

ARBROOK, THE RYTHER AND ITS MEADOWS

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Arbrook is part of the Esher group of Commons but falls within the former parish of Thames Ditton and has quite different characteristics. Situated between the London Clay belt and the Bagshot Sands it is about 50 acres of flat low-lying land, very wet in parts – even in dry summers. Historically it was open pasture, but has become wooded over the last century as grazing declined and ceased altogether around 1940.

To the south is Arbrook Farm. On the west the river Rythe divides it from Esher Common. The eastern boundary with Loseberry Farm may be of two different periods: the northerly section appears older with a wide ditch and bank and evidence of aged oak trees with coppiced hazel whilst the southerly section below a small outcrop of common has a more recent feel and may indicate where the common once extended further eastward.

The earliest written record for Arbrook is as 'Alorbrok' from a description of bounds of land held at Esher in 1005 by the Oxfordshire Abbey of Eynsham and forming part of its foundation charter. Since then it has been recorded in variously as Alrebrok (1262, 1304, 1314), Allerbrok (1279), Alderbrok (1332), Aldebrok (1405), Albroke (1548, 1582, 1607), Arbroke (1610), Albrooks (1749), Harbrook (1823) and Abrook (1866).

The meaning, as you may guess, is Alder Brook and remarkably the alder trees are still there, 1,000 years on, marking out the path of the stream as it crosses the common. Some particularly large and very old alder coppice stools (resulting from hundreds of years of cutting the young stems for wood) can be found further upstream west of Copsem Lane.

The Rythe

The river Rythe begins on Esher Common and forms a section of the original Esher/Thames Ditton parish boundary as it flows across Arbrook Common. A tributary, also called Rythe, runs through Horringdon and Loseberry Farms to the east, joining the main flow just north of the common. The source of the smaller stream is the spring-fed Walrythe pond (meaning welling of the Rythe) which was situated just south of the Esher By-pass near Holroyd Road in Claygate. Rythe and Rye – as in Peckham Rye – are common Old English terms for a streamlet.

The small Rythe marks the ancient administrative hundred boundary between Kingston and Emleybridge and also the western extent of the Kingston Manor of Claygate. Along much of its route through farmland to Harelane Green a double hedge, dated by species count, gives

consistent age indications of between 500 and 700 years, in comparison to neighbouring farm hedges indicating 200 to 400 years.



The Rythe

Photo courtesy of Martin Woodward

Settlement on the Rythe

Settlement at Arbrook may well have begun during the Anglo-Saxon period. Small farming communities formed as settlers cleared woodland from the banks of rivers and streams to create open land with a source of water, a means of transport, good pasture for domestic animals and fertile soils for small-scale cultivation. Ancient woodland is seldom if ever found adjoining rivers unless escarpments are too steep for the plough or grazing – for example at The Ledges by the river Mole at West End.

Openings thus created may include an area of open, shared pasture around which people with or without their own land might cluster giving rise to common-edge settlements - a familiar pattern of countryside habitation. Shared pasture of this type, sometimes known as 'waste' can be found along the Rythe where the ground is too wet or prone to flooding for cultivation. Arbrook and (former) Claygate Common, Harelane Green, Littleworth Common, Ditton Marsh and Giggs Hill Green all follow this pattern.

Farms facing onto such 'waste' on the Rythe in the early 19th century were Horrington at Claygate Common; Arbrook, Copsem, and Waterville at Arbrook Common; Pitts (The Orchard) at Harelane Green; Littleworth, Beazleys, Thistly Croft and Couchmore at Littleworth Common; Manor and Heart Farms at Ditton Marsh and St. Leonard's at Giggs Hill Green. It could be argued that Slough Farm in Claygate should be included here as it formerly adjoined Claygate Green and stands on a small unnamed tributary of the Rythe emanating from springs on Telegraph Hill.

The Meadows

Medieval meadow was very valuable land; it was recorded in the Domesday book for taxation. In 1309 at Bocking in Essex arable land was valued at 6d per acre, pasture at 12d and meadow at 4s per acre. Making hay to keep plough animals through the winter and strong enough for the spring ploughing was essential. The best grassland, usually adjoining a river or stream, was permanently reserved for hay and seldom ploughed. It can take more than a hundred years to establish good meadow land rich in herbs and grasses.

These vital grasslands were usually shared by customary tenants of the manor. Known as 'lot' or 'dole' meadows they were marked out in strips for each to make his own hay, with the strips drawn by lot or doled out differently each year to ensure fairness. Once the hay was removed those with rights could freely graze their animals.

Deeds for Arbrook Farm of 1722 include a Lot Mead and the Tithe Award for Thames Ditton 1843 has two Lot Meads alongside the Rytte between Arbrook and Harelane Green. One of these was owned jointly by HM King of the Belgians (Claremont Estate) and others unnamed and occupied by 'several persons'. They are now part of Loseberry Farm and Bedser's Yard.

Parliamentary Enclosure

Fortunately Arbrook and Littleworth Commons and most of Harelane Green were just outside the grasp of Kingston Corporation, by virtue of belonging to the Manor of Weston. 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 part of Harelane Green. 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 approach to Arbrook Farm was from Birchwood Lane rather than 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 1880s though a footpath remains along part of the route.

The Swan Inn at Harelane Green was established before 1715 to serve travellers as well as the growing local community. Hare Lane was not the present road in Claygate but ran

between Littleworth and Arbrook Common and The Swan originally faced onto this road. Roads were renamed c1890. At 1843 there were some 15 tenements, a farm house and other cottages around the green. The hamlet of Harelane, formerly Chadsworth, was first recorded in 1223 as Cadeswurthe (Ceadd's farm) and is quite separate from Claygate. It straddles the parish boundary; most of the dwellings were within Esher Parish.

Arbrook Farm

This farm has perhaps some of the better agricultural land of the area which may indicate it being one of the earlier settlements. In 1722 it was described as 'Abroke orwise Abrooke of the Rythes' which suggests that the farm lands extended between the two Rythes.

Earliest detailed records are in abstracts of title deeds of that year when it was the subject of a bargain and sale between Ralph Argill of London, gentleman, and John Huggins, yeoman, of the Parish of St. Martins in the Fields, Middlesex. The property contained an estimated 126 acres with a rentable value of £78 per annum. There was one house, one garden, 100 acres of land, 5 acres of meadow, 15 acres of pasture, 30 acres of wood and common of pasture.

The occupier was one William Belser. The name is recorded variously as Bolser, Bodder, Belser and Bedzer – probably the Bedser family of Arbrook Lane, known from Esher tithes and census returns of the 1840s and living there until 1994.

In 1774 the farm was purchased by the Rev. William Musgrave. It then contained 2 messuages, 3 barns, 3 stables, 3 gardens, 3 orchards, 100 acres of land, 20 acres of meadow, 40 acres of pasture and 20 acres of wood and common of pasture for all cattle. It was leased to William Redford for a term of 21 years at £115 a year for the first 9 years and £125 for the remainder.

In 1787 Lord Tyrconnel purchased the 'Capital Mansion House and Park of Claremont' with the Manors of Esher Waterville and Episcopi which included the commons. He also acquired extensive farm lands for the estate: Horridon Farm in 1788, Arbrook in 1792 (for £4,000), the holding beside Arbrook in 1796 and Copsam Farm in 1797.

During the 65 years prior to Lord Tyrconnel's purchase descriptions of the Arbrook lands remain constantly as: one close known as Lay Close 10 acres, close known as Barn Close 3a, close called Walnut Tree Close 1a, piece of Meadow Ground 3a, meadow known as Lot Mead 1a, close called Pear Tree Close 8a, coppice wood called Round Wood 2a, coppice row called Hudshill Row 1a, parcel of ground called the Hudisthill Close 18a, close called the Four Acres Close, coppice called the Four Acres Wood 4a, coppice called Copton's Wood 4a, close called the Hatch Close 3a, close called the Bush Close 2a, coppice called the Hatch Wood 6a, close called Albrooke Field 16a, coppice row at the lower coppice called the Harphill Wood 3a, a certain parcel of ground called the Wood Beaches 13a, piece of wood ground called the Mould Wood 2a.

By 1843 when Claremont and the farmland was in the ownership of HM King of the Belgians, all the coppice woodland appears to have been cleared with the possible exception of Copton's Wood which may have survived as Copsham Wood, then within the area of Copsham Farm. Only a few of the old field names survived to this date: Lot Mead, Harphill and Moulden's Wood as a field. Many of the small closes, meadows and woods were amalgamated to form larger fields known only by their acreage.

Homestead next Arbrook Farm

Beside the farm was another holding described in 1753 as a messuage (principal house) and close of land at Albrooke. It contained one messuage, two cottages, one garden, one orchard, 40 acres of land, 4 acres of meadow, 34 acres of pasture and common of pasture for all cattle with the apportionments in Claygate and Albrooke and Chargworth in the Parish of Thames Ditton. In addition was a 'parcel of land and pasture commonly called the Warden Tree Close, about 4 acres, in Arbook' then in the occupation of Henry Stone. Warden is an old variety of pear - small and hard and suitable for keeping and stewing.

The holding was sold by James Cooper of Cobham, yeoman, to the Claremont Estate in 1796 when it became part of Arbrook Farm. Three families lived there in 1851 providing four agricultural labourers for the farm. The cottages were rebuilt, again for three families, in the late 19th century.

Arbrook Common Cottages

A pair of cottages on the east side, now demolished, date back at least to the 1760s and were owned in 1843 by William Wheston who farmed at Couchmore for George Banks. They were occupied then by the families of William Batchelor and Thomas Francis. A small enclosure further along the common boundary was used as a vegetable garden by Elizabeth Francis. The cottages were occupied until the 1940s by a family called Francis – probably the same. Mr. Francis kept pigs on the common and may have been the last person with common rights of pasture in Arbrook. His son Robert worked at Horrington Farm.

The cottages had no mains gas, electricity or drainage: 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 were used by the Home Guard before demolition.

Twentieth Century Arbrook

In 1924 Esher Urban District Council abolished common rights and confirmed its authority over the surviving commons and greens mentioned above. All were subsequently

registered under the 1965 Commons Act which sought to record any individual claiming commoners' rights. None were confirmed for Arbrook.

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 gardens 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 should 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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