A Short History of Rodborough Common, Gloucestershire
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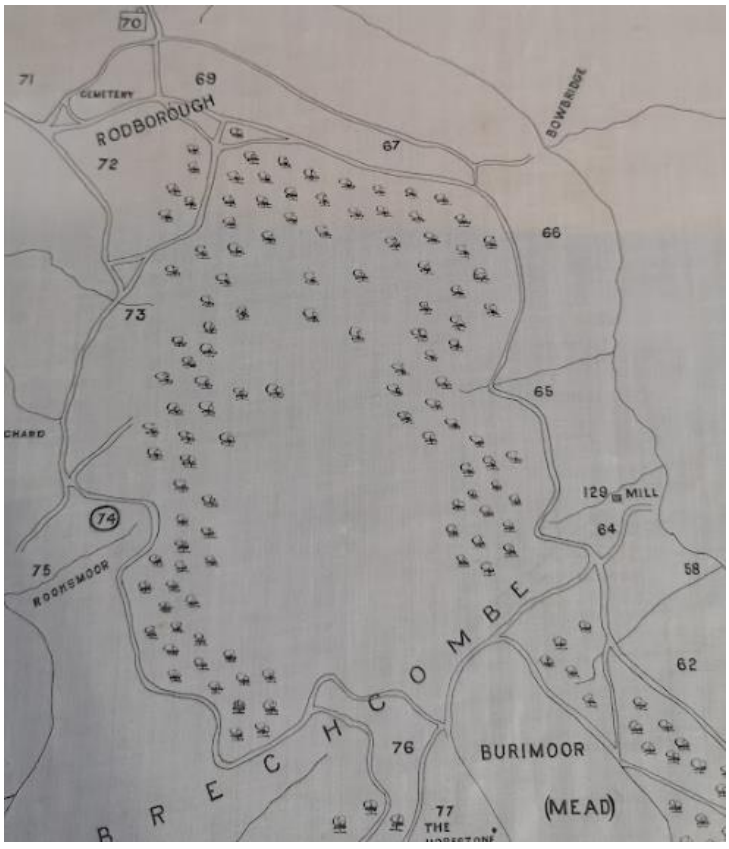
Rodborough Common was originally part of the ancient demesne of Minchinhampton. Demesnes (pronounced domains) were different from traditional manors, in that they were independent of the hundred and shire courts which ensured the law was upheld across much of the rest of England. Instead, the law of the Lord (or oftentimes, the Lady) of the Manor was ruled on and enforced by the local Courts Leet.

Along with much of the land in England, at the time of the Norman Conquest, ownership of the Minchinhampton Demesne was taken up by William the Conqueror, who in turn gifted it to his daughter, Cecily, the Abbess of Caen in around 1080. Successive Abbesses retained ownership of the land, and Minchinhampton actually means 'nun's settlement' in Old English, although no abbess (or her nuns) are ever recorded as having visited, let alone lived here. Being a French owner of English land became increasingly untenable however, and the land was eventually taken back into the regent's ownership during the prolonged wars with France in the 1400s. It was passed to the Abbey of Syon in the latter half of the 1400s and remained with them until the dissolution of the monasteries saw it retained by Henry VIII who promptly swapped it with Lord Windsor, not entirely voluntarily, for his family's ancestral lands in Hampshire.



Rodborough Common c.1300 extract from a Tentative Map of the Manor of Minchinhampton, Charles Ernest Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal and its Place in the Study of the Manor', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society,* 54 (1932), 203-384, (p. 324).

The Minchinhampton Demesne, like other land in England, was, even before the Normans arrived, farmed communally, with land tenants traditionally exercising their common rights in exchange for certain labours and taxes. These were relative to the size of landholdings, social status, and gender, and were far-ranging, from paying an annual stipend to the Roman Catholic church (the Peter's Pence), through to watching for the souls of the dead on midsummer eve; an event that was so renowned for its drunkenness and debauchery that certain tenants would pay a fine rather than allow their wives to take part.

The more usual labours however were those related to farming. The Lady's lands were used to generate income and the tenants worked them on her behalf, for example by gathering hay, ploughing the fields, or making wine. In exchange, tenants were allowed to farm their own arable crops, grow and gather fodder, graze their beasts, as well as harvest firewood, animal bedding and building materials. This fine equilibrium between tenant and landowner was maintained by the laws of the manor, which no one was exempt from. Breaches on either side were recorded, reported, and rectified on pain of fines, or perhaps worse, social ostracization. The landowner did however solely retain the 'right in the soil' which allowed them to quarry and mine, and the extensive use made of this right can still be seen today in the holes and dips on the common, particularly on the Severn side of the Fort. This was not however allowed to interfere with the wider rights of the commoners at large.

As time moved on, traditional labour services were exchanged for money rents, until communal arable and meadow-making largely ceased, and rights over the woods were all that remained. Those areas were split into common woods, where all commoners had rights and the lord's woods where rights were more restricted. The tenants still relied on these woods however, originally to raise their pigs and fuel their fires and later, when the woods were cut, to graze their sheep, goats, horses and cattle. The commoners, despite often being employed in other occupations, were still tenacious of these rights, and attempts to enclose the lord's woods were resisted for many years, in deed and in the courts, during the 1600s. This fight to prevent the enclosure of the lord's woods was ultimately lost, but the fact that it took place at all may well account for the common we have today's resistance to the tide of enclosures which swept through much of England's countryside during the long 19th century.

Rodborough Common mid-1800s. Note the enclosed fields in the bottom quarter of the map, that largely correspond with areas that are occupied by houses today. Know Your Place*, West of England, Gloucestershire Edition*, [n.d] <https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp/?edition=glos>

Instead, at Rodborough, the fine balance between commoners and owners has continued to be maintained by the efforts of successive generations. Despite ostensibly (and technically) still being part of Minchinhampton, as its population grew, by 1790 Rodborough had begun holding its own Court Leet, either at the Bear, or the Old Fleece, supported by its own commoners committee. The committee proposed and the court set the regulations that governed the grazing of the common; how many beasts per commoner, the penalties for breaking the rules, when animals could be grazed and the appointment of the commons officials, the hayward and the constable. Encroachments were reported, fines were issued,

and rule breaking was not tolerated by anyone, be they commoner or Lord. These rules and regulations were printed up and distributed each Marking Day - the traditional day when the animals were released on to the common, and were marked, or branded, so the hayward could easily identify any imposters or rule breakers. These rules and regulations still form the basis of grazing on the common today and the hayward is still responsible for overseeing the welfare of the common's grazing animals. Marking Day still takes place each May 13th, although happily now the animals are ear tagged rather than branded.

As times changed, and the country industrialised, Rodborough, like many other commons, came to be increasingly important to more than just the traditional commoners. Commons were becoming vital refuges from industrialization and urbanisation. Campaigns by the Commons Preservation Society, now the Open Spaces Society, during the latter half of the 19th century, ensured that commons gained legal protections from further enclosure. Commons thus became protected rather than exploited in law, and Rodborough, from 1937, enjoyed the extra protection it gained from being passed to the National Trust. Its then owner was keen that its wonderful grasslands, and the insect life they supported, be protected for future generations from future development and further quarrying. The popularity and importance of the common to local people from at least the early 20th century can be inferred from this period postcard.

Rodborough Fort, *Postcards of Rodborough Fort* (n.d) < https://rodboroughfort.co.uk/>

Alongside being increasingly important for human wellbeing, changes in agricultural practices, and land development have made unimproved (i.e. never ploughed or worked) limestone grasslands like Rodborough Common more and more rare (97% of them have disappeared since the 1930s). They have also therefore come to play a key role in the ongoing survival of lots of wildlife too. From grasses and wildflowers, to insects, shrubs, and birds, our corner of the Cotswolds is now part of a shrinking, but vital habitat. As a result, Rodborough Common is recognised as being of international importance, and is protected

as a Special Area of Conservation under the Habitats Directive. It is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest and forms an important part of the Cotswold National Landscape. It is a beautiful, but sadly increasingly rare, example of a landscape that has developed in harmony; between people, grazing animals, and wild animals and plants.

We are extremely lucky to have Rodborough Common at the heart of our community. It is a living example of an ancient and rarely surviving way of life that stretches back for a millennium at least. It is a fine example of the quintessentially English ‘Cotswold’ landscape. It contains a wealth of plant and animal life that may look common to us but is in fact rare and vitally important. And on top of that, thanks to successive generations of commoners, pressure groups, land managers and members of the public, we are able to enjoy it responsibly at our pleasure and leisure; whether it be for walking, running, wildlife spotting, cow pat dodging, sledging if the snow arrives, or simply for admiring the view.

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