs to break the strike and Hughes prosecuted strikers for leaving work (under the notorious Employers and Workman's Act.) A widely disliked Mr Jacobs, who leased a sandpit off the College, also had fences broken.

The following day (Sunday) a crowd returned to demolish the already rebuilt fences: a police attack led to a battle with stones thrown and fires started. Monday saw more rioting: according to a hostile witness there were 10,000 there on Monday and Tuesday, and *"I never saw a scene so disorderly and lawless."* The furze on Tongue's land was set on fire. While the cops brought it under control, enthusiastic meetings continued.

Although many rioters were costermongers, local coalheavers, labourers from the Woolwich Arsenal (700 men took the day off from one department here to hear a de Morgan speech), many more 'respectable' workmen were up there trashing the fences.

Hughes put pressure on, and John de Morgan and several other organisers were charged with incitement to riot (although de Morgan had not even been present after the July 1st events).

There was clear disagreement locally over methods of saving the Common: obviously the more respectable campaigners plumping for legal means and disapproving of the rioting. Local secularist Robert Forder (another defendant in the Riot trial) also bitterly criticised De Morgan, accusing him of pocketing defence funds. He had previous issues with De Morgan from the Irishman's split with Secularist leader Charles Bradlaugh, who Forder supported.

At the trial, in October 1876 at Maidstone, 3 men including Forder were acquitted, but de Morgan was found guilty. Sentenced to a month in jail, he was unexpectedly released early: a planned 20,000-strong march to demand his release turned into a mass celebration with bands. Effigies of Hughes and *Kentish Independent* journalist (and later historian of the area) WT Vincent, who had given evidence against de Morgan, were burned on the Common at the Slade. Hughes also sued the liberal *Woolwich Gazette* and the *Man of Kent* newspapers for printing de Morgan's 'libellous' speeches.

In the aftermath of the riots, the constitutional campaigners stepped up their negotiations with the Queens College, in an attempt to prevent further rioting. The upshot was that the Metropolitan Board of Works bought Plumstead Common for £16,000, and remains a public open space.



LOCALS TEARING DOWN FENCES ON PLUMSTEAD COMMON, 1876. YEEHAW!

Rob Allen in his "Battle for Plumstead Common" reckons that the local structures of power were undergoing change, and that the struggle over the Common was also a focus for class resentment and other disputes. However, local gentry also opposed the enclosures (while not supporting the rioting) for their own reasons, it was not simply a division along class lines. This can usually be found in many of the anti-enclosure movements mentioned here: they were rarely unified in tactics, or even in their motives for opposition.

AND ELSEWHERE...

Other open spaces in the South London area saved from being enclosed or built on in the late 19th century include:

Hilly Fields: Between 1875 and 1896, a long public (largely middle class) agitation, led mainly by Octavia Hill & the Commons Preservation Society (CPS), saved the Fields from development.

Chiselhurst Common: G H Baskomb was the owner of a windmill built in 1796 on common land on Chiselhurst Common. On 20 May 1876 he pulled down the windmill & fenced off the land to sell off for building. But locals kept pulling the fence down at night, every time he put it up. A public meeting threatened legal action against him... Baskomb backed down. In neighbouring Camden Park, the landowner, William Willett, (inventor of putting the clocks back!) tried to enclose the land here: locals defeated the idea and proved it was common land. Ironically in 1920 an attempt by the owners of nearby Petts Wood to sell the wood was prevented by a campaign by locals, who wanted it preserved as a monument to Willett!

Ravensbourne Recreation Ground, Catford: In 1888 the CPS & London County Council prevented Nunhead & Shortlands Railway building a line over the Recreation Ground.

Epsom Downs & Commons: There was opposition to enclosure of a part of the Downs by locals in 1865. The 1866 Metropolitan Commons Act saved it. But in 1888 there were legal actions against the Lord of the Manor & Epsom Grandstand Association over encroachment.

Latchmere Allotments, Battersea: The CPS successfully

opposed the building of houses on wasteland in 1888. They argued the need for open space in a very crowded working class area. They made links with the strong local radical and growing socialist elements in the area, who were powerful in the borough.

Barnes Common: The Local Vestry's attempt in the 1890s to encroach on the Common to extend the cemetery was defeated by the CPS.

Petersham Park: In the 1880s locals in alliance with the Commons Preservation Society defeated a plan to appropriate part of the Park for a vicarage. In 1896, owner Lord Dysart introduced a Private Enclosure Bill, wanting to build on the land. Footpaths were closed & a piece of land reclaimed from the river annexed. Local opposition & CPS pressure led to the Bill's failure.

West Wickham Common: 27 Feb 1890: Lord of the Manor Colonel John Lennard enclosed and sold 20 hectares for building, then put up a "strong unclimbable spiked iron fence". Local popular opinion was against him. The Bromley Commons & Footpaths Preservation Society weighed in... He was eventually forced to sell the land to Corporation of the City of London.

NB: West Wickham & Hayes Commons also saw a Ministry of Transport plan in 1924 to build an arterial road through the woods defeated after local protests.

Croham Hirst, South Croydon: This popular 19th Century recreation spot was owned by Whitgift's Hospital. They tried to flog half of it off for development in 1898. Croydon residents formed a Defence Committee to oppose it, which successfully campaigned to get the local council to buy it for the public.

Croydon Fair Field (off Park Lane) was previously the focus for protest in the 1860s over plans by the Brighton Railway Company to buy it and build a line across it. When Fairgoers rioted in 1868, the authorities used it as an excuse to ban the Fair. Killing two birds with one stone: getting rid of troublesome crowds and making a fast buck.

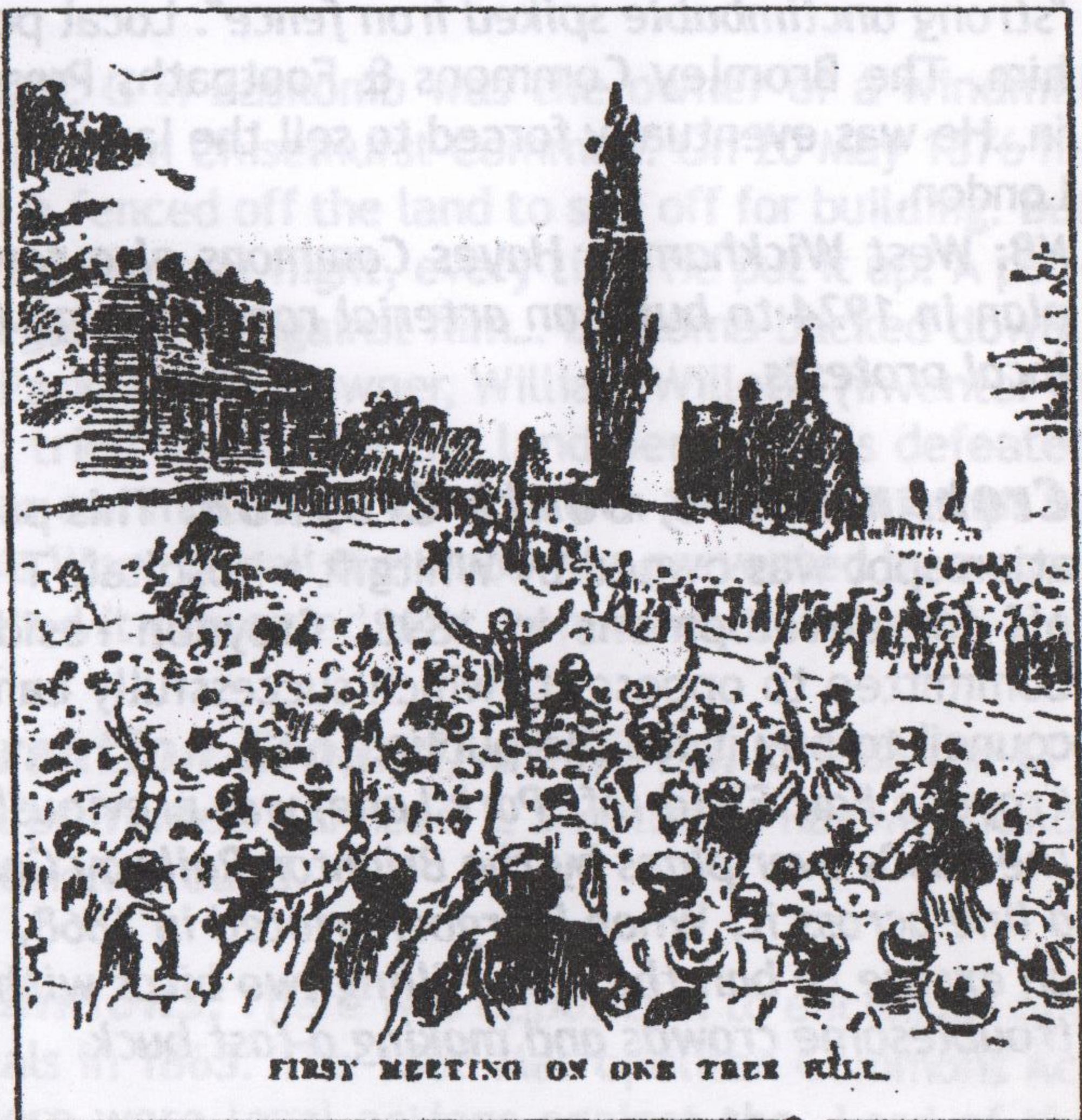
ONE TREE HILL: THE GOLF WAR

Golf, golf, golf: Enemy of freedom.

One Tree Hill, in Honor Oak, had always been an open space, a traditional gathering spot for locals, more recently for recreation. In Autumn 1896 it was suddenly enclosed by a golf club! Locals were understandably pissed off. There followed a large number of protest meetings, in Spring-Summer 1897, many held in the open air on Peckham Rye. Meetings of an "Enclosure of Honor Oak Hill Protest Committee" were held from August in the Samuel Bowley Coffee Tavern, Peckham Rye. They got support from the Commons Preservation Society. They were in the process of collecting evidence about traditional access to the Hill. But there was some unrest in the membership, over the slow progress they were making...

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 2 lads who had broken down part of the fence and 'trespassed' on the hill... children who wandered through a broken section to pick flowers

were also attacked by a fierce guard dog. In October a large protest meeting on the Rye condemned the Club's prosecution, and supported the 2 'trespassers'. Further failed attempts to get the Committee to authorise direct action against the fence led to a resolution at a mass meeting on October 3rd 1897, voting for the removal of the fence the following Sunday... On the 10th, some 15,000 people assembled; after apparently waiting a while for an appointed



demolisher, a section of the crowd in Honor Oak Park pulled down part of the fence. The crowd then rushed onto the hill from Honor Oak Park & 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." I bet it was. Some of the crowd attacked the house of the grounds keeper, (he of the vicious dog?), only the arrival of more cops keeping the crowd 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 also publicly went to pull down a section of fence on October 16th, stating they'd been instructed to do so on behalf of the public. Seems a reasonable defence!

The Golf Club however was still maintaining they had bought the land fair and square from the previous owners.

"a lurid glare upon the upturned faces"

On Sunday the 17th, a very large crowd gathered, obviously expecting trouble. Estimates vary from 50,000 to 100,000 people present! They were faced by 500-odd police, some mounted, patrolling the hill. The filth 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 were hemmed in here, many of who stoned the cops, charging 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.

Meanwhile, the Protest Committee, although condemning the rioting, took advantage of them. In its attempts to persuade the Camberwell & Lewisham Vestries (One Tree Hill being on the border of the two parishes) 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 2 vestries voted to go to court over 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 5 members of the Committee.

Over the next few years, though the riots never revived, the process 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, ask-

ing 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.

It is still a very lovely open space now, definitely worth a visit/picnic, with its great view of London. In 1997, a hand-crafted centenary bench was put up to remember the riots, though it has since vanished. It was from here that the Association of Autonomous Astronauts tried to launch their independent ventures into space in 1999.

Golf of course is the ultimate game of the rich, the powerful, social aspirations, the game of the businessman. the Golf Course is where deals are made, where the upward-looking working class man attempts to slide up the social scale. Joining the Golf Club is the mark of acceptance into the elite. It takes up huge areas of land that would be better left wild, and in many countries, eg Spain as we write, consumes huge water supplies are at the expense of local communities. It is the pits. It really is time to get rid of it.

Other struggles against golf include:

The armed resistance of Mohawk native Canadians in 1990 against attempts to evict them from their tribal lands for the building of a golf course. Barricades across roads, guns, the lot. And heavy sentences.

The Movement Against Golf Courses, active in 11 countries in South East Asia. Golf, even more of a rich man's game in Asia, often involves the clearing of virgin forest, the forced destruction of villages and eviction of their people, the diversion of vital water supplies... 1000s rioted in the late 1980s/early 90s and destroyed golf courses. As Contraflow asked: "How long till we carry this struggle to the Home Counties?"

Transvestite Golf War: A mysterious group who carried out attacks on golf courses in the 1990s. Are they still around? Their country needs them.

ELTHAM AND WOOLWICH COMMONS

Eltham Common: Around 1900, the War Office tried to appropriate the Common to build Army officers' quarters. This, together with mass tree felling led to local protests. The War Office claimed the land wasn't a Common & they were practically the owners. Pressure from residents and the Commons Preservation Society led to War Office backing down.

But shortly after, in 1908, they tried same at Woolwich Common, attempting to enclose 20 acres for officers quarters & a polo ground. The was fierce local opposition, but the War Office landtheftniks cunningly threat-

ened to withdraw military establishments (crucial to the local economy) from the area. As a result the local council gave up, and part of the Common was lost.

WIMBLEDON GREEN

Wimbledon Green was a small piece of land detached from Wimbledon Common. Wimbledon Fair was previously held here (it was suppressed in 1840, at the insistence of Mrs Marryat, whose property lay next door, who said it brought ruffians to the area. Shame.) Some of the Green lay to the east of Parkside, some down by the War memorial. The Green, as well as the open space opposite the Crooked Billet & Old Town Hall, was a local speakers corner for socialists & secularists as well as religious preachers. In 1901 a Development Company claimed all this land. Ironically it was sold by heirs of Henry Peek, the leader of campaign to save the Common in the 1870s! In March 1901 Wimbledon Commons Conservators decided they had no legal grounds to act.

Locals thought otherwise.

Some time in late March or early April, the new fence enclosing the land, guarded by 8 bobbies, was attacked by a crowd of 300-400 people. A bugle sounded, the fence went down and was set on fire with petrol...The cops couldn't put out the fires. 13 perps were charged with its destruction, but the case became one about the right of the Company to erect it in the first place. One of the magistrates was an ex-local Radical, Thomas Arrowsmith Meates. The accused were discharged, as the magistrate held there was no proof the Company had a right to the land. The defendants were carried out on the crowd's shoulders in triumph! In July 1902, a rowdy protest meeting and march on the Green led to a couple of arrests. But despite an ongoing legal challenge, the Company kept building. The council and the Commons Preservators eventually dropped the issue: probably due to a weak case, where there were no obvious common rights.

THE ROOKERY AND NORWOOD GROVE

The Rookery, next to Streatham Common, was put up for sale in 1912; it was preserved for public use by a local committee.

In 1923, the same committee revived to save neighbouring Norwood Grove from development.

RECENT TIMES

In the last 100 years, many open green spaces in South London have been more or less protected from development. The trend towards people moving out from the inner cities into suburbs and surrounding countryside have often pushed the areas of dispute into the green belt. From the 1970s, developers' eyes turned more to gentrification of derelict industrial land and bomb-damaged wasteland. And in the 80s, affluent folk and yuppies started moving back into developments in the inner cities: facing much resistance of course by communities facing destruction, relocation, eviction.

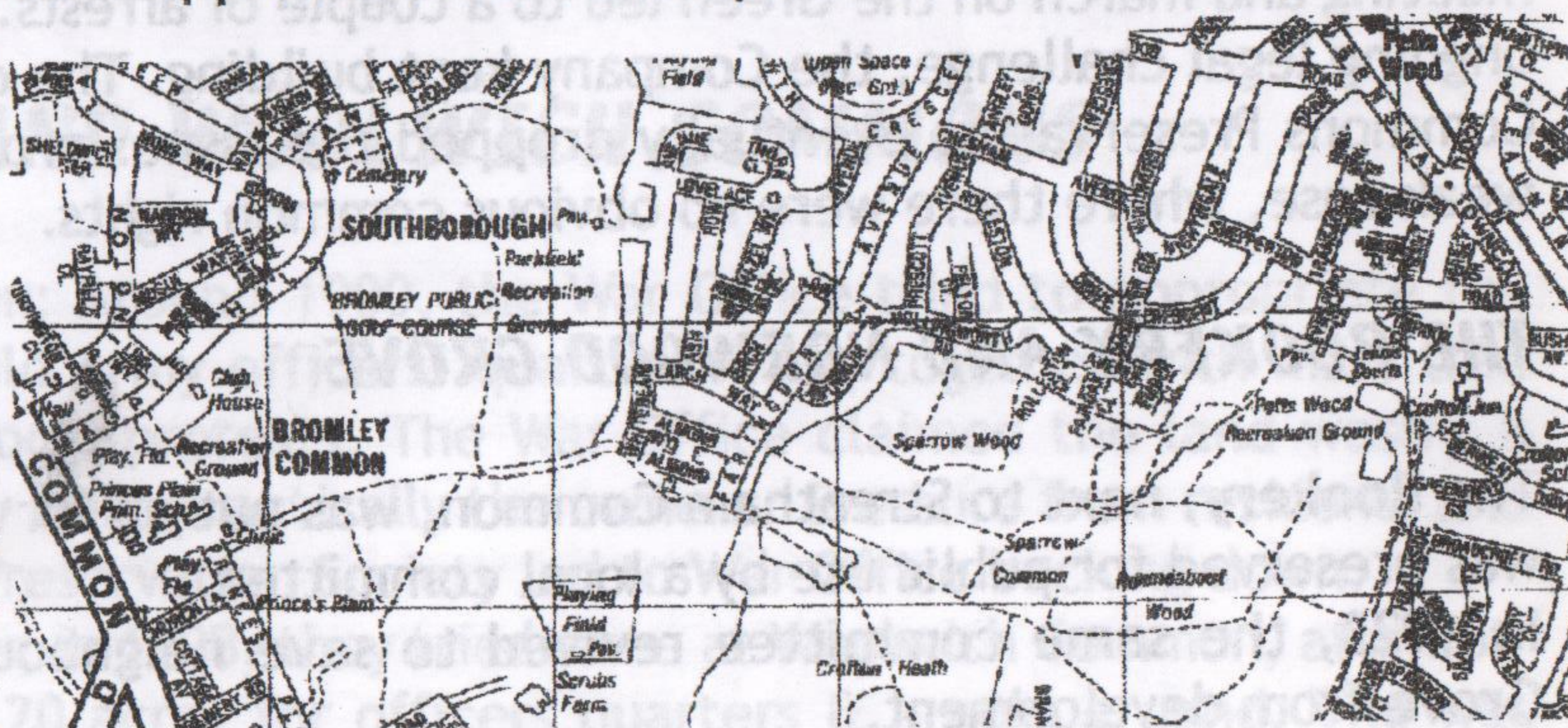
But although there has been less opportunity to build on or develop green open spaces, the vast profits available in London from building office buildings and especially at the moment, housing, still lead to attempted open theft by greedy bastards. As in the past, only active resistance has prevented woods and parks being lost.

Some places have gone, for instance the Pullens Green in Walworth, home of the alternative Pullens Festival in the 1980s; also the wasteland on the site of the old Bricklayers Arms railway off the Old Kent Road, scene of a long battle that is still being fought (over the last small open spaces).

SPARROW WOOD, ROUNDABOUT WOOD & CROFTON HEATH

In 1973-4 local opposition scuppered a plan to develop 139 acres of this woodland near Bromley for housing. Locals campaigned over land between Southborough Lane and Blackbrook Lane, which had been open land for many years. A 1967 application for development was eventually refused.

In **Covet Wood, Petts Wood,** in 1973, residents associations opposed plans to build 60 flats in the Wood. The Wood was bought by the Council instead and preserved as an open space.



Two of the most celebrated victories of recent years in South London were won over open space battles:

OXLEAS WOOD

Proposals (1985-93) to build an East London River Crossing, with a new motorway driven through this very beautiful 8000-year old wood, (as well as 100s of homes being demolished) were defeated by fierce campaigning from locals formed as people Against the River Crossing, & environmentalists. A wide range of methods were used, from Adopt a Tree to a Beat the Bulldozer pledge: 100s of people promising to physically resist destruction of the wood. Spitting distance from Plumstead Common, you didn't think they'd lose? The mass direct action-based resistance to motorway building around the country at the time, especially at Twyford Down, scared the government into backing down in July 1993. Hurray!

CRYSTAL PALACE PARK

Bromley Council's plans to sell off the top end of the park to develop a huge multiplex cinema complex were widely opposed by locals. A broadly based middle class local Crystal Palace Campaign held many meetings, demos, lobbies, etc., and led to strong legal challenges to the plans. In parallel with this campaign, an eco-camp was set up in the threatened part of the park, by people mainly drawn from the anti-roads movement, and occupied for over a year, and treehouses and barricades built. In April 1999, the camp was violently evicted by the police who arrived hidden in double decker buses.

However, the cost of evicting the camp, fighting legal challenges etc, held development off for four years to the point where in May 2003, Bromley Council announced the collapse of the plan. The future of the top of the Park is still the subject of debate...

THE WIDER CONTEXT

The struggles described in this pamphlet were not unique. The history of any area of England through the 16th to the 19th centuries is crowded with thousands of local battles against the enclosure and development of open spaces.

Not surprisingly anti-enclosure struggles reflected class relations, political ideas and movements of the times.

It's debatable to what extent struggles were begun by, or linked, to wider radical movements. This seems to have been partly the case in the later (eg late 19th century) fights: witness the involvement of Secularists and Radicals like De Morgan and Forder at Plumstead Common. It's also worth remembering that the Levellers and Diggers of the 17th Century protested strongly against enclosure: the very names of these groups derive from anti-enclosure movements. The Diggers' whole ideology was tied up with control and ownership of land, and they attempted directly to challenge the landlords' control of common land.

However, one of the most obvious elements in many of the movements that arose to oppose enclosures is their broad, cross-class nature. While most of the rioting and direct destruction of fences etc was carried out by the lower orders, this was not always the case. People of all classes, certainly up till the 19th century, saw enclosures and the loss of access to the commons as breaching a traditional order, a set of social relations, admittedly hierarchical, everyone in their place. In this world-view it was commonly held to be legitimate to defend what many saw as long-established rights using violence. This applied widely in many struggles in the pre-capitalist era, eg bread riots, where crowds would loot bread being sold at what was seen as unfair prices.

Riots and protests against enclosures fitted into a broadly paternalist view of society. There was also clearly a split within the ranks of the better off, as to the rights and wrongs of enclosure. Many parish officials and later ratepayers also clearly saw the effects of the social upheavals enclosures brought. Divorcing people from longstanding means of subsisting from the commons, like small plots of land, rights to graze animals, to collect wood for fuel, etc, only forced them into crime and even rebellion or to seek relief from the parish funds, horror of horrors!

Also, it wasn't just the poor who benefitted economically from access to commons. Many middle class people also opposed the enclosing actions of big landowners, as they encroached on their own interests and later leisure activities. In the later 19th Century, added to this was a belief in the civilising effect of open spaces, properly ordered of course, on the unruly working classes. In a distorted fashion this was almost a return to the paternalism of earlier centuries.

The battles covered here are only the tip of the iceberg. We could have covered any of these campaigns in more detail: we blatantly concentrated on the more interesting & riotous struggles. More research (we're working on it!) will uncover many more struggles against the open theft of our commons.

There are undoubtedly many more of our most beloved open spaces in South London and elsewhere, which would not be there if they hadn't been preserved by legal and illegal means. We should never take them for granted! The campaigns for Crystal Palace and Oxleas Wood show that there's still dark forces out there bent on stealing the woods and commons for profit...

Better still, would be if we could start reclaiming some of the commons nicked from us over the years. When will we begin turning golf courses into woods, office blocks into fields, industrial estates back into wetlands...?

Past Tense Publications
November 2004.

SOME USEFUL READING

BOOKS/PAMPHLETS

Rob Allen, *The Battle For Plumstead Common.*

John Nisbet, *The Story of the One Tree Hill Agitation (1905).*

WT Vincent, *Records of the Woolwich District.*

Gillian Hawtin, *The Battle for Wimbledon Green.*

Anon, *Two Accounts of the making of the New Forest and Richmond New Park , (1751)*

Mario Shoard, *This Land is Our Land.*

**E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters.
Customs in Common.***

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

Lord Eversley, *Commons, Forests and Footpaths.*

Rob Gilbert, *The London Green Way.*

Robert Hunter, *The Preservation of Open Spaces, Footpaths and Other Rights of Way.*

G. Shaw-Lefebvre, *English Commons and Fields.*

Plus numerous books & pamphlets on the local history of different areas of South London, too many to list.

NEWSPAPERS/MAGAZINES

South London Press.

Wandsworth Borough News.

Kentish Independent.

South London Record (Southwark & Lambeth History Workshop Journal).

Cheers to everyone at the many Borough Archives/Local history libraries visited for all their help.