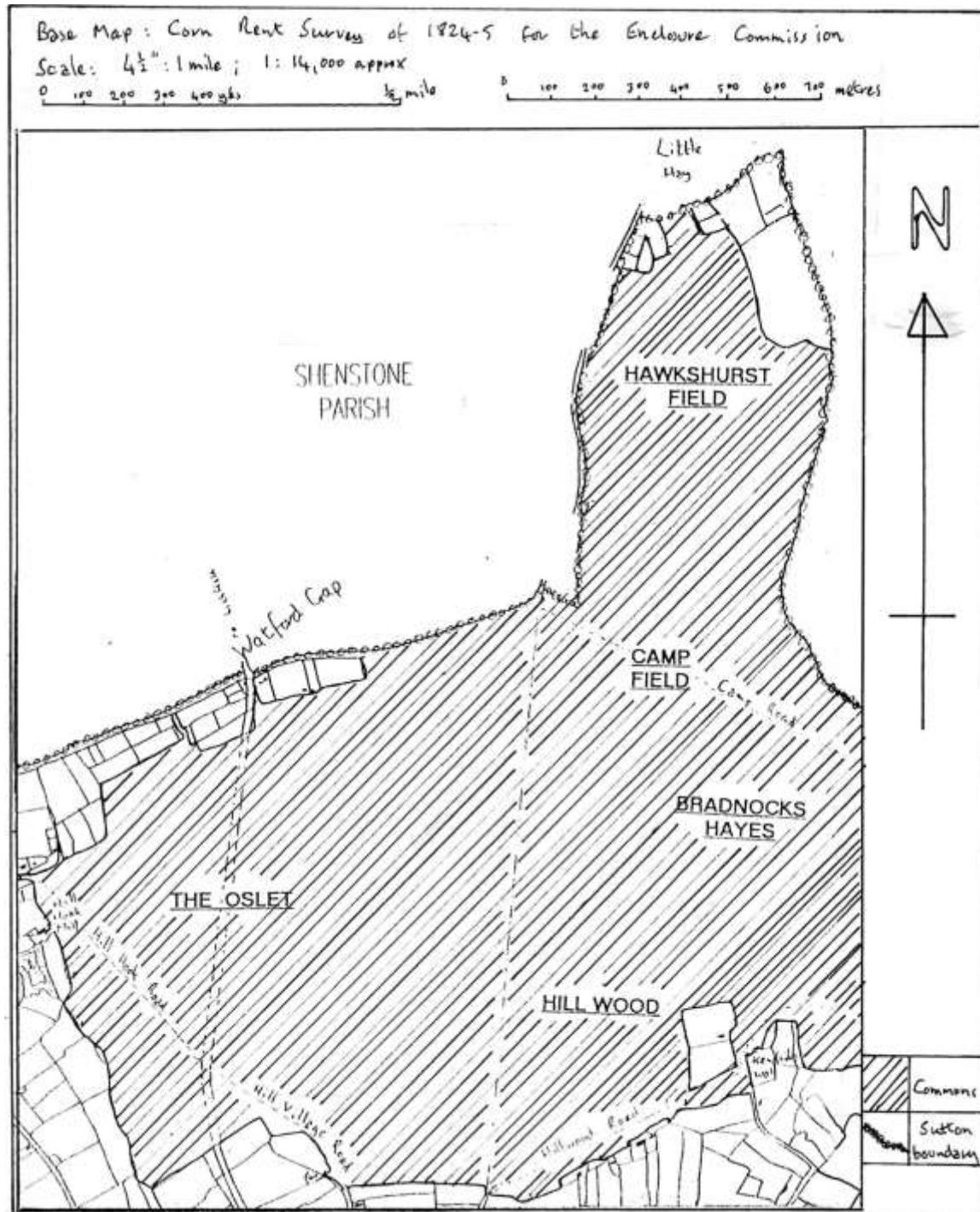


Village Greens in Sutton Coldfield

By Roger Lea



The Northern Commons

The Corn Rent Map

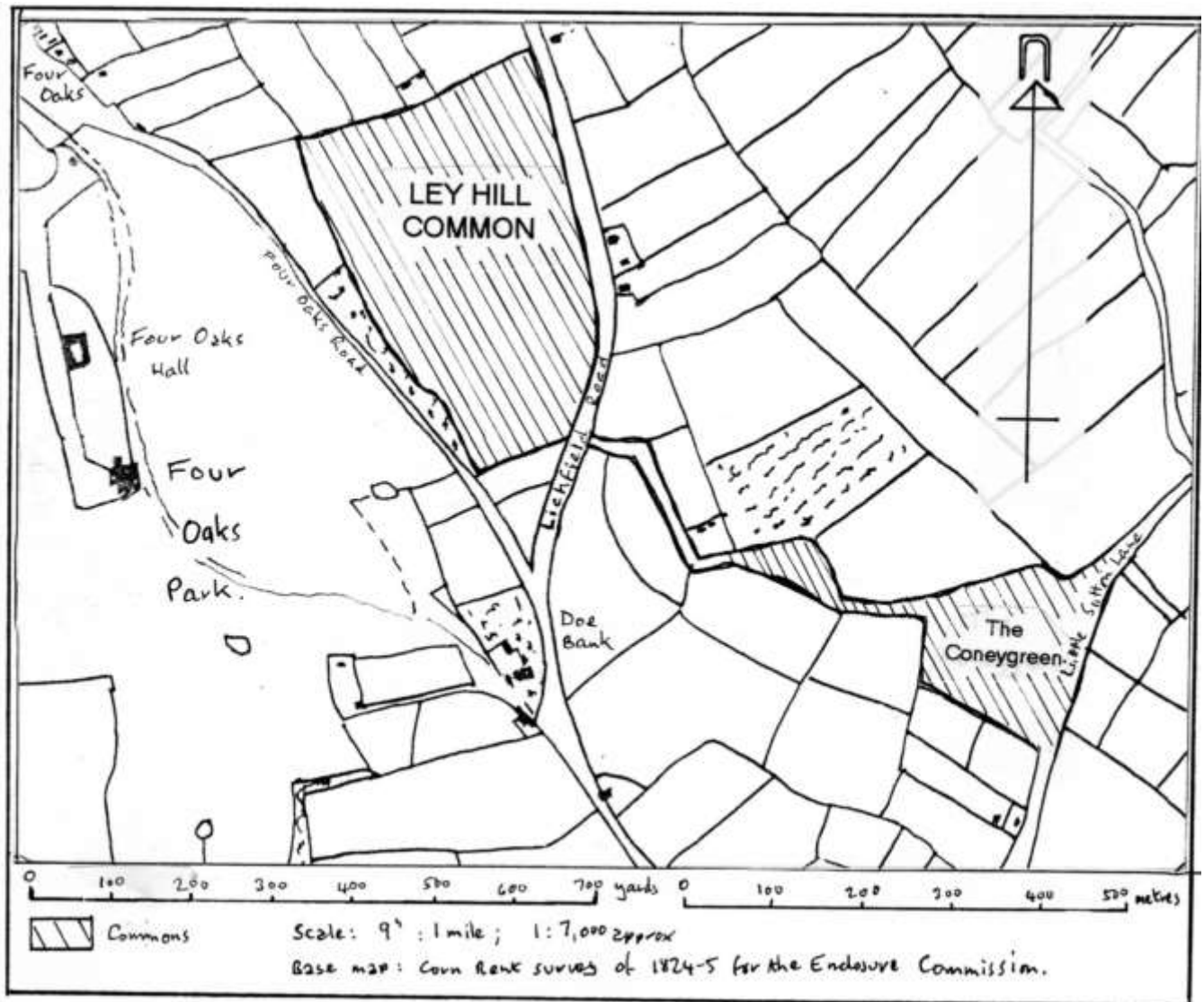
The Corn Rent Survey of 1824 is the earliest large-scale map of the whole of Sutton Coldfield. Until 1824, Sutton had extensive common lands, not privately owned, open to all the inhabitants, where local people had rights and entitlements. There had been an attempt by some local gentry late in the eighteenth century to change the system so that all the common land would come into private ownership, such that everyone entitled to use the commons would receive a piece of common land to own as their private property ¹. This process, known as Enclosure of the Commons, was gradually being applied to most of the parishes in England; in order to enclose the commons of a parish, an Act of Parliament for that parish had first to be obtained.

The Act for enclosing Sutton's commons was passed in 1824². Under the Act, an Enclosure Commissioner was appointed, whose duties included making a schedule of every piece of private property in Sutton. The value of each piece of property was assessed and a calculation made so that the tithes due to the Rector in respect of that property could be expressed in money terms (previously, tithes had been paid in kind, for example, one tenth of the wheat harvest or one piglet out of a litter). This was known as the Corn Rent Schedule, since most of the tithes had been paid in the form of corn which the Rector had collected in his tithe bam. The map, which accompanied the schedule, shows every building, field and garden in Sutton, and all those areas remaining blank were deemed to be common lands available for enclosure.

There were over 3,300 acres of (compared with over 7,000 acres in private hands), most of it extending across the outlying areas of Sutton in vast tracts of heathland and rough grassland. There were smaller areas of common within the main cultivated areas, some quite tiny, alongside roads or occupying barren ground, and some village greens. As soon as he had recorded them in his survey, the Commissioner destroyed them by allotting pieces to private owners, so the survey records all the greens in their last days. There are some earlier plans which show some of the greens, for example the Survey of Corporation Lands of c1811, and some of the greens are mentioned in historical documents, so there are some clues as to how they had changed over the centuries.

Village Greens

A group of dwellings surrounding a common open space seems a natural pattern for small rural settlements, and it can be seen in a number of places on the 1824 map of Sutton. Perhaps Little Sutton shows the peak of this type of settlement, the more populous Hill Village having only a tiny green left, while at Great Sutton any green which may have existed had suffered development by 1824. Other examples may show the early stages of such a settlement, or one which is in decline from depopulation. This survey of the village greens begins in the north and works southwards.



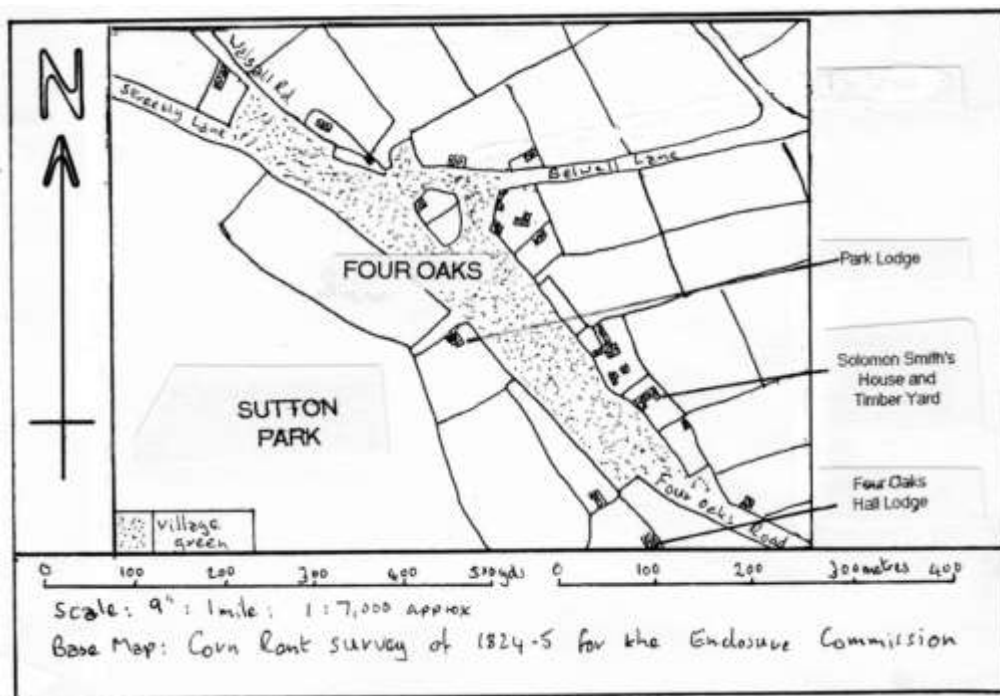
Ley Hill

Village Greens in the Making

To the north of Sutton lay Hill Commons, a vast tract of open common with a few dwellings here and there at the edge of it. Some of these groups of dwellings may have developed into villages with greens over time had the trends of the previous century — gradual intake of common and gradual addition of new settlers — continued. The six dwellings at Hill Wood, fronting onto the common, comprised such an embryo hamlet, while the 22 households at Hill Hook needed only to be more formally arranged around a green to be a village rather than a haphazard accumulation of cottages. Using the corn rent map and a creative imagination, a number of possible embryonic villages can be found, at Four Oaks Common Road, at Canwell Gate, at Ley Hill on Lichfield Road, at Reddicap Heath, or at the Yenton.

Four Oaks

Four Oaks, at the corner of Belwell Lane and Four Oaks Road, consisted of 14 dwellings clustered round a rectangular green about 50 yards by 300 (map 3.10). One of these was the lodge to Four Oaks Hall, and three were corporation cottages, while a further 7 were farm labourer's cottages, leaving only three which may have been more substantial dwellings. One of these belonged to Solomon Smith, who had a thriving business as a builder. His Four Oaks timber-yard took advantage of the green, as he paid an annual fine for his saw-pits there³



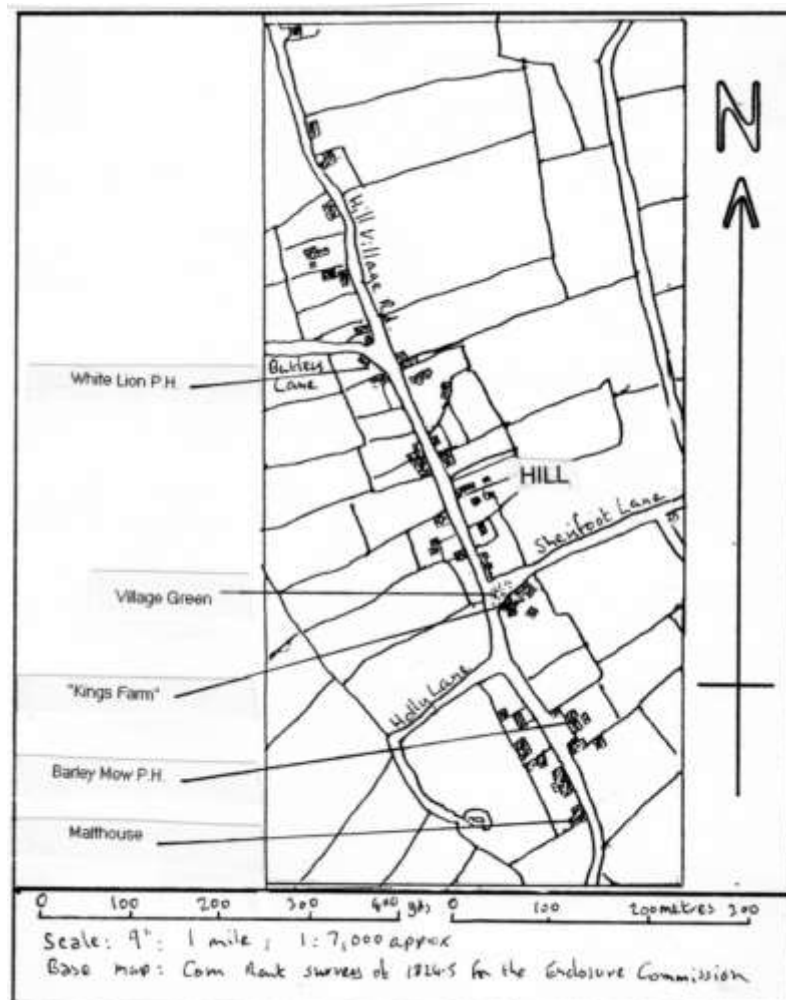
Four Oaks

Four Oaks probably developed in the Middle Ages when new land was being brought into cultivation, most of the buildings being on the edge of the new land fronting the narrow strip of common between the new land and the park. This strip of common became the village green as more labourer's cottages were built around it. Four Oaks had seen little change over several centuries — the Parish Register of burials contains 13 different surnames from Four Oaks, and there were probably more, as most entries do not specify where the deceased person lived. Other records show that there was at least one substantial house of three hearths in Four Oaks, while at least four of the cottager households were in receipt of poor relief.

Four Oaks Hall, built early in the eighteenth century, had little impact on the village, apart from the erection of the lodge at the south end of the green. This south end of the green was altered in 1823, when the owner of Four Oaks Hall, Sir E.C.Hartopp, had Four Oaks Road moved further away from his estate, and constructed a new driveway and a new lodge, squarely in the centre of the former road.

Hill Village

The village at Hill was large and well-established, with over 60 houses strung out along Hill Village Road. These included two pubs, as until 1827, when the present Lichfield Road from Mere Green to Watford Gap was made, Hill Village Road had been part of the Lichfield turnpike road. This linear village may have had several greens at one time for example, in front of the two pubs, but in 1824 only a tiny area (15 perches, about 10 yards by 45) on the south-east corner of Sherifoot Lane (then "Back Lane") remained. This was next to Kings Farm, one of the principal houses in the village, which still consisted of farms with land in the nearby fields which had once been the open fields of the medieval village.

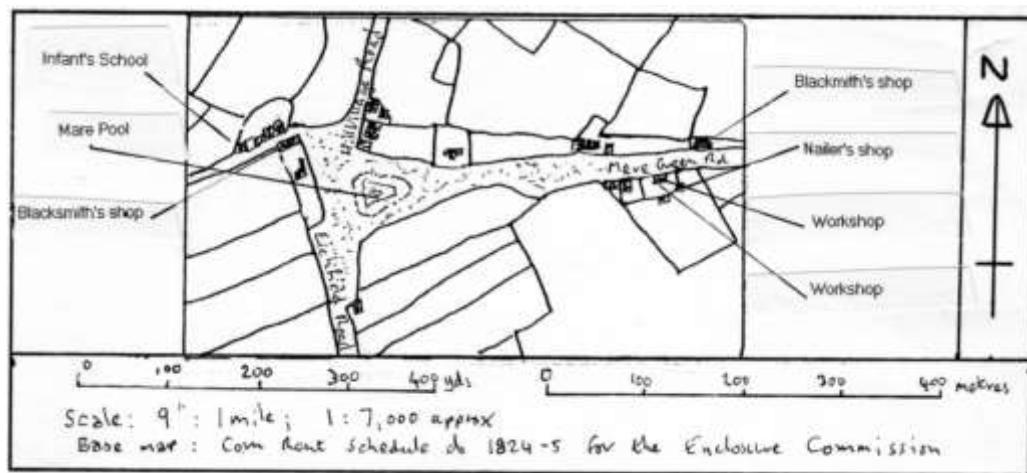


Hill Village

Mere Green

There were only a dozen houses at Mere Green, a settlement less rooted in agriculture, with trade and crafts being the main occupations. The Green was a large triangular area, probably let uncultivated because of poor drainage. Over time, squatters gained a foothold on land on the fringes, many of the houses belonging to tradesmen by 1824. The map gives an idea of the probable former extent of the

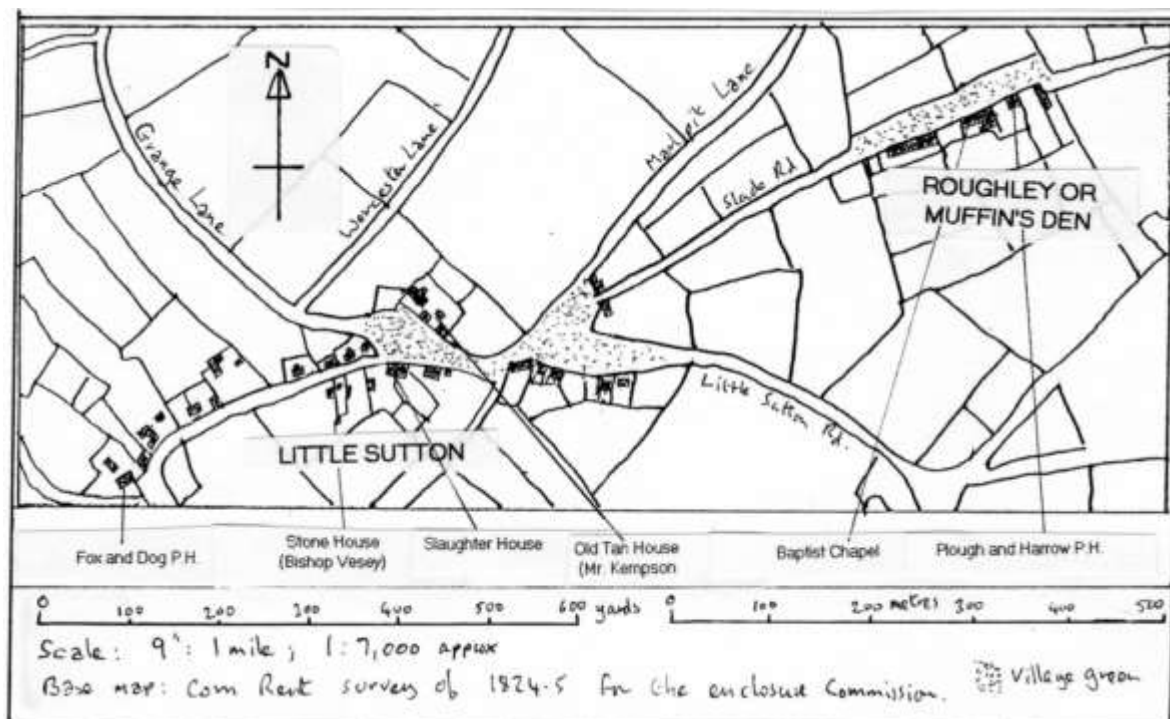
green, and shows the pool in the middle. Mere Green and Mere Pool probably derived their name from the neighbouring Mare Field, one of the medieval open fields of Hill.



Mere Green

Little Sutton and Roughley

The two dozen houses at Little Sutton suggest very little change in size since Medieval times, and most of the occupants, as then, derived their living from the land. At one end of the village was the Fox and Dogs inn, and the green proper stretched along Little Sutton Road from Worcester Lane to Marpit Lane. The record



Little Sutton and Roughley

of an Inquest of 1751 into the accidental shooting of young George White⁵ refers to the boys playing on the green at Little Sutton before going into the blacksmiths shop where the accident occurred. On the south side of the green was a Vesey stone

house, demolished in the 1950's, the site now part of Moor Hall School, and near it was the slaughter house of a butcher, opposite Butchers Lane (now Grange Lane). Mr Kempson, who lived at the big house later known as The Grange, was involved in curing leather, and the green outside his house was where his tan vats stood — 14 of them are shown on the 1811 Survey. Many of the houses fronted on to the Green, so enclosure could have caused difficulties if access to the existing houses was not preserved.

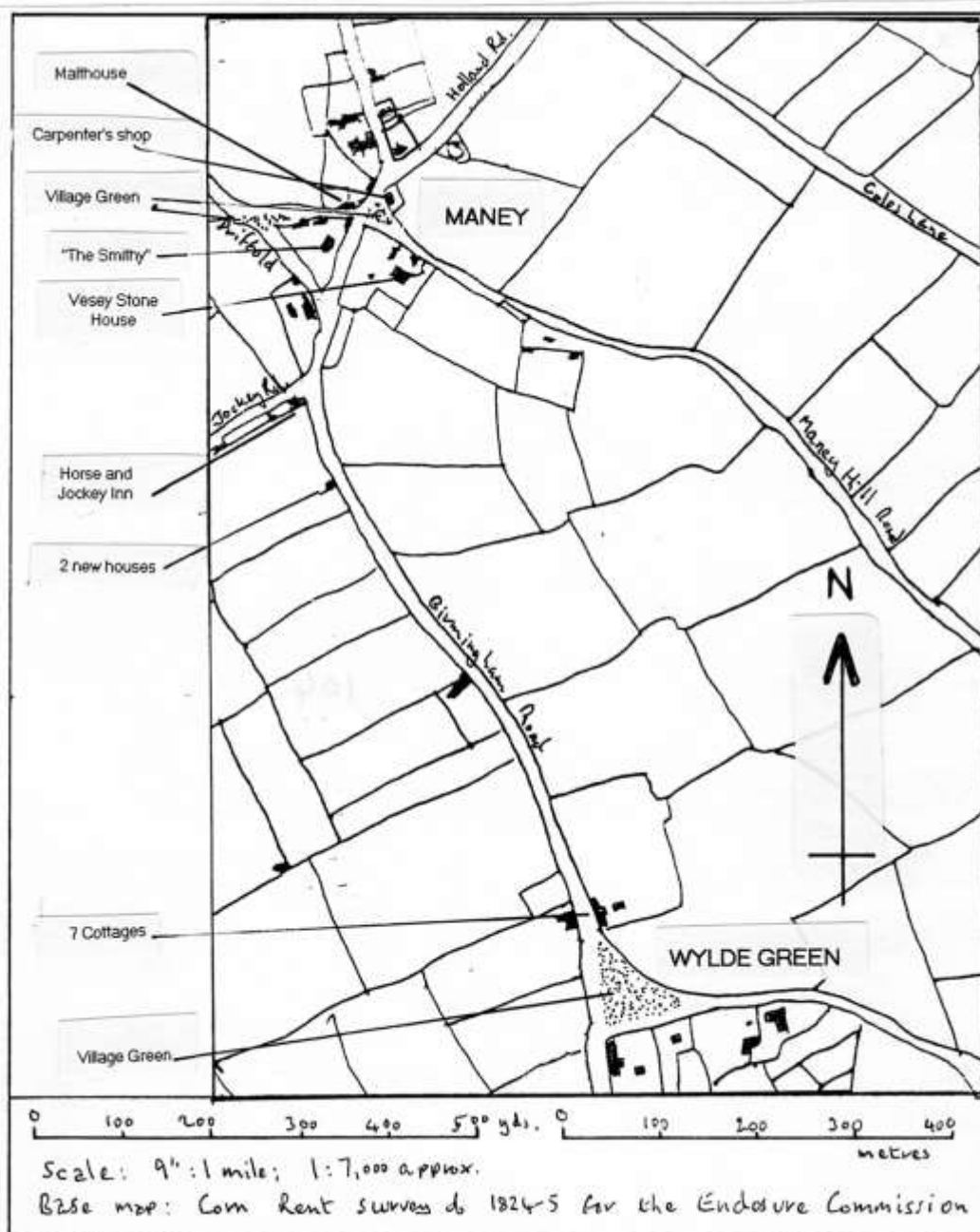
A little further along Slade Road was the hamlet of Roughley, a line of about 10 houses along the south side of the road with a wide verge or green opposite. In Bishop Vesey's time this area had a bad reputation; Muffins Den, the cottage next to the Plough and Harrow, is alleged to have been the haunt of highwaymen. On the other side of the pub there was a Baptist church. There had been independent and Baptist meetings in a chapel here since 1770⁶, a new chapel being built in 1869. When the green was enclosed, access to the houses was not affected as they fronted on to the road. After enclosure, more labourers and working men settled in this area, sufficient to justify the building of Roughley elementary school in Weeford Road in the 1870s.

Maney

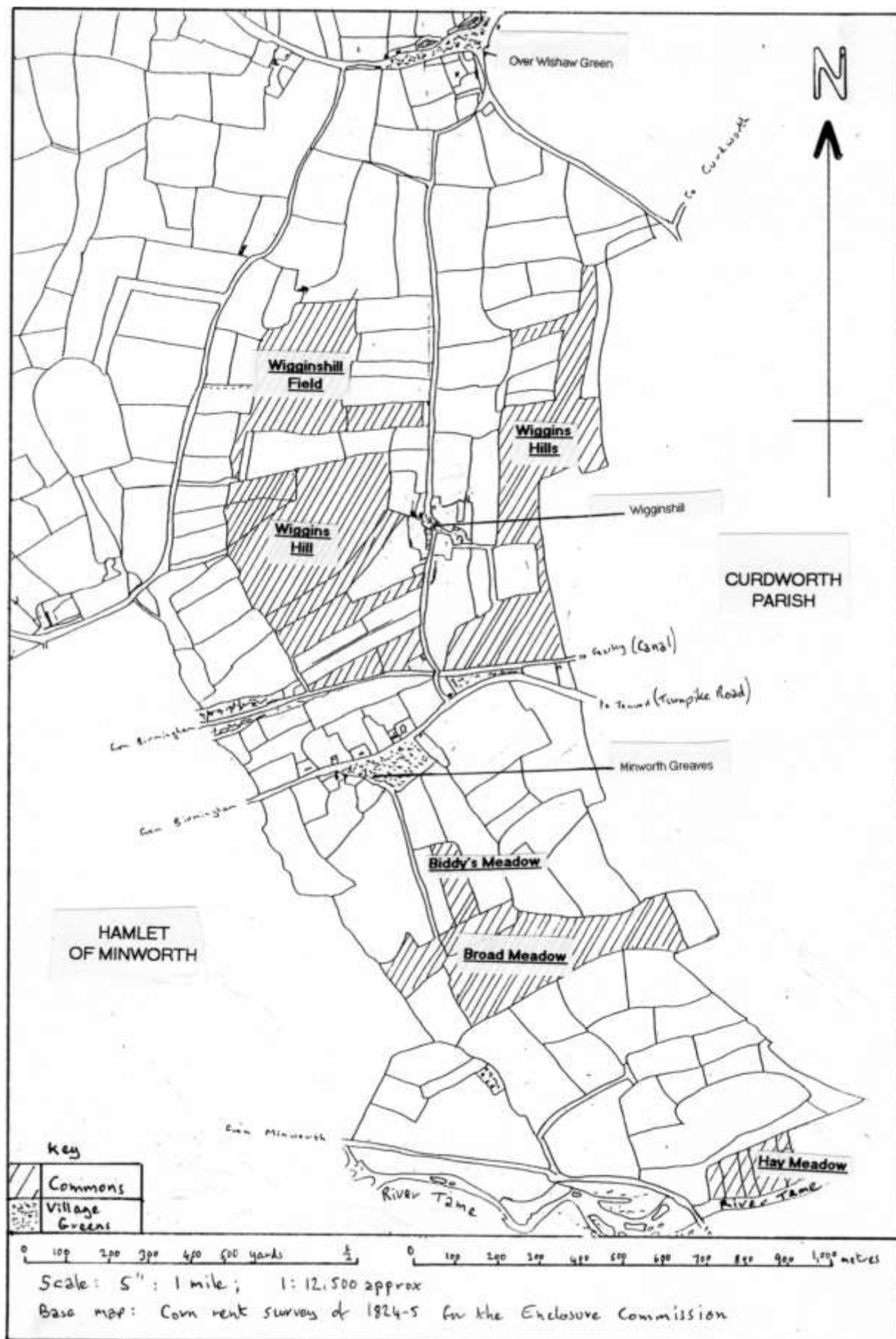
Maney was another of the medieval villages with open fields. The houses were clustered round two triangular greens, or one large green bisected by Birmingham Road. This Green, bounded by the Driffold, Church Road and Maney Hill Road, probably disappeared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Stone House in Maney Hill Road and the Old Smithy were both built on land which may have been part of the village green in feudal times. The green had almost entirely disappeared by 1824, so that all that was left for the enclosure were some wide road verges. The Birmingham Road was a main turnpike route, with the West Bromwich Turnpike forking off at the Horse and Jockey.

Wylde Green

Wylde Green was at the junction of Birmingham Road and Wylde Green Road, and is an ancient name, this part of Sutton being known as Maney and the Wylde over 600 years ago. There never seems to have been a settlement here of more than two or three houses, so this was a green without a village, dating from the period when new land was being brought into cultivation to the south of Wylde Green Road in the twelfth century. In 1824 there were three substantial farm houses and a row of seven cottages. Penns, by the present Penns Hall Hotel, is only marginally worth including in this survey, as the houses were all related to the Penns Wire Mills, and the green was virtually part of the Eachelhurst Field.



Maney and Wylde Green



Over Green, Wigginshill and Greaves

The south-eastern greens

At the eastern end of Bulls Lane is Over Wishaw Green, one of several settlements on the edge of the Parish of Wishaw, (Wishaw does not appear to have had any settlement at its centre). Bumble End (now Grove End) at the end of Ox Leys Road, was another such settlement, but its green was in Wishaw. On the Sutton side of Over Green the common land was mostly taken up with a pool, probably formed by the extraction of clay for marling the land and making bricks. Farmers lived here in the main, but the pub was already in existence, as the Enclosure Commissioner confirms in his perambulation of the boundary here: 'proceeding to the centre door of the Cock Public House occupied by John Sandon thence through the kitchen and house in an oblique direction southward and then passing by the back of a malthouse'. Nearby, at the Hermitage, are the remains of a moat made over 600 years ago, described in the court roll for April 1558 as having 'the Comer Grene called Wishaw Green on the south side'.

The ancient settlement of Walmley consisted of a few houses along Walmley Ash Lane, which ran parallel to the Sutton boundary about 30 yards to the south⁷. Although the road widened at the fork with Walmley Ash Road, this small open area was not affected by the enclosure. Just to the west of Walmley Ash is a moated site where the principal family may have lived 700 years ago. At the end of Walmley Ash Lane, on the edge of Minworth, was Hurst Green, a single farmstead by 1824 (another moated site) opposite a triangular green. Wigginshill, a hamlet mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, had a tiny green on a steep slope with the three or four remaining farmhouses facing it.

Sharing the open fields with Wigginshill in medieval times was the hamlet of Greaves. Its rectangular green lay to the south of Kingsbury Road, the site being now part of the sewage works. A farmhouse on the north side is still there, while an old cruck-framed house was removed from the western end of the green in 1911 to Bournville Village, where it can still be seen, known as Minworth Greaves.

Note that this map includes the 'village greens' of Over Wishaw Green, Wigginshill, Minworth Greaves, and Hurst Green. The eastern boundary with Curdworth follows the line of the medieval ploughlands for part of the way, the only part of the Sutton boundary to cross land which was arable in 1086.

References

- ¹ Lillywhite, J. *Early Enclosure movements in Sutton Coldfield*, IN *Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group*, vol. 1 1992.
- ² *An Act for Inclosing Lands within the Royal Town, Manor and Lordship of Sutton* 3rd June 1824.
- ³ *Valuation of the Charity Estates belonging to the Warden and Society of the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield*. 1811. p. 49
- ⁴ By comparing probate records (wills and inventories), Hearth Tax Returns (published as *The Quarters of Sutton* by Roger Lea, 1981), and the Parish Registers.
- ⁵ Sutton Borough Record no. 78(235) (Coroner's Papers)
- ⁶ Langley, Arthur S. *Birmingham Baptists past and present*. 1939. p.62.
- ⁷ Webb, Barbara. *Walmley Ash Lane* IN *Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield local History Research Group*, vol.6 2001.