

THE CROWBOROUGH WARREN ESTATE, 1809-44

by Pamela Combes

In 1809 Edward Frisby Howis, an oilman (i.e. dealer in oils) of Piccadilly, London, purchased the lease of an estate of 1,700 a. on Ashdown Forest, variously known as Crowborough Lodge, New House Warren, Partridge Warren or Crowborough Warren; it will be referred to as Crowborough Warren throughout this article (Fig. 1). Many wealthy Londoners purchased small estates in Sussex and Surrey during the early 19th century.¹ The purpose of this article is to study the development of the Crowborough Warren estate between 1809 and

1844 in the context of the purchase and management of estates in Sussex by London businessmen in this period. The aims of the estate owners varied: although all seemed to use them for leisure, some tried to make them produce rent, some built showy country mansions, others were concerned with landscaping and some, probably a minority, improved their estates with the primary aim of creating efficient agricultural units.² The owner of Crowborough Warren was in this last group; he tried both to enjoy his land and to make it pay. He was one of

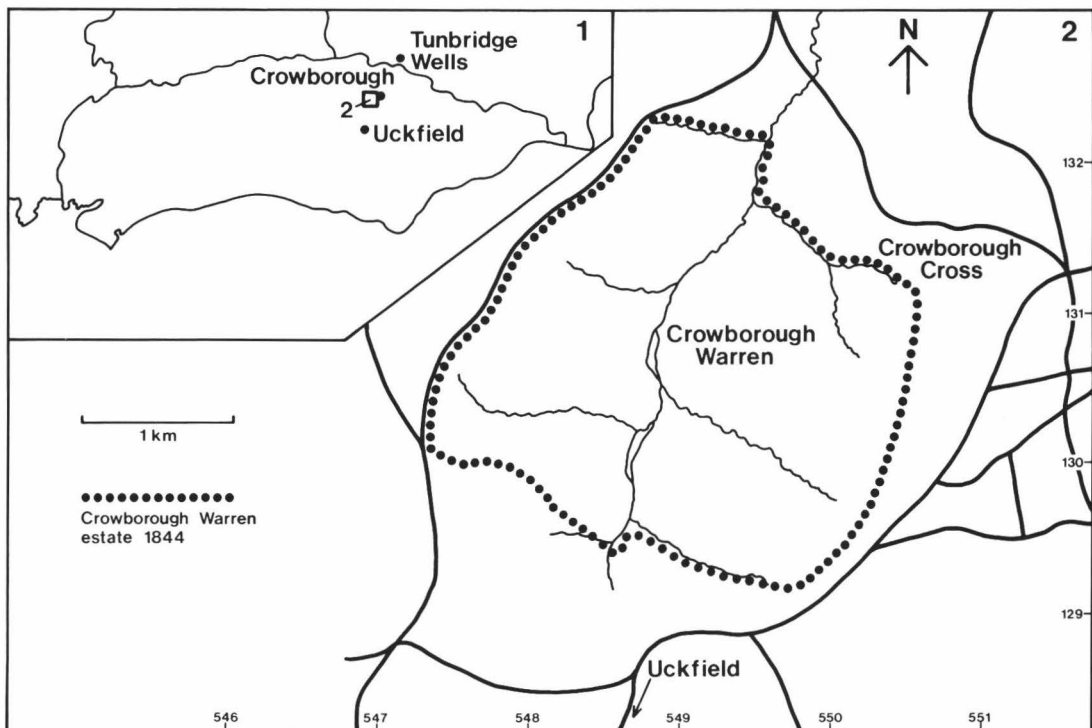


Fig. 1. Crowborough Warren. Location map.

the group of London businessmen who ran their estates as profitable farms as well as country retreats, although in Howis's case the notoriously poor Wealden soil made the former aim both difficult and costly. The development of these estates was aided by the growth of the turnpike network between London and Sussex, due to the development of the seaside resorts, and by the growth of very prosperous industrial and service sector enterprises in London, such as banking and brewing, as well as the more modest businesses of bakers, confectioners and oilmen.³ These estate purchases preceded the spate of Victorian country house building in the Sussex Weald following the development of the railway system.⁴

Crowborough Warren was originally part of Ashdown Forest and was one of the areas enclosed from the forest in 1693. The Earl of Bristol had attempted enclosure earlier and met vigorous opposition from the commoners but despite this it appears that Crowborough Warren had been leased to Thomas Raymond

from as early as 1678.⁵ When agreement was reached on areas to be enclosed in 1693, Alexander Staples acquired Crowborough Warren, together with all the other major areas of enclosed land. He introduced grazing animals, sheep and rabbits, not only to his newly enclosed estates but also to parts of the common land.⁶ The commoners protested and he was forced to destroy the 'berries' or pillow mounds he had had constructed for rabbits on the unenclosed land.⁷ Adjacent to the Warren estate pillow mounds can still be seen on the open forest. These were described as 'ancient' berries in 1728, suggesting that the warren was established before the enclosure.⁸ The berries were possibly within the boundary of the estate when it was first enclosed. There is a disparity between the original boundary beside Whitden Lodge on the 1693 enclosure plan (Fig. 2) and the present boundary of the estate, suggesting that the bounds were rationalized to their position on the line of the ghyll when the warren was abandoned. The warren was in use in 1738;

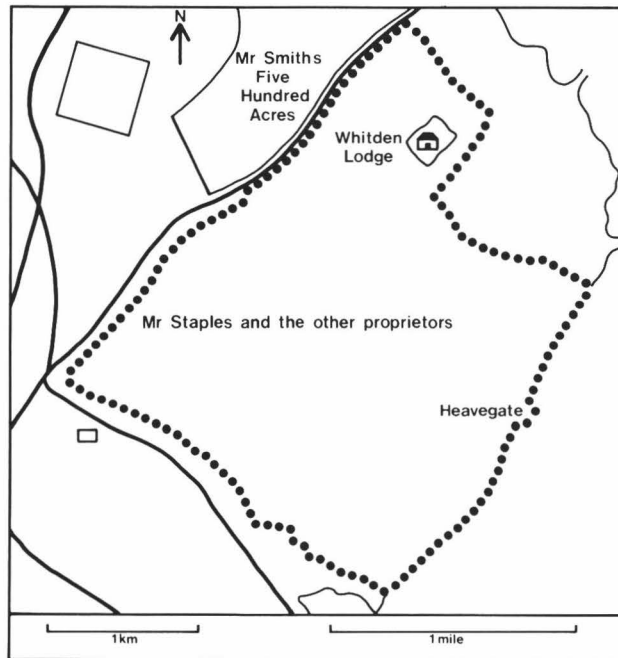


Fig. 2. Crowborough Warren in 1693.

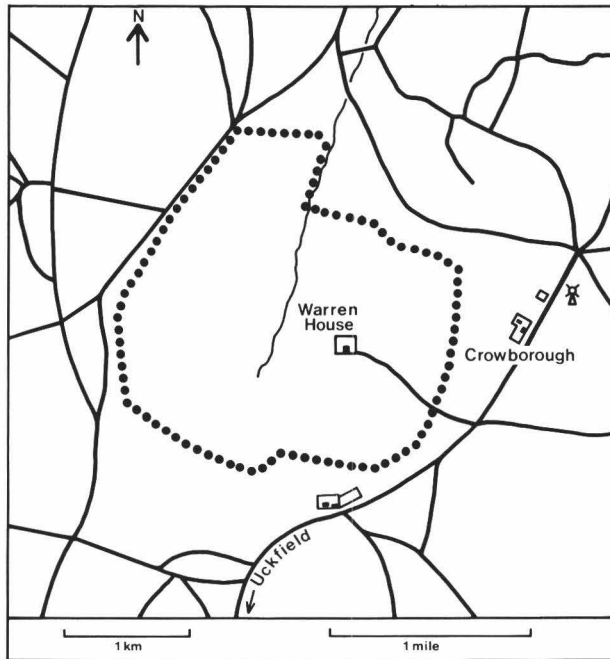


Fig. 3. Crowborough Warren and the surrounding area in 1795. The boundary is not shown on the original map.

poachers trespassed on Crowborough Warren and even the warrener Henry Mitchell was not above attempting assault 'upon the bailiff in the execution of his office'.⁹

Whitden Lodge, one of the forest keepers' lodges, stood close to this warren area when the land was first enclosed (Fig. 2). By 1747 another house was established near the present Warren House (TQ 494306) and by 1795 the old Whitden Lodge no longer existed (Fig. 3).¹⁰

In 1780 Sir John Major, whose son-in-law was created Baron Henniker in 1800, owned the portion of the estate lying in Withyham parish. His tenant was John Newnham.¹¹ In the 19th century another member of the Henniker family, Rear-Admiral Major Henniker, owned an estate of 3,563 a. on Ashdown Forest, probably comprising Ashdown Park, Pippingford Park, Old Lodge and the present army training ground.¹²

In 1794 a farmer, Joseph Davison, leased the Crowborough Warren estate from Sir John Henniker (later Lord Henniker) for 20 years and

six months at a rent of £105 per annum. One year later it was assigned to Mr. William Lankshear, a surgeon of Witney, Oxfordshire.¹³ In 1809 Howis paid £1,800 for the remainder of this lease. The agreement mentions the warren and rabbits as well as a farm.¹⁴ The Act of Parliament of the same year which was required to enable John, Lord Henniker and Elizabeth, Dowager Countess of Chandos to lease the entailed estate to Howis does not mention the warren, suggesting that it was no longer in use. The wording of the Act also implies that the farm improvements had been modest. The land is described as extremely barren and unproductive and the suggestion is made that it would best be improved by planting 1,000 a. of wood and underwood with trees of various species within the first 20 years of the lease. The lessee also obtained the right to dam the streams to create heads of water in order to form ponds, or for any purpose that would improve the estate. The rent was to be £200 a year for the first 20 years of the lease, £400 a year for the

next 20 years and £600 a year for the remainder of the lease.¹⁵

Howis's London company, 'Edward Howis, Oilman', was established in Carnaby Market by 1784 and had purchased premises in Piccadilly by 1803. Both establishments were in use as shops until 1830, the year of Howis's

death, when the Piccadilly shop was the only one retained as retail premises. For a brief spell in 1820 the company manufactured mineral water. In 1835 the firm became 'Howis & Co., Oil and Italian Warehouse' (grocers) and three years later the name was changed to 'Howis and Masson' (a Mary Masson had witnessed

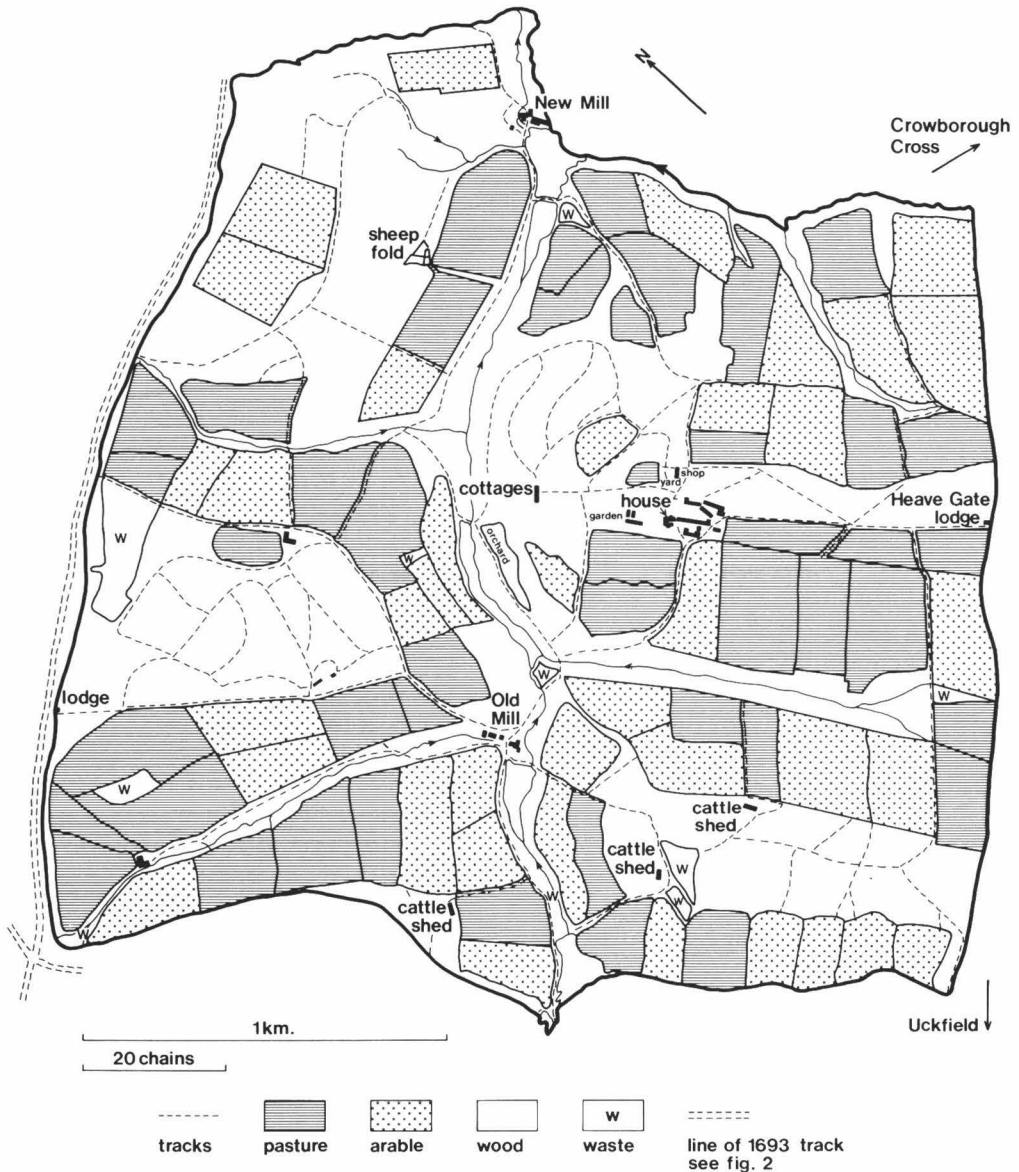


Fig. 4. Crowborough Warren. Sale plan, [1844].

Howis's will). The company remained in Piccadilly until 1886, trading as grocers and wine merchants.¹⁶

During his tenancy of Crowborough Warren, Howis made improvements to the estate similar to those being made by many other estate owners during this period.¹⁷ Crowborough Warren house was built, entrance lodges were established at Heavegate and Greenwood Gate and large areas of woodland were planted, although a plan, probably made for the sale of the estate in 1844, shows only 514 a. and not the 1,000 a. suggested in the lease (Fig. 4). A mixed farm was developed with 356 a. of arable and 416 a. of pasture. Stocks of cattle and sheep were purchased and appropriate farm buildings constructed. Many farmers and landowners were purchasing additional land and rebuilding farm buildings in order to benefit from the increased demand for farm produce at this time.¹⁸ The trade blockades of the Napoleonic Wars, together with a succession of poor harvests, had created an era when farmers could command grossly inflated prices for their produce and anticipate further unprecedented prosperity. These conditions probably encouraged Howis's attempt to develop intensive farming on the poor forest land of Crowborough Warren.

Possibly Howis's largest financial investment was made in the construction of the two watermills, Old Mill (TQ 487303) and New Mill (TQ 495321), some time between 1809 and 1830. The overshot water-wheel at New Mill had a diameter of about 30 ft. and was one of the largest water-wheels in Sussex.¹⁹ Photographs taken in the early years of the 20th century, when New Mill was decaying, show the scale and quality of the buildings (Fig. 5). The fine stonework of the spillways at both mills as well as the arches of the dam at New Mill can still be seen today. New Mill continued working until about 1897 when the miller, Robert Hollands, who was in financial difficulty, ceased working the mill and moved to a small windmill at Ore, near Hastings.²⁰ Old Mill was in use as a sawmill



Fig. 5.

as recently as the time of the First World War, but there is no evidence to determine whether it was in continuous use until then.

Howis undoubtedly considered that he could expect considerable profits from the milling enterprise and this venture is the distinctive element of his estate development. Most Sussex estate owners attempted to make their agricultural land profitable but Howis may be one of the few who attempted to develop processing. The size of the mills suggests that he wished to benefit from the increased grain production in the Weald during this period, not only on his own land but in the locality. Within the parishes of Hartfield and Withyham in 1799, the area of arable was 50 per cent of the total farmland (40 per cent being under grass); by contrast in 1598 the Buckhurst Terrier had showed only 31 per cent arable and 55 per cent grass. The greatest increase in arable acreage probably occurred in the later 18th century. The arable area had decreased only slightly by 1842 but declined again by 1875 to 41 per cent of the total farmland.²¹ Howis's business links in London must have provided him with a market for the produce from his mills. The construction of these mills is contemporary with the expansion of the flourishing tidemill at Bishopstone,

which also provided for markets beyond Sussex.²²

Trade practices of millers had changed during the latter part of the 18th century, and by the early 19th century bakers, especially those in London, 'were very much under obligation to the millers and factors'. Millers had stepped in 'between the growers of corn and the bakers', becoming 'purchasers of wheat and dressers of it into flour for sale upon their own account'.²³ Sussex white wheat was considered to be of good quality for baking, and since the turnpike roads had been developed the Crowborough mills were situated within reasonable travelling distance of both London and the corn-growing areas of Sussex.²⁴ Indeed, Howis himself is credited with leaving London at two or three in the morning, changing his horse at Godstone and arriving in Crowborough in time for breakfast. He would then supervise work on the estate during the day and leave for London again in the evening.²⁵ These factors, together with the new freedom enjoyed by London bakers after the profit control on their business was removed by the abolition of the assize of bread in 1815, and the huge demand generated for good-quality white bread in the developing metropolis, appear to provide a more than adequate reason for the vast investment Howis made in his mills.²⁶

The only memorable incident in the useful life of New Mill occurred in 1840, when the flour for Queen Victoria's wedding cake was ground there and transported by a Crowborough resident to the premises of a confectioner named Gunter in Berkeley Square.²⁷ Howis's son was named Edward Gunter Howis, suggesting a possible family relationship with the Gunters, owners of the famous firm of confectioners which was still trading in London until about the 1950s.

In common with other estate owners Howis borrowed considerable sums of money during his tenancy of Crowborough Warren.²⁸ Although it is impossible to know how much of the money was used for development of the

estate, surviving evidence shows that the improvements he made were considerable. Unlike William Roe of Witheaden, who raised mortgages from local landowners to finance improvements to his estate, Howis turned to London businessmen for financial assistance.²⁹ The known loans secured against Crowborough Warren, his London property and deposited bonds amounted to over £26,700. In 1818 Howis borrowed £4,000 from John Innes, a cheesemonger of Little Tower Street, London. Howis's widow repaid this loan in 1832.³⁰ Further loans and mortgages were obtained from Messrs. Drummond of Charing Cross. In 1826 Howis borrowed £9,200, and the agreement mentions earlier loans in 1809, 1820 and at other dates, all of unspecified value. His widow repaid £3,000 of this later loan in 1837 but the remainder was outstanding until 1844. In 1828 a final sum of £13,500 was borrowed, £1,000 of which was repaid by Howis's widow in 1831, enabling her to redeem some securities and the deeds of a leasehold property, the Boot public house in Marylebone. The residue of this loan also remained outstanding until Crowborough Warren was sold.³¹

The development of the estate under Howis's close supervision, from the predominantly open heath of the early years of the century to the agricultural and milling estate of 1844, created interest, and no doubt comment, from the neighbouring small farmers of the Crowborough area. Their reminiscences of the development of the estate were recorded by Boys Firmin towards the end of the century.³² Considerable numbers of workmen were brought in to Crowborough to work on the estate development. Twelve donkeys transported chalk from the Ouse navigation at Shortbridge near Uckfield to Crowborough, and eventually special wagons were devised to which the donkeys were harnessed two abreast, making the 8- or 9-mile journey to Shortbridge three times a week. Threshing machines and other similar machines were installed on the estate.

These innovations, observed by the residents of the 'poor but populous district', made Crowborough Warren one of the objectives of the 'Swing' rioters of Mayfield and Rotherfield in November 1830. The men were met by Howis's son Edward and his son-in-law William Enderby. The rioters demanded that the threshing machines be taken down, to which Edward Howis replied: 'If you compel us we must'. The men pressed Howis's workmen to join them in their march to Withyham to demand higher wages from the farmers and a reduction in tithes. The men went first to New Mill, where four or five men were at work threshing and cleaning corn, and from there through Five Hundred Acre Wood to Withyham. The rioters did not see Howis himself, who was gravely ill and died shortly after the incident.³³

Howis was reputed to have requested in his will that a window or grating should be left in his grave overlooking his friend 'Cast Iron' Jack Turner's home, Summerford Farm, which lies to the north of Withyham church.³⁴ Howis's will contains no such request but an aperture can still be seen in his grave looking towards the home of his aptly named friend. Jack Turner's farm was another of the marchers' objectives; it appears he was thought to pay low wages. Turner set out to meet the throng and on returning to his own farm told two of his men who were in the yard that if they were dissatisfied

with the wages he paid them or with him as a master they should go and join the mob. Not surprisingly neither of them went! The rioters never reached Summerford Farm and eventually dispersed after helping themselves to food and drink from Withyham workhouse, claiming that they had Jack Turner's permission to do so. This claim was denied by Mr. Turner, who, however, offered to do what he could to get farm work on full pay for those men who were on parish pay and were, in his opinion, distressed.³⁵

William Enderby initiated the Crown prosecution case at Lewes Winter Assizes against the two identified leaders of the riot. One of the men, John Wickens, a labourer, was recorded as coming from Crowborough. His brother Joseph was charged in a separate indictment with obtaining food from the workhouse at Withyham under false pretences. John Wickens was sentenced to one year's imprisonment in the house of correction in Lewes and Richard Hodd, the other defendant, to 18 months in gaol. In view of the fact that at the same Assizes a Withyham man was convicted of stealing a gelding and sentenced to death (he was later reprieved and transported for life), the sentences on the riot leaders were extremely lenient.³⁶

After Howis's death Charlotte, his widow, inherited all his property in London and Sussex. Improvement work continued until the estate

TABLE 1
Land Use at Crowborough Warren, 1841-4

	<i>Arable</i>	<i>Pasture</i>	<i>Wood</i>	<i>Waste, ponds, gardens, etc.</i>	<i>Total</i>
Buxted and Withyham tithe maps, 1841 and 1843	325 a.	333 a.	710 a.	52 a.	1,420 a.
Sale plan, assumed to be 1844	356 a.	416 a.	514 a.	57 a.	1,343 a.

Note

The acreage figures are adjusted to the nearest acre. It is not possible to account for the discrepancy in the total acreage.

was sold.³⁷ The cottage pond was created after the survey was made for the Withyham tithe apportionment map (1843) and before the estate was sold in 1844. During the same period the acreage of pasture land and arable was increased at the expense of the woodland (see Table 1). The plan (Fig. 4) from which the 1844 land-use figures are taken is undated, but seems to be related to the sale of the Crowborough Warren estate by the Howis family in 1844.³⁸

Stone quarried on Ashdown Forest was used to repair roads on the estate. In 1832 Mrs. Howis was required to pay the acknowledgement for stone used to repair a road near the mill; some of the stone was taken from a quarry near the old road adjacent to Five Hundred Acre Wood.³⁹ On 17 January 1832 Fanny, the daughter of William and Mary Enderby, was christened 'privately' at Crowborough Warren House.⁴⁰ In 1841 a Mr. Hewis (*sic*) of Crowborough won first prize for the best short-woolled ram in the Kent and Sussex Agricultural Association show at Groombridge.⁴¹ Local records obscure details of the ownership of the estate during the early 1840s. Charlotte Howis was named as occupier of the Withyham portion of the estate in the tithe apportionment of 1843 but the Buxted tithe apportionment names Catherine Howis as owner-occupier in 1841.⁴² The Buxted portion of the estate was possibly owned freehold by that time but the Christian name used was probably an error. In the 1840s the tithe apportionment surveyors were working under pressure, producing the bulk of the maps and schedules, and errors were sometimes made. Mrs. Howest (*sic*) was listed as owner of Crowborough Warren in the Buxted land-tax records, but unfortunately her Christian name was not recorded. Mrs. Howis paid parish rates in Withyham until 1843 but no land-tax payments were made in 1841 or 1842 and by 1844 the tenancy of the estate was recorded as 'late Howis'.⁴³

Some information about employment on the estate shortly before its sale can be obtained from the 1841 Census. The farm bailiff (who

was directly responsible to the Howis family), the gardener, their families, and a carpenter were recorded as living in three dwellings known as 'Crowborough Lodge' on the Census return. The millers, Joseph Richardson and Henry Hinckley, together with their families, lived at New and Old Mill respectively.⁴⁴

In 1844 Crowborough Warren, with 1,400 a. of land (a more reasonable estimate than the 1,700 a. claimed in the 1809 agreement) was offered for sale. The estate was purchased, together with other land, by Thomas French, Esq., of Cornwall Terrace, Regent's Park, for a total of £17,500. Probably only a portion of this sum was payable to Charlotte Howis for her interest in Crowborough Warren. A further 30 a. of land near Crowborough Gate was acquired in 1845, and in December 1849 French sold Crowborough Warren to the Fielden family and another phase in its development began.⁴⁵

Hodson, the 'old style agricultural genius' described by Richard Jefferies later in the 19th century, explained very simply the problem of the 'modern farmer'; he paid, in the many and various costs of improvement to his farm, the equivalent of eight or nine rents.⁴⁶ Despite the fact that the greatest and costliest agricultural, commercial and transport innovations of the 19th century were still to come when Howis was improving his estate, his position was much the same as Jefferies' 'modern farmer' who often found himself in financial difficulties. Although some landowners in the early 19th century were prepared to enlarge their landholdings, and new 'metropolitan' landowners purchased estates in the more advantageous farming areas of Sussex, few landowners were prepared to risk possible financial loss in an attempt to improve farmland on the poor acidic soils of the heathland of the High Weald.⁴⁷ The pasture land and arable fields of Crowborough Warren, lying as they do in immediate proximity to and striking contrast with the depleted heathland of Ashdown Forest,⁴⁸ provide a silent testimony to the improving zeal and tenacity as well as the con-

siderable financial investment of Edward Frisby Howis and his family.

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Notes

- ¹P. Brandon, 'Designed Landscapes in South-East England', in *Change in the Countryside*, ed. H. Fox & R. Butlin (Inst. of British Geographers, 1979), 165-87; S. Farrant, 'William Roe of Withdean', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **119** (1981), 173-80.
- ²M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (1978), 214-18.
- ³G. J. Fuller, 'The Development of Roads in the Surrey-Sussex Weald and Coastlands between 1700 and 1900', *Transactions of Inst. of British Geographers*, **19** (1953), 37-49.
- ⁴Girouard, *Life in English Country House*.
- ⁵E. Straker, 'Ashdown Forest and its Inclosures', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **81** (1940), 121-35.
- ⁶East Sussex Record Office (hereafter E.S.R.O.), AMS 3959.
- ⁷C. F. Tebbutt, 'Rabbit Warrens on Ashdown Forest', *Suss. N. & Q.* **17** (1968), 52-4.
- ⁸Inf. from Mr. C. F. Tebbutt.
- ⁹E.S.R.O., Q1/EW 9.
- ¹⁰E.S.R.O., SAS maps A/11; T. Yeakell & W. Gardner, *Map of Sussex* (1795).
- ¹¹E.S.R.O. LT/Withyham.
- ¹²C. F. Tebbutt, 'The Church of St. Richard de Wych and the Thompson family of Ashdown Park, Hartfield', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **118** (1980), 389-91. The Henniker family estate records are deposited in the Suffolk Record Office and are being catalogued. Further evidence of the family's connection with Ashdown Forest may become apparent when they can be consulted.
- ¹³E.S.R.O., SAS/FA 192.
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- ¹⁵E.S.R.O., SAS/FA 194.
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- ¹⁹Inf. from Mr. F. Gregory.
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- ²⁴*Report from Committee to Inquire into Laws on Manufacture and Sale of Bread*, H. C. (1814-15), v, Evidence.
- ²⁵Boys Firmin, *An Illustrated Guide to Crowborough* (1890).
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- ²⁸*Suss. Arch. Coll.* **116**, 261-8.
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- ³⁰E.S.R.O., SAS/FA 196.
- ³¹E.S.R.O., SAS/FA 196-7, 197A, 199.
- ³²Firmin, *Crowborough*.
- ³³Public Record Office (hereafter P.R.O.), TS 11/1007.
- ³⁴Firmin, *Crowborough*.
- ³⁵P.R.O., TS 11/1007.
- ³⁶P.R.O., ASSI 35/270.
- ³⁷P.R.O., PROB 11/1782.
- ³⁸E.S.R.O., SAS/FA 198; TD/E 135, 138. The sale plan was deposited with the Sussex Archaeological Society by the British Records Association, together with other Howis family papers. The plan does not show an additional area of land which was included in the sale of 1849, the only occasion later in the 19th century when the estate was sold.
- ³⁹Ashdown Forest Centre, C.A.F. MSS. 4, 305.
- ⁴⁰E.S.R.O., PAR 512/1/2/1.
- ⁴¹*Suss. Advertiser*, 1 Nov. 1841.
- ⁴²E.S.R.O., TD/E 135, 138.
- ⁴³E.S.R.O., LT/Withyham.
- ⁴⁴E.S.R.O., XA/19/5. Although many of the agricultural labourers living in the area as well as the smith at Heavegate were probably working on the estate, their individual dwellings are not identified clearly enough to associate them unquestionably with it.
- ⁴⁵Deeds in the possession of Mr. G. Walter of Crowborough.
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