A Brief History

The landscape of Cookham has long attracted visitors to this beautiful area of Berkshire. Evidence of early man on Winter Hill and the Bronze Age tumulus on Cookmarsh reveals our early history. There are Roman earthworks in the Thicket and legend has it that Saxons battled with marauding Vikings on Wydbrook. In AD 957 Ethelred the Unready held a Council of State in the then Royal Manor of Cookham. All the land we now know as the Maidenhead and Cookham Commons, once belonged to the Royal Manor, an area which stretched as far away as Sunninghill and Binfield. The Crown sold the land to raise capital in 1818 and Mr George Bangley became the first ‘private gentleman’ owner of the Manor for the sum of £7,500. This turned out not to be such a bargain as he sold it in 1849 for only £4,000 to the Skrine family who lived at Stubbings. In 1929 Odery Estates Ltd became Lords of the Manor and eventually in 1934 the land was bought by public subscription and given to the National Trust.

Saving the Commons

The commons have nearly been lost many times over the centuries and have been saved mainly due to the efforts of local people. Within the Manor the bit of poor land and waste was left as ‘common’ land, and the local people had ancient rights to graze beasts and take wood for fuel – rights which local have been determined to preserve. The first recorded dispute with the landlord was in 1306, with the then tenant of the land – the Abbot of Cirencester. Again in 1597 Elizabeth I leased Wydbrook Common to villagers for the term of three lives – or that of the longest lived. They chose Hungaryman Thomas Doshon who lived until he was 86 and well into the reigns of Charles II. When he did eventually die the people refused to return the grazing rights to the Crown. It went to the Court and the villagers won. In 1799 there were threats to enclose the land and make it part of the bigger farms. Enclosure was happening all over the country with much common land being wiped out. But in Cookham a resistance movement started and a committee formed. Abraham Darby (who owned the brewery) and John Westbrooke (of Cannon Court) were appointed and a fighting fund set up. Again the villagers triumphed and the commons were saved once again. Henry Skrine also ran into trouble when he made a mud track through the Thicket to his house at Stubbings against the commoner’s wishes. He ended up making a grovelling apology to them. In 1869 Miss Fleming of Odery tried to stop the locals using Odery Pool – a stretch of the Thames on the Common much used by villagers and yet again was defeated by public opinion. In the 1926 the Maidenhead and Cookham Commons Preservation committee was formed with the intention of safeguarding the long term future of the commons. A fundraising appeal raised £2738 towards the purchase price of £2800. John Selden Lewis of the Odery Estates and Viscount Astor, then living in Cliveden, contributed but most came from residents in Maidenhead, Pinkneys Green and Cookham Dean. Odery Estates retained the title to Odery Commons, but the title of ownership of the rest of the land was passed on to the National Trust in 1934. Local farmers still exercise ancient rights over most of the commons.

The Ancient Manor

The running of the ancient Royal Manor of Cookham was done through a Manorial Court which met at specific times of the year to appoint officers such as the Haywards, who were responsible for making sure how many beasts were turned out on to the commons. It also set fees to cover the running costs and would mediate in disputes. What is now Courthouse Road in Maidenhead was the original site for the building which in 1607 was deemed to be in a poor state of repair. Timber was felled on the Commons for the repair. By 1814 the building had gone and the Court met in local pubs – including in the 1890s the Kings Arms in Cookham. The final Court would appear to have been held at the Kings Hall in Cookham in 1920. (Now the Stanley Spencer Gallery) and approved, much as they had done a century before, the ban on turning out of swine on Cookham Moor and the removal of gates from Wydbrook Commons during the winter. The earliest surviving survey of the Commons was carried out in 1669 and contains references to ‘a common called Bigfrith containing an estimated 200 acres wherein diverse tenants have certain lands of wood and common pasture for their cattle and the same is well set with young beech.’ In the same survey reference is made to an area known as ‘The Rocket’ which consists of 20 acres with little wood growing, not

Useful Contacts

The National Trust Warden

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The National Trust Thames and Solent Region

High Wycombe, HP14 4LA
Tel: 01494 328051

The National Trust Website:
www.nationaltrust.org.uk

To be involved in volunteering, consult the website on www.nationaltrust.org.uk/volunteering which will list local opportunities, or contact Hughendens on ts.volunteering@nationaltrust.org.uk

The Maidenhead National Trust Association can be contacted via the NT website using the “local to you” option. The Association meets monthly at Altwood School, Maidenhead, on the second Thursday of the month commencing at 7.30pm. It supports local properties financially and, in particular, has part funded this publication.

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead has also supported this Guide as part of their “Parish Path Initiative”. It publishes a range of local walking and horse riding guides which can be used in conjunction with this Guide.

The Guide was designed and produced by Woodsite Communications, Tel: 07899119224

The Routes can be followed in more detail on the Ordnance Survey Explorer Map No. 172, Chilterns Hills East.

The National Trust Charity Number 205846

Modern History

During World War II areas of the commons were dug over as the nation ‘dug for victory’. Potatoes were grown on Pinkneys Green and areas of Cookham Dean Common were planted to compensate for the loss of land the ownership of the Glebe Field adjacent to Stubbings Church was transferred to the National Trust, as was an additional area of woodland to the west extending the Thicket towards Burnt Hill Green. The whole area is managed by a National Trust Warden, and much care has been taken to maintain, preserve and conserve this stunning area as both a public amenity and a sanctuary for people, animals and plants.

Some of this material has been adapted from the work of our friends at the Maidenhead History Society.
Cockmarsh
Has a long history of human activity and contains tumuli from the Bronze Age period. It is a most attractive area with two distinct habitats which are rarely found so close together – flat mardy meadows and steep chalk slope; for this reason it has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Common is gated and is grazed by cattle in the Summer – please keep your dog under control. Access is best obtained from the car parks at Winter Hill and Cookham Moor; it is also practical to walk to Cockmarsh from the railway stations at Bourne End and Cookham. Cockmarsh is bounded by the River Thames, so access by boat is possible; indeed the Thames Path crosses the eastern part of the area.

Winter Hill
The name is believed to derive from its usage as winter pasture for livestock when more low lying areas became unusable. It rises from river level to a height of 280 feet and consists of a mixture of open gravelland, encompassed by blocks of scrub; today it is managed not by grazing but by the National Trust Warden. There is a large car park here which affords panoramic views over the River Thames into Buckinghamshire. The car park also gives the best point of access to Cockmarsh to the east, and is also on the route of the national cycleway taking in Winter Hill and Cookham Dean Common on the way.

Cookham Dean Common
Cookham Dean Common, the Cricket Common, Bigfrith, Hardings Green and Tagwood Common all go to make up the commons of Cookham Dean. They are mostly small in size but collectively they do much to maintain the open aspect of the community. All are maintained by the National Trust and Cricket Common in particular is often used for local festivities. The principal car park is at Cookham Dean Common itself but other small scale opportunities exist adjacent to Cricket Common.

The Brick and Tile Works
The Kilns of the Maidenhead Brick and Tile Company were still in use until the middle of the 20th century and the extraction of clay from the adjacent pits would, at one time, have brought in a useful income for the Commons. After closure the pits not already part of the Commons came into the ownership of the National Trust; the pits to the east of Winter Hill Road contain a rich wildlife habitat and the pathways that have been laid out are suitable for wheelchair users via a radar entrance. There is limited car parking adjacent to Malders Lane.

Pinkneys Green
The Green would have been produced by the gradual clearance of Maidenhead Thicket; although originally a gated common it is now completely unfenced and allows the visitor the chance to roam over a very large area. There are now no livestock on the Common. Although parts are mown for hay, the National Trust has kept other parts as wild flower meadows where cowslips, kidney vetch, birds foot trefoil and oxeye daisies may be seen in season. The best car parking is to be found at Pinkneys Drive with a small additional area between the Warden’s Workshop and the cricket pitch; the Green is also crossed by a national cycleway.

Maidenhead Thicket
The Thicket is perhaps the best known of the Commons and was at one time notorious as the haunt of Highwaymen. It is a good example of what would happen if the more open Commons were allowed to revert back to nature. Today the Thicket contains a wide variety of trees and shrubs all at different stages of development; there is a great range of trees at all different stages of age, height and thickness which allows a variety of birds and wildlife to become resident.

The national Trust has cleared a series of horse rides through the area and there are numerous footpaths;Robin Hood’s Arbour is a ditched enclosure of some antiquity. The Thicket is best accessed from the car park near the two roundabouts on the A4, from here a footbridge crosses the busy A404(M).

Maidenhead&Cookham Commons

Legend
The National Trust would like all users of this Guide to obtain maximum enjoyment from their visit to Maidenhead and Cookham Commons. All the main points of access are shown whether they be by road, rail or river. Where the Commons are widely scattered as in Cookham, the principal footpaths are shown to allow access to be gained on foot, where the Commons are close together as at the Thicket and Pinkneys Green, footpaths are not shown as access is uninterrupted.

The principal National Trust Car Parks are shown as are Public Houses (PH); Cookham village has other places for refreshment and also has public toilets. Horse riding by local people is encouraged on National Trust land but riders are asked to use the designated routes and not the Public Footpaths. Cookham has its own Bradfrew circuit but this for the most part does not use National Trust land – the Royal Borough and the National Trust publish leaflets to cover this circuit. An extensive cycle route stretches from Cookham Moor to Pinkneys Green taking in Winter Hill and Cookham Dean Common on the way.