
FEATURE ARTICLE

The lost commons of East Ilsley

Nearly all parishes were defined by Inclosure Awards and East Ilsley was thought to be the only exception because the commoners fought to retain their rights and won. When Parish Councils were created in the 1890s, they took over the management of the parishes from the Parochial Church Councils and the top priority for the newly formed East Ilsley Parish Council was to define grazing rights and the period of their use.

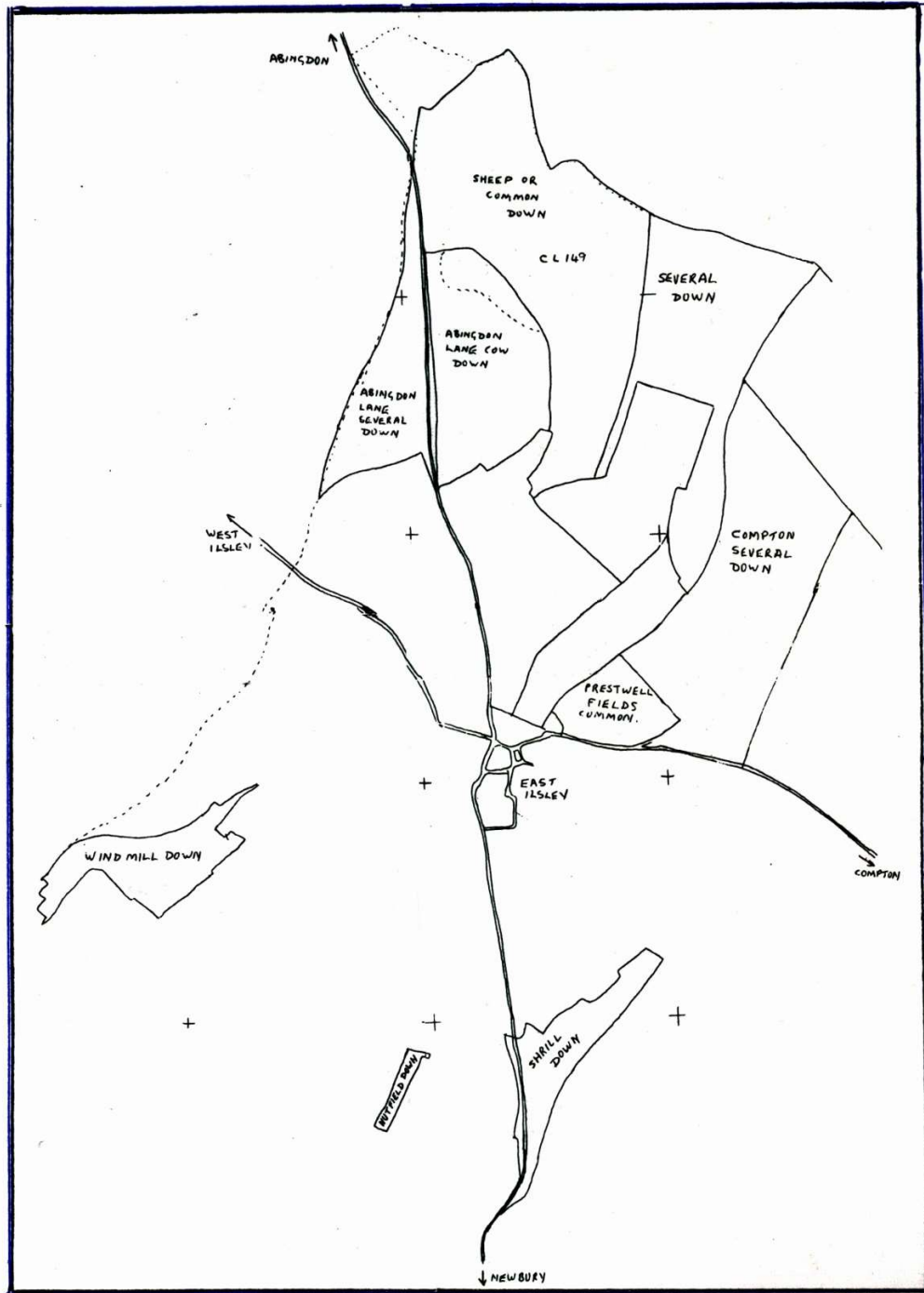
The starting point was to study the Washburn Valuation List of 1840 and bring it up to date (1894) for the use of Cow Down. The Tithe Map defined several other areas but their use has not been recorded. Their names were Abingdon Lane Down, Cow Down, Sheep Down and Several Down to the North, Compton Cow Down and Several Down to the East, Shrill Down to the South and Windmill Down and Nutfield Down to the West. Shrill Down carried the right for the Rector to graze sheep and Nutfield Down was said to be for grazing horses.

The outbreak of World War II caused two things to happen: nearly all downland was ploughed up to grow crops and the Research Institute negotiated an exchange of land so that Compton Cow Down was no longer used by commoners. The rights to graze cattle were transferred to the much smaller area now known as Prestwell Fields Common. To compensate for the reduced acreage, the area was conveyed to the Parish Council to manage, for use over the whole year. An effort was made in 1948 to return the other ploughed areas to open downland but it was claimed that the state of emergency was still in force.

In the 1960s the Commons Commission was set up to register all common land and later to identify owners. The message from the County Council was, "If in doubt, register". All areas but one were lost as commons, the argument at the Inquiry being that they were not commons at the time of registration. Naturally the right of commoners to use Prestwell Field Common was sustained, along with nine smaller areas in the village that were classed as roadside or manorial waste. The following map shows where the various commons were.

One other type of right was registered; that was the right to gather brushwood from Poors Furze, an area of Gore Hill East of the A34 and south of the woodland known as The Warren. This was judged to be obsolete and the right extinguished.

There is always a need for further research and, while Parish Council records are virtually complete, the Parochial Church Council records have not been located. One hopes that they are somewhere in the Oxford Diocesan archives and may be found sometime in the future.



Map of the Lost commons of East Ilsley

Bob Moulton