

# BOOKER COMMON, A TITHING REVEALED c.1700–c.1800

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*Booker Common, part of the West Wycombe Estate and formally a tithing within the Manor of West Wycombe, no longer supplies large quantities of timber and wood or acts as a grazing resource for cattle; instead, recreational walkers traverse its paths. Modern houses surround the common on its southern and eastern borders where there were once cottages and small farms. To the west, the neighbouring M40 dissects the landscape, physically severing the common's association with the neighbouring parish of Great Marlow. While the common has survived, there are few reminders of the past community. This paper reveals that the common, home to a valuable resource of trees, was governed effectively by the manorial court during the eighteenth century, despite the challenges of persistent encroachment.*<sup>1</sup>

Parish, village and town studies fill the pages of local history publications but contributions focusing on a single tithing are rare. This is because a tithing may consist of a small area of land, host little population and hence appear to offer little scope for contextual understanding of past communities or landscapes. Yet upon further investigation, employing the tithing as a unit of study reveals the past of those modern day communities that have lost all association with their former administrative boundaries. The tithing of Booker in the parish of West Wycombe is one such example. Originating as a common-side settlement, twenty-first century Booker bears little resemblance to its eighteenth-century past. While its name has been retained, it is difficult to determine spatially where present-day Booker begins or ends, and equally hard to locate the centre of the twenty-first century community. The 2001 census records the population of Booker and Cressex Ward as 4756, but it is difficult to make demographic comparison because of changes to parish and civil boundaries. Devoid of a distinct local identity, a stranger arrives and leaves without any awareness of the place at all. In short, the study of such a community may appear at first sight to be an unrewarding or even pointless task. Yet investigation reveals that this landscape and its earlier settlement are rich in historical significance, providing insight into woodland management, landholding and manorial governance. This paper investigates the tithing of Booker, one of eleven of the Manor of West Wycombe, between the late

seventeenth and early nineteenth century, using evidence from wills, manorial documents, parish and estate records.<sup>2</sup> It begins with the background to the sale of the manor at the end of the seventeenth century and then proceeds to reveal the value of the common's resources and the manorial court's response to persistent encroachment during the eighteenth century. While the exact area covered by Booker tithing remains elusive, the author suggests that the tithing consisted of the common and its immediate vicinity.

The name Booker probably has its origins in the old English 'bok' (beech) and 'ora' (bank), suggesting a long association with a woodland landscape.<sup>3</sup> The southern boundary of the common today comprises a plateau area while the remainder of the common is characterised by steep wooded slopes. These steep inclines and the flinty soil meant that the site was quite unsuitable for arable cultivation, hence its designation as common waste of the manor.<sup>4</sup>

In medieval times West Wycombe manor belonged to the Bishopric of Winchester, who exchanged it with the Crown in 1551 for other lands.<sup>5</sup> Held for a time by the Dormer family, Earls of Carnarvon, in 1698 it was bought by a London merchant family, the Dashwoods, whose seat and residence it remains into the twenty-first century. The Dashwoods acquired the manor when acting as executors to their fellow Royal African Company merchant, Thomas Lewes, who required the sale of the manor to support his young grandchildren. As

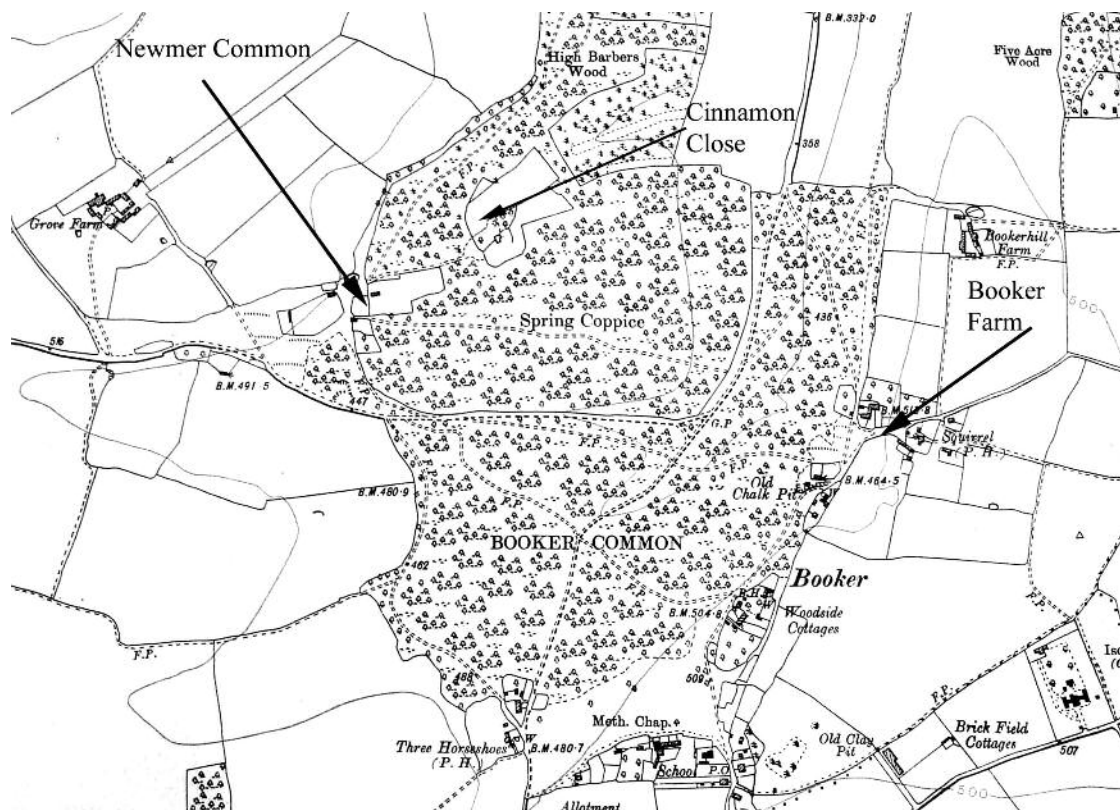


FIGURE 1 Booker Common, 1883 (source: Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 6" sheet)

such, on 7 July 1698 Samuel and Francis Dashwood purchased West Wycombe manor for £30,000.<sup>6</sup> Following the death of Samuel in 1707, Francis wrote of his disappointment with the West Wycombe investment.<sup>7</sup> In his cashbook beginning in 1703, he reflected that West Wycombe had brought substantial profits to Thomas Lewes, but the Dashwoods had made no money from it. Significantly, Francis also wrote that he had been 'forced' to make the purchase. Family loyalty, a sense of duty to orphaned relatives and valuations supporting the potential worth of the estate probably all contributed to the Dashwoods' decision to purchase the estate. Despite his apparent reluctance, Francis was certainly not short of money. His account book shows that he loaned money to the Royal African Company and traded in diamonds, with one shipment valued at £2025.<sup>8</sup>

The coterminous manor and parish of West Wycombe were characterised by a landscape of

varying elements of arable, meadow and woodland. At just over 6000 acres, West Wycombe manor had convenient access to the London markets by road and by river via the Thames at Marlow. Administratively, parish rate accounts consistently grouped ratepayers according to their tithing, referring to Booker tithing as a hamlet by the 1720s. An early eighteenth-century manorial survey of West Wycombe confirms that the total waste comprised approximately 488 acres located at Booker, Downley, Naphill, Toweridge, Lane End, Wheeler End and Church Hill. Booker Common's 168 acres formed the largest area of waste situated on the margin of the manor, two miles south of the manor house at West Wycombe.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the seventeenth century, Booker tithing was a sparsely populated settlement consisting of fourteen cottages located either around or in small enclosures directly on the common.

In addition to the income received by the manor

from leases and copyholds, sales from timber and wood were important as demonstrated by the survival of a series of wood accounts.<sup>10</sup> This had long been the case at West Wycombe, as revealed in the work of David Farmer. He calculated that wood sales from the manor averaged 136s 2d between 1305 and 1403.<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise therefore that, following Thomas Lewes junior's death in March 1695, the manor commissioned a series of valuations. Three timber and wood valuations/accounts survive for 1696, 1691–1697 and 1698, each one revealing different aspects of woodland activity and distinguishing carefully between timber and wood.<sup>12</sup> The 1696 and 1698 accounts appear to be contemporary with the years covered and hence differ from the 1691–1697 account, which was compiled retrospectively, presumably at the behest of the new owners. Recording past felling of trees, the 1691–1697 account is undated and unsigned, raising some doubts about its reliability. The 1696 valuation records far fewer trees than the 1698 account, suggesting deliberate inclusion of particular trees and exclusion of others during the assessment process. It is therefore impossible to determine the manorial tree population or acreages of woodland from these documents alone. Fortunately, a manorial survey was commissioned between 1702 and 1717.<sup>13</sup> The coloured map is generally in good condition, recording field and woodland acreages, ownership and occupation. The pattern of small, enclosed fields, interspersed with woodland, so typical of the Chilterns, is perfectly illustrated in this survey. Indeed many fields are recognisable today. Although the three timber and wood valuations are selective, their attention to detail reflects the importance of timber and wood in early modern England, especially in the Chilterns and, above all, at West Wycombe. When the overseers of the poor collected the poor rate in West Wycombe, Thomas Lewes' assessment for his woods was the first entry in the account, coming before rental income from his farms.<sup>14</sup> The employment of beech timber in 'architecture' and in the construction of mills is well documented and despite the use of coal in the seventeenth century, beech, in all its various forms and sizes, continued to be an important source of fuel. When Batty Langely wrote in 1728, he spoke of 'it being the very best and well known in the City of London'.<sup>15</sup>

The 1696 valuation of the woods of West Wycombe carried out by Mr John Hunt and Mr

William Neale in August of that year, four months after the death of Thomas Lewes junior, is in list form with seventy-nine entries. Each line typically makes a distinction between wood and timber, describes the location of the wood resource or timber trees and values accordingly. William Neale was a trusted and respected local farmer, acting as Churchwarden in 1697. He knew the landscape well, seeking out and including trees standing in the hedgerows; one hedge was home to twenty-three timber beech trees. Out of a total valuation of £7017, the hedgerow assessment of wood and timber accounted for only £300, but its inclusion adds to the growing weight of evidence that hedgerows did not simply act as boundaries, but were home to a valued timber and wood resource. This valuation, in distinguishing between the wood acreage and the number of timber trees at various locations within the manor, reveals a landscape of trees at different stages of growth. Ranging in value from £3 to £23 per acre, the woodlands clearly differed in their maturity, capacity and layout. An example of coppice management featured at Booker, where the valuation records 'the stock of wood besides the timber in the coppice lately laid out in Booker Common'.<sup>16</sup> The twenty acres here were valued at £6 10s per acre whereas 'the stock of wood besides the timber' in the old coppice had a valuation of £15 per acre. Although the largest area of woodland, 'not timber', was close to Booker at Widdenton Park, it did not command the greatest value. The wood stock at Widdenton was valued at £8 per acre, and its 115 acres made it worth £920. In contrast, Fillendon Wood to the north, although worth £833, comprised only 49 acres valued at £17 per acre, suggesting that this woodland was more heavily populated. The difference in the tree density appears to be confirmed by the manorial survey, because Widdenton Park shows very little tree population in comparison with Fillendon Wood, which is much higher.

However, of greatest significance for Booker Common is the prosperity it brought to the manor. Figure 2 illustrates that upon the death of Thomas Lewes junior, Booker Common was assessed as home to the highest number of beech trees while oak, the generally more favoured timber tree, was in short supply there and elsewhere. That beech trees grew faster than oak was well known, and as William Ellis observed, its species were well suited to the 'sides and steep declivities of the chalky

hills'.<sup>17</sup> Ellis also observed evidence of the beech effect on other trees; he writes that 'when this [beech] has once got Dominion, it will be sure always to remain Master'.<sup>18</sup> Economically, the significance of Booker Common to manorial wealth at the end of the seventeenth century is compelling. While the common comprised an area of just over 2.5 per cent of the total acreage of the manor, the 1696 valuation indicates that its timber and wood monetary value contributed twenty per cent. This land at Booker, not fit for arable or meadow cultivation, was nevertheless a prime fuel and building material resource. As Oliver Rackham confirms, 'woods are not on land that was good for growing trees, but on land that was bad for anything else.'<sup>19</sup>

It is one thing to value standing trees, but how much and how often did felling take place within the manor and more particularly at Booker Common? Despite the unreliability of the 1691–1697 account, it provides the only record of the quantity of trees felled in this period, as illustrated in Figure 3. Timber was typically measured and valued by the 'load', a cubic measurement that varied according to location and local practice. At Booker Common, when Robert Jenkins, woodmonger of Stangate near Lambeth, purchased 500 loads of beech timber in January 1706, the load was designated at 50 cubic feet.<sup>20</sup>

Does the pattern of felling as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 represent a planned cycle, or was felling market driven for local or distant consump-

tion? As David Farmer pointed out, the difficulty in manoeuvring and transporting timber directed that timber trees were felled to order, the smaller parts of the tree unsuitable for construction being processed for fuel. The 1691–1697 document is a descriptive record of past woodland activity, most likely created to illustrate the commercial potential of the manorial woodland. Its classification of wood into town billets, water billets, stacks and faggots reflects the local practice in West Wycombe of sorting twigs and branches by size, shape and perhaps, their method of transport as indicated by the designation of town and water billets. According to Batty Langley, a stack of wood could range between 108 and 128 cubic feet.<sup>21</sup> The 1691–1697 valuation not only documents the quantity of timber and wood harvested, but records the locations within the manor where felling and cutting took place. There are only two entries for Booker Common, both relating to the felling of beech timber. In 1691, 49 loads were felled and in 1692, a further 42. The survival of the 1696 valuation is therefore particularly fortuitous because it confirms that the 1691 and 1692 fellings did not leave Booker Common devoid of trees. As the 1696 valuation illustrates in Figure 2, there were in that year almost 2500 beech trees on the common, many of which must have been felled in 1706 for Robert Jenkins.

The distinguishing features of the 1698 'account of the timber trees and valuation of the stock of wood' are its detail and timing. Commissioned by

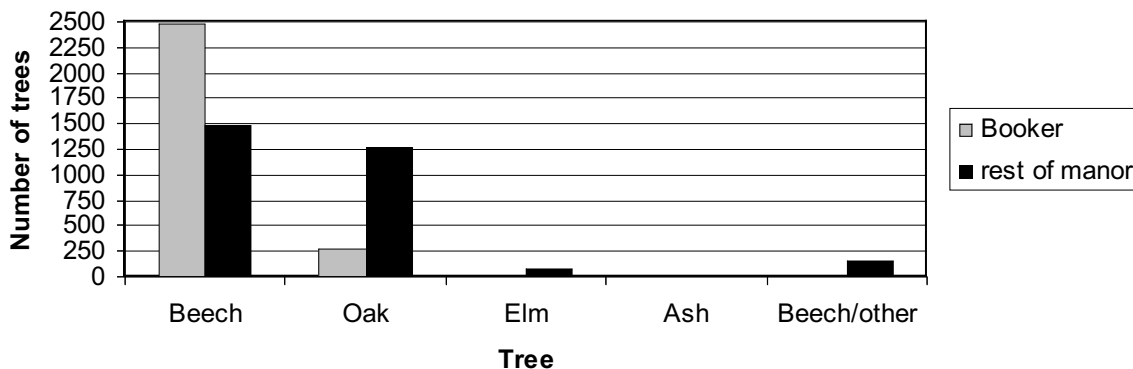


FIGURE 2 Trees by type and number: West Wycombe Manor, 1696 valuation (source: CBS D-D/14/55)

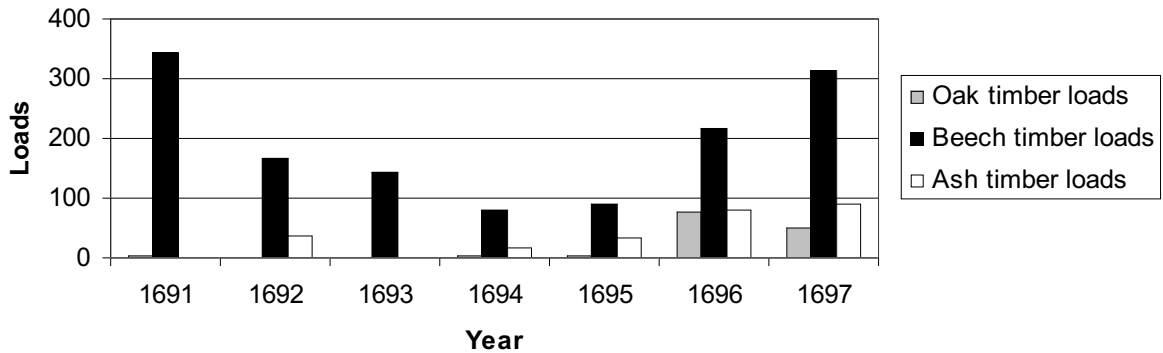


FIGURE 3 Timber felled 1691–1697, West Wycombe Manor (source: CBS D-D/14/54)

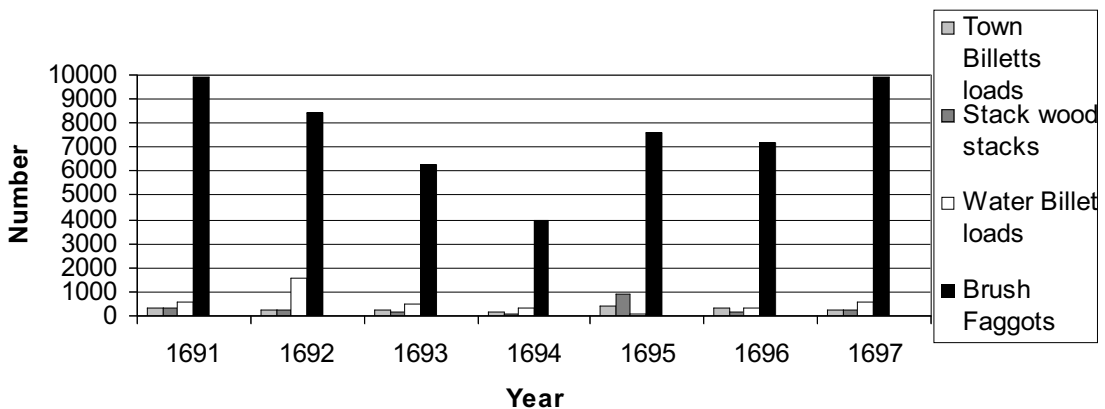


FIGURE 4 Wood felled 1691–1697, West Wycombe Manor (source: CBS D-D/14/54)

Thomas Lewes and undertaken by James Martin and Mr Loveday, it is probable that this valuation was of prime importance in the sale negotiations between Lewes and the Dashwoods. Not only does it list the number, type and location of trees within the manor, but also values by load and monetary value. For example, in ‘Bookar (sic) wood being common’ we are told there are 4409 beech trees, the content of which is 1418 loads and 18 foot, valued at £1560 3s 11d. The apparent doubling of beech trees between 1696 and 1698 at Booker Common is clearly impossible, and reflects the assessor’s careful selection of trees in each valuation. Furthermore, while other beech tree loads within the manor were valued at 18s, those in Booker commanded a higher price of 22s. Quantity and quality abounded at Booker Common.

Indeed, assessed at just over £2508, the 1698

valuation reveals that Booker Common was the most valuable single timber and wood fuel resource within the manor, yet it only accounted for twenty per cent of the total valuation. Of the forty-five locations within the manor, seventy-one per cent were valued at less than £250. West Wycombe manor in 1698 clearly had few large valuable woodland spaces. Instead, these resources were dispersed throughout the manor, located in small woods and hedges.

The valuations so far discussed consistently position Booker Common as the most important woodland resource within the manor at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The manor continued to make sales of wood and timber, as evidenced by the account of wood felled between 1769 and 1770 by Lord Le Despencer. This account, while inconsistent in its recording of loca-



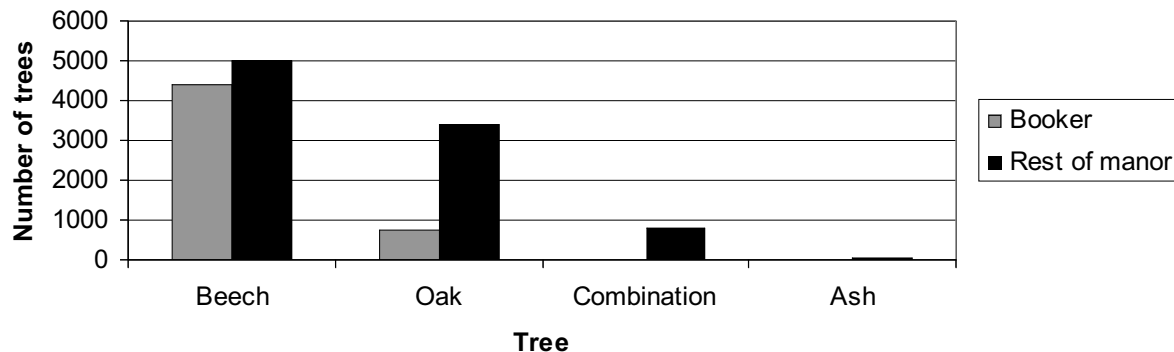


FIGURE 5 1698 valuation: trees (source: CBS D/D/14/56)

tions within the manor, confirms that a brisk trade continued in faggots, kids, stacks and hurdles.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately there are no other surviving valuations which compare well with those of the 1690s.

The inheritance custom of West Wycombe manor stipulated primogeniture, but, as elsewhere, copyholders could and did opt to have their holdings sold off on death. Furthermore, a number of Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills show that wealthy individuals held land on the fringes of Booker Common. These copyholders, either resident or living elsewhere, held a combination of copyhold, leased and freehold property. Indeed, non-residence mattered to the court, as indicated in the suit roll of 1750. A rare survival for this manor, it lists 104 copyholders living within the manor, and 74 who 'live out of the manor of Westwycombe'.<sup>23</sup> Non-residence led to subletting, as demonstrated by the case of William Spearing of St. Dunstan's parish in Stepney. At the end of the seventeenth century he held a combination of copyhold and leased property, subletting his copyhold property, a small farm on the site of what was to become Booker Hill Farm, to Richard Chalfont. Spearing was typical of his day, a prosperous 'gent' living in London but investing in land not too distant from the city. Richard Chalfont farmed much of the land to the east of the common in small fields, upon which housing in Booker Recreation Ground (Fernie Fields) and Squirrel Lane now stands. He also held the copyhold of Booker Farm whose fields extended in the opposite direction. Booker Recreation Ground comprises three of Richard Chalfont's fields, aptly named the Jace, Little Jace and Great Jace. The word Jace signifies

a ribbon or fringe, apposite names for fields situated on the 'fringe' of the common and on the boundary with the parish of Great Marlow.<sup>24</sup> When Spearing's will was proved in 1717, he gave instruction for his copyhold and leasehold property in West Wycombe, Marlow, and Wellington, Somerset to be sold for the benefit of his daughters; his tenant, Richard Chalfont increased his holdings by purchasing the copyhold.

The London connection continued because Richard Chalfont's son Peter left Wycombe, settled in London and became a glazier. However, in 1765 a fellow glazier, Richard Hoare, resident in the parish of St Andrew, London purchased the Booker Hill Farm copyhold from Peter Chalfont. By the end of the century, Richard Hoare was running a butcher's business in Brook's Market, Islington, the farming investment in Booker possibly facilitating his enterprise in London. Furthermore, the 1804 land tax assessment records 'proprietor' Richard Hoare subletting to six tenants, further confirmation of his enterprise.<sup>25</sup> Later, Richard Hoare sold the copyhold of Booker Hill Farm to Samuel Rotton, lace merchant, brewer and alderman of Chepping Wycombe, who also held property in Oxley, Staffordshire. He appears to have resided at the 'Cuppy ground' one of his copyhold tenures but although a local resident, continued the tradition of subletting the Booker property.<sup>26</sup>

Not all copyholders lived distantly from the manor; William Denham lived at Fingest but held land at Skirmett, Hambledon and West Wycombe. When he died in 1793, he bequeathed his estate to his wife and children.<sup>27</sup> Likewise Aaron Medwin, a 'gentleman' of Little Marlow, held land at Booker

but died intestate in 1784, leaving a wife Hannah and family. Custom of the manor naturally ensured that the copyhold passed to his eldest son Andrew Medwin, a saddler operating from the High Street in Oxford.<sup>28</sup> Custom also protected Hannah, who retained a life interest in the property. In need of cash, they mortgaged the copyhold through another local man, James Rumsey, a surgeon from Amer-sham.<sup>29</sup> Hannah and Andrew never lived at Booker, subletting instead to Henry Crook, farmer of Clay Lane, in the neighbouring parish of Great Marlow. As elsewhere, their copyhold acted as security for a loan, with wealthy local people providing the funds.

West Wycombe manor acted as a magnet for those seeking to invest in land, and all forms of land holding were in evidence here; freehold, copy-

hold, and leases. Twenty-three farms were let by the manor, as revealed in the terrier c.1767.<sup>30</sup> Some were on leasehold terms of 21 or 25 years, others were copyhold tenures such as Booker Farm. Grove Farm and Fryers Farm to the west of Booker Common, administratively associated with Booker tithing, were freehold properties. Regrettably, the terrier omits the acreage for six of the farms, but fortunately, Booker Farm's acreage is recorded at fifty-two acres. This small farm most likely operated by using family labour, hiring labourers only for seasonal periods when required.

The 1702/1717 manorial survey reveals a Booker Common quite unlike the present day heavily wooded landscape. As illustrated in Figure 6, the common appears to contain fewer trees than today suggesting a more open landscape, but it is uncertain

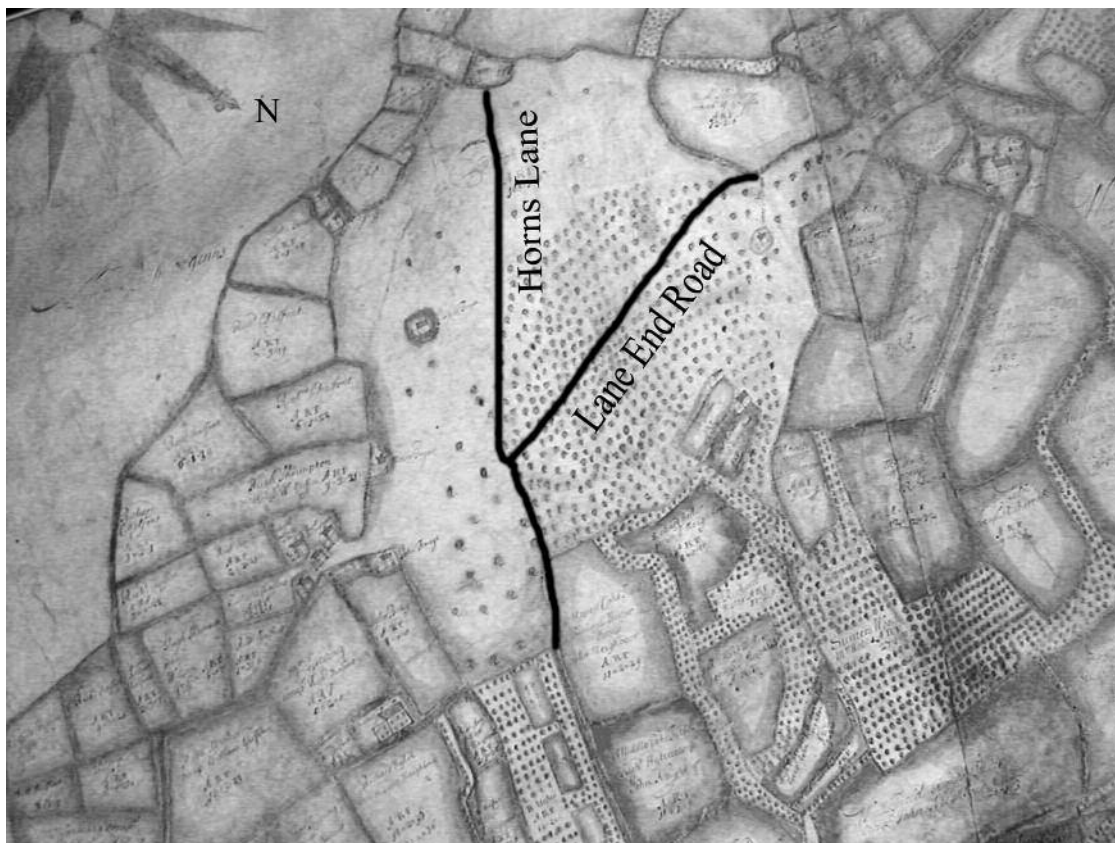


FIGURE 6 Survey of the Manor of West Wycombe, 1702/1717 (reproduced with the kind permission of Sir Edward Dashwood)

whether this snapshot is typical of how the common functioned during the eighteenth century. The lord of the manor managed the common for profit as evidenced by the valuations discussed earlier but the commoners and undoubtedly others too benefited from the grazing resource. The entrances leading to the common from Grove Farm, Booker Farm, Booker Hill Farm and Limmer Farm confirm that the grazing resource was central to the life of the local farming community. The common's duality as a seigniorial wood and timber resource and as grazing resource for those with formal common rights highlights the common's worth to the Lord of the manor and commoners alike. In 1676, under the lordship of Thomas Lewis, and just six years into his ownership, orders regulating access to and use of the common were issued by the manorial court. Only those with common right were permitted to graze their cattle upon any common within the manor, and digging there or 'carrying away waste' brought with it threat of an amercement, as did erecting a cottage.<sup>31</sup> The orders did not specify the number of cattle permitted to graze on the commons. Why these orders were issued at this particular time is uncertain, but they do suggest that all the commons were experiencing pressure from those without formal common right. The orders indicate that overgrazing, removal of materials from the soil and significant encroachment had become a real problem, but compliance with the court was another matter.

The manorial courts of 1677, 1685, 1687 and 1693 record instances of repeated encroachment on the commons and the attendant monetary punishments meted out to offenders. One case study from Booker Common is illustrative of the long period over which encroachments were consistently challenged by the manorial court. At the end of the seventeenth century, Moses Fryer, James Fryer and Jonas Phillips occupied cottages located not on the fringes of Booker Common, but conspicuously on its open space area. The Fryers were not wealthy, so much so that they benefited from the legacy of Elizabeth Hobbs, who in 1690 left forty shillings for the benefit of the parish poor; Moses and James Fryer each received one shilling.<sup>32</sup> In 1700, Moses Fryer and Jonas Phillips were presented to the court for encroachment on Booker Common and again for continuing to do so in 1716, 1719, 1722, 1735 and 1749. The amercements levied on Fryer and Phillips were in reality a form of rent, their occu-

pation of the common being effectively tolerated by the court. In the meantime, there were enterprising newcomers to the common. By 1749 John Carr had erected a 'smiths shop' on the common, in addition to the one set up by Edward Anderson. Carr set up his business next to a cottage that eventually became the *Three Horseshoes* public house, the name aptly reflecting the economic activity of that locality. The court clearly acknowledged Carr's success and took action to benefit from it, increasing his amercement in 1752 from 13s 4d to £1 1s a year later because he had built a house in addition to his blacksmith's shop, and continued to make 'other' encroachments on the common. John Carr chose to set up business close to an abundant fuel source, selecting a perfect site at the junction of two tracks traversing the common. He clearly provided a valuable service to local farmers and prospered, evidenced by the small enclosure in his name on the 1767 manorial survey; Carr's enclosure is illustrated in Figure 7.

The amercements levied by the court failed to deter the erection of cottages or enclosures on the manorial waste, because the same family names appear year after year in the court documents, particularly under the lordship of the Dashwoods. The 1720s and 1730s saw a high incidence of court business taken up with instances of encroachment. Indeed, the 1749 court listed encroachments by tithing, evidence of a more structured approach to the collection of amercements.<sup>33</sup> As discussed, the amercements in reality had assumed the form of a rent payment. When the court really wanted to deter any action, it chose to act with severity as in the case of John Body, who in 1749 'entertained vagrants' and was amerced a hefty £3 3s 'in case he commits the like after one month from this day'.<sup>34</sup> Preventing poor outsiders from becoming a financial burden was clearly a priority, but the court also had to deal with the demands of its own people. As evidenced, the court recognised and accepted the loss of small plots of common land, but this was a delicate balance. Provided the tenant's encroachment was of reasonable size and that the sustainability of the common was not compromised, there was every chance for its permanent recognition by the court. This policy of sustainable management extended to everyone, including the lord of the manor. In 1735, under the stewardship of Garnham Edwards and jurors who included Richard Chalfont from Booker, Sir Francis Dashwood was amerced



by the court for his enclosure and erection of a cottage on the manorial waste.<sup>35</sup> Like other offenders, he too continued to occupy the waste, as evidenced by further amerancements in 1749.<sup>36</sup> The amerement levied on Sir Francis Dashwood was never going to put an end to his encroachment, but the jurors' action sent out a message that the common waste was a valuable resource, prized by commoners, and that any loss by anyone would not go unchallenged.

By 1760, it appears that individuals were no longer presented for encroachment offences on the common, as evidenced by the blank pages in the draft court rolls for that year. This policy continued until 1778, when the court declared that as long as enclosures on the waste were paid for in the form of a fine, they could remain.<sup>37</sup>

The Map of the Manor of West Wycombe,

surveyed by John Richardson in 1767, vividly illustrates new enclosures that had established on the manorial waste since the 1702/1717 survey. At Booker Common, William Plumbridge had erected a cottage in one enclosure and Thomas Dean and John Barton each occupied another two. James Fryer, undoubtedly descended from the earlier tenant of the same name, continued to occupy the same cottage on the common, having enlarged his enclosure. This time, however, the cottage operated as a shop or inn, as evidenced by the shop sign symbol on the 1767 survey. By that year, what was to become present day 'Newmer Common' had formed. John Stevens and Thomas Dean each had small enclosures there, and George King and Henry Young had erected cottages.

Nestled in the woodland area of the common, in 1732 William and Mary Gibson occupied a cottage



FIGURE 7 A Map of the Manor of West Wycombe in the County of Bucks belonging to the Right, Honourable, Francis Baron le Despencer, accurately surveyed by John Richardson of Burnham, Bucks, 1767. John Carr's blacksmiths circled in white (reproduced with the kind permission of Sir Edward Dashwood)

and two-acre enclosure known as Cinnamon Close, the copyhold originally held by William Gibson the elder.<sup>38</sup> William and Mary Gibson sublet their copyhold to William Pusey and his wife in 1747, and then to Robert Howard in 1757. Pusey worked as a 'pheasant man', rearing and preserving bird stocks in the woods, hedgerows and surrounding fields. In one sense he acted as gamekeeper, the role first defined under Act of Parliament in 1670–1, but it is evident from his title that the role was more specific, responsible solely for pheasants and not other game such as rabbits and hares. This woodland enclosure, unlike the others established on the edges of the common, was created for on-site, direct management of game, stock and timber; William Gibson's enclosure is formally recorded in the valuation wood accounts and in other manorial documents.<sup>39</sup>

The cottages clustered around Booker Farm constituted one small community at the edge of the common, the site now occupied by twentieth-century housing and *The Squirrel* public house. Another community was situated close by to Limmer House, where John Lane farmed at the turn of the seventeenth century. His farmhouse was in the parish of Great Marlow just yards from the parish boundary with West Wycombe.<sup>40</sup> He farmed the small fields on the West Wycombe side of the parish border, undoubtedly enjoying use of the common. Indeed, in 1716, along with many others within the manor, he was presented at the manorial court for encroachment on the manorial waste.<sup>41</sup> The inclusion of Limmer House on the 1702 and 1767 manorial surveys illustrates that this farm, while not in the manor of West Wycombe, held some significance to the locality. It is therefore unsurprising that the location around Lane's farm grew into the larger, nineteenth-century community, where the Methodist chapel was erected in 1847. Convenient proximity to the road leading to Marlow, interaction with those neighbouring parish inhabitants and the hilltop plateau of the common are the most likely reasons why this small community grew in size instead of the one near Booker Farm. The small cluster of cottages to the west of the common near Grove Farm remained an isolated settlement, the origins of present day Newmer Common.

Establishing the population figure for those living on or around the common in the eighteenth century is problematic. The 1691 poor rate assess-

ment records thirteen people but, in consideration of family size and those too poor to pay, a population estimate of around fifty people inhabiting the environs of the common is likely.<sup>42</sup> The holdings of land in the tithing remained constant because over time, although names in the rating assessment naturally changed, there was no significant increase in the number of people assessed. Interestingly, the parish adopted the yardland measurement as its basis for the tax assessment rather than a valuation of property. This form of assessment continued throughout the eighteenth century until the 1780s, when valuation of property finally replaced the yardland. Steve Hindle observed the use of the yardland in seventeenth-century Warwickshire poor rate assessments, but why some parishes employed its use and not others is uncertain.<sup>43</sup> Until 1754 the West Wycombe vestry assessed need amongst the parish poor, but only listed individuals and not where they lived within the parish. In 1754, a workhouse was established at Wheeler End Common when relief of the poor was farmed out to Thomas Dean from Great Missenden. He was paid a yearly sum of £270 to 'provide for the poor in every respect'.<sup>44</sup>

Although Booker Common hosted a community at some distance from the centre of manorial and parochial administration, its people contributed to parish and manorial governance. Manor and parish administration was tightly interlinked, with parish and manorial office holders rotating between posts. Robert Keene and Christopher Newell, who farmed at Booker, were churchwardens in 1688, and Richard Chalfont acted as parish overseer of the poor in 1724 and manorial court juror in 1725. Likewise, Samuel Rotton acted as overseer of the poor in 1795. Were these men chosen for office specifically because of their association with Booker Common, or did they seek office in order to influence the setting of the parish poor rate? The answer remains elusive but, despite Booker Common being a marginal settlement, some distance from the 'towne' of West Wycombe, its people were neither excluded nor isolated from manorial or parochial affairs but took an active part in the administrative decisions made via the parish and manor.

The poor harvests of the 1790s, the effects of war and a rise in general population conspired to produce a new wave of encroachment on the manorial wastes in 1801. The earlier policy of charging

continued, by formal conversion of amerancements to quit rents. At Booker Common in that year, Thomas Dean's 'rent' for his one-rood encroachment was amerced as a fine of three shillings and quit rent of three shillings. Richard Giles, with a smaller encroachment of ten perches, paid a six pence fine and six pence quit rent. Inability to pay the poor rate grew during the 1790s. In 1794, out of fourteen ratepayers only two, George King and Widow Fryer, were unable to pay, but by March 1801, out of thirteen ratepayers, six were unable to pay, including one Thomas Dean. As elsewhere, during the early years of the nineteenth century, poverty was a feature of many communities, and Booker was no exception. Indeed, things were no better by 1809, when nine out of fourteen households were too poor to pay.

The defining characteristic of the eighteenth-century tithing at Booker Common is of an area of common waste under continual threat from encroachment, yet able to support small tenanted farms and cottage households on its margins. Blacksmiths and two shops supported the agrarian community, and while the common was constantly under threat from encroachment by insiders and outsiders, its sustainability was of central concern to the manor, which recognised and profited from the valuable tree resource. Presentments for encroachment were plenty and frequent at the manorial courts, but just a few translated into permanent structures, as evidenced by the two manorial surveys: between 1702 and 1767, the number of dwellings increased from fourteen to just eighteen at Booker Common. As discussed, determining population is notoriously problematic before the nineteenth-century censuses, but corroborative evidence from the poor-rate assessments confirms that holdings were indeed stable, with the court clearly playing a pivotal role in controlling population and land use. The small family farmer prospered here, using his own family labour, negating the need for a large pool of agricultural labourers. These farms, surrounding the common, proved attractive investments to both locals and those at a distance, with subletting the overriding practice. Although furniture manufacturing developed in this area of the Chilterns during the late eighteenth century, there is little evidence to identify chair makers at Booker. Out of eighteen chair makers listed in the Buckinghamshire *Posse Comitatus* for West Wycombe in 1798, no 'Booker'

names are recognised.<sup>45</sup> This does not mean that Booker played no part in the nascent furniture industry, merely that paucity of evidence precludes verification. Indeed, the people of nineteenth-century Booker Common embraced the opportunities presented by the furniture industry.

Using the tithing as a unit of study, this paper has touched on some aspects of eighteenth-century rural change, notably the pressures facing the common waste and the manor's strategy and response. Ultimately, the policy implemented in the eighteenth century contributed to Booker Common's survival.

## NOTES

1. The author is undertaking doctoral research at Lancaster University into common land in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns; the work is ongoing.
2. Manorial court rolls refer to the tithing of Booker or Booker and Vining. Late 17<sup>th</sup> century parish rate books refer to eleven administrative areas: the towne, Haveringdowne, Downley, Plomer-greene, Millend, Booker, Toweridge, Park Lane, Lane End, Wheeler End and Chawley
3. With thanks to Dr. Paul Cavill at the University of Nottingham for his helpful suggestions regarding the name Booker.
4. Jacob Gile's 'A New Law Dictionary' (ed. 1732) defined waste as, 'those Lands which are not in any Man's occupation, but lie Common; which are so called because the Lord cannot make such Profit of them as of other Lands...' It must be remembered that the waste was not always 'common'. The term common can be confusing and refers to the land's legal status, *i.e.* land held as private property, but over which others had rights to take certain produce from it.
5. VCH Buckinghamshire vol. 3 pp.135–40.
6. CBS, D-D/6/54 Bargain and Sale.
7. Bodleian Library (BOD), MS Dashwood (Bucks) CI (A2) entry for 1703.
8. BOD, MS Dashwood (Bucks) C1 (A2), p.106.
9. CBS MaR/36/1.
10. The author has not conducted analysis of rental income.
11. University of Saskatchewan Archives, Papers of David Farmer, MG145, Vols 13 & 16. See also R H Britnell and BMS Campbell (Eds.), *A Commercialising Economy: England 1086–1300* (Manchester, 1995).

12. See O. Rackham, *Trees & Woodland in the British Landscape* (Phoenix 1990), 10: 'Wood was used for light construction or firewood and timber for planks, beams and gateposts'. The three accounts are as follows: CBS, D-D/14/54 (1691–1697); CBS, D-D/14/55 (1696); CBS, D/D/14/56 (1698).
13. Analysis of this map is beyond the scope of this paper, but if undertaken would undoubtedly aid confirmation of manorial landholding and woodland acreages. The map is undated and in part incomplete, notably totals of arable, meadow and woodland. The CBS suggests a date of 1698. However, Francis Dashwood was knighted in 1702 and several fields held by him refer to Sir Francis Dashwood. The employment of 1717 as an end date reflects the granting of probate for William Spearing in that year. A list of manorial inhabitants for 1716 (D/BASM/88/230), almost exactly replicates those inhabitants at Booker recorded on the map. An electronic copy of the map is available at the CBS.
14. CBS, PR227/11/1, 1691 Poor rate assessment.
15. Batty Langley, *A sure method of improving estates by plantations of oaks, elms, ash and other timber trees, coppice wood offered to the consideration of the nobility and gentry of Great Britain* (Twickenham, 1728), pp.98–99.
16. CBS, D-D/14/55.
17. W. Ellis, *Chiltern and vale farming explained, according to the latest improvements* (London, 1733), p.91.
18. Ibid
19. O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (Phoenix, 1986), p.98.
20. CBS, D/D/6/301.
21. The author can find no explanation for the local term water billets and suggests these were billets transported via the Thames.
22. CBS, D/D/14/60, Account of wood felled by Lord le Despencer, 1769–1770.
23. CBS, D/BASM/88/148/4.
24. With thanks to Dr Paul Cavill for his help on the use and meaning of the word 'jace'.
25. BS, Q/RPL. Land Tax Return for West Wycombe, 1804.
26. Incidentally, Samuel Rotton was related to William Huskisson, politician who died at the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830. Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies, DX13/11, 12; Dictionary of National Biography, William Huskisson (1770–1830); TNA. PROB 11/1280, will of Samuel Rotten
27. TNA, PROB/11/1231.
28. Holden's Trade Directory 1816
29. CBS, D/BASM/88/72, Special Court Baron, 13<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1805.
30. CBS, D/D/14/98. The terrier is undated and incomplete. The numbered fields on the terrier match those on the 1767 manorial survey indicating the terrier was created around the time of the survey.
31. CBS, D/BASM/88/25, Court Roll 28/3/1676.
32. CBS, PR 227/4/1.
33. CBS, D/BASM 88/146/2.
34. Ibid
35. CBS, D/BASM/88/69, Manorial Court 16<sup>th</sup> April 1735. (This was not at Booker Common)
36. CBS, D/BASM 88/146/2.
37. The use of the word 'fine' is problematic. It may refer to a modern term for an amercement or could indicate that encroachments were now being treated as a form of tenure, therefore inviting a traditional fine.
38. He lived in Wargrave, one of the Bishopric of Winchester's manors; further research is required to confirm and reveal further cases of migration between estates.
39. See for example CBD, D/D/14/56 (Valuation of woods and timber at West Wycombe, 1698) and CBS, D/D/14/129 (Particular of West Wycombe farms and woods to be disposed of. Undated)
40. The author has not fully examined Great Marlow court rolls or land tax returns but it is highly likely, as so often found elsewhere, that copyholders with tenures at Booker, also held land just over the border in Great Marlow parish.
41. CBS, D/ BASM/88/65 Court April 1716.
42. CBS, PR 227/11/1.
43. S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), p.285.
44. CBS D-D/6/365 (Counterpart lease, message to be used as a workhouse). CBS PR 227/8/1 Vestry Minute Book 1744–1810
45. See <http://www.bucksinfo.net/brs/assets/other/brs-vol-22/> for the online version of Buckinghamshire Record Society, Volume 22, The Buckinghamshire Posse Comitatus 1798.