

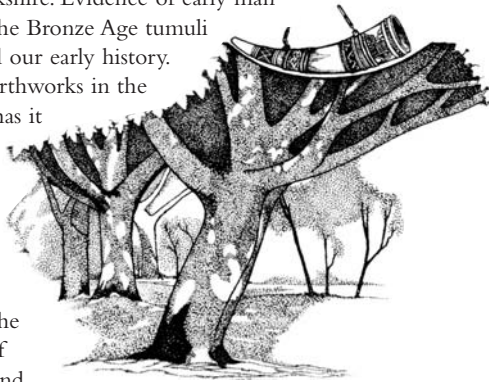
Explore Maidenhead and Cookham Commons

Discover the unexpected



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 tumuli on Cockmarsh reveal our early history. There are Roman earthworks in the Thicket and legend has it that Saxons battled with marauding Vikings on Widbrook. In AD 997 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 £5760. This turned out not to be such a bargain as he sold it on in 1849 for only £4000 to the Skrine family who lived at Stubbings. In 1929 Odney 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 bits 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 locals 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 Widbrook Common to villagers for 'the term of three lives' - or that of the longest lived. They chose bargeman Thomas Dodson who lived until he was 86 and well into the reign 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

About the National Trust

The National Trust has a membership of 3.5 million people, this makes it by far the largest membership organisation in the United Kingdom and gives it a powerful voice when dealing with Government bodies at all levels. It is a registered charity and relies on the support of its members for much of its income. It has in its care 626,000 acres of land and 707 miles of coastline. The Trust is the largest owner of farm land in the UK and 80% of the population are within 20 miles of one of its properties.

The National Trust was created to foster links between people and places, and the good things that come from them. A century ago our founders believed that places of natural beauty and historic interest could bring out the best in human nature. They could be oases of tranquillity to lift the spirit.

These thoughts must surely apply to our Commons, giving so many people in East Berkshire the chance to escape into a beautiful countryside which is right on their own doorstep.

If you are not already a member of the Trust, please think about joining. If you are able to do this through the local properties, then they benefit financially in a direct way. This is true of the Maidenhead and Cookham Commons - the Commons produce little income of their own.

Your local contact for the National Trust is the Warden of the Commons; there is also the Maidenhead Association who run an active programme of talks, social events and visits.

If you have time to spare there is a large body of volunteers (with 49,000 members) who contribute hugely to the day to day running of the Trust. Our Commons are part of the Thames and Solent Region which is administered from Hughenden Manor.

Finally, the Commons Advisory Committee exists as a sounding board to convey to the Trust the feelings of members relating to the day to day management of the Commons - the Committee is best contacted via the Warden.

being wiped out. But in Cookham a resistance movement started and a committee formed. Abraham Darby (who owned the brewery) and John Westbrook (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 road 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 Odney tried to stop the locals using Odney Pool - a stretch of the Thames on the Common much used by villagers, and yet again was defeated by public opinion. In the 1920s 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 Spedan Lewis of the Odney Estates and Viscount Astor, then living in Cliveden, contributed but most came from residents in Maidenhead, Pinkneys Green and Cookham Dean. Odney Estates retained the title to Odney Common, 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 monitoring 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 Widbrook Common during the winter. The earliest surviving survey of the Commons was carried out in 1609 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
Hughenden Manor, High Wycombe HP14 4LA
Tel: 01494 528051

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 Hughenden 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 7.45pm. 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 Paths 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 Woodside Communications, Tel: 07889 119224.

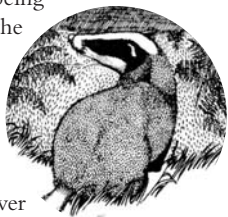
The Routes can be followed in more detail on the Ordnance Survey Explorer Map No. 172, Chiltern Hills East.

The National Trust Charity Number 205846



Line drawings by Allan Gedling

above 100 small pollard beeches fit only for firewood.' Here is an early indication of the increasing problem of the degradation of the commons due to the taking of timber. In 1772 Mr Ambler, the Steward, reports 'fuel being very scarce in these parts' he has permitted the poor people to cut furze from Maidenhead Thicket for their own use, but 'to leave some for the next generation'. However, by 1851 that 'furze' has grown so high and thick as 'to be injurious to herbage'. This vegetation in the Thicket was the perfect cover for Highwaymen, and the area became notorious as a dangerous place to travel through. In 1860 complaints were made again about the surveyor of the Maidenhead Turnpike Road for digging flints on the Thicket and not replacing the turf. However the 1863 Highways and Locomotive Act did away with the Turnpikes (gated toll roads). The gates were removed at about the same time as an avenue of stately Lime Trees were planted on either side of the Bath Road, many remaining to this day. Some were replaced in 1953 to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.



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 with various crops. Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands lived at Stubbings and what became known as the 'Dutch Camp' was set up in the Thicket to house the Police needed to protect her. Perhaps the single event which has most altered the nature of the commons in modern times was the creation of the dual carriageway linking the M4 and M40 motorways which cut a swathe through the heart of the Thicket. Great efforts were made to minimise the environmental damage, and 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 Burchetts 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.



Maidenhead & Cookham Commons

Scale 1:25000

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 marshy 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 grassland encompassed by blocks of scrub; today it is managed not by grazing but by the National Trust Warden.

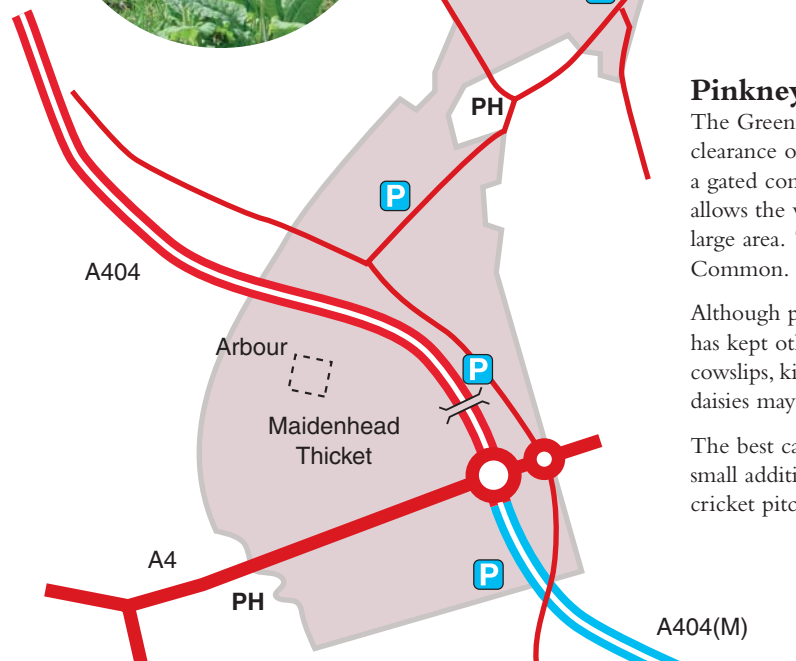
There is a large car park here which affords panoramic views over the River Thames into Buckinghamshire. The car park also gives the best point of access to Cockmarsh to the east, and is also on the route of the national cycleway.



Cookham Dean Common

Cookham Dean Common, the Cricket Common, Bigfirth, Hardings Green and Tugwood 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.



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).



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 in 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.



Widbrook

An attractive permanent pasture in two fields either side of the A4094 road; this is an ancient common originally gated but now fenced. It is very much in the flood plain of the River Thames and there are many pollarded willow trees here.

The area is grazed by cattle in the summer months, hence dogs should be kept under control.

Widbrook is best accessed on foot as there is no adequate parking nearby



North Town Moor

This small remnant of the Maidenhead and Cookham Commons reminds us that, before the Victorian development of Maidenhead, common land existed on the very borders of the community.

Regulations existed to prevent pigs wandering the streets of the town. North Town Moor is now maintained by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead in accordance with an environmental plan drawn up by the National Trust.

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 Bridleway 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.