

# A disappearing landscape: the heathlands of the Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey borders\*

by Alan G. Crosby

## *Abstract*

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the heathlands of the Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire borders covered at least 100,000 acres. They were generally condemned as inhospitable, barren and unproductive waste and were vilified by agricultural improvers at the end of the century. But already in the 1720s their gradual disappearance was foreshadowed by the turnpiking of roads across the heaths and the development of country estates for the *nouveaux riches* within easy reach of London. Over the ensuing 250 years the parliamentary enclosures of 1780–1830, the building of railways, the founding of land-hungry institutions, the annexation of great swathes for military use, and the inexorable progress of large-scale urbanization meant that by the Second World War only small areas of open heathland remained. Designation as ‘green belt’ after 1947 saved most of this residue, but, today, pressure for commercial, residential and transport development remains a significant and growing threat.

The interchange between the M3 and the A322 at Lightwater is a noisy clot of congested traffic on one of the nation’s busiest arteries. It lies at the heart of a network of overloaded roads, some of them dual carriageways, others no more than former country lanes, which now carry great streams of commuters. Beneath the next interchange, half a mile to the north, where the A30 crosses the A322, runs the railway line from Ascot to Camberley and Aldershot. Suburban housing, garden centres, car showrooms, and superstores sprawl in every direction, interspersed with belts of woodland and residual patches of farmland, much of it now given over to what has wittily been termed ‘horsiculture’, for this is a land of pony clubs and gymkhanas. Overhead, the sky is engraved with the exhaust streams of jets landing and taking off from Heathrow, ten miles away. But between Lightwater and Thorpe, heading for London on the M3, the car passes briefly – for no more than a couple of minutes at the legal speed – through a quite different landscape. On either side of the motorway are expanses of gorse and heather, piny woodland and exposures of sandy, gravelly soils (Figure 1). This is the

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FIGURE 1: The once-characteristic heathland landscape is now a rarity, but this view of the central part of Chobham common evokes the sense of bleakness and barrenness which so struck observers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The landscape is more wooded than it would have been 200 years ago, but the thin soils, coarse vegetation and gently undulating topography are as the agricultural writers would have seen them. Photo: Author.

northern end of Chobham Common, chopped through by the motorway at the beginning of the 1970s when people cared rather less about such places.

Two hundred years ago, though, everything was entirely different: indeed, it would have been barely recognizable as today's outer-suburban jungle. The site of the interchange at Lightwater was amid heathland, part of a vast tract of waste which extended northwards to the village of Bracknell (the edge of the heath was where Bracknell station is today) and south to the margin of the clay vale north of the Hog's Back, at Wanborough and Normandy. This area would have seemed to us almost unimaginably silent – we would have heard nothing but the bleating of a few sheep, the calling of a few birds, the rustle of wind in the gorse, maybe the distant hooves of a horse on the turnpike road or the rumbling wheels of an occasional cart. It would also have seemed extraordinarily empty. Though only 25 miles from London, large stretches were completely uninhabited. A tattered scatter of farms and cottages fringed the open heathland, and there were a few villages on the margins, such as Frimley, Pirbright and Sandhurst, but we could have walked for miles without passing a house and, if we had been interested (which few of us two hundred years ago would have been), we could have witnessed the flourishing of

a fascinating ecology, of snakes and slow-worms and lizards, of warblers and heath butterflies, of sundew and marsh grasses and in August rich purple seas of heather.

Today those landscapes have almost disappeared, and that emptiness and solitude is a long-forgotten memory. It vanished almost a century and a half ago as London, that dark cloud on the eastern horizon, spread its tentacles to encroach upon, and eventually to engulf, great swathes of the commons. Canals, railways, arterial highways and motorways sliced the heathlands into portions, while the voracious appetites of housing, light industry and retail parks swallowed up the acres. Firing ranges and military training grounds, edged by red flags and warning signs, cut off access (although paradoxically this has helped the snakes, the lizards, the butterflies and the sundew by keeping out the developers).

Today only remnants of the heathlands survive, cherished and protected, nurtured and sponsored by enthusiastic Friends' organizations, helped as best they can by cash-strapped local authorities and shielded to some extent by planning laws and development controls. These hardy survivors – Horsell Common, Chobham Common, and some of the heaths around Aldershot, Fleet and Yateley – serve to remind us of what has been lost. Their ultimate saviour was probably the imposition of the green belt after 1947, but the building of the M3 across Chobham Common demonstrated that this was not sacrosanct, and in the early twenty first century pressures to release further land for housing, commercial development and yet more transport links grow apace. The heathlands are mostly gone and will never return. Their disappearance was largely unmourned, since they did not attract the vocal defenders who, for example, saved Epping Forest and the Lake District in the late Victorian period. They were not loved by the Victorians, they had no poet or artist to praise their melancholy beauty, and they were vulnerable because of their location, character and agricultural poverty.<sup>1</sup> This paper explains how these landscapes disappeared, between the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries.

## I

Writing in the mid-1720s, Daniel Defoe described a journey from Farnham in Surrey towards London, taking the road that led over Bagshot Heath towards Staines.<sup>2</sup> His polemic upon the landscape through which the road passed is justly celebrated:

Those that despise Scotland, and the north part of England, for being full of waste and barren land, may take a view of this part of Surrey, and look upon it as a foil to the beauty of the rest of England, or a mark of just resentment showed by Heaven upon the Englishman's pride ... here is a vast tract of land, some of it within seventeen or eighteen miles of the capital city; which is not only poor, but even quite sterile, given up to barrenness, horrid and frightful to look on, not only good for little, but good for nothing. Much of it is a sandy desert, and one may frequently be put in mind here of Arabia Deserta.

<sup>1</sup> A comparable story could be told of the heathlands of East Dorset, extending from Purbeck and Bovington in an arc north of Poole to Ringwood, and linking with the New Forest. There, railways, roads and massive post-1850 suburban development, together

with military use west of Wareham, have dramatically reduced the extent of the former heath and caused major damage to a particularly fragile ecology.

<sup>2</sup> The road is now the A30.

Defoe observed that although the sand supported heather, the only livestock were 'some very small sheep ... and but very few of these'; and that there were 'but few houses, or people for many miles far and wide'.<sup>3</sup> His estimate that this tract of land, extending across the borders of Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire, covered at least 100,000 acres was often repeated by later writers and was close to the truth.

The heathlands extended from Bracknell and Ascot in the north to Farnham in the south, almost to Hartley Wintney in the west and beyond Woking in the east. They covered parts of 24 parishes, in some (such as Easthampstead, Sandhurst and Aldershot) occupying the very great majority of the land. As Defoe noted, the whole area was thinly populated, with few nucleated villages. Seventy years later the 'horrid and frightful' heathlands were the subject of no less vitriolic condemnation from the new breed of agricultural writers, with their evangelical fervour for 'improvement'. William James and John Malcolm, in their 1794 survey of the agriculture of Surrey, were scathing:

upon traversing these cold and exposed wastes, we saw only a few starved animals unworthy of the name of sheep ... certain it is that no animal can live long upon these wastes in their present state.<sup>4</sup>

Four years later William Marshall, assessing the rural economy of Southern England, was equally hostile:

The present PRODUCE, if it deserves the name, is a sort of dwarfish, stunted heath; in many places unable to hide the sand, on which it may be said to starve ... on a general view of this extensive tract of country, there will be little risque in saying, that ... it is in its PRESENT STATE, the most unprofitable to the community, of any district of equal extent, in the Island, the mountains on the north-west coast of Scotland, perhaps, excepted'.<sup>5</sup>

In 1829 Thomas Allen, claiming that 'it is impossible to imagine a worse kind of soil than that of the heaths of Surrey', stated that 'a pure heath sheep is a remarkably ugly creature, with very large horns, and seldom weighs more than eight pounds per quarter'.<sup>6</sup>

Fellow writers on Hampshire and Berkshire were no less scathing. William Pearce, characterizing the Berkshire heathlands in 1794, stated that

in their present wild and uncultivated state, little or nothing is returned by them to the community ... we generally see on all the COMMONS and WASTE LANDS, a number of miserable cattle, sheep, and horses, which are a disgrace to their respective breeds.<sup>7</sup>

They were all, of course, propagandist and their views were based on limited research.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A tour through the whole island of Great Britain* (1724, Penguin edn, 1979), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> W. James and J. Malcolm, *A general view of the agriculture of the county of Surrey with observations on the means of its improvement* (1794), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> William Marshall, *The rural economy of the southern counties* (2 vols, 1798), II, pp. 84, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Allen, *History of the counties of Surrey and Sussex illustrated by a series of views engraved on*

*steel from original drawings* (1829), pp. 8, 21.

<sup>7</sup> William Pearce, *A general view of the agriculture in Berkshire with observations on the means of its improvement* (1794), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> William Fordyce Mavor, author of *A general view of the agriculture of Berkshire* (1809) was an expert in English grammar and poetry, and was disarmingly honest about his lack of qualifications for writing about agriculture (p. iv).

Passionate about improvement, they optimistically and naively believed that with manuring and ploughing the heathlands could quickly become productive arable land. Pearce claimed that by such means, ‘it may be hoped, some effectual plans may be established, to polish this rough jewel, which lies disregarded and unproductive’.<sup>9</sup> Later agricultural writers were slightly less negative about the area in general, albeit still disliking the sands: Henry Evershed, in a prize essay published in 1853, claimed of north-west Surrey that

A considerable portion of this formation is included by the sands of Bagshot Heath, but it must not be supposed that the whole of this district is of a similarly poor nature; in many instances the land is of the best description, and except on the worst sands it is generally of a useful kind.<sup>10</sup>

Any positive value of the commons – especially to the cottagers and ‘labouring classes’ – was largely ignored. Only occasionally do we glimpse the exploitation of resources by the wider community, even though such exploitation was ubiquitous. Charles Vancouver, in his treatise on the agriculture of Hampshire, recorded that ‘a large quantity of peat is annually dug on the commons of Cove, Farnborough, and Aldershot’, noting that ‘the largest body of peat appeared to lie in the parish of Cove ... where it seemed much in demand for the coarse potteries established in that parish’.<sup>11</sup> William Mavor, writing of the Forest areas of Berkshire, stated that

much turf is cut and burnt by the poor, which diminishes the already thin staple of the soil ... This occupies too much of the time of the poor, and is perhaps a loss rather than benefit.

Condemning their modest entrepreneurship, he added that ‘Some burn turves beyond what is necessary for their domestic consumption, in order to make a profit by the ashes’.<sup>12</sup> Other evidence shows that brushwood, thatching materials and firewood were gathered on the heaths, while the rough grazing of scrawny sheep, which was so condemned by the agricultural writers, was in fact a valuable resource for cottagers and smallholders. Stevenson noted in 1813 that in the Bagshot and Windlesham area local women cut heather to make besom brushes, and gathered whortleberries for sale, disparagingly referring to these as ‘miserable productions and trifling employment’.<sup>13</sup> Pearce, in 1794, seems to have acknowledged that the welfare of the ordinary folk should be taken into account, proposing with touching faith that ‘liberality to the cottager’ involving ‘giving a full allocation in return for his few prescriptive rights’ could be achieved by the landed gentleman giving up ‘a greater proportion of the uncultivated land (from which he receives no benefits) than the law, at present, obliges him’.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, such generosity of spirit was never effected. In 1841, when the mania for improvement had somewhat abated, a different perspective was taken: Brayley observed perceptively that the unenclosed heaths of West Surrey ‘afford [the cottagers] opportunity for healthy recreation,

<sup>9</sup> Pearce, *General view Berkshire*, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Evershed, ‘Farming in Surrey’, *JRASE*, first ser., 14 (1853), pp. 395–424.

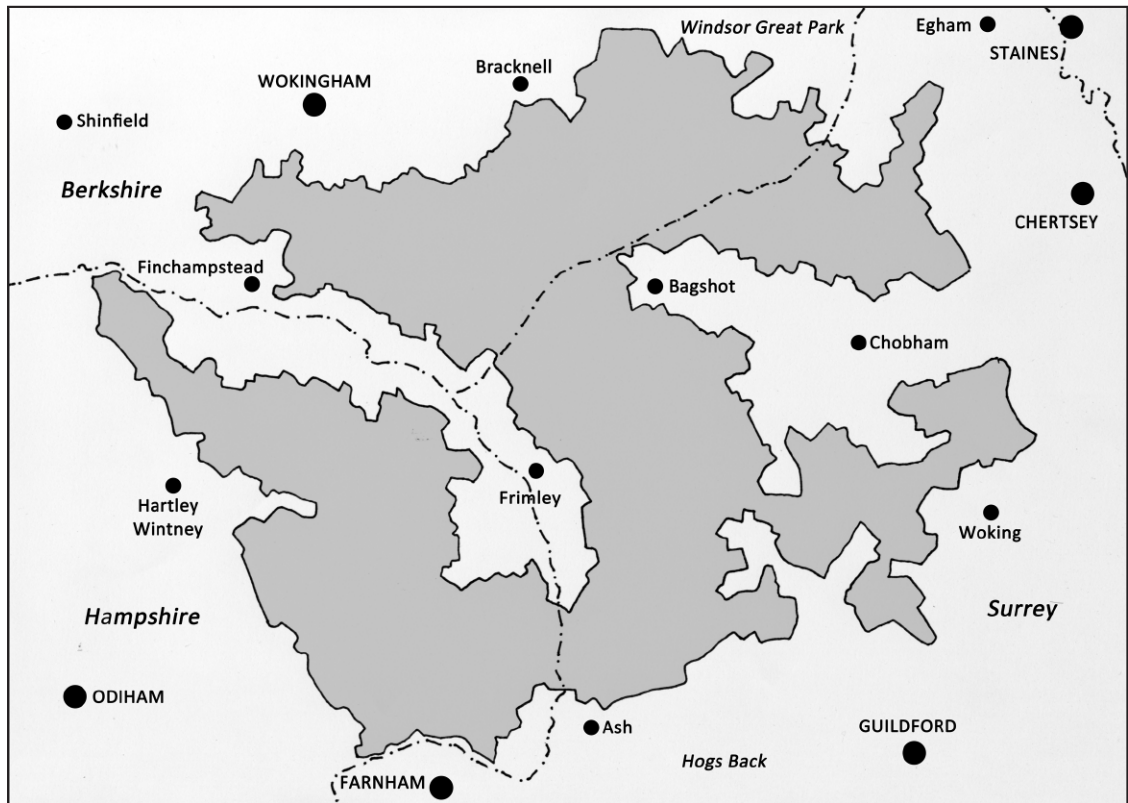
<sup>11</sup> Charles Vancouver, *General view of the agriculture of Hampshire* (1810), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Mavor, *General view Berkshire*, pp. 31, 421.

<sup>13</sup> W. Stevenson, *General view of the agriculture of Surrey* (1813), p. 459.

<sup>14</sup> Pearce, *General view Berkshire*, p. 60.





MAP 1: The extent of the heathlands before the mid-eighteenth century. Map: Author.

denied to the population of counties wholly inclosed', hinting at what would eventually become a key role for these despised landscapes.<sup>15</sup>

In 1801 the total population of the seventeen parishes forming the core of the heathlands was just over 14,000, a density of a mere 0.17 persons per acre, and sizeable tracts were completely uninhabited (Map 1). Given its proximity to London, and location between the prosperous and productive valleys of the Thames and the Wey, it is hardly surprising that this area of bleak and barren wastes, harsh and impoverished, attracted such negative comment. Its condition was the consequence of geology, for here the Bagshot Beds or Sands (today more properly known as the Bagshot Formation) outcrop extensively: 'pale yellow-brown to pale grey or white, locally orange or crimson, fine- to coarse-grained sand that is frequently micaceous and locally clayey, with sparse glauconite and sparse seams of gravel'.<sup>16</sup> More picturesquely, William Marshall wrote of

a barren sand, or gravel, encrusted with the black earth of heaths, of a dry crumbly quality; and, in general, very thin; the soil, altogether, being of the very worst quality; especially on

<sup>15</sup> Edward Brayley, *A topographical history of Surrey* (5 vols, 1841–8), II, p. 198.

<sup>16</sup> The website, British Geological Survey: Bagshot Formation ([www.bgs.ac.uk/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=BGS](http://www.bgs.ac.uk/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=BGS)).



FIGURE 2: Langshot Bog on Chobham Common: a typical basin bog, where a layer of impermeable iron pan in a small valley allows the formation of shallow pools; the peatbogs of the heathlands were the source of fuel for local people as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. Photo: Author.

the low flat-lying land; where it is inferior even to that of the Yorkshire Moreland; and much inferior to that of Heaths of the Highlands of Scotland.<sup>17</sup>

Stevenson was even more pejorative:

It is difficult to conceive a character of soil worse ... it is a barren sand, soft, deaf, and duffy, mixed with a hungry, poor, gravel, and with the remains of decayed heath; it is very thin, lying on small stones of a dead white colour.<sup>18</sup>

The thinness of the acid soils – or, as some writers observed, over large areas no true soil at all – meant that sands and gravels were widely exposed on the surface, friable and eroding (Defoe described being caught in a sandstorm at Bagshot) and nourishing only a scanty vegetation. The thick layers of loosely consolidated sands supported few surface streams but, contrarily, in the hollows and valleys completely impermeable layers of iron pan had formed, impeding drainage and giving rise to waterlogging, open pools and sizeable peat bogs (Figure 2). The area was thus characterized by both desiccation and saturation, often in close proximity. Nevertheless, the experience of the past 150 years has shown that when the heaths are not

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economy*, II, p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Stevenson, *General view Surrey*, p. 40.

grazed, woodland cover can regenerate with remarkable speed. The conspicuous lack of trees and the open bleakness of the heaths, which so angered and upset the agricultural writers two centuries and more ago, were as much a product of prolonged overgrazing by those scrawny sheep, as of any intrinsic similarity to 'Arabia Deserta'.

To many people today the heaths are attractive landscapes – they are perhaps the nearest rough country to London – but contemporaries two centuries ago delighted not in wildness but in the lush beauty of rich farmland: as Brayley wrote,

To a traveller crossing the black and barren heath-lands in the early part of the year, from the neighbourhood of Ash and Pirbright, the scene on approaching Mayford changes as though by enchantment; and instead of blackness and desolation, he sees the hills clothed with verdure, the fields cultivated, and the banks and hedges gay with violets and other spring flowers.<sup>19</sup>

John Byng, travelling from London via Farnham to Winchester in late August 1782, was more courageous than Defoe 60 years before (although the road was now much easier because it was turnpiked). He 'cross'd Bagshot Heath, without a melancholy thought' and after a drink of tea even 'attempted a walk; but it was so cold and damp, that I was glad to return to the warmth of the stable'. His landlord told him that 'On the neighbouring hills were formerly grouse; one was kill'd thereon last year, and deem'd a great curiosity'. But even Byng recorded that on the following day, heading south though what is now Camberley, 'Still the black heath continued, [but] a mile further I quitted the heath; and entering warm enclosures, my eyes receiv'd ample satisfaction about the pretty village of Frimley'.<sup>20</sup>

The physical loathing for the heathlands was compounded by the widespread belief that these were unhealthy areas with a deleterious effect upon the moral and mental state of the inhabitants. Vancouver suggested of the heaths of Cove and Aldershot that 'the raw damps exhaling from this part of the district are supposed to produce rheumatism, and to be otherwise unfriendly to the health of the inhabitants',<sup>21</sup> while most observers took for granted the ignorance and stupidity of local people. Even in the 1840s Brayley could claim of the inhabitants of the green valley of the Wey that 'The working people ... are more intelligent and better informed than the labourers on the western borders of the county'. Recounting a tale similar to those from many country districts, he says that 'Among other stories told, illustrative of the ignorance which formerly characterized the inhabitants of this wild tract, is, that they only knew when it rained by looking into the ponds on their heaths and commons'.<sup>22</sup> Just as no writer was really interested in human inhabitants of the heathlands, none was concerned with the exceptional ecological and geological significance and distinctiveness of the heaths. Today, the remnants of these landscapes are treasured, both for their visual quality and their unique ecology. Two centuries ago they were vilified, and their disappearance was positively encouraged. They were, by virtue of their proximity to London and their very poverty, considered ripe for other sorts of development.

<sup>19</sup> Brayley, *Topographical history*, II, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> C. Bruyn Andrews (ed.), *The Torrington Diaries* (1934), I, pp. 71–3.

<sup>21</sup> Vancouver, *General view Hampshire*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Brayley, *Topographical history*, II, p. 24; I, p. 437.



## II

The agricultural writers not only exaggerated the negative aspects of the heathlands, but also overlooked changes which were in progress by the 1790s. By then, improvement of a kind was already taking place, though not usually the kind of which they approved. The improvers wanted grand projects and large-scale landscape change, the opposite of what was actually happening. Piecemeal encroachment upon the waste, and small-scale reclamation to create new farmland, had been under way for many generations, slowly nibbling away at the edges of the heaths and giving rise to highly dispersed settlement patterns, in particular, the squatter communities which were characteristic of much of the heathland margin. The process was discontinuous and fragmented but its cumulative effect was such that since 1600 the area of waste had been substantially reduced. The first Ordnance Survey map (1816) reveals such amorphous and attenuated patterns of settlement in, for example, Knaphill and Westfield on the edge of Woking parish; around Bisley and Lucas Green; across the evocatively named Hungry Hill between Farnham and Aldershot; and beside Sunninghill Bog, another vividly descriptive name, in Berkshire. West of the road from Bagshot through Lightwater to Bisley were numerous islands of improved land scattered across the 'moors', separated by surviving strips and tongues of heath and edged by scattered cottages. At Horsell the squatter fringe was known, with ironic humour, as Cheapside.<sup>23</sup> A century later George Sturt, the Farnham wheelwright who wrote under the name George Bourne, recalled these places from his childhood: 'hardly anywhere are there to be seen three cottages in a row but ... little mean dwellings are scattered in disorder ... wanting in restfulness to the eyes and much disfigured by shabby detail' (Map 2).<sup>24</sup>

By the 1790s encroachment was also under way further north, at the eastern edge of the Berkshire heathlands around Sunningdale and Ascot. But whereas the piecemeal encroachments described above were characterized by poverty and squalor, these particular examples foreshadowed a very different future, since they involved the carving out of country estates for the *nouveaux riches* of late Georgian society. The earliest major change was the creation from 1753 onwards of the beautiful lake at Virginia Water, formed by damming a shallow boggy valley on the southern edge of Windsor Great Park. This served as a focus for fashionable new development.<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Tyack's map of Berkshire country houses before 1750 shows only two in the heathland zone of the county (Bannisters at Sandhurst, and Fernhill Park at Winkfield) but his second map identifies nine more in the vicinity of Wokingham, Bracknell and Sunningdale, all dating from between 1750 and 1800 and 'often built on relatively small estates by newcomers to the county who were not reliant on income from land: typically, colonial nabobs, merchants and bankers, retired military officers and government contractors' (Figure 3).<sup>26</sup>

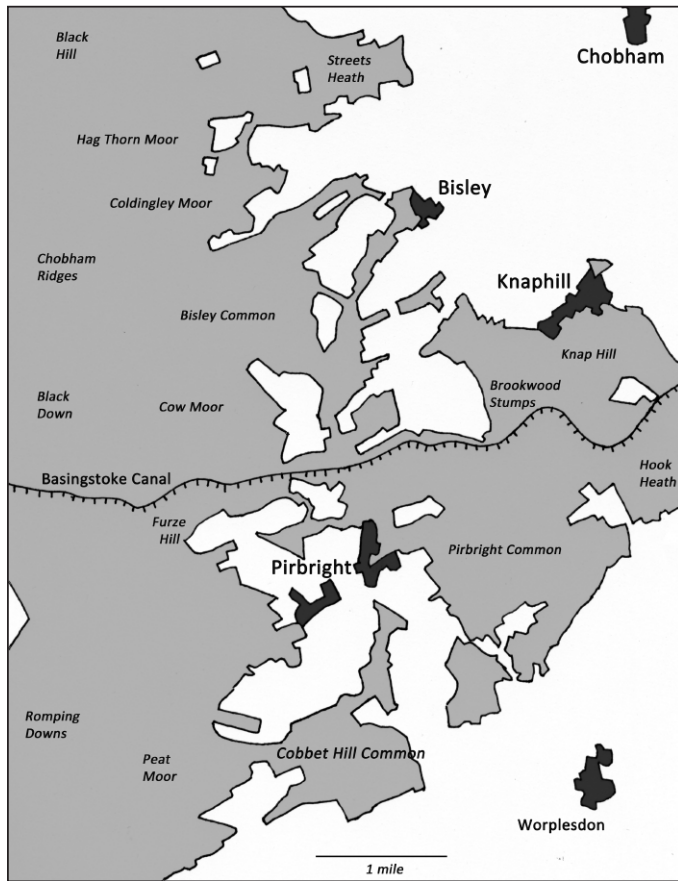
<sup>23</sup> The squatter settlements of the Woking area are discussed in more detail in Alan G. Crosby, *A history of Woking* (sec. edn, 2003), pp. 32–5.

<sup>24</sup> George Bourne, *Change in the village* (1912), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> The landscape history of Windsor Great Park and Great Forest, including Virginia Water, is covered in meticulous and fascinating detail by Jane Roberts in

her splendid and beautiful study, *Royal Landscape: the gardens and parks of Windsor* (1997).

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Tyack, 'Country houses to 1750' and id., 'Country houses, 1750–1914' in Joan Dils and Margaret Yates (eds), *An historical atlas of Berkshire* (sec. edn, 2012), pp. 76–7, 120–1.



MAP 2: The tattered edge of the heath resulting from two centuries of piecemeal enclosure in the area south of Bagshot, based on the First edition Ordnance Survey map of 1816

FIGURE 3: The first edition of the one-inch OS map, published in 1816, gives the first earliest detailed depiction of the heathlands. The area between Bracknell, Bagshot and Virginia Water, now densely wooded, was then almost devoid of trees. It was criss-crossed by a geometric network of tracks, mostly the result of military manoeuvres in the previous 25 years. The landscaped parks which were created in east Berkshire after 1750 are prominently shown.



By the end of the eighteenth century the once shunned heathlands were fast becoming an attractive location for the new elite, eastern Berkshire being especially favoured because of its good road access to London via Staines, and also the social cachet bestowed by proximity to Windsor. The latter assumed greater significance with the accession of George III in 1760 and his marriage the following year to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. Between 1762 and 1783 they produced fifteen children and, consciously setting a new domestic tone, lived much of the time at Windsor (which had been out of favour during the previous two reigns). The area became a focus of royal activity and attracted numerous hangers-on. Furthermore, the king was a genuine and active enthusiast for farming and agricultural improvement: it was not idle flattery which led Mavor to declare, in highly elliptical language, that:

Berkshire, distinguished by many other advantages, is pre-eminent in this, that here the King and Father of his country has deigned to take agriculture under his more immediate cognizance and protection, and from the improvements and experiments made under his august direction, has given ocular demonstration to every person who has had the pleasure of seeing his farms, of the wisdom that directed them, and the beneficence from which they originated.<sup>27</sup>

This programme of improvement transformed the royal estate adjacent to the heathlands and seemed to demonstrate their potential.

During the 1790s there was a new and more desperate imperative towards the improvement of waste lands, generating a dramatic wave of parliamentary enclosure across England and Wales. The immediate cause was the national crisis in food supplies occasioned by the Napoleonic Wars, which gave an urgency to ploughing such land to grow grain. The government actively supported and encouraged these developments, through the medium of the Board of Agriculture, which was established in 1793 and thenceforward actively evangelized the cause of improvement. The heathlands of Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey had hitherto been almost unaffected by formal enclosure, since creating good land from this deeply unpromising terrain presented formidable physical and financial challenges, but the exigencies of a wartime economy dictated that enclosure should be tried on an unprecedented scale, with marginal lands being brought into at least some form of production (although inevitably the transformation could not be achieved instantly).

Between 1800 and 1820 enclosure took place in all the heathland parishes of East Berkshire, mostly in consequence of the Windsor Forest Act 1813, affecting over 24,500 acres, one of the largest parliamentary enclosures in Britain, which triggered a sequence of subsidiary awards for individual parishes. In Sandhurst, Crowthorne and Easthampstead parishes the enclosure involved over half the acreage and in Sunninghill no less than 80 per cent of the parish.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Sandhurst 'the whole parish was something of a sandy wasteland ... with a population density [in 1801] of only one person to every 20.4 acres'.<sup>29</sup> In West Surrey there

<sup>27</sup> Mavor, *General view Berkshire*, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Durrant, 'Parliamentary enclosure', in Dils and Yates (ed.), *Historical atlas of Berkshire*, pp. 100–1; W. E. Tate, 'A handlist of enclosure acts and awards relating to land in Berkshire', *Berkshire Archaeological*

*J.*, 67 (1943) pp. 56–90: the website, New Landscapes: Enclosure in Berkshire ([www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk](http://www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk)); Ross Wordie, *Enclosure in Berkshire, 1485–1885* (Berkshire Rec. Soc., 5, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Wordie, *Enclosure in Berkshire*, p. 129.

were no enclosure acts or awards prior to 1800, but eight in 1800–20, and another five between 1821 and 1840.<sup>30</sup> The Windlesham award, covering about 3000 acres of the notorious Bagshot Heath, was made in 1814 although proposed as early as 1790.<sup>31</sup> A similar picture can be seen in north-east Hampshire, where Farnborough was partly enclosed in 1812, Blackwater and Hawley in 1817, and Crookham and Ewshott in 1834.

Nevertheless, a significant number of parishes remained unenclosed until after 1835, and indeed some were never enclosed: Horsell, on the north side of Woking, where over 830 acres of waste survived, and the great Chobham Common, are particularly important in this respect. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that enclosure was largely futile: the potential for improvement was not realized, most of the land remained uncultivated, and the only possibly viable option was to grow trees. The planting of conifers was increasingly adopted as an expedient by landowners whose allotments of land proved so much less useful than they had anticipated, though even these might struggle: at Sheerwater, between Woking and Chertsey, enclosure in 1805 was accompanied by the draining of a large shallow lake, but although ‘the land which the water covered [was] planted, chiefly with Scotch pine ... the soil proved less fertile than the planters expected’. Nevertheless, by 1841 there were ‘many extensive and thriving plantations of larch and Scotch fir’ in Windlesham, and as early as 1820, only six years after the award for that parish, some of the former West Common had been planted with conifers.<sup>32</sup>

In his treatise on the agriculture of Berkshire, Mavor placed particular emphasis upon the potential for timber as a serious commercial resource, suggesting with regard to woodland management in Windsor Forest that ‘the improvements which have been made ... are truly worthy of a patriot King’ and that elsewhere on the heaths, if only common rights (‘frequently synonymous [*sic*] to the right to trespass’) could be abolished, ‘one tenth of the land, properly planted and secured, would produce timber to a greater value, and of a superior description, to the whole under existing circumstances’.<sup>33</sup> However Evershed, writing in 1853 after the great wave of enclosures had subsided, and contradicting some positive statements earlier in his own essay, was notably pessimistic even on this point, suggesting that:

a large portion of the western area of Surrey must ever remain irreclaimable. The heaths of Frensham, Whitley, and Thursley on the south, and of Frimley, Bagshot, and Woking on the north, consist of a sterile and unimprovable sand, while a great part of the intermediate country is of a similarly poor nature; only a few patches of good loam are to be found, and the district must always remain comparatively worthless in an agricultural point of view, and its products ever be confined to the growth of heath, gorse, fern, and a few plantations of larch and Scotch fir.

He quoted the specific example of ‘Bradley common’ [Bridley near Woking] where ‘more than 100 acres is being reclaimed at an expense of 7l. or 8l. an acre; but it appears doubtful if the larch and Scotch fir which have been planted will thrive’.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A. G. Parton, ‘Parliamentary enclosure in nineteenth-century Surrey: some perspectives on the evaluation of land potential’, *AgHR* 33 (1985), pp. 51–8.

<sup>31</sup> The Windlesham award is discussed in detail in Marie de G Eedle, *A history of Bagshot and Windlesham*

(1977), pp. 98–103.

<sup>32</sup> Brayley, *Topographical history*, II, p. 147; Eedle, *Bagshot and Windlesham*, p. 103.

<sup>33</sup> Mavor, *General view Berkshire*, pp. 309–10.

<sup>34</sup> Evershed, ‘Farming in Surrey’, p. 414.



Of greater long-term significance was the discovery that while the heathlands were less than ideal for conventional agriculture, they were perfectly suited to the cultivation of newly arrived and ultra-fashionable garden plants. Various species of azaleas were in regular cultivation in the 1740s and 1750s whilst *Rhododendron ponticum* was introduced to England in 1763 from the Iberian peninsula.<sup>35</sup> By the 1790s it was recognized that the thin, acid soils were ideal for these and many other species: James and Malcolm, writing in 1794, claimed of Bagshot that:

the very soil, which is by so many said not to be worth cultivation, is so very desirable and so very much in request by every nurseryman, that he can scarce grow a plant that is a native of America ... without having for the principal part of his composition, equal to four fifths of this species of soil.

At the end of the century Michael Waterer established nursery gardens at Knaphill, between Woking and Pirbright, described forty years later as comprising:

about 120 acres of ground, which were enclosed from the bog and heath, and progressively stocked with numerous exotica from America, which now flourish here with even more than their native beauty and luxuriance. Here, the noble magnolia, with rhododendrons, azalias, kalmias, andromedias, and many other hardy exotics, obtain a vigorous growth, and display, in May and June, one entire mass of blossom, which perfumes the air for miles around.<sup>36</sup>

From the sterile soils of the area emerged one of the formative elements in English landscape design and domestic gardening of the past two centuries.

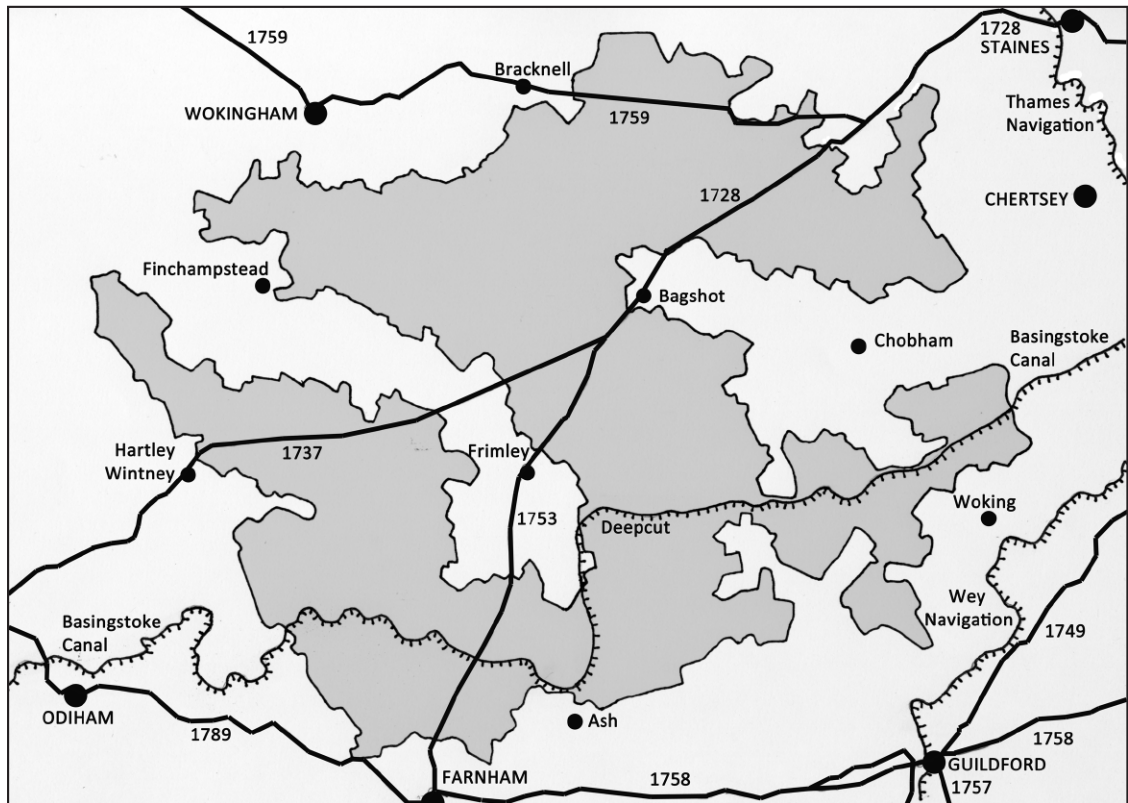
### III

A key to the larger-scale changes that emerged in the later eighteenth century and gathered pace after 1800 was the improvement of communications (Map 3). In this respect the turnpiking of the road from Staines to Bagshot in 1728, and its extension to Basingstoke in 1737, were of crucial importance. Turnpiking tamed the terrors of using the road across the heaths, so vividly expressed by Defoe, and it substantially reduced journey times. The main road to the west soon became busy with scheduled coach services, a trend accelerated by the further turnpiking of the Bagshot-Farnham-Alton road in 1753, and that from Sunningdale to Reading via Wokingham in 1759. The main local impact of turnpiking the three routes from Staines – to Wokingham, Basingstoke and Farnham – was that it opened up the area to the precursor of commuter traffic. The improved surfaces and faster journeys made it possible for city men, politicians and self-made nabobs to live in the area south of Windsor but to travel into London with relative speed and comfort. This was not daily commuting, but it marked the appearance of what would become a fundamental of modern society – the physical separation of home and workplace. For a small minority of wealthy individuals, road improvements facilitated

<sup>35</sup> The websites, Forest Research: Rhododendron Control ([www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/rhododendroncontrol](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/rhododendroncontrol)) and Henning's Rhododendron and Azalia Pages

– History ([www.rhodyman.net/rhodynhis.php](http://www.rhodyman.net/rhodynhis.php)).

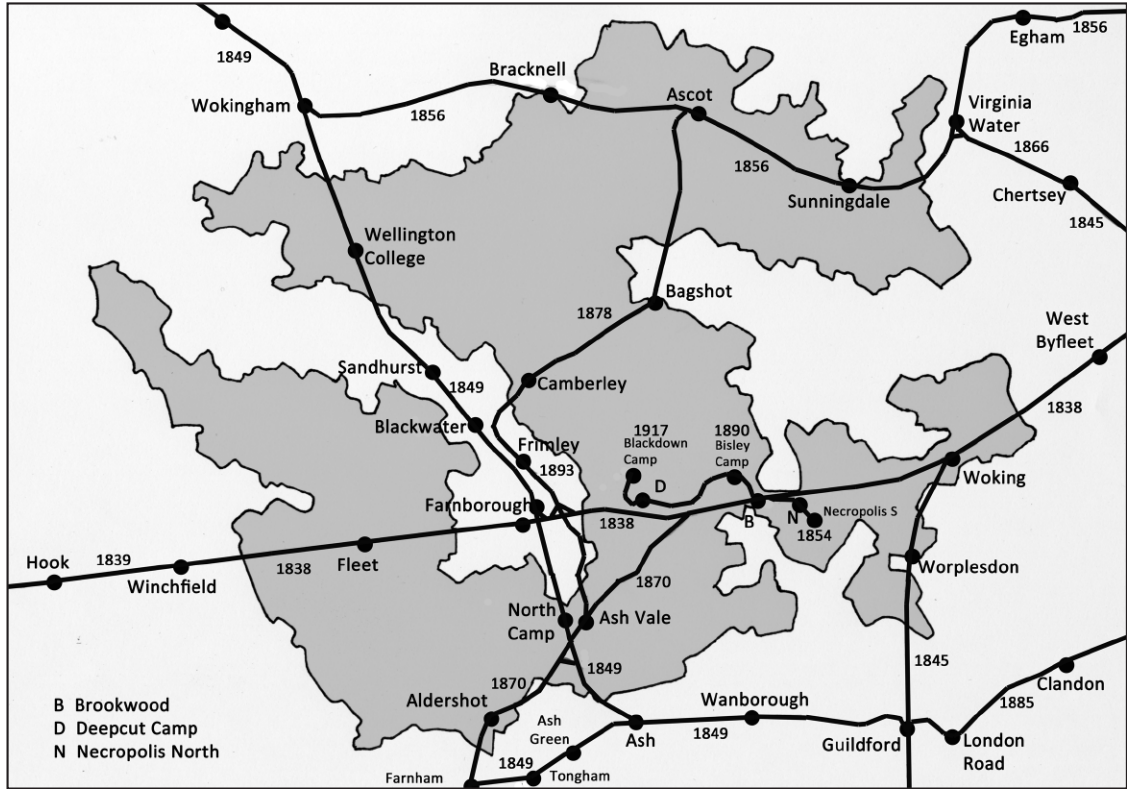
<sup>36</sup> James and Malcolm, *General view Surrey*, p. 71; Brayley, *Topographical history*, II, p. 7.



MAP 3: The turnpike roads and the Basingstoke Canal. Map: Author.

the lifestyle choice of a country estate within reach of town. The effect is readily seen in the creation of parkland and building of country houses, already noted: a similar phenomenon was observable in the vicinity of Esher, along the Guildford turnpike, but east Berkshire set the trend.

Other transport improvements were more prosaic. The Basingstoke Canal, first proposed in the early 1770s and authorized in 1778, was finally completed in 1794. For much of its 37 miles it crossed unenclosed commons, a major factor in reducing the costs of land acquisition but the cause of some lengthy meandering. Of the 23 miles between Byfleet and Church Crookham, over twenty were cut through heathland. It crossed Woodham and Woking Commons, sliced through the north-south ridge of the heath with the impressive 1000-yard-long cutting that has ever since been called Deepcut, contoured along the Blackwater valley and passed through the great expanse of waste between Aldershot and Fleet. Indeed, the expectation was that the canal would derive much traffic from transporting chalk and manure from the area south of Basingstoke to the Surrey and Hampshire borders, where they would be used to sweeten the acid soils and allow extensive improvement. In return, peat would be carried into Hampshire, to top-dress limy soils. It was a rational plan which, like so many promoted in speculative canal projects, was largely unsuccessful. Some piecemeal enclosure and improvement did take place close to the waterway in the vicinity of Pirbright, Ash



MAP 4: The railway network. Map: Author.

and Church Crookham,<sup>37</sup> and large quantities of chalk were sent eastwards from the pits at Odiham, but half a century after the completion of the canal most of the surrounding heathlands remained unenclosed.

Far more significant, in so many ways, was the growth of the railway network, arguably the single most influential factor in the disappearance of the heathlands. Map 4 shows the opening dates of lines through the heaths of Berkshire, Surrey and Hampshire. The railway from London to Southampton was first proposed at the end of the 1820s with a route via the flourishing market towns of Guildford, Farnham, Alton and Winchester. However, that alignment was soon rejected, partly because it was inconvenient for projected extensions to Bristol and Exeter but also, of greater concern, because it involved extremely high land acquisition costs. These considerations dictated a different route, running in a direct line via Woking Common and Farnborough to Basingstoke, the intended junction for lines to the west, and then south to Southampton. Like the parallel Basingstoke Canal, from the River Wey westwards it passed for much of its length through empty heathland which was either unenclosed or had never been improved for agriculture. It was no coincidence that its first temporary terminus, Woking Common, as we can see in Figure 4, stood in the centre of a vast

<sup>37</sup> Paul A. Vine, *London's lost route to Basingstoke: the story of the Basingstoke Canal* (1968), esp. chs 3 and 7.

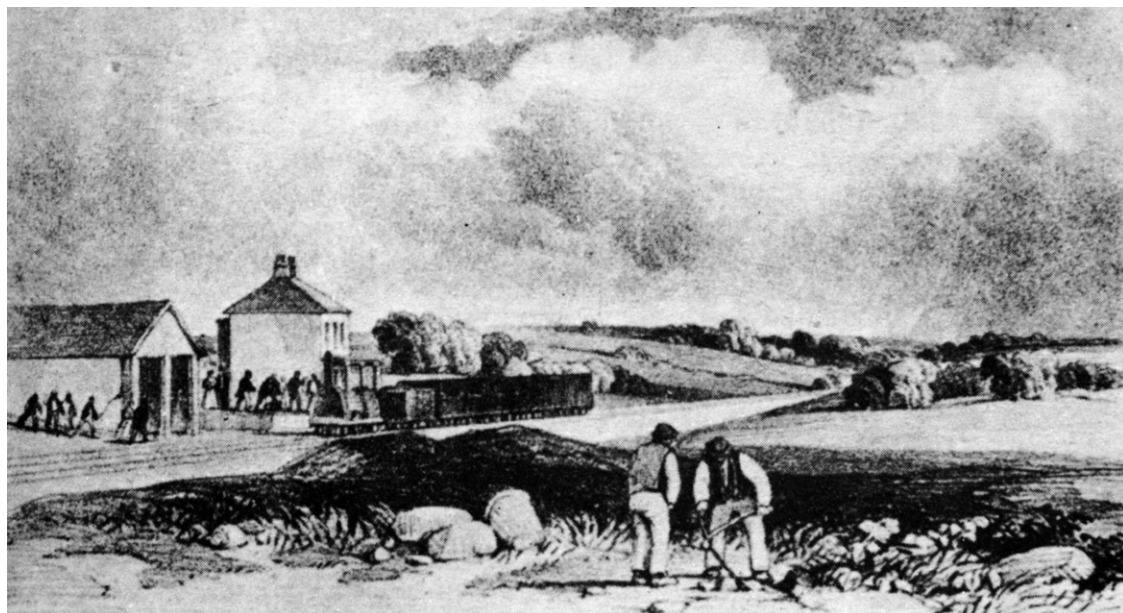


FIGURE 4: Woking Common Station on the London and Southampton Railway, shortly after its opening in May 1838: this is now the heart of a town of more than 100,000 people, but in 1838 the nearest building was more than half a mile away. 'The station at Woking Common' by L. Wood (engraved by J.R. Jobbins and published by R. Tyas (October 1838)) Photo: Author.

tract of heath with no other building in sight. Such land was cheap and willingly disposed of by manorial lords and landowners. Most other lines in the area were similarly routed through or close to heathland, minimizing land costs but passing through areas with little or no population. That was soon to change.

#### IV

Almost inevitably, railway stations close to London acted as the foci of urban growth, as commuting began to develop. 'Dormitory towns' emerged and the stations themselves generated employment and commercial opportunities. But across much of the heathland the initial major changes were associated with government policies and the development of institutions. Railways made accessible huge tracts of poor, cheap land which had hitherto been remote and of little agricultural value. Major changes in Victorian social, defence and education policies created institutions that were land hungry, and the heathlands suited their requirements perfectly. The earliest such changes pre-dated the railway age: during the 1790s the army conducted military exercises and built a series of redoubts and practice works on Bagshot Heath and the other commons stretching north on the Berkshire side of the Basingstoke road.<sup>38</sup>

The Royal Military College was founded at Marlow in Buckinghamshire in 1802 and, in 1813, its methods and systems already a proven success, the College relocated to new buildings at

<sup>38</sup> The website, Swinley Forest History and Mystery ([swinleyforest.org.uk/archaeology/napoleonic-period/](http://swinleyforest.org.uk/archaeology/napoleonic-period/)).



Sandhurst Park, close to the earlier exercise grounds.<sup>39</sup> In April 1801 some 450 acres had been purchased by the government from the prime minister, William Pitt, who had previously acquired the land from John Tekell, his nephew by marriage, and who made a hefty profit on the deal.<sup>40</sup> The physical character and location of the site were crucial. Major General John le Marchant, the founder-designer of the College, especially valued its open heathland aspect and very small local population: he chose the site 'as to avoid a neighbourhood injurious to the morals of the cadets and which allows space for military movements and the construction of military works without interruption'.<sup>41</sup> Subsequently amalgamated with the Royal Military Academy and the military seminary of the East India Company, Sandhurst became the focus of officer training and, as the army reforms of the mid-nineteenth century placed greater emphasis on professionalism, the college expanded rapidly, extending beyond the original parkland site onto the adjacent heath.

By the 1840s key figures in government were acutely concerned over the manifest weaknesses in British military training, but until the death of the Duke of Wellington in 1852 little could be done – he and his powerful coterie held steadfastly to the procedures which had been in force at the time of Waterloo. As soon as the Iron Duke was out of the way a reformist faction, including Prince Albert, began to implement changes, foremost among them being the provision of permanent military training grounds instead of peripatetic summer camps. These required cheap land which was otherwise of little value; easy access for large numbers of men and large quantities of supplies; and the potential to form part of London's defences since, despite the good relationship with France under Napoleon III, it was still assumed that any potential invasion would be by the French.

The first site considered was near Reigate, but there the cost of the good agricultural land was far too high. However, in 1853 a great summer camp had been held on Chobham Common and, inspired by this excellent location, Viscount Hardinge, Wellington's successor as commander-in-chief, suggested that the desolate emptiness of Aldershot Heath – only five miles from Sandhurst – would be ideal. In January 1854 the War Department began buying tracts of land north of the small village of Aldershot, paying £12 an acre, and by 1861 had acquired some 8000 acres. The original idea was to use the land every summer, but the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853 had made it imperative to have a permanent encampment, so between April 1854 and the end of 1859 over 1200 wooden barrack huts were built. The site was bisected by the Basingstoke Canal, which enjoyed a brief period of busy prosperity as construction materials and supplies were brought in for the new camp, but the railway opened in 1870 put an end to its remaining business.<sup>42</sup>

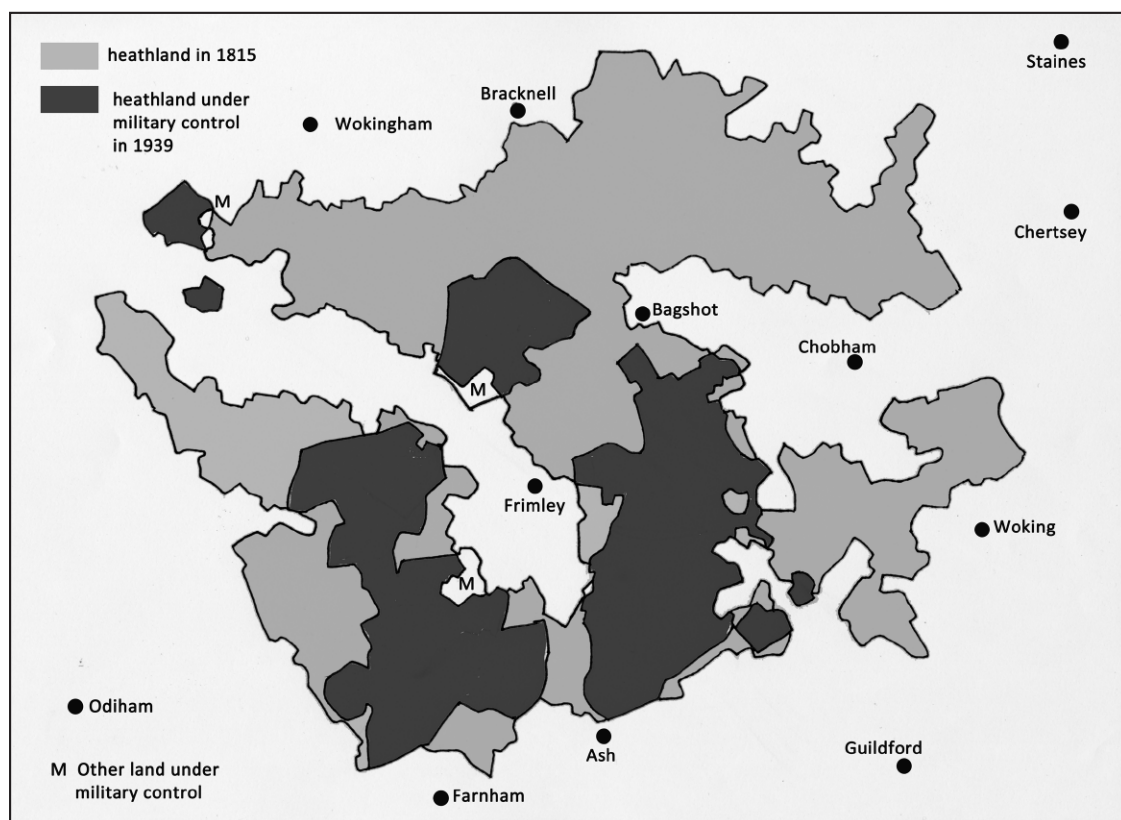
The success of the project, and the remarkable speed with which it was put into effect, encouraged further expansion (Map 5). By 1900 Aldershot had become Britain's largest garrison town, at the centre of a network of subsidiary depots, barracks and training grounds,

<sup>39</sup> A. F. Mockler-Ferryman, *Annals of Sandhurst: A Chronicle of the Royal Military College from its Foundation to the Present Day with a sketch of the History of the Staff College* (1900), pp. 9–14.

<sup>40</sup> S. Chesterman and K. Dancy, *A history of Sandhurst* (1986).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Alan Shepperd, *Sandhurst: the Royal Military Academy* (1980), p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Paul H. Vickers, *Aldershot military town: a brief history* (2011); id., 'The origins of Aldershot Camp' at [www.friendsofthealdershotmilitarymuseum.org.uk/garrison.010.html](http://www.friendsofthealdershotmilitarymuseum.org.uk/garrison.010.html)



MAP 5: The heathlands showing the extent of military ownership in 1939. Map: Author.

almost without exception occupying former heathland requisitioned by the government or purchased cheaply from willing landowners. In 1875, for example, the War Office acquired 3070 acres on Pirbright Common, and began the development of the main camp of the Brigade of Guards. Fifteen years later the National Rifle Association, with the active support of the War Office, bought 3000 acres at Bisley, transferring its ranges from Wimbledon Common.<sup>43</sup> With its almost unaltered Victorian and Edwardian architecture and layout Bisley Camp is now a conservation area, and its rifle ranges are part of an internationally significant site of special scientific interest, preserving over 2000 acres of heathland of exceptional ecological richness.

Between 1894 and 1902 almost all of Chobham Ridges, extending south from Bagshot to the southern edge of Pirbright, and including the higher ground around Mytchett and Deepcut, was bought by the War Office. The construction of Deepcut Camp and the nearby Blackdown Camp began in 1900, major extensions being added during the First World War served by an extension of the Bisley branch railway which had been completed in 1890. Other land was acquired in the Yateley and Fleet area of Hampshire, together with the great tract of heathland

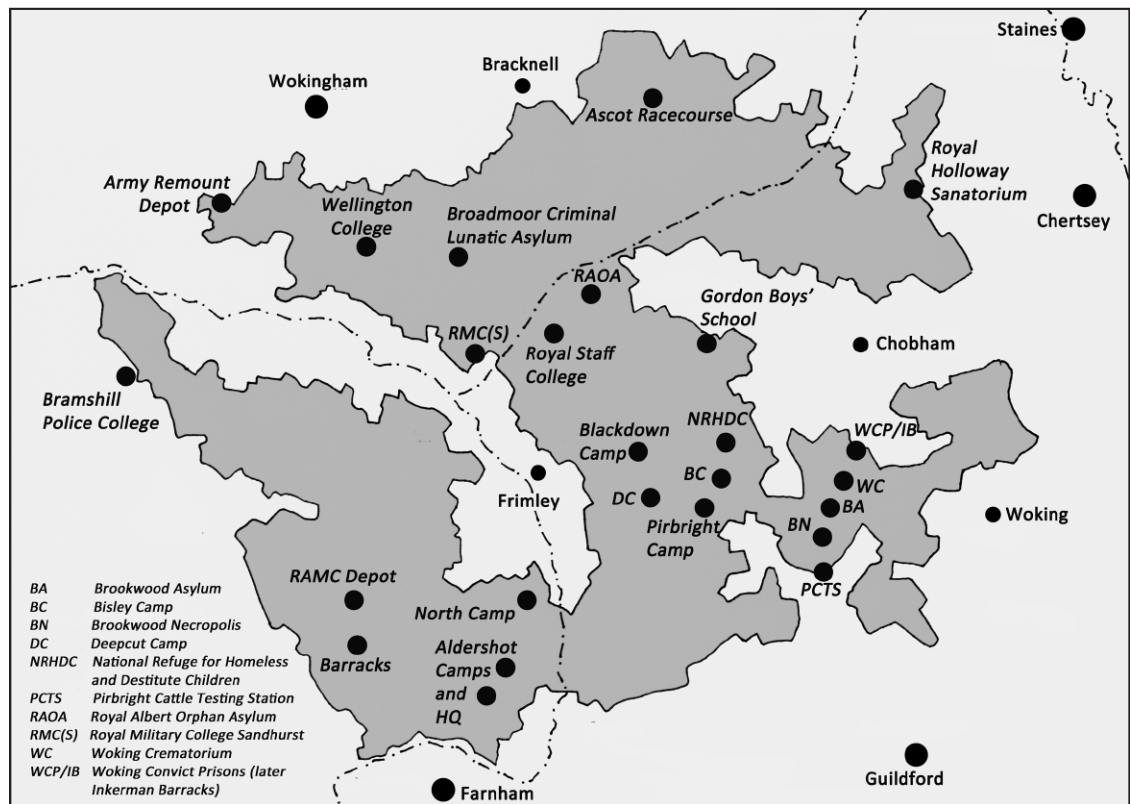
<sup>43</sup> The website of the National Rifle Association of the United Kingdom includes a timeline ([nra.org.uk/who-are-we/history/](http://nra.org.uk/who-are-we/history/)) and background notes on the history of Bisley Camp ([nra.org.uk/nra-bisley/about-bisley/](http://nra.org.uk/nra-bisley/about-bisley/)).

extending north of Sandhurst towards Bracknell. In 1904 land at Arborfield, at the north-western tip of the heathlands, was chosen as the site of a remount depot which operated until 1937 and then became the Army Technical School. A notable addition to the assemblage of military installations was the landing ground at Laffan's Plain, Britain's first airfield, which in 1908 saw the first powered aeroplane flight in this country. Its distant successor, Farnborough Airport, now covers over 1500 acres including the adjacent warehousing and business parks, all on former heathland. In 1941–42 Blackbushe military aerodrome was built on the common at Hartfordbridge Flats, beside the A30. After the war it became a moderately successful civilian airport, but closed in 1960. It was later reopened as an executive and private airport, its proximity to the affluent residential areas of the former heaths being a major asset.

## V

By the outbreak of the First World War the War Office was much the largest landowner in the area, and its successor, the Ministry of Defence, remains so to this day. But other institutions were attracted by the same factors that encouraged military use of the heaths – cheap land, convenient access to London, and a small resident population that was unlikely to be in a position to object. The first major scheme was perhaps the most bizarre. The Burials Act of 1850 forbade future use of churchyards for interment in the metropolitan area, creating a potential crisis in the disposal of the dead. In 1848–49 there had been proposals for huge new cemeteries on the edge of London, at Kensal Green and Erith, and the newly formed General Board of Health had already contemplated a scheme for an immense national cemetery, or necropolis, outside the city. The 1850 Act refocused attention on the latter idea, and in October 1851 the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company was registered. Its plan was to acquire all the unenclosed commons in the parish of Woking, a site carefully chosen because the land was almost worthless, the light sandy soil was very suitable for interment, and the main London-Southampton railway and the Basingstoke Canal ran across the common. The somewhat surreal intention was that the corpses of the nation would travel to the necropolis by rail or water, forming a never-ceasing procession of funerals attended by an army of clergy, labourers and administrative officials, as well as trainloads of mourners.

After much wrangling, in June 1852 parliament authorized the plan, and by the Woking Commons Act of 1854 the Company acquired 2268 acres of common land, most of which was thereby in effect enclosed, paying Lord Onslow, the lord of the manor, a total of £33,944. Work on the cemetery began immediately, taking in 400 acres of former common at Brookwood, alongside the road from Bagshot to Guildford. Brookwood Necropolis was designed by Henry Abraham, the company architect, who visualized an oasis of greenery and tranquillity amid windswept lonely heathland, and his ambition succeeded admirably. Winding paths and avenues linked Gothic chapels, surrounded by a luxuriant and beautiful planting of the shrubs and conifers which grew so successfully in nearby nursery gardens. There were architecturally impressive mausolea and monumental tombs amid lavish greenery, although the vast majority of interments were of London paupers, who were buried without ceremony in biodegradable 'earth to earth' coffins in unmarked shallow plots. The cemetery was opened in November 1854, linked to the London and South Western Railway by a short branch line with two stations. At



MAP 6: The Victorian and Edwardian institutions and major military establishments. Map: Author.

Waterloo the Necropolis Company had its own station, from which it operated a daily return journey to Brookwood, each train conveying up to 35 funeral parties. It is said to be the largest cemetery in Western Europe, and by the end of 1939 there had been 201,000 burials there.

However, once the cemetery was open, and to nobody's great surprise (many MPs had expressed doubts during the parliamentary debates in 1851–52), the company announced that it did not need the remaining 1800 acres. By a further Act in 1855 it was permitted to sell the surplus, mostly for building purposes. As some commentators suggested at the time, a gigantic property speculation had been masked by the cemetery project – indeed, in the 1870s and 1880s, as sales progressed, the company was selling valuable building land at knock-down prices to its own directors. The long-term significance of the 1855 legislation is that it allowed the company to develop a completely new town, Woking, centred on the railway station in the middle of the heath. It is impossible not to conclude that this was the intention from the outset.<sup>44</sup>

Other institutions soon followed (Map 6). In 1858 the Necropolis Company sold 65 acres at Knaphill, on the western edge of Woking parish, to the Home Office, for the construction of male and female convict prisons, and two years later the Surrey county justices acquired a further 150 acres for the building of a new lunatic asylum at Brookwood. In 1871 the parish

<sup>44</sup> The history of the company, the cemetery and the land deals is covered in detail in Crosby, *Woking*, pp. 70–80.



of Woking had a population of 6500, of whom some 3000 were convicts, lunatics, or prison and asylum warders and their families.<sup>45</sup> And Woking was not, of course, unique, for almost every heathland parish acquired comparable institutions for the secluded accommodation of society's undesirables – the dead, criminals, the insane, and public schoolboys. These great Victorian edifices, huge Gothic buildings in red or patterned brick, set in extensive landscaped grounds with home farms, shrubberies, lawns, and high perimeter walls, were of course found throughout the country, but nowhere else was there such a concentration as in the heathlands of Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire.

In 1816 the area that was to become Crowthorne was the middle of an uninhabited expanse of heathland, four miles by seven miles. The railway from Reading to Guildford was built across the common in 1849, and in 1859 a station opened to serve a great new institution, Wellington College, founded in December 1853 under the patronage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to provide for the education of the orphaned children of army officers. The site on the heath near the wind-battered tree called the 'Crow Thorn' was chosen for the usual reasons, as well as its proximity to Sandhurst:

The land was very cheap. The spot was desolate and the soil barren ... 150 acres of what was virtually useless land ... a wilderness of heather and scrub, broken only by forests of tall majestic pines and sluggish stretches of bog and flat.<sup>46</sup>

It eventually extended to over 400 magnificently landscaped acres, but *The Times*, reporting the opening ceremony in January 1859, was scathing about the choice of site. Its vehement hostility sums up the contemporary view of the Berkshire heaths:

On Saturday, Her Majesty inaugurated the public opening of this institution, and consequently the bleak, inhospitable-looking moor on which the building has unfortunately been erected had, for the first time, such a busy aspect as was almost sufficient to give an air of animation even to a spot so desolate and so cold. The selection of a spot so wild and so cheerless can only be accounted for by the fact that the twelve acres of land on which the college and its outbuildings stand was presented to the Wellington memorial fund gratuitously ... It is a matter of great though useless regret that the governors ever accepted such an offer at all and were led to erect a national memorial on ground so utterly bleak and barren.<sup>47</sup>

Two years later the Home Office bought 53 acres just over a mile from the College, and there built the architecturally splendid Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, which was opened for female patients in 1863 and males in 1864. Again, the location was crucial: 'The new asylum was to be perched high up on a ridge within the forest, commanding a magnificent and suitably healthy view across the countryside below'. The ample space available for generously sized buildings and extensive grounds was the key factor.<sup>48</sup> By 1881 Broadmoor had 485 inmates and 45 resident staff, together with many others who lived in the adjacent villages. With the Royal Military Academy, the College and the Asylum, the ancient parish of Sandhurst now housed

<sup>45</sup> For the institutions in the Brookwood and Knaphill area, see Crosby, *Woking*, pp. 93–8.

<sup>46</sup> David Newsome, *A history of Wellington College, 1859–1959* (1959), p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, 31 Jan. 1859.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Stevens, *Broadmoor revealed: Victorian crime and the lunatic asylum* (2013), p. 6.

three major institutions. Here, as at Woking, their sheer scale, and the numbers they employed, made a major and decisive contribution to the emergence of a sizeable town.

## VI

The same factors which encouraged the development of institutions and military activities also prompted the laying out of racecourses and golf courses, an important social and recreational adjunct to the emergence of high-class residential areas on the former heathland. The celebrity pioneer was the racecourse at Ascot, founded on the instructions of Queen Anne who, despite her later monumental physique, was in her youth an enthusiastic horsewoman, 'passionately addicted to hunting'. In later life she rode in a light chaise to follow the hunt through the Windsor Great Forest, where many of her royal ancestors had hunted, and in the summer of 1711 ordered the laying out of a 'round Heat on Ascott Common'. Its earliest use was recorded by Jonathan Swift, who wrote from Windsor on 11 August 1711 that 'much company is come to town this evening to see tomorrow's race'.<sup>49</sup>

Although much the most celebrated and long-lasting, the course at Ascot was originally one of several in the vicinity of the heathlands during the eighteenth century. For example, in his diary covering 1736–44, Robert Lee of Binfield recorded attendance at race meetings held at Egham, Maidenhead Thicket, Bracknell, and Binfield itself. These were important social occasions for the local yeomen and lesser gentry.<sup>50</sup> Eventually, as the historian of Berkshire racing has commented,

Courses began to close as a lack of money and enclosure of common lands on which some of them were sited made holding the meeting less profitable. Maidenhead held its last meeting in 1787 ... and Reading [in] 1814 (although it was revived in the 1840s). Hawthorn Hill, between Maidenhead and Windsor, survived until 1939.<sup>51</sup>

However, at Tweseldown, near Fleet, racing on the heath began in 1866, mainly for the benefit of officers from local camps and garrisons. The course was used for the equestrian events in the 1948 Olympic Games and still survives, although races are no longer held.<sup>52</sup>

Golf came much later but had a far wider impact. At the end of the Second World War there were 15 golf courses in the area of the former heathlands, and today the tally is 27. Unsurprisingly they are concentrated in areas such as the west and north sides of Woking, in the vicinity of Sunningdale and Virginia Water, and around Bracknell and Wokingham. Among the first was the Royal Ascot Club (1887), and of Surrey it was noted that, 'In the ten years between 1886 and 1895 golf clubs grew with great rapidity throughout all districts of the county'.<sup>53</sup> The New Zealand Golf Club at Woodham near Woking was opened in 1895, 'carved

<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Laird, *Royal Ascot: a history of Royal Ascot from its founding by Queen Anne to the present time* (1976), pp. 13–16; *VCH Berkshire*, II, pp. 305–9 deals with the county's major racecourses.

<sup>50</sup> Harry Leonard (ed.), *Diaries and correspondence of Robert Lee of Binfield, 1736–1744* (Berkshire Rec. Soc., 18, 2012), pp. 92–3, 136, 138, 141–2.

<sup>51</sup> David Boyd, *The running horses: a history of racing in Berkshire from 1740* (1978).

<sup>52</sup> The Tweseldown racecourse and equestrian centre website includes a history of the course, with timeline, at [tweseldown.co.uk/history/](http://tweseldown.co.uk/history/)

<sup>53</sup> *VCH Surrey*, II, (1903), pp. 521–6.

out of a pine forest' as a result of a wager from a friend that Hugh Locke King, owner of the estate, would be unable not to turn this unpromising site into a successful course. Locke King won, and went on to establish the racetrack and airfield at Brooklands on another unprofitable part of his estate.<sup>54</sup>

Here, as elsewhere in the heathlands, the sandy soil was particularly suitable for the construction of golf courses, while the need for a large area of land was easily met when landowners happily sold property of little agricultural value. The development of courses culminated, in 1922, in the opening of Royal Wentworth, which lay at the heart of a super-expensive private residential estate. During the 1950s and 1960s more new courses were laid out close to fast-growing residential areas, a trend which was increasingly in conflict with the strict application of green-belt policies, since the development of golf courses implied major landscape change and the construction of ancillary buildings, car parks, access roads and practice facilities.<sup>55</sup> The dominance of golf courses as a land use is today exemplified by the borough of Woking, where they occupy 10.74 per cent of the entire area, the highest proportion in the United Kingdom.<sup>56</sup>

## VII

The most far-reaching consequence of the development of the railway network was the urbanization of the heathlands. Until the mid-nineteenth century there were no towns and few villages, although a ring of medieval market centres circled the area at distances varying from three to five miles – from Guildford and Farnham, via Odiham and Wokingham, to Windsor and Chertsey. When the railways were built across the heaths most stations were, as at Woking, Farnborough, Fleet (originally and revealingly 'Fleet Pond'), and Wellington College, in the midst of empty land. Woking Common station, for example, was a mile and a half from the tiny town of Woking, which stood beside the River Wey. Farnborough station, for over ten years the nearest railhead to Farnham and serving a number of small villages, was in the middle of nowhere. Within a few years, however, these stations stimulated new development, invariably unplanned and with no sense that a coherent urban area could, would, or should be created. By the 1860s the London and South Western Railway Company, which had very heavy commuter traffic from stations between Surbiton and Waterloo, was well aware of the potential for commuter business further out from the city, and began to timetable fast longer-distance services, which encouraged the urbanization of places such as Woking and Ascot.

Table 1, which gives population figures at the beginning, middle, and end of the nineteenth century, emphasizes the significance of the twin forces driving urbanization – the railway network and the development of the great institutions, including military activity. In 1900 parishes such as Chobham, Pirbright and Yateley, with no rail link or no direct link to London,

<sup>54</sup> T. D. P. Emblem, *Around and about New Zealand Golf Club* (n.d. but 1989), p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, the website, Sutton Green Golf Club ([www.suttongreengc.co.uk/course/video-flyover](http://www.suttongreengc.co.uk/course/video-flyover)).

<sup>56</sup> The website, the Golf Business, 'More than 10% of Woking is golf courses' ([www.thegolfbusiness.co.uk/2017/09/more-than-10-of-woking-is-golf-courses](http://www.thegolfbusiness.co.uk/2017/09/more-than-10-of-woking-is-golf-courses)).

TABLE 1: Population growth in the core parishes of the heathlands, 1801–1901

	1801	1851	1901		1801	1851	1901
<b>Berkshire</b>				<b>Surrey</b>			
Easthampstead	566	698	1708	Bisley	196	340	747
Finchampstead	463	613	666	Chobham	1176	2069	3186
Sandhurst	222	815	2386	Frimley	532	1791	8409
Sunninghill	700	1350	4719	Horsell	493	762	2105
Winkfield	1465	2185	4243	Pirbright	400	637	1540
<b>Hampshire</b>				Windlesham	1060	1794	3415
Aldershot	494	875	30,974	Woking	1340	2837	16,244
Farnborough	399	477	11,500				
Yateley	1375	2156	2794				

and without a major institution, had shown relatively slow growth. Sandhurst parish, despite not having a direct rail connection to the capital, had grown much more rapidly because of the various institutions in the vicinity. But those places with both direct links and institutions, such as Woking and Aldershot, had become sizeable towns in only half a century.

The great phase of growth – the ‘take off’ period for urban development in the area – was from the 1870s. By this time the new and chaotic town of Woking was beginning to sprawl across the heath, the old village of Farnborough was extending north to its new focus along the railway, and thanks to the massive military intervention, Aldershot had been transformed from a small rural community into a major town in less than twenty years. The village of Frimley, whose bucolic delights as an oasis of green amid the black heaths had been extolled by writers fifty years before, grew rapidly after the railway from Bagshot to Ash was opened in 1878, but even more remarkable was the mushrooming of a new town, Camberley, just to the north. In 1816 this area was uninhabited heathland, although a broken ribbon of recent housing extended along the main road from the bridge over the Blackwater towards Bagshot. Christened York Town, after George III’s son Frederick, Duke of York, this was the earliest settlement in the vicinity of the later town. In the early 1860s the new Royal Military Staff College was built there, along the road from Sandhurst, and the housing that developed adjacent to the college was named Cambridge Town (the Duke of Cambridge, Queen Victoria’s cousin, was commander-in-chief of the armed forces). In 1877 this nascent community was renamed Camberley (an invented name, though reminiscent of genuine Surrey place-names) to avoid postal confusion with Cambridge, and after its station was opened in the following year the emergence of a town – which like most of the heathland communities was unplanned, lacked a proper centre, and had a dismal quality of architecture – was guaranteed.

On the Hampshire side of the Blackwater urbanization was also rapid. In Aldershot the impetus was not commuting: it was too distant from London and, like any garrison town, had a deeply unenviable reputation as a wild place characterized by drunkenness, prostitution, and brawling. But it grew with remarkable speed: only six years after the founding of the camp



the town had a population of 9000 military personnel and 7000 civilians, and by 1900 the total population was over 31,000. Farnborough, its marginally more decorous and respectable neighbour, shared in the military role – the great North Camp lay within the parish – and by 1901 had a population of 11,000. To the north-west Fleet began to develop as a town after the sale of almost 250 acres of building land in 1878, and by 1901 had over 2000 people. All of these towns were eventually outranked by Woking, which is now by far the largest town in Surrey with a population of just over 100,000. Described in the 1960s by Ian Nairn as ‘a period piece but not a very creditable one’, the child of the Necropolis Company was largely a failure in terms of planning, design and architecture, but it was a triumphant success as a building speculation.<sup>57</sup>

Although Aldershot was distinctively a rougher and poorer community, all the new towns had areas of terraced housing, gasworks and railway sidings, and substantial numbers of small villas and lower middle-class developments. However, a hallmark of every one apart from Aldershot was the early emergence of superior residential areas characterized by large detached houses set in extensive landscaped grounds. These neighbourhoods were often the result of careful policies of more orderly land sales combined with restrictive covenants, implemented by landowners anxious to maintain the social tone and to maximize profit by strictly excluding unsociable or socially inferior uses. In some cases, as in Hook Heath in Woking, the elevated sites enjoyed sweeping views across rural landscapes to, for example, the North Downs, and in all instances the detailed planting of gardens and grounds, with conifers, shrubberies, ponds, lawns and winding drives, was a crucial element in the ambience. Deliberately ‘rustic’ designs for houses, tile-hung, barge-boarded, many-gabled and consciously vernacular (albeit on a grand scale) highlighted the desire of new residents, socially conservative and politically Conservative, to harness the forces of ‘tradition’.<sup>58</sup>

The combination of money, traditionalism and the particular landscape of the heathlands produced a highly distinctive townscape, inextricably associated with a no less distinctive social structure. The great devotee of suburbia, John Betjeman, loved the area and was perfectly attuned to these nuances:

A horse-riding horse for a horse-track  
Conifer county of Surrey approached  
Through remarkable wrought-iron gates

...

Over the redolent pinewoods, in at the bathroom casement  
One fine Saturday, Windlesham bells shall call.<sup>59</sup>

The poem entitled ‘Camberley’ pokes gentle fun at the retired ex-Indian Army residents, while the celebrated ‘A Subaltern’s Love Song’ brilliantly evokes the inter-war atmosphere of the residential heathlands:

<sup>57</sup> It must be admitted that since the 1960s Woking has been radically transformed by successive phases of wholesale redevelopment, so it is no longer ‘a period piece’. The jury is still out on whether its architecture is more creditable.

<sup>58</sup> For high-class residential development in the

Woking area, see Crosby, *Woking*, pp. 88–93.

<sup>59</sup> John Betjeman, ‘Pot Pourri from a Surrey Garden’; the title of the poem is derived from the best-selling gardening memoir *Pot-pourri from a Surrey Garden* by Mrs C. W. Earle (1897). Mrs Earle lived at Cobham, at the eastern end of the heathlands.

By roads 'not adopted', by woodlanded ways  
 She drove to the club in the late summer haze  
 Into nine-o'clock Camberley, heavy with bells  
 And mushroomy, pine-woody, evergreen smells.

The paradox was that the heathlands, for centuries one of the poorest parts of southern England, had the very attributes which made the upper middle-class dream possible – gentle hills, sandy soils perfect for the new styles of landscaping, and cheap land which meant that a large property could be bought for a bargain rate. The impoverished heathlands would eventually rank among the most expensive real estate in Europe.<sup>60</sup>

In some cases the towns which emerged later in the nineteenth century, and especially in the first half of the twentieth, before green belt restrictions placed at least some limits on urban sprawl, were almost entirely of this type. The classic example is Ascot which, with Sunninghill and Sunningdale, forms an urban area of over 12,000 people. By 1830 thirteen country houses had been built in the area south of a line from Windsor through Wokingham to Arborfield, and on the Ordnance Survey map of 1816 their surrounding parks, carved out of the heathland edges in the arc between Bracknell, Ascot and Bagshot, are particularly distinctive. The continuing improvement in communications, including the arrival of the railway from Staines to Wokingham in the summer of 1856, prompted a second wave of country house building, with another eight major houses being constructed between 1840 and 1914 around Bracknell and Ascot. Thereafter, a distinctive form of urban development followed, essentially amorphous, with small and exclusive residential developments along leafy lanes and wooded avenues, gradually coalescing into a sizeable low-density built-up area, with no true town centre and much open land in pockets within the urbanized envelope.

Comparable 'quasi-urbanization' can be seen at Virginia Water, Crowthorne, the Wick Hill area south of Wokingham, Yateley, Blackwater and Hawley, Lightwater and West End. None of these places is truly urban in character or function, but each of them has the population size and geographical extent of a town. They are in reality town-sized suburbs, very heavily dependent upon commuting either to Greater London or to nearby 'real' towns such as Reading, Woking, Bracknell, Guildford and Aldershot but, as further expansion into the green belt is proposed and as urban facilities are gradually acquired (notably, retailing and office developments), their character will alter again. A quite different form of urban development gobbled up swathes of former heathland in Berkshire – the dramatic expansion of Bracknell from a small and obscure town at the end of the Second World War, into a sprawling new town of the 1950s which has continued to grow apace and now has a population now approaching 90,000.<sup>61</sup> Recent Office of National Statistics attempts to define urban areas on the basis of built-up area rather than administrative boundaries have proposed that almost all the heathlands now

<sup>60</sup> The character of urbanization in the area is discussed in more detail in Michael H. Ferguson, 'Land use, settlement and society in the Bagshot Sands region, 1840–1940' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1979). It is placed in a wider context in Alun Howkins, 'Social, cultural and domestic life',

ch. 23, in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000), II, pp. 1354–1424.

<sup>61</sup> There are outline plans for the further expansion of Bracknell to bring its population up to 125,000.

come within the urban orbit of Greater London, since continuous belts of developed land, especially along railway lines and main roads, connect even Bracknell and Wokingham with the capital. It suggests, however, that reasonably coherent urban subdivisions can be delineated: Aldershot/Farnborough/Farnham/Camberley (174,000 people); Woking (124,000); Bracknell/Ascot (96,000); Wokingham (42,000) and Yateley/Sandhurst (37,000). This gives a rough figure of around half a million people in the former heathland areas, an astonishing change from fewer than 20,000 two centuries ago.

## VII

So what is left? A combination of enclosure, institutional development, military takeover, urbanization and the creation of parks and estates, and the building of railways (and, later, main roads and motorways) drastically reduced the extent of heathland from the 1750s onwards. The previously uninterrupted tracts of open land – Defoe’s 100,000 acres – were chopped up, subdivided, built over and converted to other land uses. But equally important was the almost complete destruction of traditional agriculture and, in particular, the end of grazing by sheep and cattle. Descriptions of the heathlands after the 1830s refer mainly to the new and the novel, not to what was inevitably seen as the dwindling and the disappearing. Though we know, for example, that peat-cutting for fuel lingered on in some areas until the beginning of the twentieth century, it was scarcely documented and of little interest. New housing developments and socially elevated residents were, in contrast, extensively reported.

But the total reshaping of the local farming economy was of profound importance. Not only did it involve the disappearance of traditional lifestyles, but it also meant a major change in landscape terms. Once the grazing of those ‘miserable and half-starved sheep’ had ended, and once it was realized that afforestation of the poor-quality land was feasible, there was both a direct incentive for landowners to plant conifers, and an insidious natural regeneration first of scrub and latterly of full woodland. As noted earlier, although the commons and heaths seemed so barren to the agricultural writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the lack of tree cover was almost certainly the result of the over-grazing of the area by those stunted sheep. There was no intrinsic reason why tree cover could not be re-established, particularly with birch which can thrive on very thin poor soils. The decline and disappearance of sheep farming from the late nineteenth century onwards was the trigger for the regeneration, which was well under way by the late 1930s, but the process dramatically accelerated after the myxomatosis outbreak of 1953–55, which killed an estimated 95 per cent of wild rabbits in Britain. The surviving areas of open heathland, with short turf and sandy soils, had been ideal for rabbits. Their intensive grazing effectively continued the work of sheep in previous generations, preventing any scrub or tree cover from developing. After 1955, however, woodland regeneration was uninhibited and rapid. The result is that a very high proportion of the undeveloped land which was formerly heath was covered either in self-regenerated deciduous woodland, preceded by gorse and scrub and followed by silver birch (the first species to form full tree cover), oak, and alder in wetter areas, or by deliberately planted conifer woodland (Figure 5).

This was at first regarded with equanimity, but by the 1970s it was realized that it would spell the end of the unique ecological structure of the open heathlands, a habitat of great rarity



FIGURE 5: The impact of woodland growth is very clear in this view from Windy Gap Hill near Aldershot, looking north-west towards Farnborough and Camberley. As recently as the mid-1950s almost none of this landscape was wooded, but today tree cover is ubiquitous. Photo: Author.

in European terms and one everywhere endangered by urban development and woodland encroachment. In consequence, considerable efforts are now made in some areas, such as Chobham Common and Horsell Common, to reverse this process, with grazing by ‘traditional breed’ cattle and ponies, felling and clearance of invasive woodland, and deliberate re-creation of grassland and open habitats, including environmental work to sustain and extend the shallow basin wetlands so typical of the original heath. Ironically, the finest stretches of untouched heathland are those which have been in military control for over a century.

Standing on the heights of Chobham Common or Caesar’s Camp above Aldershot, two worlds are visible. In the distance are the ever-taller tower blocks of sprawling towns, pylons and high-voltage cables span the view, and the incessant drone of traffic on the M3 or the great highways is matched by the seemingly ceaseless passage of planes heading for Heathrow. But in the foreground are boggy hollows at the foot of loose gravelly slopes of heather and coconut-scented gorse, mushroomy smells emanate from oak and birch woodlands, and the paths and tracks winding through the coarse moorland grasses are trodden by horse riders and dog walkers. As Brayley noted 175 years ago, the heathlands were already a recreational asset. Now, they are loved, treasured and jealously guarded, but this disappearing landscape is still under threat. It has a rich and unique history. Let us hope it survives the development pressures of the twenty-first century.