

Swannington Commons Part 1: An Historical Perspective

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Common land in England dates from feudal medieval times 7 to 15 centuries ago. Most of the rural population were then bondsmen (effectively slaves) or serfs, who were allowed a small garden to grow basic provisions. Both were legally bound to their feudal lord, had to work on his estates and bear arms for him. They worked and fought better if they had something to eat but without wages relied on their lord to provide for accommodation and food. This was about a thousand years before John Sainsbury was born so the feudal lords could not nip down to the local supermarket to get their slaves some groceries. Instead they allocated low quality land (manorial wastes) to their peasants for them to keep stock and grow firewood “in common”, hence such lands became known as “common land”.

A key feature of common land was that **it was managed by the commoners for the commoners independently of the landowners.**

Until the start of the seventeenth century common land was very extensive, e.g. it was possible to walk from the Norfolk/Suffolk border on the coast in the SE, to Hunstanton in the NW without ever leaving common land. This was to change: from 1604 – 1914 a series of **Parliamentary Enclosure Acts** gave adjacent landowners property rights over 6.8 million acres of common land. Commoners were not very pleased, indeed they felt rather rebellious about it. One landowner, Robert Kett, sympathised with the commoners and offered to act as their spokesman. This proved to be a fatal



*For serfs life was harsh in medieval times
(medievalchronicles.com)*

mistake because in 1559 he was apprehended in a barn in Swannington, marched off to Norwich and hanged from Norwich castle. Throughout the last seventeen centuries, commoners managed commons by consensus to maximize their collective benefits. Until WWII parishioners in Swannington stock were traditionally hobbled, fettered or, recently more often herded, on both Alderford and Ugate Commons. **Grazing by stock and rabbits kept the commons open** because young trees got nibbled off as very small seedlings.

In 1934 John Dixon Whortley, Rector of Alderford with Swannington, published a book entitled “The Charms and Beauties of our County Commons” drawing attention to the wide range of attractive flowering plants that thrived on Swannington commons under these grazing regimes. Partly prompted by this book, in 1957 the Nature Conservancy Council classified both Ugate and Alderford Commons as **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)** on the basis of the plant communities so beautifully described by John Whortley.

Towards the end of the 1970s these open communities were disappearing rapidly from Swannington commons because tree seedlings were no longer being eaten off by either stock or rabbits (in 1954 99% of rabbits in England died of myomatosis) so became overgrown, changing first into scrub then woodland.

An extensive consultation took place in the village involving a lot of discussion between interested parishioners and recorded interviews with senior residents. A clear and strong consensus emerged that **the open areas were very highly valued by a large majority of parishioners.** A plan was drawn up based on this consensus. The primary aim for managing the commons was **“to maintain and enhance the recreational amenity value of Swannington commons for parishioners”**

(to be continued).



Pugsley's marsh orchid, one of the rarest plants recorded in Swannington, grew in the flushes by the streamside path until shaded out by adjacent trees (Flickr.com)