

THE LANDS TO BE ENCLOSED

BY ROGER LEA

Common land was assumed by the Enclosure Commissioner to be land which nobody owned. Having established for the Corn Rent exactly who the owners were and what was the extent of their property, the remainder (excluding the Park) was available to be enclosed and allotted. However, the commons so defined were not of a uniform nature as regards their history, potential value, fertility, convenience of location, or need for capital investment. Nor were they evenly distributed across Sutton, including as they did the vast open expanses which comprised most of the acreage; local patches of land of the village green type, wide road-side verges, and a few special cases.

The Extensive Commons.

There remained in 1824 some 3,000 acres of what had previously been even more extensive commons, which, including the Park, had formed a great horse-shoe shape around the cultivated land. By 1824, this was more fragmented, but still extensive. The different parts of the commons had local names, many of which are given here from the early 19th century sources; earlier sources give other names - e.g. Noddy's Field, Cockshutt Field, Smiths Field - which may have been superseded by 1800 by newer names, or perhaps have ceased to be common.

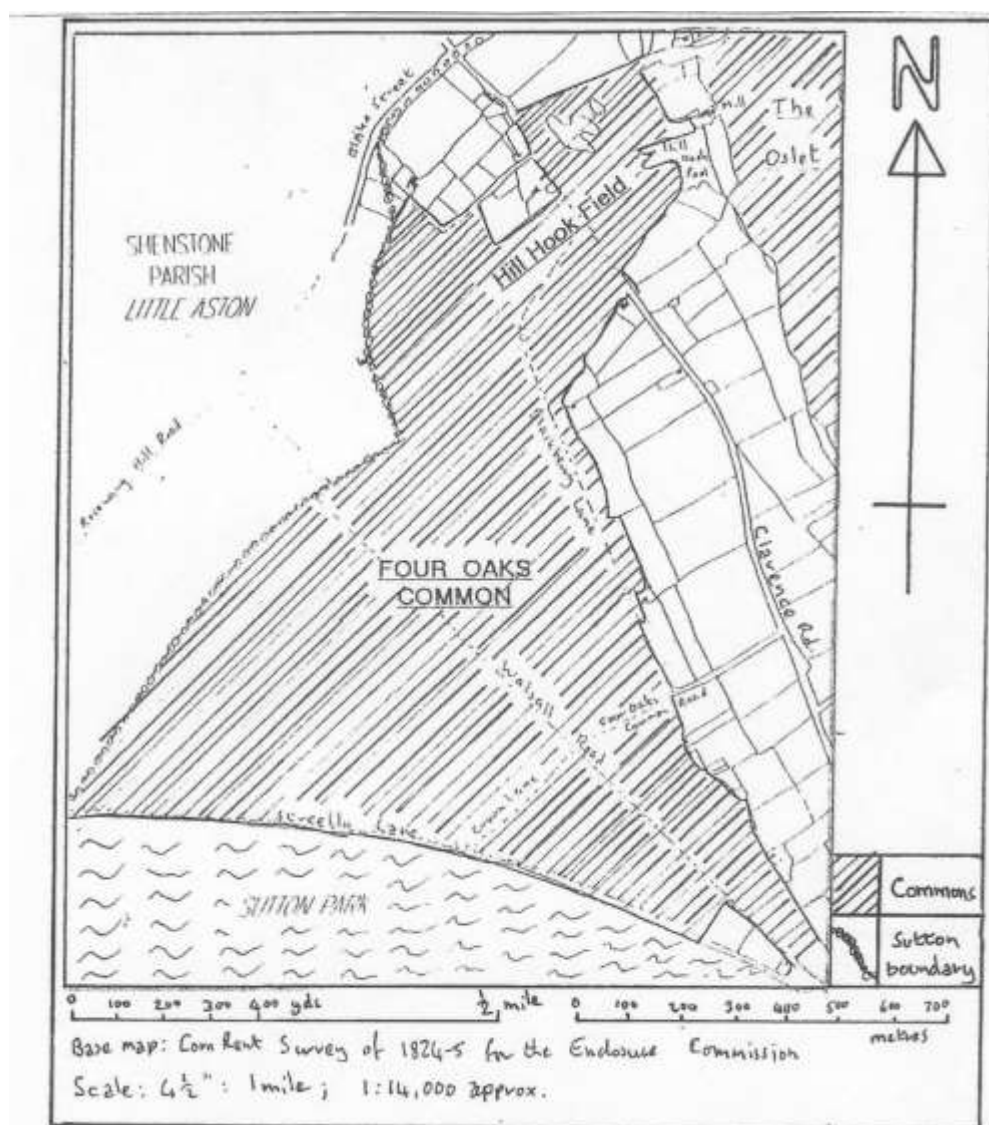
To the north-east of Sutton Park was Four Oaks Common (map 3.1), bounded by the Park, the boundary with Little Aston, the smallholdings at Blake Street and Hill Hook, the farmland at Blackberry Lane, and the hamlet of Four Oaks.

While the Park boundary had been established since at least Bishop Vesey's time, the boundary with Little Aston was only clearly defined when the Little Aston commons were enclosed in 1812. Then, the supposed boundary of Little Aston included part of Sutton Park, and near Park View Road the markers were said to be ditches, white posts, and a number of white stones; a compromise as shown on the map was reached¹. Perhaps someone living in the Park View Road area still has one of these stones in their garden. The smallholdings on the edge of the commons had probably developed from squatters settlements over the years, while Hill Hook may have been an embryonic hamlet². The open fields of the village of Hill originally extended

no further west than Clarence Road, the additional land having been taken in piecemeal by local owners. The part of the common next to Hill Hook was known as Hill Hook Field.

Map 3.1 : Four Oaks Common.

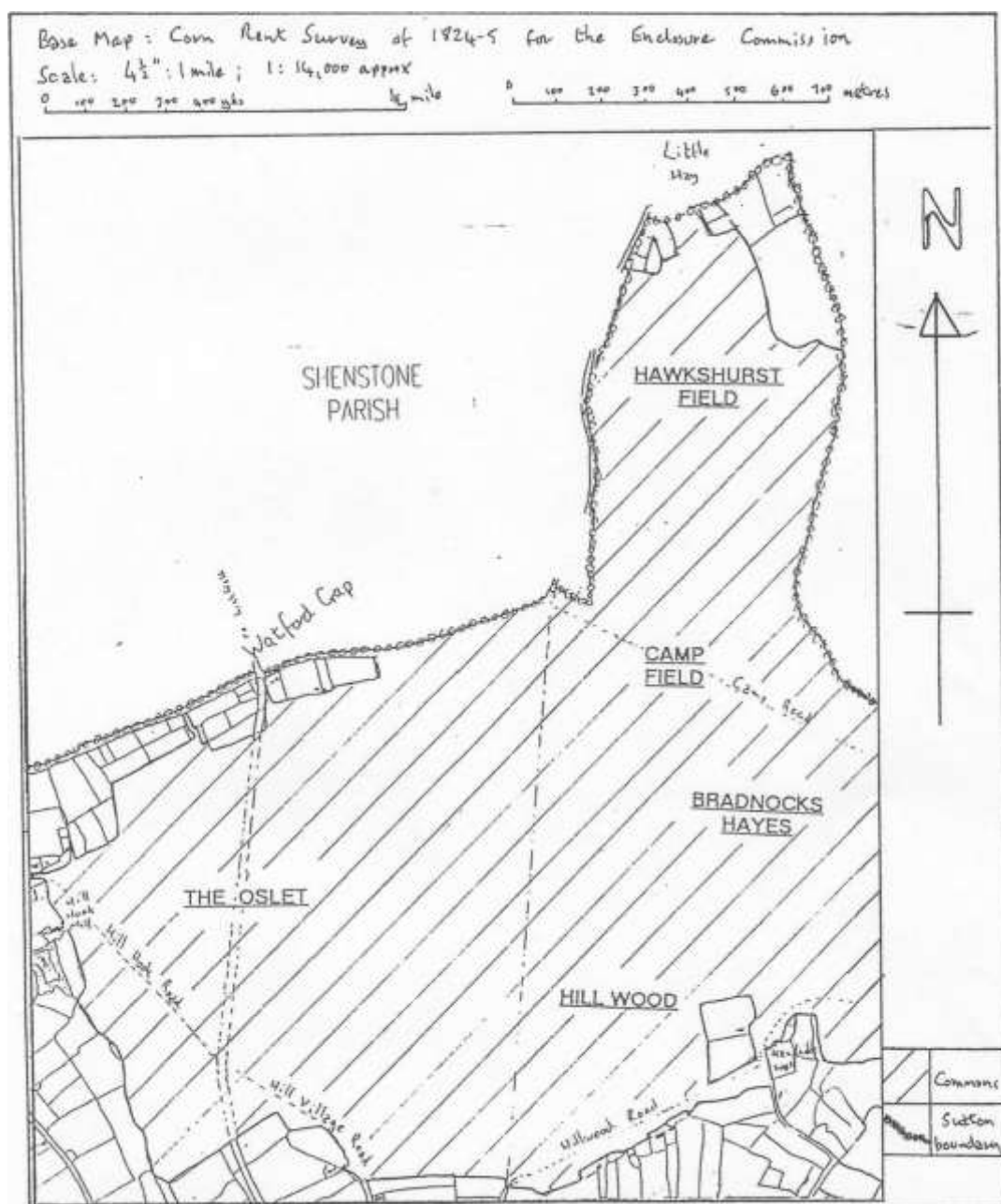
Note - on this and the following maps, roads across the commons are shown as pecked lines with their modern names: however, neither the roads nor their names existed in 1824, and they are shown to give the reader some points of reference in spaces which would otherwise be empty.



Hill Commons stretched in a great arc from Hill Hook to Lindridge Pool, but normally the names of the many local subdivisions were used. The village of Hill was strung out along Hill Village Road, and the commons to the north of the last house - between here and Hill Hook Mill, as far as the Watford Gap smallholdings, was the Oslet. (see map 3.2). The Oslet occupied the whole of the west-facing slope from the ridge where the TV mast now stands to the little brook

at Hill Hook, and was crossed by the new Turnpike Road to Lichfield, which can be seen on the map cutting across the old fields - traffic previously used Hill Village Road³. Further

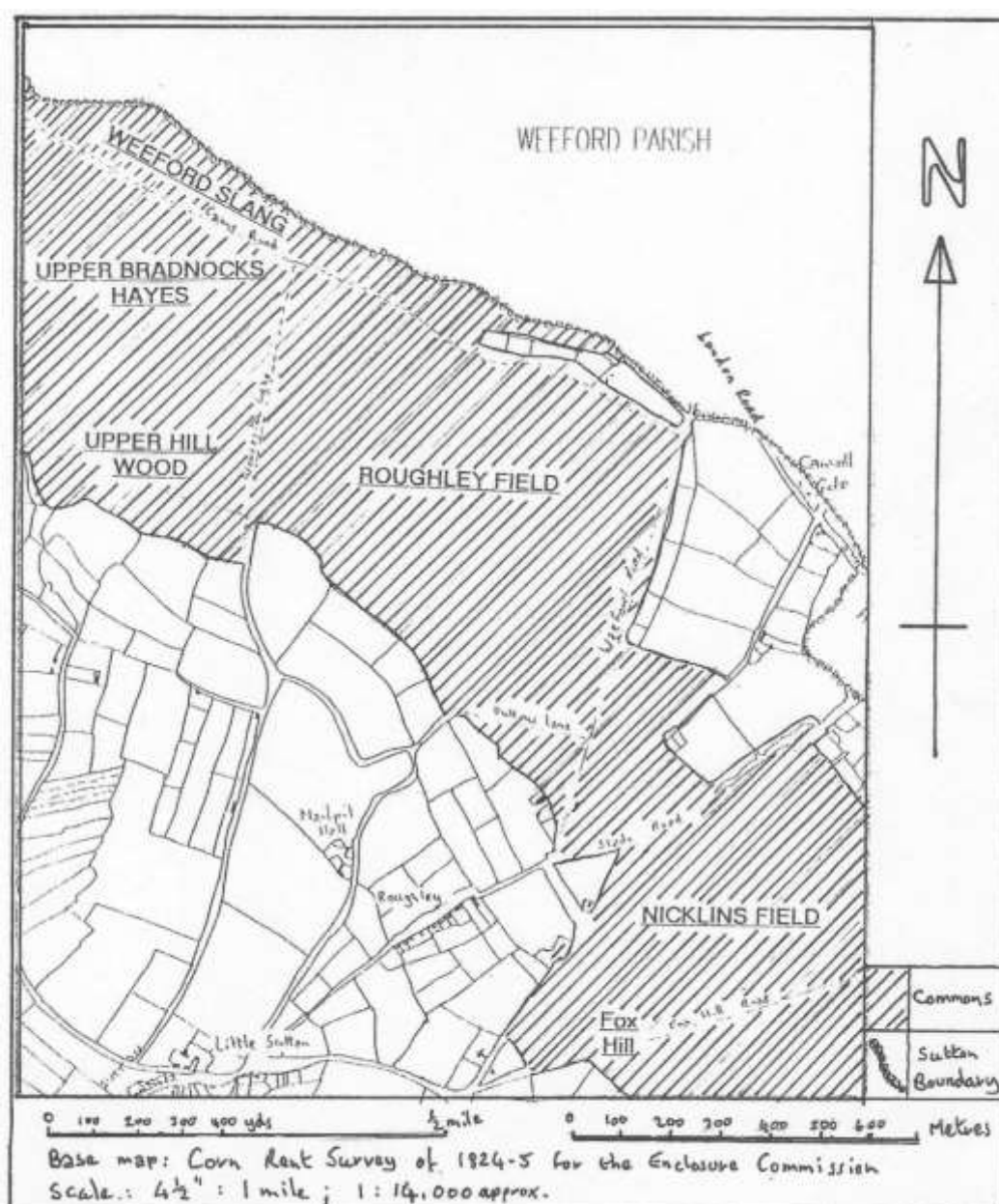
Map 3.2 - The Northern Commons



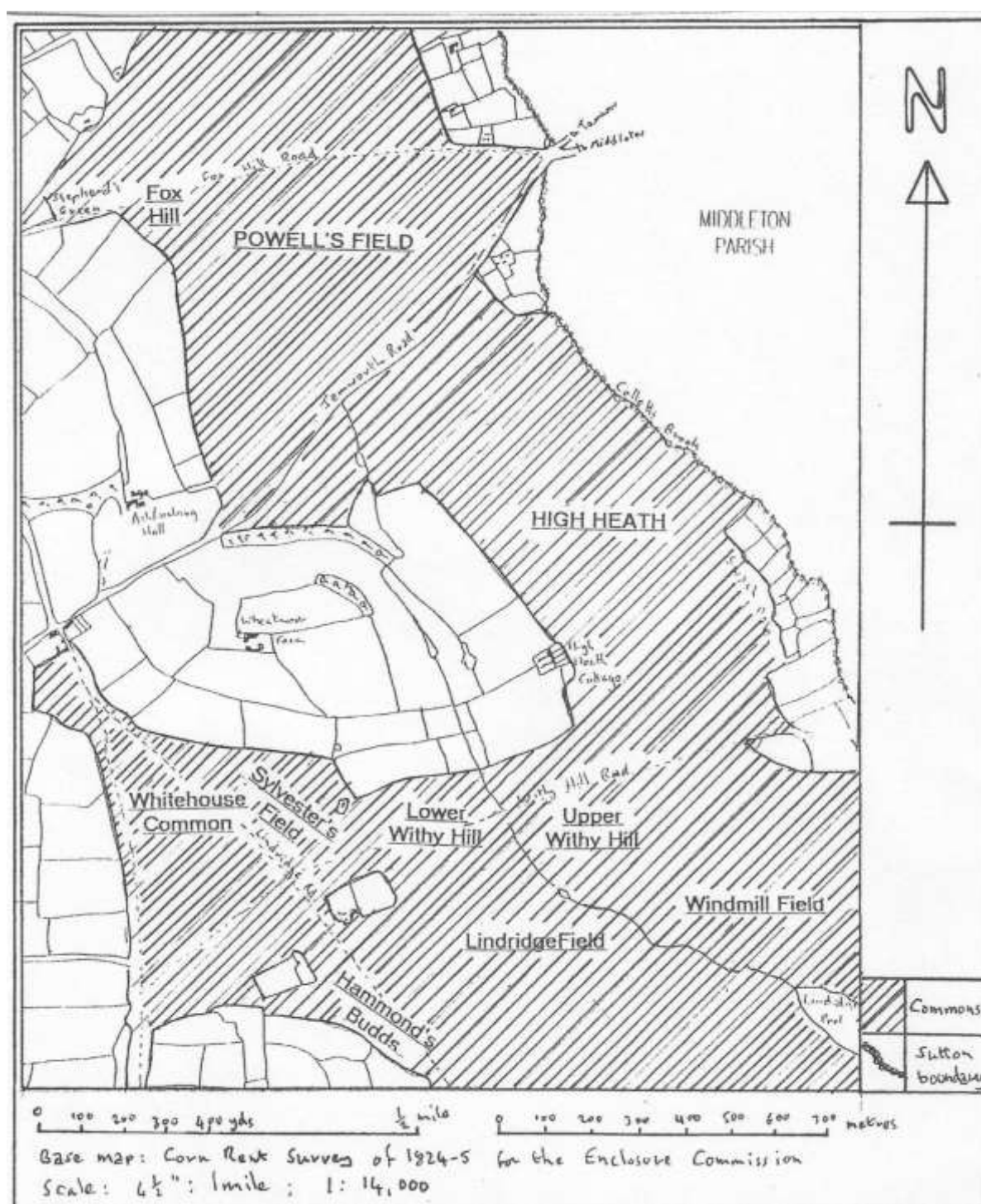
east was Hillwood Common, occupying the East-facing slope from the ridge to the north of the ancient open fields of Hill Village. Hillwood had been one of the four divisions of the medieval Sutton Chase, and later the name of a nearby coppice. To the north, the name Camp Field dates from 1811⁴, when there was a large encampment of militia here; but this name probably took over

from the older Bradnocks Hayes (or Braddocks Hays), a name still used for most of this part of the common in 1824. Beyond Camp Road, in the horn of land which is now outside Sutton, was Hawkshurst Field. The Sutton boundary with Shenstone here was set out when the Shenstone commons were enclosed in 1812, and, like most of the north-eastern boundary, followed the course of tiny streamlets. As the land rises up towards Worcester Lane, the names change to Upper Hillwood and Upper Bradnocks Hayes.

Map 3.3 - The North-Eastern Commons



Map 3.4 - High Heath



Before the enclosure, routes across the commons were undefined - well-used routes would show a well-worn track, but lesser used ones may have been hardly visible at all, and the traveller might strike his own path. In the same way, the different parts of the commons rarely had defined boundaries, local people would have known they were in Bradnocks Hayes or Hawkshurst, without being able to pin-point when they crossed from one to the other.

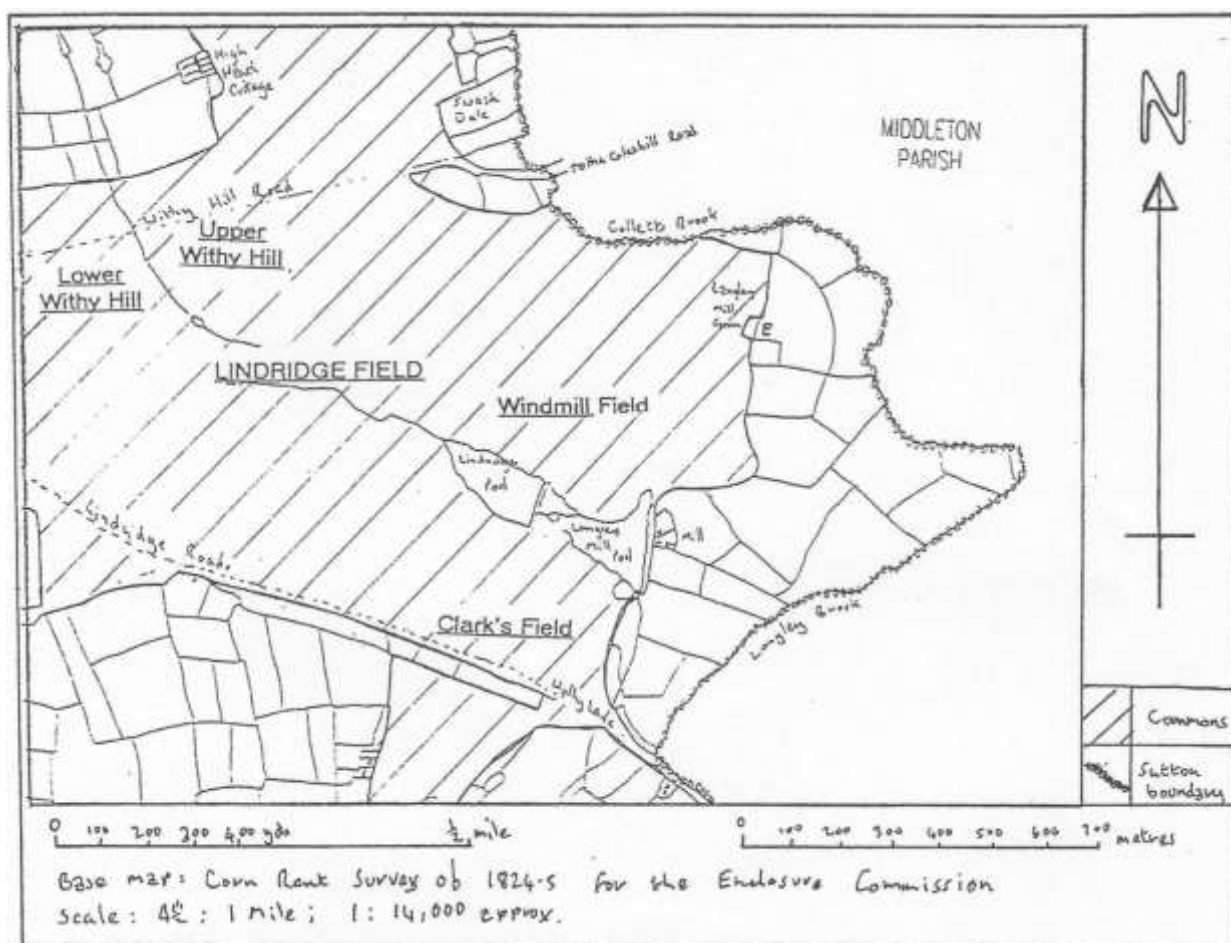
To the east of Worcester Lane, Weeford Slang occupied the valley beside Camp Road, while the higher ground took its name from the neighbouring hamlet of Roughley (map 3.3). To the east of Roughley field are the smallholdings at Canwell Gate, where the ancient route from London to the north-west, London Road, crosses into Sutton for a few yards. To the south more small pieces of land have been carved out of the commons, many of them later to become part of the Canwell Estate. Alongside Slade Road was a long marl-pit or pond, where clay was extracted to spread over the stony fields, and maybe also for brickmaking.

Nicklins Field, to the south of Slade Road, was named after the Nicklin family who had one of the nearby houses, in 1824 there was a Nicklin occupying a house near the corner of Slade Road and Weeford Road; Powell's Field to the south was likewise named after a family who may have lived at what is now Ashfurlong Hall (map 3.4). The road names, Fox Hill and Slade, possibly preserve other earlier names for these pans of the commons. Tamworth Road was turnpiked in 1807, and to the south of it was Wheatmoor Hill, after the Wheatmoor farm, which may have been set out on former common land in Bishop Vesey's time (c. 1540). The farm in turn may have taken its name from a more ancient source, as Whitemoors are mentioned in a document of 1260⁵. The map shows Wheatmoor almost surrounded by commons, those to the west being Whitehouse Common, the house at the Tamworth Road crossroads having been known as the White House. Whitehouse Common widens to the south, merging into Sylvesters Field to the east and Hammonds Budds to the south. These fields were named for local people, Hammonds Budds possibly being where the butts were set up for firing practice for Captain Hannam's troops in the Civil War.

High Heath and Lindridge Field bring the vast expanse of Hill Commons to an end, with their subdivisions of upper Withy Hill, Lower Withy Hill, Clark's Field and Windmill Field. Lindridge, which means a ridge with lime trees, was one of the four divisions of the medieval Chase of Sutton, so was formerly the name of a much larger area. High Heath Cottage is a Vesey stone house, possibly designed to house someone to police this remote part, overlooking the rough dwellings of Swash Dale and the main London Road beyond. Windmill field (map 3.5) is self-explanatory, but the windmill was superseded in 1604 by the water corn mill at Langley Pool - the two pools here are the only documented examples of the commons being flooded for water-power⁶. Where Lindridge Road crosses the Langley Brook it used to be called Holly Lane. In 1727, a traveller on the London Road stopped at the Canwell Gate Inn, where he was told of a short cut across the commons. He followed his guide across High Heath and Lindridge, but when

they got to Holly Lane, he was robbed and murdered. The culprit, Powers, "was gibbeted afterwards upon Little Sutton Common. Which sentence was carried into execution on 25th day of April 1728 not far from Colletts Brook. The Common Field for many years after were called Powers's Field"... "N.B. I knew an old woman of the name of 'Sarah Brown' who lived at a house on Reddicap Heath (when I was a boy). She well remembered seeing both men 'Powers' and 'Alport' hanged up. She was a by stander at both times"⁷.

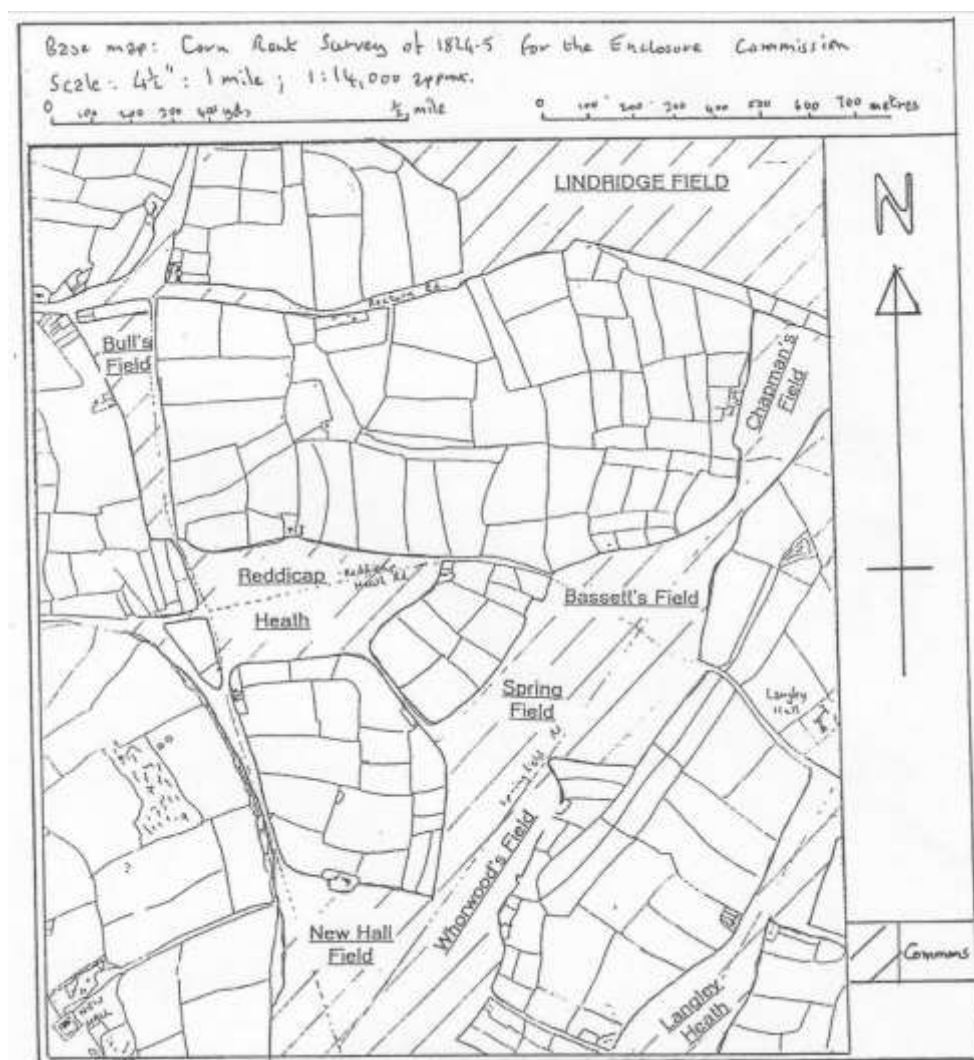
Map 3.5 - Lindridge Field



Southwards, the commons continued in two strands of varying width along the lines of Hollyfield Road and Springfield Road (map 3.6) forming another wide expanse north of Walmley. From the southern end of Whitehouse common there was a narrow link to Bulls Field; like the commons along Springfield Road - Chapman's Field, Bassetts Field, Whorwoods Field - this was named after a local family. Bulls Field was next to Reddicap Heath, which had a narrow link to Spring Field, and it seems likely that these two names once related to larger areas than they did in 1824, as the whole triangle bounded by Springfield Road, Lindridge Road, and Hollyfield Road

may once have been common. It is possible to see the settlement within this triangle as a number of islands surrounded by waste land, these islands having been taken into cultivation from the common at some time. The better land had presumably been chosen by the settlers who established their farms, and one of the key factors in making this choice may have been drainage, as the flatter terrain seems to have remained common.

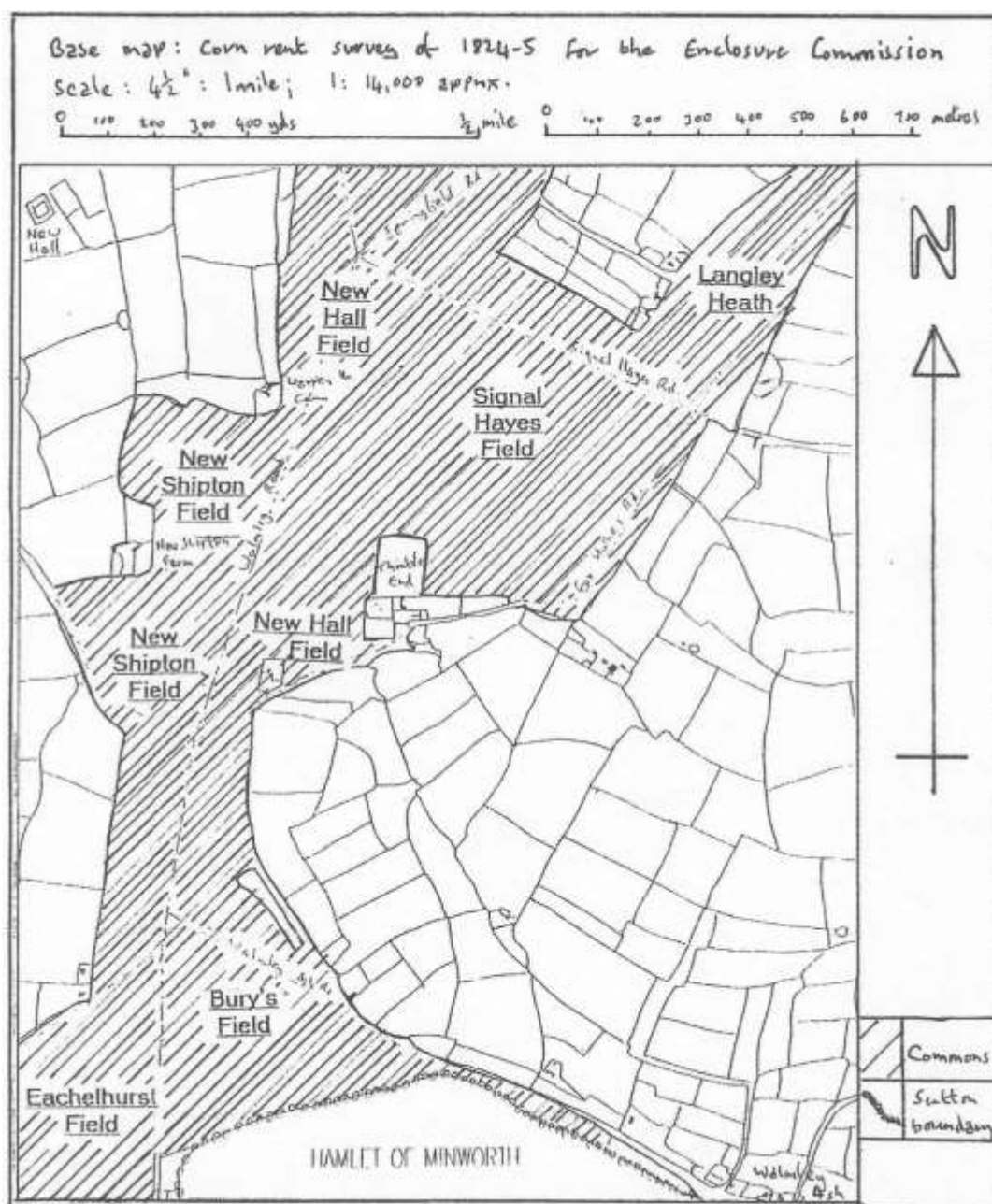
Map 3.6- Reddicap Heath



Signal Hayes or Single Leys Field (map 3.7) is probably an ancient name for the common which by 1824 included New Hall Field, New Shipton Field, and Langley Heath. New Hall and New Shipton were both neighbouring estates, at least 400 years old in 1824 despite their names, and Langley Heath is also an old name, the 12th century Langley Hall having adopted the name then in current use for that locality. At Bury's Field the boundary of Sutton separated this from the hamlet of Minworth, an

area later to be included inside the Sutton boundary. Beyond Burys Field lay the Eachelhurst Field, which is the subject of a separate study in this volume.

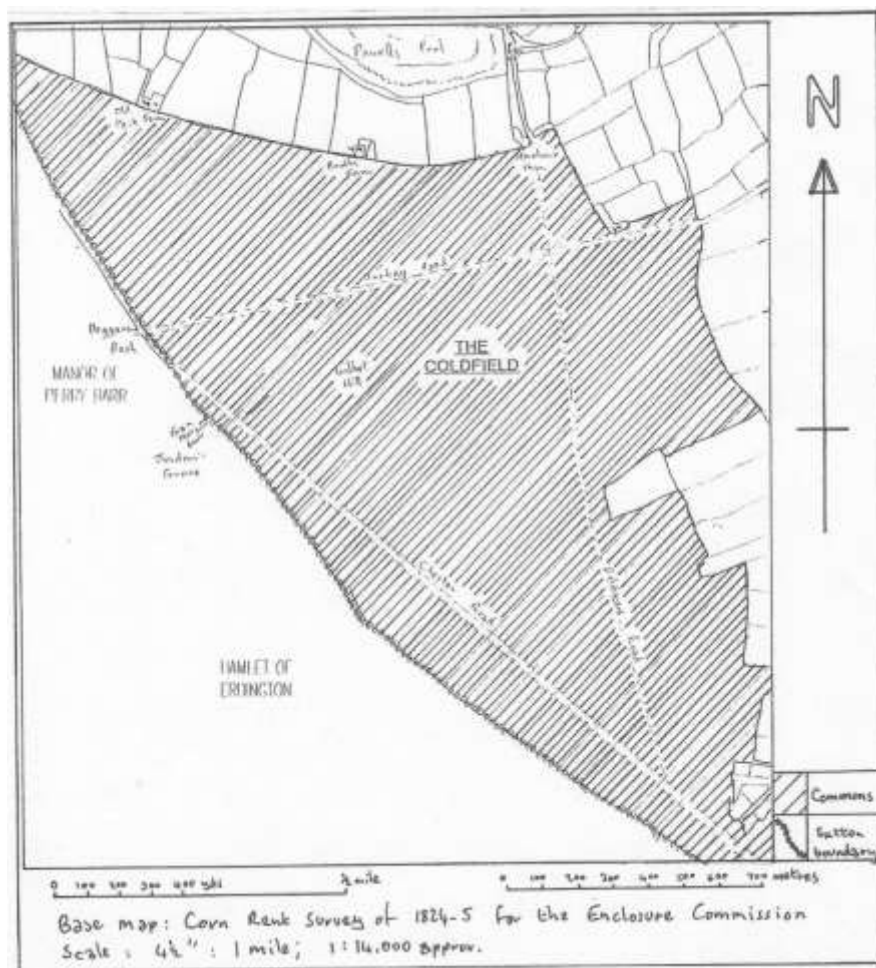
Map 3.7 - Walmley



The name Coldfield is of importance to Suttonians as part of the Town's name. The Coldfield Waste once extended as far as Perry Barr, Barr Beacon, and Aldridge, and by 1125 it described the whole of the western part of Sutton Chase; it probably signifies a barren treeless expanse rather than charcoal or coal production. By 1824 the name was applied to the area now known as

Boldmere. Its Eastern boundary (map 3.8) was determined by geology, the cultivated land being mostly east of the fault line separating pebble beds from sandstone. To the north was originally Sutton Park, the farmland shown on the map dating from the 16th century when this part of the Park was granted away. The farm buildings were against the boundary with the Commons in order to give free access. The Western boundary was determined at the time of the Perry Barr enclosure in 1814, when some Suttonians claimed that the Sutton boundary should have been the Hawthorn Brook, nearly a mile further south. The road to West Bromwich,

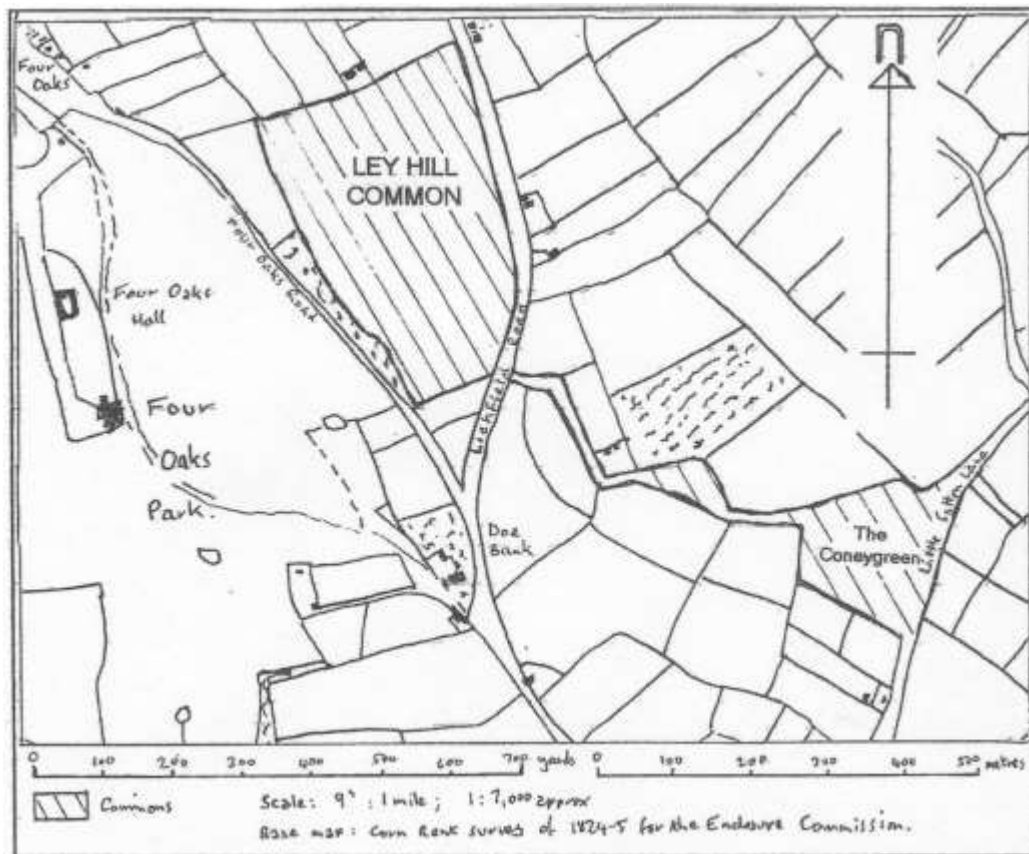
Map 3.8 - The Coldfield



Jockey Lane, was turnpiked in 1804, while Chester Road (the Stonnall, Stonebridge and Castle Bromwich Turnpike), was well-defined across the common. Gibbet Hill is a grisly reminder of

the custom of dealing with cutthroats by displaying their dead bodies near the scene of their crime, but whether this made the roads any safer for travellers is questionable.

Map 3.9- Ley Hill Common



Commons may once have stretched from Four Oaks to Ashfurlong to the south of Mere Green and Little Sutton, before the establishment of Moor Hall (1525) and Four Oaks Hall (1697). By 1824 there remained two parts of this. Ley Hill Common (map 3.9) was bounded on the east by the Lichfield turnpike road, on the north by farmland pertaining to Hill Village, and on the west by a strip of woodland belonging to Four Oaks Hall. Linked to Ley Hill Common by a foredrove (passage along which animals may be driven or led) was the Coneygreen. Conygree was the old name for a rabbit warren, but this area of land near the corner of modern Little Sutton Lane and Dower Road was treated the same as any other part of the commons by 1824.