

Barton Turf

A history of the Common

Michael Brandon-Jones



Barton Turf Common looking West towards the thatched cottage 'Dale House' c.1910

Common Land

In the parish of Barton Turf there are several areas now registered as common land - the Parish Staithe (CL356), the Claypits (CL355), the Gravel Holes (CL354), and Barton Fen (CL357). One of the earliest maps of Barton Turf dated 1714 of Berry Hall, then known by the name of Barton Bury Hall, shows the extent of the estate belonging to the Boys Hospital in Norwich, including fields named Home Barn Close, Rushy Ground, Dove House Pightle, and the Orchard. The meadow and marshland to the South and East of Bury Hall is marked on the 1714 map as Barton Common. This vast area of common land known as the Great Common was for use by the parishioners to graze their cattle, sheep and geese. The common was nearly ½ mile wide from Bury Hall eastward to the river Ant, and as far South as the Hertfordshire County Council Sailing Base in Staithe Road. After the 1810 Enclosure Award, which established the lawful owner of each parcel of land in the parish, the area of common land was greatly reduced and the Great Common disappeared. However, in the Barton Turf Poor Rate Book of 1895 some cottages in the village were still listed as being next to the Great Common.

The Claypits

Known as the Claypits, but now more often referred to as The Common, this parcel of land of a little over one acre was described in the 1810 Enclosure Award as a public clay pit. It was allotted to the Surveyors of the Highways to be used by them and 'the proprietors of lands and estates within the said parish of Barton Turf, and their tenants for the time being, forever in a reasonable and proper manner'. The Claypits are within the triangle of land surrounded by three

roads in the centre of the village and named in the Enclosure Award as ‘the First Public Road to the West, the Fourth Public Road to the East, and the Fifth Public Road to the South’.



Barton Turf Enclosure map 1810

Norfolk Record Office ref: C/Sce 2/18

Gravel Holes

The Gravel Holes, an area measuring about 2 acres, is located to the East of Berry Hall Road. Sometimes referred to as the Gravel Pits, or the Gravel Hills, this parcel of land was also allotted to the Surveyors of the Highways by the Enclosure Award for use as a public sand and gravel pit. In the 1950s it was used as a place to dump rubbish, both by parishioners of Barton Turf and by others from outside the village, much to the annoyance of the Parish Council who had paid for a large ‘No Dumping’ notice to be put up.

The Fen

Barton Fen is an area of 30 acres in the North East of the parish that was allotted to the Trustees of the Poor in 1810. The Enclosure Award gives a list of the trustees: the Lord and Lady of the Manors of Barton Kybalds and Barton Bury Hall, the Vicar of Barton Turf, the Churchwardens, and the Overseers of the Poor. The land is close to the parish boundary with Smallburgh and Stalham, and borders on the South and West the Bury Hall estate. Access to the fen is along the Third Public Road from the South.

The Common

The 1840 Tithe Award map of Barton Turf shows the Claypits and the Gravel Holes owned by the Surveyors of the Highways. The Overseers of the Poor and the Surveyors of the Highways were officials appointed by the Annual Vestry meeting. In 1894 when the first Parish Councils were formed the last Surveyor of the Highways, Mr Henry Christmas Goulder, became the Parish Clerk for Barton Turf. The first record in the Council Minute Book which refers to

common land in the parish is a note to the Police Constable in 1895 asking him to keep all Hawkers and Tinkers and their Vans off the Claypits. Three years later in 1898 the Councillors discussed the possibility of making a village green or playground on the Claypits, but no decision was arrived at before the meeting closed. When the subject of levelling the Claypits was raised at the Annual Parish Meeting in 1899 there was some opposition to the proposal. The ongoing problem, then and now, was flooding of the Claypits. In 1908 the footpath across the Claypits from Hall Road to the Post Office was levelled and made safer, the fence was repaired and hedges trimmed, but little could be done to prevent the area flooding. Of course in the winter months if there was an extremely hard frost the Claypits were good for skating. On 26th August 1912 more than seven inches of rain fell in one day in Norwich and East Norfolk. Known as the Great Flood, in Barton Turf the roads were flooded and there was water all across the Claypits. At Barton Hall near Hobround Corner the fir trees were all leaning on one another as they had been blown over by the gale. In an old photograph showing part of the Claypits taken around 1910 there are no trees on the Common.

In 1935 a proposal was put before the Parish Council that perhaps the Rural District Council might help with the levelling of the Claypits if the job could be undertaken for poor relief work. Several years passed before the Parish Council considered another proposal in 1950 that work to improve the Common could be done in honour of the Festival of Britain, a national event that was due to take place in 1951. After the subject was raised at the Annual Parish Meeting in 1950 a small sub-committee of Barton Turf councillors were appointed to consider the practical difficulties of turning the Common into a level grass playing field. The committee met for the first time at Barton Hall on 9th May 1950 - Lewis Cox in the chair and John Twells Poole honorary Secretary. Revd Poole undertook to inform the Eastern Daily Press of the committee's plan to level the Common which produced an angry response from some Barton Turf residents in the correspondence column of the newspaper. The E.D.P. published a photograph of Barton Common with the headline - Eyesore or Unspoilt Nature? In the letters page the Common was described as 'an eyesore' by one resident and as 'unspoilt nature' by another: -

'No visitor has ever said that Barton Common is an eyesore, as the Revd J.T. Poole stated in his letter. It has always been admired by visitors as a very pretty view. They had said it is nice to come to a village where nature remains unspoilt'.

And this letter from another resident of the village:-

'I have known Barton Turf since 1912 and been a resident since 1919. During all this time I have never heard anything but admiration for the Common. The only eyesore is since it has been used as a dump for tins and rubbish. I certainly think steps should be taken to preserve the natural beauties of the Common. It is quite another thing to desecrate it by turning it into a modern playground, so spoiling the appearance of a Norfolk beauty spot'.

The Clay Pits Committee agreed a plan to cut all the brambles and small bushes, collect the tins and other rubbish, and level the whole of the Claypits - 'the ground be sloped to a ditch along the South side, terminating in a pond at the South-East corner; this pond to have an overflow through a pipe under the road into the Hall ditch'. However, when the contractors produced their estimate for the work the committee decided that they could only afford at the present time to level half the Claypits to the East of the footpath at a cost of £45. This change to the original

plan was no doubt welcome news to the residents of Barton Turf who wished to see the natural beauty of the Common preserved. The committee asked the men of the village to volunteer to clear the bushes and weeds from the Common, and in the summer of 1952 three tons of lime was spread on the Claypits to improve the soil. The following year Mr Wilton offered to sink a trial bore hole through the clay to draw off the surface water. Later four more holes were sunk about 11 feet down into a layer of sand in order to drain the lower parts of the Common.

The last meeting of the Clay Pits Committee was held in January 1953, but the ongoing work to improve the Common and keep it looking tidy continued throughout the 1950s. The long grass was cut, the gorse bushes cut down and burnt, the hawthorn hedge over-hanging the road cut back and a load of clinker put on the muddy path across the Common. With permission from the Parish Council several loads of spare top soil from Mr Leighton's Boatyard were dumped on the Common and spread out with a bulldozer, kindly paid for by donations to the Clay Pit Fund. The Parish Councillors arranged Whist Drives at Neatishead Victory Hall during the winter months to fund the grass cutting and trimming the hedge, whilst most of the smaller jobs were undertaken by a few local volunteers. In 1957 the Parish Council agreed to allow the Barton Broad Regatta Committee to organise car parking on the Common on the day of the Regatta.

In 1960 the Parish Council received a reported that rubbish and garden refuse had been dumped on the Common, especially at the West end, although this was not a new problem. James Haylett, the last basket maker in Barton Turf who died in 1944, used to skin the willows for making baskets and discard all the old rubbish in the corner of the Common nearest to Barton Hall known as Haylett's Pit. One Barton Turf parishioner reported that the Village Sign was not as visible as it might be because undergrowth was being allowed to grow up behind it. Another parishioner said that he had noticed strangers to the village stopping near to the corner of the Common not having seen the Village Sign. A letter sent to the Parish Council in 1960 from one gentleman complained of the nettles and thistles on the Common which were unsightly and invading his 'garden and living-room'. The following year a letter from the Ministry of Agriculture at Sprowston Hall prompted the Council to try and control the thistles - the wind-borne seeds were a real nuisance for the farmers and gardeners living nearby. In the 1940s one or two cows belonging to Mr Shepherd were let loose for the day to graze on the Common, and in 1960 it was not unusual to see a few goats on the Claypits. At a Parish Council meeting the question of insurance was raised by one of the councillors who had received a complaint from someone falling over the chains attached to the goats.

At the Annual Parish Meeting in March 1967 the Chairman gave a report on his meeting with an expert on land drainage, and after some discussion it was decided to obtain more soil when it became available in order to raise the level of the Common. In 1976 the Parish Council decided to make a small car park near to the Post Office Shop for two or three cars. In the summer of 1981 the whole of the Claypits were flooded from end to end due to torrential rain that lasted for two weeks. The flood water covering the road was only cleared when new gullies were cut into the bank by Stalham Highways Division. It was suggested by one councillor that if the pit behind the Village Sign was deepened it might drain the surrounding land, and a similar proposal was put forward to enlarge Haylett's pit to prevent flooding of the playing area on the Common.

Ownership of the Claypits - Commons Registration

The Charity Commissioners held an Inquiry in 1976 to consider the question of the ownership of the Claypits CL355 which the Barton Turf Parish Council claimed to be the freehold owner of the land. Mr Wilton (Chairman of the Parish Council) and Mrs Fiske (Clerk) attended the Commons Registration Inquiry in Norwich on 16th July. By the Local Government Act 1894 the land belonging to the Surveyors of the Highways was transferred to the Rural District Council, and then passed to North Norfolk District Council on 1st April 1974. The conclusion of the Chief Commons Commissioner was that North Norfolk District Council was the owner of both the Claypits and the land known as the Gravel Holes in Barton Turf. However, I do not know if this decision of the Commons Commissioners was later changed following an appeal by the Parish Council. In 1987 Barton Turf Parish Council were in negotiations with the Charity Commissioners to create a Trust to Protect Land Controlled by the Council (Barton Staithe, the Claypits and the Gravel Holes). In May of that year it was reported that negotiations with the Charity Commissioners was nearing completion and a Draft Scheme would be published.

References and Notes:

Barton Turf History Project (BTHP)

Norfolk Record Office (NRO)

1714 map of Barton Bury Hall Estate, NRO Horner ACC1997/215 [BTHP M320-323]

1810 Enclosure map, NRO C/Sce 2/18 [BTHP M111] State of Claims [R222]

1822 map of Bury Hall Estate, NRO BR 276/1/855/2 [BTHP M149]

1840 Tithe Apportionment and Award Map, NRO DN/TA 205 [BTHP R109 and M59-72]

1841 Barton Turf Census - In 1841 Census the cottages in the centre of the village have the address 'Great Common'. In the 1851 Census this was changed to 'Barton Common'

1893-1895 Barton Turf Poor Rate Book [BTHP D600]

Parish Council Minute Book 1894 -1959, and 1959 -1987

Clay Pits Committee Minute Book 1950-1953

1910 Inland Revenues Duties, NRO P/DVL 1/77 [BTHP D5000 & map M459]

1945 Aerial photographs taken by the RAF show few trees on the Common

Eastern Daily Press 20th May 1950 [BTHP N78]

1976 Inquiry by the Commons Commissioners

John Yaxley 'Jam Round Barton' [BTHP R88]

Postcard of Barton Common, not dated [BTHP P135]

Anne Wilson 'Wherries and Windmills' 1982, and 'A Bartoner's Boats' 1985

Michael Brandon-Jones

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Neatishead, Irstead and Barton Turf Community Heritage Group (NIBCHG)



A postcard of Common Road, Barton Turf c1910



The Common, Barton Turf EDP photograph 20th May 1950