

## Arbrook, The Rythe and its Meadows

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Deeds for Arbrook Farm of 1722 mention a Lot Mead and the Tithe Award for Thames Ditton, 1843, has two Lot Meads alongside the Rythe between Arbrook and Harelane Green. One of these was owned jointly by HM King of the Belgians (Claremont Estate) and others (not named) and occupied by 'several persons' which was an unusual situation for enclosed land, and would seem to indicate pre-existing common rights.

Though those meadows were enclosed long ago and are now part of Loseberry Farm and Bedser's Yard, many survived unenclosed as commons and greens. It is fortunate, for us, that they were prone to flooding and of little agricultural worth, and therefore regarded in the early 19th century as 'waste land'.

Such 'waste lands' survived all along the Rythe: Giggs Hill Green, Ditton Marsh, Littleworth Common, Harelane Green, Arbrook and Esher Commons. But evidence of their former value can be seen in the positioning of many older farmsteads and small-holdings - on the edge of, and facing onto the commons, with their private fields behind them.

On the commons of the Rythe were St. Leonard's at Giggs Hill, Manor and Heart Farm at Ditton Marsh; Couchmore, Beazleys, Thistly Croft and Littleworth Farm at Littleworth; Pitts Farm (The Orchard) at Harelane Green and Waterville, and Arbrook and Copsem Farms at Arbrook. Horrington Farm is on the smaller Rythe at what used to be Claygate Common. Additionally there were a number of farm cottages and tenements around the commons without land of their own, but their occupants undoubtedly eked out or supplemented a meagre living from the 'waste lands' reinforcing the familiar pattern of common edge settlement.



*The Rythe*

*Photo courtesy of Martin Woodward*

## **Enclosure**

Fortunately Arbrook common and most of Harelane Green were just outside the grasp of Kingston Corporation. In 1832 the authority procured a General Act of Inclosure which enabled and indeed enforced the enclosure of vast areas of common. It was "An Act for inclosing lands in the several Manors of Kingston and Imworth... and for selling part of such lands for the purpose of providing a Court House and Market House in the said town." Thames Ditton Parish lost around 100 acres of common land including most of Claygate Common, all Claygate Green and a small section of Harelane Green. Further downstream common land was lost at Ditton Marsh and Giggs Hill. This was the last Act of Inclosure to affect the commons of the Rytte and what was left then is what we have as open space today.

## **Roads**

Ancient roads and tracks are a feature of most common lands giving a typical straggly shape as the common funnels out where roads enter and leave. Eighteenth century maps show routes across Arbrook from Ditton via Harelane Green and from Esher via Copsem Lane to Epsom and Leatherhead using Birchwood Lane. The entrance to Arbrook Farm was from Birchwood Lane rather than from the common as now. A link across the southern side led into a track to Claygate which was stopped short when the railway and Foley Estate were laid out in the 1880's, but a footpath remains along part of the route.

The Swan Inn at Harelane Green was almost certainly established to serve travellers as well as the considerable local community - by 1843 there were some 15 tenements, a farm house and cottages. Harelane, as it was known in the 19th century, formerly Chadsworth, was first recorded in 1223 as Cadeswurthe ('Ceadd's farm') and is quite separate from Claygate. Most of the dwellings were within Esher Parish.

The cottages were occupied up to the 1940s by a family called Francis - probably the same. Mr Francis kept pigs on the common - perhaps the last person with common rights of pasture in Arbrook. Mrs Francis did housework in Esher for the Codd family and their son Robert attended Claygate School, and then worked as a farm hand.

The cottages were never connected to gas, electricity or mains drainage, and water was drawn from a well in the garden. They stood in the centre of a half-acre plot; single storey, red brick with a clay pantile roof and a verandah at the front. The gardens were full of fruit and vegetables - some apple trees are still there. The Francis family was moved to one of the new Council houses in Arbrook Lane during the war and the cottages used by the Home Guard before being demolished.

## **Waterville**

At the north point of the common in Arbrook Lane is the manor house of Waterville and a pair of cottages which date from the late 18th century. These and associated buildings have a rich history of their own, but in relation to Arbrook it is worth recording local memories of a herd of some 30 dairy cows being kept here up to the 1940s and grazing on the common.

## Twentieth Century Arbrook

In 1922 the Claremont Estate was broken up and Esher UDC acquired the manors of Esher and Milbourn (Waterville), which brought Arbrook and Esher Commons into public ownership. Arbrook Common was registered under the 1965 Commons Act but no individual commoners' rights were confirmed.

Just 50 years ago the common was mostly open grassland; near Arbrook Lane there were benches set out and much picnicking. Since then it has reverted entirely to woodland. There are young oaks and some hazel on the farmland perimeters, with hawthorn and elm - probably from old hedges. The central area which was last to be kept open (partially by fire in 1959) now has a dense cover of species which are often first to colonise abandoned land; birch, willow and aspen. There is also some rowan, wild cherry and pine; holly and yew have moved in from garden hedges, and the alders along the stream now compete with vigorous undergrowth.

During the winters of 1993-4 and 1994-5, Elmbridge Borough Council began a programme of traditional woodland management by coppicing with standards (cutting sections of underwood on a 15-year cycle, leaving a scatter of timber trees, usually oak, to mature) which will benefit wildlife and ground flora.

Arbrook was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1955.



*Entrance to Arbrook Common at the south end of Arbrook Lane circa 2000  
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