

History of Westwood and the Beverley Commons

Beverley U3A Local History Talk September 2018



**“Unbounded freedom
ruled the wandering
scene
Nor fence of ownership
crept in between
To hide the prospect of
the following eye
Its only bondage was the
circling sky”**

**From John Clare ‘The Mores’ (The
Moors)**

Who owns the commons?

The origins of the Beverley commons are lost in deep history, but they are first recorded in the twelfth century, when Sewall de Bovill, archbishop of York and Beverley’s main landowner, agreed common rights for Westwood and Figham in exchange for Beverley Parks. Swine Moor was first mentioned in 1277, when a violent dispute was recorded between townspeople and the owner, the provost of Beverley Minster, over pasture rights.

Controversy over ownership and use of the Beverley Commons seems to have carried on ever since. In 1379 Archbishop Nevill granted Westwood to the town’s burgesses at a rent of £5 a year, but he kept a part for pigs’ pannage for the people of Bishop Burton. This may be why the magnificent Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) that is Burton Bushes survives today. In 1836 the Beverley Pasture Act confirmed for the freemen the right to elect twelve pasture masters to administer the pastures and enforce bye-laws. This right still exists today, but the 1836 act was contested by the corporation who still owned the land, so the act specifically stated that the pasture masters’ rights should not

**“The fault is great in man or woman
Who steals a goose from off a common;
But who can plead that man’s excuse
Who steals a common from a goose?”
From 19th century political rhyme against
enclosure**

affect the ownership of the soil. This controversy reared its head again in 1977 when common land had to be registered. The Chief Commons Commissioner ruled in favour of the then borough council’s ownership of the land but

stated that the terms of the 1836 act should not be affected. So, in effect, the council owns the soil, but the pasture masters own the grass.

We're so lucky to have these wonderful commons, when only 3% of the country is now common land. Bits have been added and taken away over the centuries. For example, Low Green (near York Road) was added in 1656, from Michael Warton, and the Tongue (Swine Moor) was sold off in 1501 to pay for the Guildhall. Butt Close was the scene of the Fishwick Mill Riot in 1861 when the corporation tried to reclaim the land when the mill shut down. This area was only officially made part of Westwood in 2015 as a land swap for the Westwood Road cycle track. Over the years the pasture masters and groups such as the Beverley and District Civic Society have put up a stalwart fight to maintain the commons for the people of Beverley.



Memorial bench for Chris Thompson, says '*pasture master for 60 years, chairman for 40 years, never missed a meeting*'

The institution of pasture masters is a wonderful relic of the past which was almost brought into the modern era in 2010 when the Beverley Freemen Bill allowed for daughters to become freemen and removed the requirement for freemen to be born in Beverley or to have parents who were freemen. In 2011 Sarah Walker became the first female pasture master. '*Sexism out to pasture as Sarah takes place in history*' was the headline in the Yorkshire Post. In fact, she wasn't the first female freeman. In 1502 Alicia Wright was recorded as a freeman and a 'singlewoman'.

How are pasture masters chosen and what do they do? The twelve are elected annually on the 1st of March in the Guildhall. No secret ballot, closure of the ballot after 20 minutes if no-one's voted, and free booze are probably a legacy of the days when corruption and bribery were the norm. The pasture masters' job is to employ two neatherds (pronounced 'netherds') who do the day to day management of the pastures, and the masters collect rent, called archaically 'compensation', and make and manage byelaws. Two neatherds' houses remain, on Swinemoor and Westwood.



The Swine Moor and Figham neatherd's house on Swinemoor Lane



Pasture masters' byelaws, ancient and modern

'Head money' is collected from the owners of beasts who graze the pastures. The land is let in 'gates'. One gate equals 1 beast or horse, 4 pigs or 2 sheep. The pasture masters 'drive' the pastures, allocate 'stints', and manage essential maintenance such as fencing.

How have the commons been used?

Chalk, clay and cows

Chalk lies below Westwood, but above that there is a layer of boulder clay from the glaciers which covered the lower wold slopes up until the end of the last ice age. Both clay and chalk have been exploited. There were brickyards near Westwood, but there were more on the south west corner of Swine Moor where the current industrial estate lies. Here the finer alluvial clay deposits made better bricks and it's thought this area was detached from Swine Moor by the 18th century. The chalk of Westwood was not much use for building but was useful for foundations and for lime mortar and fertiliser. The Newbegin Pits and other hollowed-out areas of Westwood are the remains of these chalk pits, and the Limekiln Pits, also known as Archbishop's Pits, in the middle of the golf course, was the site of several lime kilns. The last one was demolished in 1818 and all that's left is a couple of bricks. The kilns were in use from the 14th century.



Newbegin Pits: remains of chalk and clay pits

The Limekiln Pits: site of limekilns from the 14th to 19th centuries



Now all the quarrying is done outside the Westwood at the huge IMEYs works. This is the world's largest producer of white pigment, used in paint, rubber, plastics and chemicals. It was the Queensgate Whiting Works from the 1830s. Berna Moody of the Beverley and District Civic Society remembers when there were fields of

crocus growing here and has memorably said *'all trace of it has now gone owing to mining, not only from the face of the earth, but the face of the earth has gone too.'* It's said that *crocus* was grown commercially around Beverley for saffron, having been brought in by the crusaders. Sadly, this exotic story is unlikely as these were *Crocus verna*, not *Crocus sativa*, the source of saffron.



The IMEYs works on Walkington Road



Medieval Beverley bricks used in North Bar

The pastures have always been used for feeding animals, and there are obvious clues in the names to their original uses. The pasture masters of Westwood were once called 'woodmasters' which suggests, with other evidence, that much of Westwood was wooded until quite late in recorded history. We know that pigs were kept there to root among the acorns for pannage. From the 15th century onwards there are records of thousands of faggots being sold which would have been for firewood. There was a timber yard by Westwood until 1816. But large-scale felling had begun by the 16th century and Tudor demand for timber soon wiped out the remaining stands other than around the chalk pits and Burton Bushes. In 1585, for example, we know that 1174 trees were sold off. As well as superb for building and ships, oaks were used in Beverley's tanning industries. There

were some plantings in the 1750s, but Westwood never regained the wildwood state we see today in Burton Bushes. The avenues of trees along the roads that are so distinctive today were planted in the 1890s.



Remains of a 'wood bank' around Burton Bushes showing the ancient boundary of Westwood

Some of the best evidence we have of ancient woodland over Westwood is the flora. Patches of wood anemones grow outside the areas ploughed during the last war. These are woodland plants which grow very slowly, about 10cm per year, and mainly vegetatively, so are survivors of ancient woodland cover. Within surviving patches of woodland such as the Limekiln Pits there are other indicators of ancient woodland such as sanicle and wood sorrel.

Now Westwood is known for its cattle, with sheep on the Hurn, within the fences of the racecourse, but in the past horses were kept here too. Several dairies existed on the edges of Westwood until recent times to serve the townspeople before refrigeration.

On Westwood there are patches of gorse surviving, many preserved as hazards for golfers. Historically, crushed gorse was used for animal feed. It was also useful in bread ovens as it burns fast and at a very high temperature. In medieval times, nothing would have been wasted.

Figham and Swine Moor also give clues in their names. There are no pigs now on Swine Moor, which is the domain of horses and cattle, and even donkeys, but was once alder and willow carr land, and 19th century drainage digging revealed the trunks of ancient drowned oaks.



Top left: wood anemone

Top right: sanicle

Left: wood sorrel

Below: gorse, all on Westwood

Figham gets its name from 'fegang' meaning cattle track in old Scandinavian. Interestingly there are remnants of medieval plough ridges on Figham, suggesting it has not only always been important for summer pasture and hay but also in former times was used for farming.





Medieval ridge and furrow on Figham

The agricultural reformer Arthur Young, writing in the 1760s, was dismissive of these watery places, saying they were good for *'little more than frogs and wildfowl'* but in fact from prehistoric through to medieval times they have been rich in resources. Frequent flooding meant good summer grazing and hay for overwintering. Reeds and rushes were used for thatch and lamps, for seating and baskets. The common club rushes, known as 'dumbels' made good horse collars and hassocks. Willow withies were cut. Fowl and fish were caught here and were valued. Wills mention *'carr boats, fowling pieces and nets'*, and a harvest of seven thousand eels was recorded in Beverley in one 12th century record. The importance of river transport was vital to Beverley in the Middle Ages, as it was in prehistory.



Horses graze beside a pond filled with water crowfoot on Swine Moor

Westwood Mills



The iconic Black Mill was first mentioned in 1654, when it would have been a post mill, a wooden building with a moveable wooden post that turned with the wind. There are records of Westwood mills blowing down and being destroyed by fire and most have been rebuilt. The tower mills we see today, formerly with cap and sails, like the restored Skidby Mill, were mainly built in the 19th century.

Skidby Mill: a tower mill with cap and sails



The Black Mill was also known as Far Mill or Baitson's Mill. It was dismantled in 1868 when the lease expired. There is still evidence of the buildings that stood around it, and football and cricket matches were played there in the 19th century, with the miller putting on a brass band.

The Union Mill, or Anti-Mill, was built in 1799 but by 1803 had become a co-operative, to combat the high price of flour milled by the local entrepreneurs. Sadly, it suffered from bad management and fraud and was taken over by a John Thirsk who produced Beverlac Flour. By 1897 it had ceased to function and in 1906 became home to the golf club. The car park is built over the site of a pond and in May you can still see cuckoo flowers growing here, though you'd be lucky to hear a cuckoo these days. At least larks still soar and sing over Westwood.



Left and below: Union Mill, now home of the Beverley and East Riding Golf Club. Cuckoo flowers in May betray the location of a former pond



Fishwick Mill no longer exists but there is a mound just west of Minster School where it stood. This was the site of the Fishwick Mill Riot in 1861. The lease had ended and the corporation tried to reclaim the land. Three men, including a policeman, Sergeant Dunn, were sent to reclaim it, but the town crier, John Duffil, led a band of local people to defy them. By 8.30 in the evening, no doubt after the taking of drink, the mill was set alight and burnt to the ground. Several culprits were tried, but interestingly were acquitted, and the corporation never fenced off the area, now known as Duffil's Mound.

Another disappeared mill is Low Mill (or Wilson's, Crathorne's, or Hither Mill), which was an early post mill

recorded from 1620. The first two blew down and the last was demolished in 1856. This lay between the town and Black Mill and although there is no sign of the mill, an old hollow way leads to its site from the direction of the Minster.



The hollow way leading from town to the site of the old Low Mill

The last of the five recorded mills, Lawson's or Westwood Mill, was dismantled in 1891 but still exists by the site of Beverley Grammar school and is in private ownership.

Westwood Mill



Leisure

The Victoria County History tells us about a certain young man called Richard C Broadley, a Hull merchant who spend five days in Beverley in 1771 and recorded his spending in his journal. Of the total of £5.18s:

*'17s. 6d. was for the subscription to and expenses at the assembly, **one guinea for the races**, 2s. 6d. for a concert, 2s. 6d. for the theatre, and 10s. 6d. for lodgings.'*

This tells us how important the races were to Beverley's elite social status in Georgian times. Racing began formally in 1690 but there were feasts and races on the Westwood much earlier. The early races may have been run on the Tan Gallop circuit around the Black Mill. This was used in living memory as a training circuit, but we do know from evidence on the ground that it was once much wider than it is now, probably about 20 metres. It's called the Tan Gallop because it was lined with bark waste from the town's tanning industries. Races were a rather wild affair, with spectators running alongside the horses.



The Tan Gallop (above) and the modern racecourse from Burton Bushes (left)

The first grandstand was built on the Hurn in 1768 and has had three re-buildings since. There were several local stables, behind the Rose and Crown and the Royal Standard, for example, and the Watts family of Bishop Burton were notable trainers. The Altisidora pub is named after their 1813 winner of the St Leger.

Cockfighting and other bloodthirsty sports were practised on Westwood for betting. They included rattling and bare-knuckle fighting. In Newbegin Pits you can find an original bull baiting ring in a small 'amphitheatre'. Still visible in the grass around the ring is a circle where the tethered bull would reach the limit of his range.



Bull baiting was not banned in this country until the early 19th century and one of the town's claims to fame could be that the last man in England to be imprisoned for bull baiting was John Gowan of Beverley in 1820. Cockfighting was not banned until 1911.

Bull baiting was a national sport by the 1500s and at one time it was illegal to sell meat unless the bull had been baited. This may have originated as a means of ensuring the meat was freshly killed and not tainted. Thomas Muffet's 1655 tract *Health's Improvement* suggests '*violent heat and motion might attenuate the bull's blood, resolve their hardness, and make the flesh soften in digestion.*' Big money was made by the owners of the bull dogs and pit bulls who would 'pin' and 'hold' the bull, usually by creeping, darting, then biting by the nose. Dogs often suffered too on the enraged bull's horns, as told in this rueful verse by Thomas Hood in 1830:

A butcher once gave me a dog, That turned out the worst one of any. A Bull dog's own pup, I got a toss up, Before he had brought me a penny.

Bull-baiting events were popular and ritualised, for example as celebrations for the election of a new mayor in Beverley.

The Holderness Hunt began on Westwood in 1828 before being transferred to Burton Constable.

Witnessing human suffering was, ignobly, a popular sport in the not-so-distant past. In the Middle Ages, at the top of Gallows Lane, is a mound where the Archbishop's gallows were believed to have stood. Just beyond Westwood Gate, by North Bar, was Cockstulpit Lane, where a ducking pond called Bar Dyke was the scene of popular ritualised humiliation of mainly women who were described as '*too free dames, saucy queans,*' or suspected witches. Ducking was not abolished until the 18th century, '*So the Bar Dyke was, for many centuries, a pool of terror to the termagant and shrew,*' according to J Green's 1869 *Complete Handbook to Beverley*.

The Scots claim to have invented golf, but it became popular in England at the end of the 19th century, when the oldest golf club in the East Riding opened on Westwood. Originally based at the Black Mill, it moved to its present site at Union Mill in 1906. The club has its own unique rules for when a ball lands in a cow pat or hoof mark. The player, instead of ‘splashing out’, can pick up the ball and drop it over his shoulder without losing a shot. The ‘compensation’ paid as rent by the club to the Pasture Masters is also unique in that it is calculated by the acreage of land that is lost to the course which could have been grazed.

Several local notables have captained the Beverley and East Riding Golf Club, including Fred Elwell and Gordon Armstrong, but a ladies’ captain, the unsung Miss Bertha Mildred Thompson, carried off the trophy at the British Ladies Open Championship of 1905.



One of the more bizarre leisure activities of the Beverley commons must be the attempt to turn Swine Moor into a spa attraction to rival Harrogate and Bath. From the late 17th century a well on Swine Moor had been used medicinally, allegedly as a cure for skin problems and scrofula. This is a form of tuberculosis where the lymph glands in the neck swell, and was known as the ‘king’s evil’ because people believed it could be cured by the touch of the monarch.



The site of the old spa and well on Swine Moor

In 1745 the well here was let to a local grocer called John Hornby, who had plans to build a tea room, ballroom and pump room. They didn’t materialise so in 1747 the corporation decided to build it themselves. They got as far as building a well house and roads into the site. It was let to tenants and from 1772 was looked after by a ‘keeper’. A swimming pool was built nearby, and it wasn’t demolished until 1955. A few bricks and a circle of hawthorns survive around the mound. I suppose it was never going to work here, but I think it’s

quite an evocative place, and am not surprised that in legend this well was associated with St John of Beverley.

The remains of the Swinemoor Spa



War on the Beverley Commons

There are a few relics of the **Second World War** on Westwood, notably the spigot mortar base, for use in case of invasion, just west of Newbegin Pits, and the air-raid shelter just past the neatherd's yard on York Road. Around Black Mill there are some anti-glider pillars left. Two hundred acres, about a third of Westwood, were ploughed for potatoes and cereal. Here you won't find much of interest in the flora or fungi, which you can find further away from the town. While the people of Beverley watched Hull burn from the high ground of Westwood, the town itself suffered little damage. A German plane strafed North Bar Within and St Mary's, where a bullet hole can still be seen in a pew, but no-one was hit. Three people were killed in Flemingate by a bouncing bomb and machine gun fire. The casualty list would have been higher had it not been August Bank Holiday, with people at the beach and Old Mother Riley on at the cinema. Apparently, Field Marshall Montgomery inspected the troops on a 'secret' visit, at the corner of Westwood and Walkington Roads.

The **First World War** had an impact on Westwood, though little is left on the ground. York Road by the racecourse was an aerodrome for the Royal Flying Corps, with York Road sentried off and passes required. Seventeen airmen were accidentally killed in training from here, and they are memorialised in Bishop Burton Church. The 13th Hull Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment were

encamped on Westwood, and there are zigzag training trenches visible from the air, though I haven't found them on the ground.

World War One had a significant impact on Beverley with four hundred killed and six hundred gassed or missing. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that an effigy of Kaiser Bill was burned on Westwood at the end of the war. Some of the best-loved sledge runs are named after battlefield sites like Hill 60 at Ypres.

The **English Civil War** was another major event in Beverley's history. Not only did Charles 1, with his family and court, stay here for several weeks after he had been repulsed from the Beverley Gate in Hull in 1642, but Beverley was the scene of the arrest of John Hotham the following year. Beverley changed hands in the war, and there was fighting around the town. We know there must have been at least one skirmish on Westwood, as musket balls have been found in Limekiln Pits.

Rebels from the **Pilgrimage of Grace** are known to have mustered here in 1536. This was near the site of St Giles Hospital, west of today's St Giles Croft. It's thought that there may have been up to five hundred men from the Beverley area among these 'pilgrims', a surprising number from a town that may have had a population then of only five thousand. The threat to people's religious beliefs in the face of the demands of a king perceived to be perverse and subject to 'evil councillors', must have been exacerbated by the threat to the town's importance as a centre of pilgrimage, and to the role friaries and monasteries played in people's everyday lives and employment. Beverley was already in decline by then, having been superseded by the port of Hull and the woollen industries of the West Riding. The many deserted medieval villages of the Riding attest rural poverty of the time, as sheep walks replaced common fields. Indeed, the betrayal and grim fate of the pilgrims, the subsequent dissolution of the religious orders, and the secularisation of the state, did precipitate further decline, and we came close to losing our Minster.

Westwood has been a mustering site for troops throughout history. We know, for example, troops assembled here to fight the Scots in 1522.



Spigot mortar site on Westwood

Landscape of the dead

The preservation of the commons as 'unimproved' pasture has allowed traces of prehistory to remain where they would otherwise have been ploughed out. Thus, we have Bronze and Iron Age survivals on Westwood.

We know of three Bronze Age round burial mounds, with surrounding ditches, on Westwood, and there may be a fourth under the Black Mill itself. Unexcavated, they can still be seen, especially in low light or under snow, although they are now under half a metre in height. Tricky to spot now, they would have been imposing in their time, around 1500 BCE, when they would have been covered in gleaming chalk and visible for miles.

Nearby, but separated in time by over a thousand years, is a cemetery of at least eleven Iron Age square burial mounds, which are easy to find by the Tan Gallop and Limekiln Pits, if you are not deceived by the teeing grounds of the golf course. Canon Greenwell excavated one of these in the 19th century, but we don't know which, as archaeological techniques were more gung-ho in those days and recording often poor. The remains of an Iron Age cart burial were found, now in the British Museum but not on display.

Cart burials are almost unique to the East Riding in this country and have thus led to the theory that this was the territory of a tribe called the Parisi, connected to a culture in the basins of the Seine and Marne, where a tribe called the Parisii lived. This is called the 'Arras Culture' after the first excavations of exotic cart burials in the Arras region above Market Weighton. These burials were likely to have taken place before 100 BCE and were all shallow, small, and grouped in cemeteries sometimes with elaborate grave goods, including spears, shields, mirrors and horse trappings. Not all the burials in the East Riding were male, and some contained speared corpses, probably from a post-mortem ritual. One of the characteristics of the cart burials only in East Yorkshire is that the carts were dismantled before burial so that, when discovered, the remains look like someone has '*fallen off a bicycle*,' in the words of archaeologist Ian Stead.

A Bronze Age barrow on Westwood





Iron Age barrow on Westwood. Ditch shows greener than mound in dry conditions

Where did these people live? We don't know, but Iron and Bronze Age finds, and settlement evidence crop up all around Beverley, and much more may be buried beneath the town. What we are fairly sure about is that there are further Iron Age sites on Westwood.

The English Heritage survey has found old field boundaries, and a site at the western edge of the Westwood reveals an area of ditches and boundaries which is thought might be a late Iron Age or Romano-British site, probably used for cattle. There is a pond there still in wet weather, now part of the golf course, but originally a 19th century dewpond, lined with chalk and clay. Because of the siting of this in the Newbald Valley, next to the old boundaries, it's fairly certain that this pond was very much older. This large area might have been a gathering point for cattle being brought from the Wolds. We know that cattle were very important in Iron Age society, and perhaps here they were gathered from their drove roads, separated for exchange, breeding or overwinter slaughter, and given access to water.



Left: pond in the Newbald Valley after winter rain. Behind are the boundaries of the Romano British site

Overleaf: looking toward the Newbald Valley sites from by the Limekiln Pits, on one of our Westwood walks

At the northern edge of the Newbald Valley site are two boundary ditches. One is thought to be the boundary for the site itself and the second is almost certainly a hollow way leading down towards the pond and perhaps on down the valley towards the town.



There are other hollow ways scattered across Westwood, whose age is indeterminate but are likely to be at least medieval if not much earlier. Some are roughly parallel to existing roads, others seem to lead in from the Bishop Burton direction towards the Minster. One short stretch seen from the air seems to have a solid foundation suggesting it may be a fragment of a Roman road. One very clear ditch structure was interpreted by English Heritage as a hollow way but archaeologists, particularly the late Rod Mackie, thinks this in fact marked ancient field boundaries as it is so sinuous, but with sharp bends, which seems unlikely for a track alone. It's always fascinating to find these on the ground and you can work out where they all are from the English Heritage maps online or in the Reference Library (see my reference section).

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Left: double boundary ditch for the Newbald Valley site
Bottom left: one ditch continues as a hollow way
Below: hollow ways parallel to Newbald Road
Top right: hollow way winding across the Tan Gallop (made later), probably a field boundary, seen as lighter green





There is evidence of an Iron Age field system in the centre of Burton Bushes, and we know from 19th century OS maps that there were 'rides' through the centre of Burton Bushes. In 1814 a man was paid to 'cleanse the walks'. Nowadays, Burton Bushes is much less tamed.

Another feature of Westwood is Cobbler's Well, which used to be known as Shoemaker's Pit, to the south east of Burton Bushes. Of indeterminate age it is thought to have once been a quarry.



Cobbler's Well, or Shoemaker's Pit above

Swine Moor has been surveyed by English Heritage though the results were not considered publishable. There are some interesting mounds and ditches, but this area has probably always been subject to flooding. However, archaeologists did find evidence of mounds on Figham which may be 'pillow mounds', made for rearing rabbits. Warrens were certainly prolific on the Wolds from medieval times, but this area seems too wet, certainly before 18th and 19th century drainage projects. What can be seen on Figham are nettles aplenty to the south of the Beck, evidence of sludge from the sewage works, liberally spread before the modern works were built.

The Commons and nature

Only Burton Bushes on Westwood has SSSI status and under the protection of Natural England. Swinemoor and Figham, however, are important sites for natural history, with many species of breeding and passage birds and a range of interesting, mainly wetland, flora. Not to everyone's taste, these wild edge-lands have a lonely beauty, and they can be flooded during the winter months, which is a protection in itself. Westwood, on the other hand, is considered a local treasure, with its expansive views, open pastures, and patches of woodland, full of exciting dips and hollows and secretive places. We're so lucky to have these wonderful spaces and long may we treasure them.



Left: a trysting tree; a local band filming among the bluebells; tiny Holly Parachute fungi growing only on holly leaf litter, Burton Bushes

Bottom: Water Forget-me-not and Banded Demoiselle, Swinemoor



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