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# **Becoming ‘Good Neighbours’: How the Model of English Common Land Can Inspire Equitable and Sustainable Multi-Species Relationships**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa University for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Writing, Publishing and the Humanities

Bath Spa University

December 2025

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## Data Statement

All datasets created during this research are openly available from Bath Spa University's data repository at [doi.org/10.17870/bathspa.30885446](https://doi.org/10.17870/bathspa.30885446) and are derived from the following resources in the public domain:

- Becoming 'Good Neighbours' Interview Transcripts - Becoming 'Good Neighbours': How the model of English common land can inspire equitable multi-species relationships (PhD Thesis)
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# Abstract

Against a backdrop of accelerating anthropocentric environmental breakdown, this thesis examines how English common land can inspire sustainable and equitable multi-species relationships.

I consider this question via a case study of Rodborough Common in Gloucestershire. Combining historical, environmental, and qualitative research with my professional conservation experience, I examine what this lowland working common can tell us about different ways of interacting with our multi-species neighbours. Using analysis of semi-structured interviews, historical sources, auto-ethnography, and ecological observations, I present a range of more-than-human commoners' stories. I also analyse two examples of engagement projects that test Environmental Humanities methods and theories.

The study finds present-day relationships with common land rooted in communal and individual place memories, bound in attitudes of sharing, openness, and a strong commoning tradition. These enable embodied and free encounters with others and engender feelings of love, care, and personal responsibility for the future of the land and its inhabitants.

The thesis concludes that Rodborough Common shows some congruence with Ostrom's principles of common pool resource management, but full alignment is prevented by centralised controls and a lack of localised autonomy. Despite this, commons such as Rodborough can thrive when use and management are rooted in respect for past and present commoners, and the co-creative agency of other-than-humans.

Furthermore, the important role commons can play in encouraging multi-species

community cohesion suggests that more such spaces are needed. One place is not, however, automatically exchangeable for another, suggesting simply enabling greater access to land would not significantly improve inter-species relations. Instead, the quality of interaction, which must be predicated on rural realities rather than mythical constructions, is key to becoming 'good neighbours'. Alongside the need for more spaces for meaningful multi-species encounters, how and where we tell and experience the stories of our more-than-human enmeshments then become vital components of imagining and enacting a more hopeful Capitalocene.

Key Words: Commons/commoning, multi-species relationships, environmental humanities, common pool resource management, place-based conservation, English common land, storytelling and narrative, case study.

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species commoners, past and present. Your acts of care and co-creation have gifted to the world a place that inspires love, gives hope, and brings joy. This thesis, and the time and care I have invested in it, is my small way of ‘paying it forward’ to the next generation of commoners of all species, which I do in deep gratitude for Rodborough Common’s generous gifts.

# Glossary

- BCE: Before Common Era
- CE: Common Era
- CNL: Cotswold National Landscape
- Commoner: Traditionally, an individual who has the right, alongside their neighbours, to make use of land owned by another for farming and subsistence activities, in return for payments in kind or monetary rents. In this thesis I use the term to encompass anyone, of any species, who lives on, visits, or uses common land
- Copyhold or freemen/tenants: Those who paid rent for their property and were therefore free and autonomous
- Courts Leet: A localised criminal and civil court that oversaw the administration of justice within a defined area (i.e., within a manor or demesne)
- CPR: Common Pool Resources
- DEFRA: Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Demesne: Area of land and property tenanted from the Crown by a Lord or Lady that was largely farmed for their benefit. Ancient demesnes operated under a royal prerogative from 1066 giving their tenants a greater degree of freedom than tenants in other manors
- EIP: Environmental Improvement Plan
- ELMS: Environmental Land Management Scheme
- FiPL: Farming in Protected Landscapes fund
- *Genius Loci*: A location's spirit of place, or distinctive atmosphere
- Global North: 'A term that refers to developed countries concentrated in the

northern hemisphere, characterized by high levels of income, technological advancement, well-developed infrastructure, and macroeconomic and political stability'<sup>1</sup>

- Global South: 'A term that refers to developing countries located mostly in the southern hemisphere, with generally low-income levels and facing different structural problems'<sup>2</sup>
- Good Neighbourhood: Common land concept where resources are managed for mutual benefit allied with related obligations that are governed by shared customs<sup>3</sup>
- GRO: Gloucestershire Records Office
- GT: Grounded Theory
- Inter-disciplinary: Whilst the Environmental Humanities is an inherently inter-disciplinary field, bringing different knowledge and methods from across the humanities subjects to address environmental and ecological challenges, I use this term to reflect work beyond the humanities that encompasses aspects of the social sciences and, occasionally, the natural sciences
- LotL: Landscapes of the Lark
- Lord/Lady of the Manor: After 1066 the chief tenant who 'owned', rented, or was gifted land from the Crown
- MERL: Museum of English Rural Life
- More-than-human: All biotic and non-biotic life, including human

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<sup>1</sup> Arkadiusz Micha Kowalski, 'Global South - Global North Differences', in *No Poverty: Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, ed. by Leal Filho and others, 2020  
<[https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-319-69625-6\\_68-1](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-319-69625-6_68-1)> [accessed 28 May 2024], p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Kowalski, 'Global South- Global North Differences', p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher P. Rodgers and others, *Contested Common Land: Environmental Governance Past and Present* (Earthscan, 2016), p. 20.

- MRCAC: Minchinhampton and Rodborough Commons Advisory Committee
- NA: National Archive
- Native: a peasant with limited land holdings, tied to the demesne
- NT: National Trust, also referred to as 'the Trust'
- OSS: The Open Spaces Society
- Other-than-human: All non-human entities, both biotic and non-biotic
- Pandemic: Refers to the COVID-19 pandemic experienced in 2020 and 2021
- Ramsar: Named after the Iranian city in which it was adopted, Ramsar sites are those managed under the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources
- RCCP: Rodborough Commons Conservation Programme
- RIGS: Regionally Important Geological Sites designated for their special geology
- Rodborough Common, the Common, Rodborough, Commons, common(s): when referring to commons or common land in general, I will use a lowercase 'c'. When referring to Rodborough Common I will use an upper case 'R' and 'C'. Therefore, all references to 'Rodborough', 'Rodborough Common' or the 'Common' refer to the case study subject. Commons (with an upper case 'C' refers to the Stroud Commons (primarily Selsley, Rodborough, and Minchinhampton)
- SAC: Special Area of Conservation. Sites managed under the framework of the pan-European Emerald Network
- SANG: Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space
- SGS: South Gloucestershire and Stroud College
- SSSI: Sites of Special Scientific Interest designated for their rare flora or fauna
- StC: Storying the Commons
- SVP: Stroud Valleys Project

- Tree Throw: the bowl-shaped cavity or depression created by the missing root ball of a fallen tree

Note: This thesis uses the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) Fourth Edition (2024) style guide for referencing and other functional textual conventions.

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# 1. Introduction

On paths to freedom and to childhood dear  
A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'  
And on the tree with ivy overhung  
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung  
As tho the very birds should learn to know  
When they go there they must no further go  
This with the poor scared freedom bade good bye  
And much the[y] feel it in the smothered sigh  
And birds and trees and flowers without a name  
All sighed when lawless laws enclosure came  
And dreams of plunder in such rebel schemes  
Have found too truly that they were but dreams<sup>4</sup>

John Clare, *The Mores*

When the poet John Clare was writing this lament for the communally farmed lands of his youth, the era of parliamentary enclosure (1607-1921 CE) was in full swing. His home county of Northamptonshire and its neighbouring counties, saw extensive acts of enclosure that largely ended communal farming practices in England. As a result of enclosure, which accelerated rapidly from 1750 onwards, many rural populations were displaced and impoverished during the long nineteenth century (1789 to 1914).

Communally farmed land, once ubiquitous, was privatised, farmed for the profit of a few, rather than the benefit of communities. The formerly numerous manorial 'wastes',

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, 'The Mores', 'Poems of the Helpston Period' in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 169).

or commons, became rare. The ties that bound communities to land and to each other were severed. Readers today may wonder about the relevance of these long-ago acts. Why should we worry ourselves in these troubled times with troubles from the past?

The answer lies in the link between the ‘plunder in such rebel schemes’ epitomised by ‘lawless laws enclosure’ and the damage such exploitation has wrought on the rest of the planet. ‘Birds and trees and flowers without a name’ are threatened as never before.<sup>5</sup> The UK has the unhappy distinction of being one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.<sup>6</sup> In this highly urbanised country, many humans have become untethered from the labour of the more-than-humans who nourish them.<sup>7</sup> An estimated 71% of British land is used for agricultural purposes, yet as of 2023, 85% of the population resided in urban areas.<sup>8</sup> In our post-enclosure landscape, fewer than 300,000 people are employed in agriculture, much of it industrialised.<sup>9</sup> This means over 99% of the population relies on the labour of less than 1% of humans for their basic means of subsistence. This labour has become largely invisible to many, its value not considered beyond the cost quoted on a supermarket shelf. Endemic species isolation is experienced by many in the modern world. Exploitative extractive practices, inter- and intra-species injustice, mass species extinction, and accelerating climate breakdown are all palpable reminders of the broken contract between humans and the planet upon

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<sup>5</sup> Clare, ‘The Mores’, p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> ‘State of Nature 2023’, *State of Nature Partnership*, 2023 <[https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report\\_2023\\_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf](https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf)> [accessed 20 October 2023], p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Urban Population: % of Population - United Kingdom’, *World Bank Group*, 2023 <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>> [accessed 1 November 2024].

<sup>8</sup> ‘United Kingdom’, *The World Factbook*, 2024 <[cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-kingdom/#environment](https://cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-kingdom/#environment)> [accessed 23 May 2024]; World Bank Group, ‘Urban Population’.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Agricultural Workforce in England as at 1 June 2022’, *National Statistics*, 2022 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agricultural-workforce-in-england-at-1-june/agricultural-workforce-in-england-at-1-june-2022>> [accessed 28 June 2023]; ‘Working Age Population’, *You Gov UK*, 2023 <<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/working-age-population/latest>> [accessed 28 June 2023].

which we rely.

These frightening and ever-more-present realities have prompted renewed interest in alternative ways of being with the land and with each other. As scientific evidence and the lived experience of many indicates, our planetary home is careering towards human-induced environmental disaster, causing many to seek out causes and quest for solutions. We may, as a result, search for lessons from the past and ask if there is another way. Acknowledging the link between the instrumentalisation of the land and accelerating human-caused environmental breakdown, one option is to look to the few surviving commons as we search for a better way to live.

As I studied for an MA in Environmental Humanities through the tumult of the pandemic, I became ever more familiar with this unfolding environmental crisis. I, too, looked for another way. During this time, I gained employment as a project officer at a local environmental charity, Stroud Valleys Project (SVP). Whilst I was initially charged with helping the charity through the pandemic, my role evolved to include active conservation. As lockdowns moved into memory, helping the public to see the wonder of the other-than-human world, and the part they can play in helping it to thrive, also became part of my remit. Through this process, I too learned to see and more deeply appreciate the richness of other-than-human life, acknowledging its generosity in nourishing body and soul.

Part of my role at the charity was to represent it on the Stroud District Council-led Rodborough Common Conservation Programme (RCCP). This involved working with members of the public, conservationists and land managers on common land local to my home. As my academic and professional practices evolved, I developed a specialism and interest in commons that led me to join the Rodborough and Minchinhampton Commons Advisory Committee (MRCAC). These two circumstances

allowed great insight into the management frameworks within which my local Commons operate, as well as the joys and frustrations of working with this type of land. My work on common land prompted me to ask whether its enduring example of communality and co-creation may provide a better way for humans to live alongside other species. It is, after all, a model of land use that pre-dates many definitions of the proposed geological era defined by human domination driven by 'the logic of capital accumulation' known as the Capitalocene.<sup>10</sup> I wondered what a study of working common land might have to tell us about alternative ways of being, with the land, and with each other. How might it assist in the endeavour to reach across species boundaries in search of greater multi-species equity and harmony? My search for answers to these questions evolved into this thesis.

My involvement with and proximity to Rodborough Common, which lies just one mile from my home, suggested it may be an ideal locale for a case study. A case study provides an opportunity to delve deeply into a single subject, making it a suitable method for this project. Whilst case studies may not always provide direct scalability or give credence to claims of generalization, they can strive to provide relatability which can support their findings in gaining wider relevance.<sup>11</sup> This aligns with the intention of this thesis to offer case-based conclusions that can generate and provoke further inferences and investigation. Furthermore, case studies can utilise the range of interdisciplinary methods required to support 'rigorously contextualised Environmental Humanities research'.<sup>12</sup> They also support the contextualised critical realism

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<sup>10</sup> 'Capitalocene', *Climate Sustainability Directory*, 25 April 2025 <https://climate.sustainability-directory.com/term/capitalocene/> [accessed 11 October 2025], para. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project* (The Open University, 2018), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Rhys Evans, 'Case Study Methods in Sustainability Research', in *Researching Sustainability: A Guide to Social Science*, ed. by Alex Franklin and Paul Blyton (Earthscan, 2011), pp. 54-70 (p. 54); Hannes Bergthaller and others, 'Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities', *Environmental Humanities*, 5.1 (2014), pp. 261-76 (p. 270),

frameworks within which this study is situated. In it, I present the results of a range of research methods appropriate to a cross-disciplinary Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences study, namely historical inquiries, thematically analysed semi-structured interviews, and auto-ethnography.

As my knowledge and intent developed, the overarching aim of this thesis began to hatch. I decided to investigate how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships. This resulting thesis acknowledges Plumwood's call for storytelling as a means 'to vivify, to leap across imaginative realms, to connect, to empathise, to be addressed and to be brought into gratitude', combining and contrasting this approach with policy, legislation, and economic models.<sup>13</sup> My professional experience of working in conservation on Rodborough Common, combined with my academic studies, has given me a golden opportunity to carry out an applied Environmental Humanities project. This thesis is a result of this endeavour, bringing into dialogue disciplines from the Social Sciences and Humanities, alongside practical conservation activities. It presents the results of in-depth research that tells the stories of Rodborough Common located within its wider historical, economic, environmental, social, and cultural contexts.

My investigation of how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships is supported by asking:

1. How might historical and contemporary stories of the commons inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species sharing, reciprocity, and kinship?

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doi:10.1215/22011919-3615505.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World', *Environmental Humanities*, 3 (2013), pp. 93-109 (p. 106), doi:10.1215/22011919-3611248.

2. How encouraging greater multi-species contact, based on the model of English common land, might foster opportunities for improved inter-species relations.
3. What role do the ecologies of place found on English common land play in encouraging wider love, care, and advocacy for multi-species communities?
4. How can multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by the Environmental Humanities, be deployed to enable imaginings and narratives that can extend the English common land model of 'good neighbourhood' more widely?

Rodborough is a National Trust-owned common standing above the post-industrial town of Stroud, comprising around 166 hectares of largely so-called 'unimproved' calcareous grassland (Fig 1.1). Its now rare grassland species, including delicate wildflowers such as the pasque flower, bee orchid, and wild thyme are responsible for its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). It overlooks both neighbouring settlements and the Severn Vale. On a clear day, from Rodborough, you can see across the river to the Forest of Dean and Wales. From its position within the Cotswold National Landscape (CNL), you can view at least two other SACs (the Cotswold Beechwoods and the Severn Vale), the Severn Estuary Ramsar, and a National Park (Bannau Brycheiniog), as well as neighbouring Selsley Common, which is also a SSSI. Local human residents of reasonably long-standing can use the Common to physically orient themselves within the town. Those who migrate away from Stroud may continue to associate the Common with ideas of home. Rodborough Common is, therefore, both physically present as a space and symbolic as a place for many people who live and work in Stroud. It is also a vital refuge for the, in many cases threatened other-than-humans who live or visit there.



Figure 1.1: The view from Rodborough Common to the River Severn and beyond  
Source: Geoff March © Geoff March. Reproduced with permission

Additionally, it has a long and unusually well-documented history, with almost continuous written records dating back to the thirteenth century. These records enable forensic and wide-ranging examinations of past human and other-than-human relationships on this land. The Common is also undisturbed by industrialised agriculture, meaning that, alongside the written archive, wider sources of narrativity are available. Furthermore, the layers of the palimpsest are thinner here than on other, more cultivated or developed lands, reflecting the messy blurring of boundaries this mixed disciplinary study demands. Crucially, from a cultural, social, and economic perspective, there has been active commoning throughout Rodborough's documented history (Fig.1.2). It is, therefore, not only a 'relic' of a time past but also a dynamically evolving space, in terms of its habitats and relationships with human and non-human others. It is a well-used liminal space where the rural and urban meet, whose use has evolved to embrace the recreational needs of an increasing number of human neighbours. As a result, it experiences many of the problems encountered when

humans, their companion animals, and other species come into close contact. It is a site of complex place-building and memory, with visitors and residents often experiencing a deep-rooted love and affection for this place and the other species who contribute, so unerringly, towards its particular *genius loci*. The juxtaposition created between damage and delight, corruption and care, as experienced on this common, are explored in this thesis. As an example of a continuously worked lowland common, Rodborough is also slightly unusual compared to existing case studies, which primarily examine the more rural, agriculturally focused uplands, or entirely recreational urban commons.



Figure 1.2: Cattle grazing on Rodborough Common, Summer 2023  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham

In summary, there are four main aspects that make Rodborough Common a particularly apt study in support of the aim of this thesis. Firstly, it is a lowland common, adjacent to an urban conurbation, meaning it is heavily used for recreation,

and so experiences many of the challenges this entails. Secondly, it is a working common, with a documented history of commoners farming the land for at least 700 years, giving it a strong and enduring tradition of democratic use and management. Thirdly, it is owned and, in conjunction with the commoners' committees, managed by the National Trust, who have a legal obligation to carry out the difficult balancing act epitomised by their strapline 'For everyone, for ever'. Finally, it is an important site for free-living other-than-humans, whose continued thriving has come under consistent assault since at least the 1930s. This thesis will consider each of these aspects, by weaving together stories of commoners of all species, past and present, in a richly contextualised Environmental Humanities study.

If in answer to our current environmental crisis we are seeking alternative ways of being, it is also worth examining what it is about still-worked common land in general that may make it worthy of further investigation. Despite many challenges pockets of English common land such as Rodborough have survived agricultural and technological industrialisation. In this way they fly in the face of hegemonic capitalist norms, offering a challenge to accepted 'truths' about the workability of alternative ways of being. Commons reflect a period, long past in most of England but still very much alive in many parts of the world, where 'rights' to access and take resources from the land were not always dictated by ideas of land ownership. The commons idea of sharing the bounties of the land alongside neighbours and other species is deeply embedded with notions of reciprocity and kinship. It should not, however, be imagined that commons were bucolic idylls that were free from conflict. They were carefully and assiduously managed places where attempts to take more than your allowed share or not pay your dues in kind for the same (or 'free riding'), were promptly dealt with. For English commons, this manifests in the idea of 'good

neighbourhood', which seeks to achieve sustainable balance through social, spiritual, and practical means.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, dominant Western economic models encourage excessive levels of consumption that create stark inequalities in who benefits and who pays. This model, predicated on attachment to endless growth and rooted in dominant paradigms concerning land ownership, is rapidly depleting the Earth's common resources beyond its carrying capacity: its ability to regenerate in line with consumption.<sup>15</sup> Viewing this depletion through the lens of the commons allows us to link the Earth's degradation with endemic free riding that has hugely benefited a few, whilst irrevocably denuding others. Anyone, past or present, who has anything to do with managing a commons of any scale or type will soon inform you that boundless free riding is not sustainable. If allowed to go unchecked or uncontrolled, free riding ultimately destroys the resource for all. It is, quite simply, the antithesis of good commons management, as I will show in this thesis. Successful commons also offer a living rebuttal of the idea that free riding is the default human position as some have suggested.<sup>16</sup> As I will demonstrate, well-cared-for commons were, and are, intrinsically managed with fair distribution and sustainability of resources in mind. They have, therefore, much to share with us about how more equitable resource distribution can be achieved and maintained, for present and future generations. I will explore this idea in the context of Rodborough Common by asking how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships.

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher P. Rodgers and others, *Contested Common Land: Environmental Governance Past and Present* (Earthscan, 2016), p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Guy Shrubshole, *Who Owns England? How We Lost our Land and How to Take it Back* (William Collins, 2021), pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Garrett Hardin's oft-quoted 'Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162.3859 (1968), pp. 1243 - 1248.

Alongside hugely damaging and inherently inequitable levels of material consumption, many humans are experiencing symptoms of human species isolation and dislocation.<sup>17</sup> One proposed way to mitigate human isolation, and thus improve inter-species relations, is to encourage situated connection between humans and others, which often involves getting outside into ‘nature’.<sup>18</sup> It is a call that finds a receptive audience. Ninety-four per cent of adults surveyed in England felt getting outside was good for their physical health, whilst 92% felt it benefited their mental health.<sup>19</sup> In recent years these benefits have been well-documented and publicised.<sup>20</sup> In autumn 2024, walking was quoted as the third most popular leisure activity in the UK, yet in many places, you will still find ‘A board sticks up to notice ‘no road here’.<sup>21</sup> Access to green or blue spaces is also inherently inequitable.<sup>22</sup> Those with low incomes, fewer qualifications, poor health, or living in socially and economically deprived areas are less likely to enjoy access to green spaces.<sup>23</sup> Access is also split along ethnic lines, with many people from ethnic minority backgrounds living in neighbourhoods with very poor

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<sup>17</sup> Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, ‘Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?’, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405), doi:10.1002/fee.1826.

<sup>18</sup> Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén, ‘Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene’, *Ethics and the Environment*, 20.1 (2015), pp. 67-97 (p. 82).

<sup>19</sup> ‘The People and Nature Survey for England: Data and Publications from Adults Survey Year 1 (April 2020 - March 2021) (Official Statistics) Main Findings’, *Natural England*, 5 April 2023 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-data-and-publications-from-adults-survey-year-1-april-2020-march-2021-official-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-data-and-publications-from-adults-survey-year-1-april-2020-march-2021-official-statistics-main-finding>> [accessed 16 October 2024].

<sup>20</sup> ‘Improving Access to Green Space: A New Review for 2020’, *Public Health England*, 2020 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904439/Improving\\_access\\_to\\_greenpace\\_2020\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenpace_2020_review.pdf)> [accessed 22 May 2024].

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Most Popular Activities, Q3’ *You Gov UK*, 2024 <<https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/society/popularity/activities/all>> [accessed 16 October 2024]; Clare, *The Mores*, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The People and Nature Survey’, *Natural England*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

access to good quality green space.<sup>24</sup> A UK Government study found those living with disabilities or limiting illnesses were twice as likely to have spent no time in green spaces in the previous year than the rest of the population.<sup>25</sup> Even for those who do not suffer from these markers of inequality, ‘paths to freedom’ can be few and far between, with only 8% of England being truly open for the general public to access.<sup>26</sup> Common lands, as one of the few areas in England where the public can genuinely enjoy a ‘right to roam’, albeit within certain strictures, are the exception to this default of exclusion.<sup>27</sup> Their distribution is, however, haphazard, bearing more relation to medieval land uses than current population densities or requirements. Of John Clare’s native Northamptonshire’s 236,000 hectares, for example, its rapidly growing population of 426,000 people have full access to just thirty-three hectares, or one for every 13,000 people.<sup>28</sup>

Free-living other-than-humans are similarly restricted and constrained. A government ambition to protect 30% of land in England ‘for nature’ assumes that National Parks and Landscapes inherently support nature when the opposite is often the case.<sup>29</sup> The ambition also relies heavily on the somewhat meagre 8% of land that has ‘protected for nature’ status being well-managed and in good health, which often it is

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<sup>24</sup> ‘England’s Green Space Gap’, *Friends of the Earth*, 2020 <[https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/Green\\_space\\_gap\\_full\\_report\\_1.pdf](https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/Green_space_gap_full_report_1.pdf)> [accessed 16 October 2024], p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Tom Breen and others, ‘Whose Right to Roam? Contesting Access to the English Countryside’, *The Journal of Transport History*, 44.2 (2023), pp. 276-307 (p. 297).

<sup>26</sup> Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass* (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Rights of Way and Accessing Land’, *HM Gov*, n.d <<https://www.gov.uk/right-of-way-open-access-land/use-your-right-to-roam>> [accessed 7 November 2024].

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Parrott and Jeremy Doe, *Gloucestershire Commons: Their History, Wildlife and Future* (The Gloucestershire Trust for Nature Conservation, 1989), p. 4; ‘Northamptonshire Population Grows by 13.5% Shows Census’, *BBC News*, 29 June 2022 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-61984688>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

<sup>29</sup> ‘UK Government Announces Commitment to 30% of Land for Nature by 2030 - The Wildlife Trusts Respond’, *The Wildlife Trusts*, 2020 <<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/uk-government-announces-commitment-30-land-nature-2030-wildlife-trusts-respond>> [accessed 16 October 2024].

not.<sup>30</sup> Biodiversity-rich lands also frequently coincide with those the general public can openly access. For example, 87% of Gloucestershire's open access lands are classified as important for biodiversity, and 29% of the county's SSSIs are on commons, despite only accounting for 1% of the land area.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, the demands of humans to access land for recreational use and the reliance of other species on these same lands for their very survival can cause conflict. If current trends in species decline are anything to go by, the designation of limited lands for conservation purposes is proving ineffective. The growing need for humans to access the same limited lands will surely not help reverse this decline. An inherent dichotomy therefore exists between encouraging greater human use of shared outdoor spaces to counter species isolation and making more room for other-than-humans to survive, or better yet, thrive. At the sharp end of this dichotomy are the relatively few areas of land that can be easily and freely accessed by the public. Alternatives are urgently needed. This thesis will attempt to negotiate between enabling multi-species encounters, and the risks this might pose to other-than-human flourishing.

Understanding good models of commons management, through exploration of historical and contemporary stories of the commons, may point us in the direction of ways to overcome this dichotomy. Management does not, however, operate within a social or cultural vacuum. Human attitudes to common lands, their use, and their management are socially and culturally constructed, sitting at the intersection of shared and individual place memory and attachment. Understanding the roots and branches of these constructions and subjecting them to careful and considered analysis

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<sup>30</sup> 'Extent and Condition of Protected Areas', *HM Gov*, 2024  
<<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/1-extent-and-condition-of-protected-areas--2>> [accessed 16 October 2024]; 'UK Government Announces Commitment to 30% of Land for Nature by 2030', *The Wildlife Trusts*.

<sup>31</sup> Parrott and Doe, *Gloucestershire Commons*, p. 28.

can inform how they might contribute towards improved and sustainable cross-species relations. Via this understanding, I will consider how encouraging greater multi-species contact, based on the model of English common land, can foster opportunities for improved inter-species relations. It is also necessary, however, to scratch beneath the surface of social constructions to understand deeper engagements between individuals, groups, and places. Deep-seated and enduring love, care, and advocacy for land and other species are located in shared cultural memory, combined with the accretions that make up individual place attachment. The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews I present in this thesis will explore different types and layers of interactions between humans and other species on the Common. It will also examine how individuals with differing interests and priorities bargain with themselves and others over their use and care of the land. By speaking with people whose relations with the Common are of vastly differing vintages, I cut a cross-section through the sediments that make up place attachments here and explore the pros and cons of invoking such ecologies of place to encourage wider love, care, and advocacy for multi-species commons communities.

Finally, as we struggle to envisage better and more equitable tomorrows, the example of surviving commons can be a spark that ignites imaginings to take us past fear and onward to a sustainable future. Telling their stories can give us hope for the possibility of creating and living in a 'good neighbourhood' in a 'good' Anthropocene. To enable this, I ask how a 'good neighbourhood' might be revitalised, renewed and extended beyond the human. This revitalisation and extension may require extensive re-imaginings that prompt a determination to convert emotive responses or abstract ideas of kinship and equity into practical action and acts of self-regulation. I will examine the role that different methods of multi-disciplinary engagement might play in

this conversion. The examples I present of applied Environmental Humanities projects explore these methods of encouraging a deeper and more active engagement across the species divide. These activities were informed and shaped by the experiences and knowledge I gained from my research and professional practice up to the point they were inceptioned. In this way, they provide an example of evolving multi-species co-creation on which I will reflect via the presentation of my auto-ethnographic elements. In these, I examine how multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by the Environmental Humanities, can be deployed to enable imaginings and narratives that extend the model of 'good neighbourhood' more widely.

Following this introduction, in Chapter 2 I delve deeper into the areas outlined above. I explore the current literature concerning the commons and their historiography, cross-species relations, dichotomies between encouraging access and respecting the space of others, ecologies of place, and the role of narrative and storytelling in restoring human/other-than-human relations. The literature review also identifies gaps and outlines how this thesis plans to address these.

In Chapter 3 I explain my ontological and epistemological positions and the theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. I also explore theories relating to common pool resource management in its wider context. The chapter explains in detail the research methods I have employed, including historic inquiries, interviews and discourse analysis, conservation biology, and auto-ethnography. This chapter reflects the breadth of methods used, showing how and why each is appropriate and relevant for supporting the study's overall aims.

Chapter 4, 'Our Common Home' examines how historical and contemporary stories of the commons might inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species sharing, reciprocity, and kinship. It begins by introducing an

environmental history of Rodborough, which situates human commoners in their wider multi-species, deep-time contexts. I then briefly explain what English common land is, and how it is represented in the context of this thesis. After explaining the documented roots of Rodborough's common land management system from the medieval period, I look at how management has evolved through the centuries, analysing its congruence with the common pool resource principles of Elinor Ostrom. This leads to a critique of centralised versus localised management and control. I then share the thoughts of current-day commoners on challenges the Common faces, via presentation and analysis of the theme *What's YOUR Problem?* This is followed by the theme *Your Common Needs YOU!* which shares interviewees' thoughts on who, or what, is responsible for caring for the Common. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how and why Rodborough Common has survived as a communal resource when so many other commons have been lost.

In Chapter 5, 'Common Contact Zones', I investigate how encouraging greater multi-species contact, based on the model of English common land, might foster opportunities for improved inter-species relations. I begin by expanding on the health of the UK's biodiversity, suggesting causes for its rapid decline, and examining the role of common land in conservation. This section also outlines the primary environmental and agricultural policies and legislation governing these aspects of the English countryside. The chapter then explores the current state of land access rights in England, presenting a timeline of general access rights, before exploring the historical roots of exclusion from the land. This leads to a discussion of the primary arguments for and against restoring greater human access to the land. The perception and understanding of conflicts between the wants of human recreational users and the needs of other-than-humans are then examined through the presentation of interview

themes *Common Contact Zones*, and *For Everyone, For Ever*. *Common Contact Zones* discusses the opportunities that access to land like Rodborough Common can afford for multi-species flourishing. From the National Trust's strapline, *For Everyone, For Ever* weighs the importance of open access to humans against the potential damage this might cause to place and other species, sharing and analysing participants' thoughts on whether an access/conservation dichotomy exists and, if it does, how it might be overcome. It then considers the impact of current access arrangements and the construction of the rural idyll on today's rural dwellers.

Chapter 6, 'Common Ecologies of Place', asks what role the ecologies of place evidenced on English common land might play in engendering love, care and advocacy for multi-species commons communities. The chapter is concerned with the cultural implications of commodification of the countryside and the default of exclusion, particularly how social constructs and personal experiences of spaces impact the day-to-day lives of those who live near, work on, or visit Rodborough Common. I begin this chapter by exploring the roots of images and perceptions of the countryside in popular culture, recognising the importance of these in modern-day attitudes to rural 'others'. The contrast between reality and perception is then demonstrated via the presentation of the theme *England's Green and Pleasant Land?* This presents examples of 'othering' in interviews and juxtaposes them against romantic or nostalgic descriptions of the Common. I follow this by exploring participants' feelings of personal ownership and their understanding of what common land is via the theme *Oi! Gerroff my Land!*, asking whether these result in a desire to exclude others. The theme *Big Yellow Taxi* follows, analysing interviewees' expressions of fear, grief, and loss relating to community, way of life, and other species. Finally, the theme *Living in Good Neighbourhood* considers the impact of the Common on the construction of local identities, community and kinship,

before concluding on the specific role of common land ecologies of place in overcoming human/other-than-human fragmentation.

The last of my research findings are presented in Chapter 7, 'Storying the Commons' which demonstrates how multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by the Environmental Humanities, can be deployed to enable imaginings and narratives that revive and extend the English common land notion of 'good neighbourhood'. The chapter begins by providing examples of different methods of engaging humans with the other-than-human world, before examining the implementation of some of these methods through the first of my examples of applied Environmental Humanities research; the Landscapes of the Lark festival. I go on to compare and contrast this project with my experiences of running Storying the Commons events in two differing academic settings, analysing what worked well and what did not and suggesting lessons that can be taken from these projects. I then use the findings from these projects, alongside my research for this thesis, to examine the roots of cultural ecoliteracy. This leads to a reflection on the manifestations and root causes of eco-anxiety which informs how expanding eco-literacy can be de-risked. Recognising the dynamic and interactive role of researcher and researched, I then examine my own changing relationship with the Common through the presentation of a brief auto-ethnography, drawing lessons from this about ways to nurture multi-species relationships. The chapter concludes by discussing the merits and possibilities for bringing the spirit of the commons into wider spaces, the impact of doing so, and ways this impact might be measured.

The thesis concludes by summarising my main findings in respect of the questions posed in this introduction, outlining the thesis' contribution to knowledge in the field of the Environmental Humanities. I then summarise how my research has answered the major research question of how the model of English common land can

inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships. Finally, I suggest areas for further study.

To conclude this introduction, a note on my positionality. I am an enthusiastic proponent of the Common and its multi-species lives. My professional work and studies have provided a wonderful opportunity to carry out and test applied Environmental Humanities and conservation projects on Rodborough Common. These experiences form the backbone of this thesis. Whilst my primary aim is to offer an example of the rigorous, contextualised research required of Environmental Humanities scholars in our current age of environmental crisis, the project has also been a labour of love. My relationship with the Common naturally evolved as I traveled from childhood (Fig. 1.3) to adulthood, deepening and expanding through my experiences of completing this project. This relationship is, therefore, present in the lens through which I both see and present my findings. My position as a scholar, resident, volunteer, professional, and recreational user makes me a subject of this research as well as its presenter. I hope this is an enriching element that contributes towards a co-created, contextualised, and authentic experience for the reader.



Figure 1.3: The researcher and her brother during a trip to Rodborough Common, New Year's Day, 1987  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1: Becoming Good Neighbours?

As I began to outline in the introduction to this thesis, Earth's current-day inhabitants live in a time of ecological upheaval. The human-caused climate crisis, widespread destruction of habitats, the world's sixth mass extinction, and increasingly extreme weather events are just a few headline-grabbing examples of environmental breakdown. Around the world, humans and other species are being displaced from their homes, denied their cultural identity, and forced to face an uncertain future. Natural scientists and others have warned of the prospect of environmental catastrophe for decades, sounding an ever-louder alarm about the planet's disastrous trajectory.<sup>32</sup> Despite increasingly urgent calls for action, the situation worsens, with many humans seemingly unable, or unwilling, to make the wide-ranging changes necessary to avoid further catastrophe.<sup>33</sup>

There are many scientific explanations for this ecological upheaval, including the widespread adoption of fossil fuels from the nineteenth century onwards and the use of artificial fertilisers, pesticides, and fungicides in modern industrialised agriculture. The philosophical roots of worsening human/other-than-human relations can be traced from the sixteenth century, as societal and ecological norms shifted, particularly in the Global North.<sup>34</sup> From the eighteenth century, philosophers such as

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<sup>32</sup> 'Climate Change 2023, Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers', *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2023  
<[https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_SYR\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf)> [accessed 28 May 2024].

<sup>33</sup> Fiona Harvey, 'IPCC Report: 'Now or Never' if World is to Stave Off Climate Disaster', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/apr/04/ipcc-report-now-or-never-if-world-stave-off-climate-disaster>> [accessed 2 August 2022].

<sup>34</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (University of California Press, 2008), pp. 46-49.

Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke developed theories regarding individuals and the state that have become ingrained in modern discourse.<sup>35</sup> These evolved into what Bollier and Helfrich term the modern 'Onto Story' that positions humans 'as the primary agents of a world filled with inert objects that have fixed, essential qualities'.<sup>36</sup> In this ontology we find that humans are the only ones blessed with both mind and matter, gifting them superiority over the rest of the planet, and importantly, separating them from it; an idea that arguably has its roots in far older philosophies.<sup>37</sup> The mind-body dualism, most famously espoused by Descartes, can 'when accompanied by certain other ontological and ethical assumptions [...] encourage the view that nature is merely so much stuff to be felled, burned, mined, hunted, skinned and eaten'.<sup>38</sup>

The timing of these ideas coincided with technological and colonial projects that put them into practice. The complex interweaving of social, economic, technological, and philosophical discourse and development sees each neatly acting as an echo chamber for the others. As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, dualism and rationalism philosophies, along with the wider economic and social imperatives on which they were based, enabled greater profits and productivity at the expense of both people and planet. The use of coal, for example, allowed labour, resources, and land to be enslaved in the interest of increased productivity and the creation of surplus profit.<sup>39</sup> Coal use allowed natural factors such as weather, seasons, and geography, previously vital for food and materials production, to be ignored and overridden, obscuring human

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<sup>35</sup> David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2019), p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Simon P. James, *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2015), p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> James, *Environmental Philosophy*, p. 116.

<sup>39</sup> Andreas Malm, 'The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry', *Historical Materialism*, 21.1 (2013), pp. 15-68 (p. 55).

dependency on other-than-human factors.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, human lives became artificially and arbitrarily time-boxed, in what Malm calls an 'antithetical temporality', operating in abstract space and time, dictated purely on human terms, no longer in tune with rhythms of the other-than-human world.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside these changes, the countryside was being depopulated by increasing numbers of state-enabled acts of enclosure that put any hope of self-sufficiency beyond the reach of many.<sup>42</sup> Hitherto quasi-independent rural dwellers had little choice but to become waged labourers, either in the farms that replaced their communal lands or in the factories of the burgeoning cities.<sup>43</sup> During this time, English rural society shifted from one that relied on neighbourly cooperation for survival to an economy focused on individualism, production, and profit.<sup>44</sup> The previously self-evident understanding that human flourishing is intrinsically linked with the wellbeing of the rest of the earth was occluded, creating a 'primordial rift' between humans and others.<sup>45</sup> Instead, humans began to operate in abstract temporal and corporeal spaces; what Castree terms the "distinctive *spatio-temporality*' of the capitalist mode of production'.<sup>46</sup>

This primordial rift severed ancestral links to the soil previously passed between generations.<sup>47</sup> For those thus severed from the soil, it became easy to forget from whence their means of bodily sustenance came. With that severing came a

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<sup>40</sup> Malm, 'The Origins of Fossil Capital', p. 55.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>42</sup> Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 57.

<sup>43</sup> Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women', *Journal of Economic History*, 51.1 (1990), pp. 17-42 (p. 18).

<sup>44</sup> Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500 - 1850* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> Malm, 'The Origins of Fossil Capital', p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Noel Castree, 'The Spatio-Temporality of Capitalism', *Time and Society*, 18.1 (2009), pp. 26-61 (p. 27), in Malm, 'The Origins of Fossil Capital', p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer: 1760 - 1832: A Study of England Before the Reform Bill* (Nonsuch, 2005), p. 91.

cessation of care, the end of multi-species kinship, and the marginalisation of communality.<sup>48</sup> Communal resources were privatised and relations of sharing and reciprocity, inter- and intra-species, became rarer.<sup>49</sup> Common resources were subsumed by the “impersonal, individualistic, transactional-based ethic of the market economy”.<sup>50</sup> The relative freedom enabled by access to the commons was largely removed, in what Thompson calls ‘a plain enough case of class robbery’; a ‘rupture of the traditional integument of village custom and of right’.<sup>51</sup> The enclosure acts of the long nineteenth century finalised the commodification of land, people, and other-than-humans that had begun in the earlier Tudor period (1485-1603 CE), sounding the death knell for mutually respectful inter- and intra-species relations.<sup>52</sup>

As this background shows, the consequences of past events, such as the enclosure of the English commons, are never left fully in the past, instead continuing to influence the present in practical, cultural, and philosophical ways. The exploration of the past, and its consequences for the present and future of common lands, and for inter-species relations more widely, forms the basis of this thesis. In this chapter, I will explore the literature in four main areas, which align broadly with the chapters of this thesis. In Section 2.2, ‘Our Common Home’, which supports Chapter 4, I examine literature relating to historical and contemporary stories of the commons. I look at the differing lenses that can be used to view the commons and enclosure by introducing the main historical schools of thought. I will also outline the sources available as we

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<sup>48</sup> J.M Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Changes in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 325-327.

<sup>49</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 147.

<sup>50</sup> David Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (New Society, 2014), p. 79 in Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character and the Commons* (Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1979), p. 237; Ibid. p. 238.

<sup>52</sup> Trevor Wild, *Village England: A Social History of the Countryside* (I.B Tauris & Co, 2004), p. 9.

endeavour to tell these stories. Finally, this section will explore who or what is included, and crucially, excluded, from current studies of the commons.

In support of Chapter 5, in Section 2.3, 'Common Contact Zones', I explore literature relating to the multi-species community of commoners. This section begins by considering the roots of human species isolation and other-than-human exploitation, before briefly discussing gaps in some approaches to biodiversity conservation. I then consider how we can translate the language of other-than-humans into 'terms that are intelligible within the scope of our human language'.<sup>53</sup> I discuss literature that seeks to expand the notion of the self, take issue with the idea of the 'other', and examine work within the Environmental Humanities seeking to expand opportunities for cross-species understanding and communication. Recognising the inherent risks to habitats and biodiversity when physical contact and proximity between humans and other species expand, I outline current debates on land access in England, including who or what is excluded from these.

Section 2.4, 'Common Ecologies of Place', lays the foundations for Chapter 6, which examines the potential of place to heal inter- and intra-species relations. It presents the current debates around the role of place, cultural constructions of the rural, and nostalgia in addressing environmental harm. It examines place, landscape, and nostalgia, relating these to common land and inter- and intra-species relations.

Relating to Chapter 7, in Section 2.5, 'Storying the Commons', I explore literature relating to the role of indirect and direct encounters in forging deeper and more meaningful relations between humans and our 'planetary partners'.<sup>54</sup> This section

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Marder, 'To Hear Plants Speak', in *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, ed. by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Viera (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 103-125 (p. 103).

<sup>54</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), p. 142.

includes discussions of the role of education, emotion, and multi-disciplinary engagement methods in improving inter-species relations. It also outlines the potential pitfalls of increasing awareness of ecological problems and discusses the importance of the type and quality of environmental encounters. Finally, it examines the role of storytelling, imagination, and narrative in enlivening environmental consciousness.

## **2.2: Our Common Home: Historical and Contemporary Stories of the Commons**

The role of the commons in addressing ecological breakdown is a subject that finds resonance in the writing of scholars such as Shiva, Federici, Wall, and Linebaugh.<sup>55</sup> They suggest that one way of reinstating and re-enchanting inter- and intra-species relations in mindful and equitable ways is to revitalise and renew the commons.<sup>56</sup> By moving away from the imperative of commodification and individualism towards one of equitable sharing, using the traditional model of the commons as a reference point, it is hoped we can reclaim a fairer present and future. Wall argues that commons provide a logical alternative to exploitative practices, as all commoners are personally invested in the sustainable use of resources.<sup>57</sup> In contrast with current systems that practice damaging environmental exploitation, ‘the logic of the commons is that survival and prosperity require respect for ecological norms’.<sup>58</sup> Such views contradict Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’, which claims communal resources managed within a rational system will inevitably fall victim to overexploitation and collapse due to a

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<sup>55</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Reclaiming the Commons: Biodiversity, Indigenous Knowledge, and the Rights of Mother Earth* (Synergetic Press, 2020); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (PM Press, 2019); Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict and Ecology* (MIT Press, 2014); Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*.

<sup>56</sup> Shiva, *Reclaiming the Commons*; Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*; Wall, *The Commons in History*; Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*.

<sup>57</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

natural inclination to maximise individual benefit and profit.<sup>59</sup> As numerous case studies have shown, however, the assumption that individual greed is the overriding human imperative is not borne out by reality.<sup>60</sup>

This is not, however, to romanticise the commons as a prelapsarian ideal, an illusion of a golden age.<sup>61</sup> Daniels, for example, reminds us that commons sometimes show how ‘competing values but also entrenched interests’ can be the spark that ignite conflict, particularly where management is absent or governance is unjustly distributed.<sup>62</sup> Most notably, Elinor Ostrom’s case studies showed commons can be an inherently sustainable model, but only when eight key management principles are in place (Fig. 2.2.1). When managed using these principles, as Ostrom showed in her Nobel Prize-winning work, common pool resources (CPRs) can be highly sustainable and successful.<sup>63</sup> Via their success, CPRs demonstrate that mutual flourishing in a carefully managed, scalable communal model is not just possible, but desirable. I will expand on the theories underlying common pool resource management in Section 3.2 and compare Rodborough’s past and present management in the context of these theories in Section 4.4.

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<sup>59</sup> Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science*, 162.3859 (1968), pp. 1243 - 1248.

<sup>60</sup> Wade Rowland, ‘Corporate Social Responsibility and Garrett Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ as Myth and Reality’, *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 35 (2009), pp. 109-116 (pp. 111-112).

<sup>61</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 135.

<sup>62</sup> Brigham Daniels, ‘Commons Storytelling: Tragedies, Comedies, and Tragicomedies’ in *Routledge Handbook of the Study of the Commons*, ed. by Blake Hudson, Jonathan Rosenblum and Dan Cole, (Routledge, 2019), pp. 91-105 (p. 102).

<sup>63</sup> Hyun Choe and Sun-Jin Yun, ‘Revisiting the Concept of Common Pool Resources: Beyond Ostrom’, *Development and Society*, 46.1 (2017), pp. 113-129 (p. 114).

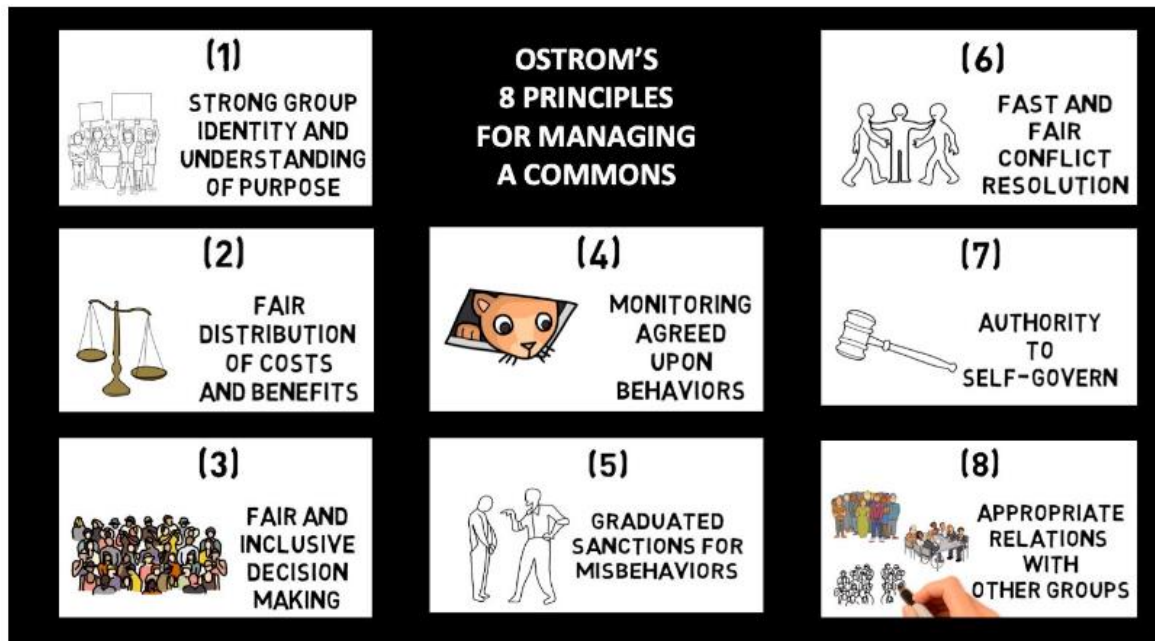


Figure 2.2.1: Ostrom's eight principles of good commons management  
Source: Kate Raworth on X, 26 October 2019. Reproduced under X's Fair Use Policy

Those seeking to use the commons as a model of equitable sustainability should, however, do so with caution. Shiva has written and campaigned extensively regarding the ongoing acquisition of 'the basic ingredients of life' and common resources in the developing world by capitalist and corporate monopolies; just one example of the ways that common resources can be misappropriated.<sup>64</sup> A lack of centralised control of commons can also make them particularly appealing to free-market libertarians.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting this, Bollier and Weston state that the current debate on commons can become entrenched in neo-liberal hegemonies 'characterized by an ideological commitment to free trade, deregulation, privatization, and reducing democratic oversight of economic activity', which, as Er points out, leaves them 'worryingly tethered to the interests of its [capital] generation'.<sup>66</sup> Federici agrees the

<sup>64</sup> Lynette J. Dumble, 'Vandana Shiva', in *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, ed. by Joy A. Palmer (Routledge, 2001), pp. 313-320 (p. 318).

<sup>65</sup> Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology, Paperback Edition* (MIT Press, 2017), p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> David Bollier and Burns Weston, 'Advancing Ecological Stewardship via the Commons and Human Rights' in *Governing for Sustainability*, ed. by Lisa Mastny (Worldwide Institute, 2014), pp. 91-104 (p. 91);

current discourse on commons is in danger of making them vulnerable to manipulation by 'a crisis-ridden capitalist class [seeking] to revive itself, posturing, for instance, as the environmental guardian of the planet'.<sup>67</sup> By offering an alternative to individualism, however, commons are also favoured by some socialists who may view them as 'functionally, democratically, and morally superior to that [system] provided by market capitalism'.<sup>68</sup> So it would seem that commons are appealing to those at opposing points on the political compass; socialists and libertarians, radicals and conservatives, who may agree on little else. This universal interest can then make commons vulnerable to intense politicisation.<sup>69</sup> This risk creates a need for careful, apolitical, and forensic examinations of commons; a necessity to seek out commons as entities their own right and carefully tell their stories to inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships.

Furthermore, when considering how historical and contemporary stories of the commons might be used to inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species reciprocity and kinship, we must avoid viewing them through rose-tinted glasses. Stories must be located within careful examinations of past and present commons. Wall suggests three lenses through which such examinations might take place: the Marxist approach that deals with power and conflict; Ostrom's study of functional management; or an anthropological view that examines cultural aspects.<sup>70</sup> Rather than taking a narrow hermeneutic viewpoint, however, Wall recommends a polycentric historiographical approach (i.e., one with multiple foci and no dominant centre) that

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Yanbing Er, 'A Commons Beyond the Human', *Environmental Humanities*, 15.2 (2023), pp. 162-180 (p.167).

<sup>67</sup> Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> Hendrik Wagenaar and Koen Bartels, 'Introduction: Advancing the Commonsverse: The Political Economy of the Commons' *International Journal of the Commons*, 18.1 (2024), pp. 337-350 (p. 338).

<sup>69</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 85; *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

incorporates all three.<sup>71</sup> Wagenaar and Bartels reflect this call for a polycentric approach when reviewing Ostrom's case studies which, they claim, are incomplete as they do not present commons relationally or seek to understand their meaning to those involved with them.<sup>72</sup> Without this context, such case studies are limited in their ability to provide a challenge or viable alternative to capitalist hegemonic norms.<sup>73</sup> Responding to Wall's recommendation, and the gaps in Ostrom's approach, as perceived by Wagenaar and Bartels, this thesis examines aspects of power, conflict, management, culture, and customs in the context of Rodborough Common.<sup>74</sup> It also responds to the need for hyper-local investigations, recognising that each common is unique within its broader contexts.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, it takes a biocultural approach that acknowledges and values the 'knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities'.<sup>76</sup> In this thesis I use the term 'biocultural' to encompass the 'cultural values and practices of communities and human populations in transformed rural areas and urban landscapes', such as Rodborough Common.<sup>77</sup> This moves beyond the anthropological definition of bioculturalism that specifically encompasses the diversity of indigenous worldviews.<sup>78</sup> In this thesis I attempt to push this further by taking it beyond a human-centric focus to encompass the contribution of other-than-humans to the cultural evolution of spaces, habitats and places. For example, in Chapter 4 I share

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<sup>71</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 106.

<sup>72</sup> Wagenaar and Bartels, Introduction: Advancing the Commonsverse', p. 339.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>74</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 106; Wagenaar and Bartels, Introduction: Advancing the Commonsverse', p. 340.

<sup>75</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Bridgewater and Suraj Upadhaya, 'What is Biocultural Diversity and Why Does It Matter?', *The Conversation*, 15 February 2022 <<https://theconversation.com/what-is-biocultural-diversity-and-why-does-it-matter-168881>> [accessed 10 December 2024], para. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Jan Hanspach and others, 'Biocultural Approaches to Sustainability: A Systematic Review of the Scientific Literature', *People and Nature*, 2 (2020), pp. 643-659 (p. 644).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

stories of Rodborough's environmental history, power relations, inter- and intra-species conflicts, and functional management. Reference to its customs and culture, both human and non-human, are dealt with predominantly in Chapters 4 and 6. Chapters 4, 5, and 7 also share stories of the Common from wider multi-species perspectives.

The call for a polycentric approach to the study of the commons is supported by the diversity of historical presentations of the subject. Whether, for example, the enclosure of the commons is presented as necessary for the evolution of modern society, a crime perpetrated on the non-landowning rural population, or somewhere in between, is dependent on the narrative frame in which those histories were written.<sup>79</sup> In turn, the acceptance of these narratives varies according to the wider experience, context, and views of the reader. The varying popularity of different approaches to historical enquiry and whose voices are heard and represented are, however, not merely academic concerns. It has real-life implications for the present and future of commons, impacting shared cultural memory, and resultant attitudes and behaviours, as I will explore in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

These different narrative frames can be seen clearly through the various lenses found in primary and secondary historical sources on commons and enclosure. For example, historians such as Gonner, Mingay, and Chambers apply a primarily economic lens that views the commons as a failing, inefficient throwback, whose removal was necessary both to elevate the lives of the rural poor and to support the necessary development of agriculture.<sup>80</sup> Early 20th-century economic historian Gonner recognises the integral nature of common rights to the survival of the rural poor, whilst

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<sup>79</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 104.

<sup>80</sup> Edward Carter Kearsy Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (Macmillan, 1912); G.E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution* (A&C Black, 1977); J.D Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 5.3 (1953), pp. 319-343.

condemning them as a 'trespass and an encroachment', particularly where those rights were gained by custom rather than official tenancies.<sup>81</sup> He claims the 'advantages of inclosing [sic] wastes and commons are accepted as indubitable'.<sup>82</sup> He also repeats the assertions of the original agricultural 'improvers' that commons attracted criminality and idleness that created 'greater poverty and wretchedness'.<sup>83</sup> He is firmly convinced that without enclosure it would have been impossible to 'do with the land what the needs of a progressive population required'.<sup>84</sup> Chambers agrees, disputing the 'conventional picture of catastrophic change effected by enclosure' stating that it 'fails to accord with the facts'.<sup>85</sup> Again leaning heavily on the writing of contemporary authors who spoke in favour of enclosure, he repeats claims that stock raised on the commons was prone to disease and that losses were far less likely in enclosed areas.<sup>86</sup> Much like Gonner, he recognises the social cost of enclosure on some of the rural population but claims that commons were economically a 'thin and squalid curtain' that the rural poor were better off without.<sup>87</sup>

Historians who follow Marx's example, however, offer a significantly different perspective. The Hammonds, writing contemporaneously with Gonner, find the pre-enclosure village a place of relative economic independence and social mobility, governed by socially binding customs.<sup>88</sup> Enclosure was, they claim, led primarily by greed, a desire for economic progress, and a level of self-interest amply evidenced by the extravagant art and architecture commissioned by the ruling classes during the 18th

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<sup>81</sup> Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure*, p. 4; Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>85</sup> Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', p. 319.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>88</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p. 33.

and nineteenth centuries.<sup>89</sup> This period also saw the expansionist horrors of both the colonial period and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, whose ill-gotten gains also contributed to these ostentatious shows of wealth. These extravagances left, claim the Hammonds, ‘dim and meagre records of the disinherited peasants that are the shadow of its wealth’.<sup>90</sup> The invisibility of the harsh realities of post-enclosure rural life in the art of the period is reflected by Payne, who finds the majority of works perpetuate a rural myth that helps to ‘bolster the cultural hegemony of the class that owned, or had owned the land’.<sup>91</sup> Thompson agrees that claims of advantages to the poor were a smokescreen for the advancement of wealth and power.<sup>92</sup>

The choice of source materials accessed and presented is also impacted by the context and intent of historians. The voices of different commoners of all species can easily be overlooked by written historical sources that often reflect dominant discourses. Smith reminds us of Derrida’s view that written archives are the ‘locus of authority where the records are kept and the proclamations made’ by ‘those “accorded the hermeneutic right and competence” to interpret’.<sup>93</sup> Which sources are considered valid by historians then influences who or what is included in histories of the commons and enclosure. For Neeson and Humphries, for example, the assertion made by some that commons held little economic value was predicated on ignoring the value of reproductive and unwaged labours that are often missing from the written records.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p. 37; Ibid. p. 270.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>91</sup> Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England: 1780 - 1890* (Yale University Press, 1994), p. 42.

<sup>92</sup> E. P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1979), p. 237.

<sup>93</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’, translated by Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25.22 (1995), pp. 9–63 (pp. 9-10) in James L. Smith, ‘Anxieties of Access: Remembering as a Lake’, *Environmental Humanities*, 13.1 (2021), pp. 245-261, (p. 255).

<sup>94</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*; Jane Humphries, ‘Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women’, *Journal of Economic History*, 51.1 (1990), pp. 17-42.

Unrecorded reproductive and unwaged labour could be easily overlooked or dismissed as 'trifling' due to its absence from traditional archives.<sup>95</sup>

A more inclusive investigation using wider sources reveals, however, that the 'incidentals' gained from access to the commons were significant, in some cases representing the difference between life and death, particularly amongst children and the elderly.<sup>96</sup> Federici finds that women in particular, 'as the primary subjects of reproductive work [...] have depended on access to communal natural resources more than men and are most penalized by their privatization'.<sup>97</sup> As economies monetise, as they do when the commons are enclosed, the contribution and decision-making powers of women are denuded.<sup>98</sup> Linebaugh agrees that women, as the predominant agents of reproductive and unwaged labour, are directly related to the commons in a particular way and that 'the feminization of poverty [...] has become widespread precisely as the world's commons have been enclosed'.<sup>99</sup>

Linebaugh encourages us to take a view of history 'from the bottom up' to reveal stories that go beyond the obvious.<sup>100</sup> More poetically, he suggests examination of the 'cranny in the wall' to uncover 'the real history on the ground when the concrete is the enemy of the abstract'; in other words, paying attention to reading between the lines, to the lived experience of a far wider population of actors, and to alternative sources of archival material than might previously have been considered.<sup>101</sup> Responses to this call are reflected in the increasing acceptance of oral history as a valid source.

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<sup>95</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 315.

<sup>96</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 288; Humphries, 'Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women', pp. 25-29.

<sup>97</sup> Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, p. 107.

<sup>98</sup> Carolyn Merchant, 'Gender and Environmental History' in *Global Environmental History: A Reader*, ed. by J.R McNeill and Alan Roe (Routledge, 2013), pp. 82-87 (p. 83).

<sup>99</sup> Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, p. 41.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Linebaugh, 'Enclosures from the Bottom Up', *Radical History Review*, 108 (2010), pp. 11-27.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25; p. 26.

Oral histories not only capture the experiences of a wider range of players but are also accessible to a wider public. For example, initiatives such as the Chiltern Commons Project recorded the stories of a range of commoners in the interests of building connections between past, current, and future generations.<sup>102</sup> The usefulness of orally gathered vernacular knowledge of the land is also highlighted by the Ouse Project, which joined farmers and ecologists in planning and enacting habitat restoration.<sup>103</sup> The collation, analysis, and presentation of the oral histories of Rodborough's current-day commoners are intrinsic to this project and can be found in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Despite loosening the definition of 'valid sources' to accommodate sources such as oral history, the stories presented are still often anthropocentric. In his provocation on lake memory, Smith challenges us to see beyond singular, humanistic archives; to embrace multiple knowledges that allow us to view the 'fragile and multifaceted identity [that] emerges'.<sup>104</sup> By accepting different genres and sources of knowledge, he suggests that 'a more capacious composite vision of a place emerges'.<sup>105</sup> The call to consider the 'cranny in the wall' of enclosure and the commons to encompass those beyond the human is, however, still a work in progress.<sup>106</sup> Bollier and Helfrich, Lesjak, Ostrom, and Wall all draw a direct correlation between the enclosure of the commons and ecological damage.<sup>107</sup> These accounts still, however, exist largely in the

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<sup>102</sup> 'Chiltern Commons Project (2011-2015)' *Chilterns National Landscape*, 2011-2015 <<https://www.chilterns.org.uk/flagship-projects/past-projects/chiltern-commons-project/>> [accessed 21 November 2024].

<sup>103</sup> Andrew Holmes, 'The Ouse Project: A Case Study of Applied Oral History' in *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, ed. by Shelley Trower (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 127-148.

<sup>104</sup> James L. Smith, 'Anxieties of Access: Remembering as a Lake', *Environmental Humanities*, 13.1 (2021), pp. 245-261 (p. 255).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

<sup>106</sup> Linebaugh, 'Enclosures from the Bottom Up', pp. 25-26; Smith, 'Anxieties of Access', p. 245.

<sup>107</sup> Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive*, p. 111; Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, p. 26; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1; Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 100.

abstract, viewing enclosure as an all-encompassing ill that damages both human/other-than-human relations and the ecosystems upon which we collectively rely. Whilst this is undoubtedly the case, an examination of the impact on individual species, populations, habitats, or relations of reciprocity is still largely absent. For example, whilst Hoskins comments on the disappearance of heathland birds from large swathes of the countryside as a result of enclosure, acknowledging the benefit of enclosure hedgerows on other avians, he does so only briefly.<sup>108</sup> He also mentions the loss of shelter for mammals due to the destruction of commons, but only because it impacted blood sports such as fox hunting.<sup>109</sup> Otherwise, the specific impact of enclosure on individuals or populations of other-than-humans is not present in many sources.

Such abstractions and generalisations can create a view of a homogeneous other-than-human population that denies individual agency and species differences. Even recent and detailed case studies of English commons, such as those presented by Rodgers and others in 2016 and 2024, do not include any detailed stories of the relationship between specific commons and specific other-than-humans.<sup>110</sup> Nor do they attempt to view the commons from the perspective of other-than-humans. Given the relationship between post-enclosure agricultural practices and biodiversity loss in England, along with the strong correlation between commons and sites of high biodiversity value, this represents a gap in the literature concerning inter-species connectedness. By presenting stories of Rodborough's other-than-humans in Chapters 4 and 7, their reliance on common land for their continued survival in Chapter 5, and their important biocultural contribution to place in Chapter 6, I address this gap. As I detail in

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<sup>108</sup> W.G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Hodder & Staughton, 1988), p. 162.

<sup>109</sup> Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, p. 162.

<sup>110</sup> Christopher, P. Rodgers and others, *Contested Common Land: Environmental Governance Past and Present* (Earthscan, 2016); Christopher Rodgers and others, *Urban Commons: The Past, Present and Future of Green Spaces* (Routledge, 2024).

Chapter 3, 'Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods', by incorporating multi-disciplinarity, whilst seeking out and allowing for multiple sources of knowledge, this thesis also answers Smith's provocation to expand the definition of what constitutes an archive beyond the written and oral sources and, crucially, beyond the human.

### **2.3: Common Contact Zones: The Multi-Species Community of Commoners**

Whilst a study of the history of common land is illuminating for many reasons, the enclosure of the commons is not simply a story of injustice that resides in the past. As Wall reminds us, processes of enclosure are ongoing; a continuing cause of injustice and environmental degradation around the world.<sup>111</sup> The need for our studies to reach beyond the human is also clear. Through processes of enclosure and colonisation, we arrive in the twenty-first century with a society grounded in an 'Onto Story' of dualistic divisions and unequally distributed human superiority that continues to separate many humans from other species.<sup>112</sup> In this ontology, other-than-human animals are marginalised into products to be exploited or objects to be viewed.<sup>113</sup> Plumwood argues that such subjugation of non-human animals, based on their apparent intellectual and emotional inferiority to humans, is symptomatic of the binary divisions characterised by Cartesian dualistic hyper-separation.<sup>114</sup> Such human chauvinism leads to relationships of utility and inequality, where other-than-humans can be exploited for their 'usefulness, without requiring moral considerability'.<sup>115</sup> Celemajer terms this reduction of the other-than-human world to 'inert, unfeeling and unthinking matter' as

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<sup>111</sup> Wall, *The Commons in History*, p. 100.

<sup>112</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Routledge, 2012) p.153; Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive*, p. 34.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>114</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World', *Environmental Humanities*, 3 (2013), pp. 93-109 (p. 94).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

‘mechanomorphism’.<sup>116</sup> This reduction encourages and justifies the de-personing and exploitation of other species, leading to horrors such as the factory farming of ‘battery’ chickens or the creation of a 26-storey pig skyscraper with the ability to raise and slaughter one million pigs a year in conditions that are divorced from any kind of natural lifecycle.<sup>117</sup> Extreme and widening levels of human inequality may cause many to become complicit in this exploitation, via demands for cheaper goods produced without reference to their more-than-human cost. As widening inequalities locate more individuals further down the scale of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Fig. 2.3.1), care and concern for the ‘other’ of any species, becomes a ‘luxury’ some may feel they can ill afford.

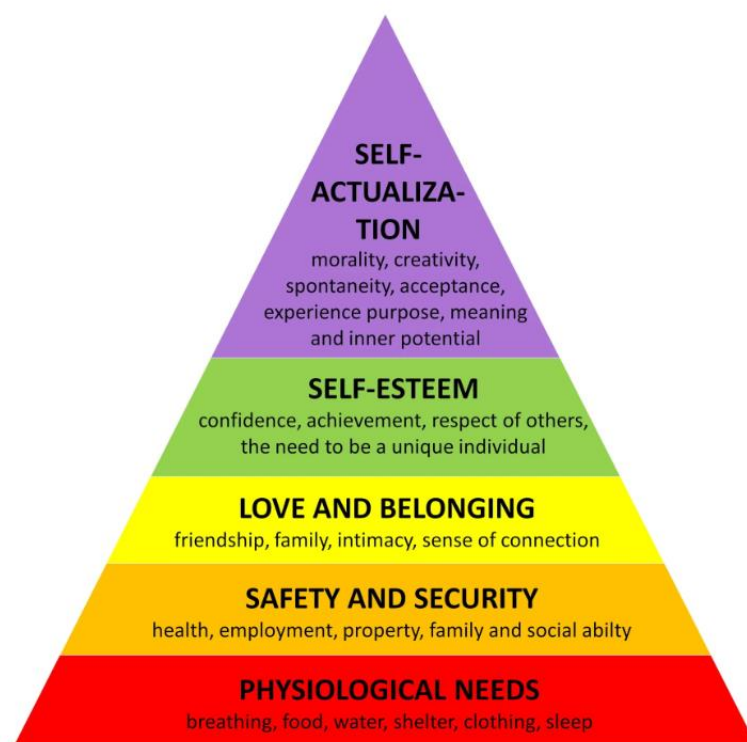


Figure 2.3.1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs  
Source: *Simply Psychology* © Saul McLeod. Reproduced with permission

<sup>116</sup> Danielle Celemajer and others, 'Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics', *Trajectories in Environmental Politics*, 20.1-2 (2022), pp. 1-36 (p. 17).

<sup>117</sup> 'China's 26-Storey Pig Skyscraper Ready to Slaughter 1 Million Pigs a Year', *The Guardian*, 25 November 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/25/chinas-26-storey-pig-skyscraper-ready-to-produce-1-million-pigs-a-year>> [accessed 21 March 2024].

Just as human separation from other species must arguably be overcome in the interest of more positive shared futures, the barriers between academic disciplines must also be blurred. Evidence of the importance of polycentric, biocultural, inter-disciplinary approaches to studies of the commons and multi-species relations is highlighted by a continuing loss of biodiverse lives, despite the efforts of conservation biologists who have been in the vanguard of efforts to reverse the decline.<sup>118</sup> These efforts have largely been firmly rooted in the natural sciences.<sup>119</sup> Whilst they have, in many cases, been successful in highlighting the range and rate of biodiversity loss, and at recovering some habitats and species, the solutions proposed have not always been successful.<sup>120</sup> As a result, species decline continues at an accelerating and alarming rate. As human resource demands continue to increase, areas protected for biodiverse lives are often at the forefront of pressures to yield to human wants and needs.<sup>121</sup> Increasing the volume of protected areas is not, however, enough to ensure that biodiversity loss is halted, let alone reversed.<sup>122</sup> Conservation biologists have been accused by some of ‘a collective form of displacement activity, advocating irrelevant responses to what on the face of it seem like the incompatible goals of protecting biodiversity and supporting human development’.<sup>123</sup> Much conservation biology that ‘tended to overlook the complex social, economic and political context within which conservation actions take place’ has not been able to provide fit-for-purpose solutions.<sup>124</sup> The need for a more holistic approach to conservation has been recognised at an international level by, for

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<sup>118</sup> Chris Margules and others, ‘Transdisciplinary Science for Improved Conservation Outcomes’, *Environmental Conservation*, 47 (2020), pp. 1-10, (p. 1), doi: 10.1017/S0376892920000338.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Samuel Hoffmann, ‘Challenges and Opportunities of Area-Based Conservation in Reaching Biodiversity and Sustainability Goals’, *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 31 (2022), pp. 325-352 (p. 328).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>123</sup> Margules and others, ‘Transdisciplinary Science for Improved Conservation Outcomes’, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

example, the 2020 Convention on Biodiversity Target 11, which explicitly calls for equitable management of biodiversity-protected areas.<sup>125</sup> Despite this, there can still be a gap between the perception of conservationists, who believe they are managing areas equitably, and local populations, who feel they experience a loss of rights and are excluded from decision-making when protected areas are designated.<sup>126</sup>

Once again we see that successful commons, rooted in vernacular knowledge, based on traditions of inclusive decision-making and equitable management, have much wisdom to share with us. They make the seemingly 'incompatible goals of protecting biodiversity and supporting human development' congenial via the promotion of mutually beneficial sustainable practices.<sup>127</sup> A recognition of this justifies a more holistic approach to conservation, a biocultural management that recognises the inherent connections between people and places, incorporating these into bottom-up planning and implementation.<sup>128</sup> Throughout, this thesis searches for the wisdom of the commons by combining the views of land managers, conservationists, and human commons visitors with ecological investigations. For example, Chapter 5 discusses Rodborough's conservation efforts from a biocultural perspective, exploring social and legal frameworks and presenting evidence from various stakeholders about the risks and opportunities of interacting with other species in largely unmediated settings.

If we are to take a fully multi-species biocultural approach, we must also consider how we might learn to recognise and represent the voices of other-than-

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<sup>125</sup> 'Aichi Biodiversity Targets', *Convention on Biological Diversity*, 2020 <<https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets>> [accessed 22 November 2024].

<sup>126</sup> Sean L. Maxwell and others, 'Area-Based Conservation in the Twenty-First Century', *Nature*, 586 (2020), pp. 217 - 227 (p. 222).

<sup>127</sup> Margules and others, 'Transdisciplinary Science for Improved Conservation Outcomes', p. 224.

<sup>128</sup> Hoffmann, 'Challenges and Opportunities of Area-Based Conservation in Reaching Biodiversity and Sustainability Goals', p. 333.

humans. There are, however, several challenges to be aware of in this undertaking. For example, who becomes 'qualified' to 'speak' on behalf of other-than-humans? How can we avoid the focus always becoming anthropocentric? Can the trap of anthropomorphism, which smooths difference and sees everything via human characteristics, be avoided? To address these challenges, it is necessary to acknowledge and accept the many forms of non-human communication, even those that seem alien or that differ vastly from our own. There is constant dialogue, conscious or otherwise, between humans, other-than-humans, land, and elements, which many human societies have ignored to the detriment of all species.<sup>129</sup>

Acknowledgment and acceptance of the different forms of other-than-human communication can come from what *Animals in the Room* describe as 'listening and close contact' with non-human animals, who are then allowed space to co-create their voice via testimony recorded as images, audio files, or videos.<sup>130</sup> Brady agrees that anthropomorphism can be avoided by being 'carefully aware of the similarities and differences' between humans and others, but adds that we must be 'watchful of projection and misattributions'.<sup>131</sup> Er advises us to avoid the trap of homogeneity when expanding our definitions of kin, whether to humans or other species, instead encouraging us to recognize and celebrate differences.<sup>132</sup> Plumwood calls for a process of intentional recognition of other species that 'allows us to re-animate nature both as an agent in our joint undertakings and as a potentially communicative other'.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Languages of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 39.

<sup>130</sup> 'What is Animals in the Room?', *Animals in the Room*, 2024 <<https://animalsintheroom.org/>> [accessed 28 November 2024] para. 7.

<sup>131</sup> Emily Brady, 'Aesthetic Value and Wild Animals', in *Environmental Aesthetics: Crossing Divides and Breaking Ground*, ed. by Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz (Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 188-200 (p. 199).

<sup>132</sup> Er, 'A Commons Beyond the Human', p. 172.

<sup>133</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), p. 177.

Scientific enquiry can complement this recognition, but only after acknowledging and accepting the possibility of the unknown, and rescinding the need for empirical proof of agency and ‘intelligence’ that is measured against human benchmarks.<sup>134</sup> This acknowledgment can allow individuals to be ‘sympathetic and attuned observers capable of open interaction, who respect non-humans as agents and choosers’.<sup>135</sup>

To fully recognise, acknowledge, and embrace the voice and agency of other-than-humans, we must also be cautious when using the word ‘other’ to describe our fellow beings. The names and terms we use matter, having a knock-on impact on attitudes and behaviours.<sup>136</sup> The ‘other’ can, when used unconsciously, be an unhelpful construct with connotations of exclusion, opposition, arbitrary ranking, and separation. Strictly imposed species boundaries can deny enmeshment, failing to acknowledge multi-species entanglements.<sup>137</sup> This idea of the ‘other’ is troubled not least by advances in the natural sciences which see traditional Linnean taxonomies challenged by entities that defy easy classification. Fungal networks, golden jellyfish, lichens, and the relationship between animals and bacteria, to name a few, all challenge us to think beyond the singular.<sup>138</sup> Bakhtin’s ‘Eloquent I’ recognises that the human self is constructed of the interior mind, the mind in relation to others, and shared lived experience, accepting that no human is self-contained.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Bollier and Helfrich

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<sup>134</sup> Marder, ‘To Hear Plants Speak’, p. 119.

<sup>135</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 192.

<sup>136</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 135.

<sup>137</sup> Hannah Fair & Matthew McMullen, ‘Towards a Theory of Non-Human Species Being’, *Environmental Humanities*, 15.2 (2023), pp. 195-214 (p. 205).

<sup>138</sup> For example: fungi have often mutually essential relationships with soil, plants and animals; the golden jellyfish of Palau who photosynthesize through the algae that live in their skin; lichens that are a combination of algae and bacteria living enmeshed with fungi and plants; the mutually essential relationship between humans and their microbiome.

<sup>139</sup> Grace A. Giorgio, ‘Reflections on Writing Through Memory in Auto-Ethnography’, *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. by Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2016) pp. 406-424, (p. 416).

identify the intrinsic relationality between humans as the 'nested I'.<sup>140</sup> De La Cadena proposes, however, that we reimagine the 'Eloquent I', reclassifying what it means to be part of a multi-faceted being, thus allowing us to become 'the complex we'.<sup>141</sup> Extending Bakhtin's construct to encompass the 'complex we' allows for the often unknown others, biotic and otherwise, with whom we share interdependent being.<sup>142</sup> Going beyond recognition of difference and complex co-mingling to a full acceptance of the 'complex we' enables shared flourishing.<sup>143</sup> Logically, what was once self-interest becomes shared interest, returning us to wiser conceptions of kinship and familial relations. The 'other' is now 'us'.

If we question the arbitrary separation of taxa and species, acknowledge other-than-human voices and independent agency without the need to classify or benchmark, and embrace the 'complex we', all species can automatically be recognised as co-creators and kin as a matter of course.<sup>144</sup> An end to hyper-separation and human chauvinism is then possible. Bird Rose encourages us to understand and celebrate the intra- and inter-species connectivity and entanglements that are vital to mutual flourishing, whilst Haraway actively urges us to redefine and rethink narrow notions of kinship.<sup>145</sup> This, she reminds us, cannot be limited to the Western modern interpretation of kin as blood relatives, but must instead extend to all neighbours, human and otherwise, near and far, with whom we are so deeply intertwined.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive*, pp. 41-46.

<sup>141</sup> Marisol De La Cadena, 'An Invitation to Live Together: Making the "Complex We"', *Environmental Humanities*, 11.2 (2019), pp. 477-484 (p. 483).

<sup>142</sup> De La Cadena, 'An Invitation to Live Together', p. 483.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>145</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 50; Donna J. Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015), pp. 159-165 (p. 161).

<sup>146</sup> Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene', p. 161.

Haraway suggests kinship may be achieved via a renewed recognition that ‘all critters share a common “flesh”, laterally, semiotically, and genealogically’.<sup>147</sup> Leopold’s fifty-five-year-old call for an ethic that ‘enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land’ has, however, as yet, gone largely unanswered.<sup>148</sup> The role that working commons can play in such an enlargement requires further exploration, as I will discuss in this thesis.

Environmental Humanists, with their ability to messily cross boundaries and to range between disciplines, are already receptive to the idea of the expansion of the self and the recognition of multiple forms of knowledge. The subject’s augmentation of traditional disciplines to incorporate the other-than-human reflects this. For example, biosemiotics expands the understanding of the communication of meaning through signs to incorporate biological processes in the other-than-human world.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, material ecocriticism goes beyond the traditional interpretation of texts to recognise that all matter can be considered a text that can be ‘read’ and interpreted.<sup>150</sup> Both disciplines reach beyond the human to highlight agency and enmeshment whilst acknowledging the inherent limitations of human means of communication and interpretation.<sup>151</sup> As Lehtimäki reminds us, there is an ‘impossibility of nature representation without some kind of human intervention’.<sup>152</sup> Despite the inherent

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<sup>147</sup> Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene*, p. 162.

<sup>148</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 204.

<sup>149</sup> Timo Maran, ‘Biosemiotization of Matter’, in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 141- 156 (p. 141).

<sup>150</sup> Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, ‘Introduction: Stories Come to Matter’ in *Material Ecocriticism* ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 1-20 (p. 6).

<sup>151</sup> Iovino and Oppermann, ‘Introduction: Stories Come to Matter’, p. 27; Maran, ‘Biosemiotization of Matter’, p. 149.

<sup>152</sup> Markku Lehtimäki, ‘Natural Environments in Narrative Contexts: Cross-Pollinating Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory’, *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 5 (2013), pp. 119-141 (p. 129).

limitations in using human language to interrogate and communicate other-than-human narratives, doing so can, however, 'open up the reenchantment of the world in its relationality, heterogeneity, productivity, agency, and vitality'.<sup>153</sup> This allows recognition of 'new narratives and discourses that give voice to the complexity of our collective'.<sup>154</sup> In Chapter 5 I explore the risks and opportunities commons present in terms of facilitating the close listening and kin-making advocated for here. My adventures in expanding sites of narrativity, and co-creating and communicating the stories that result, are explored in Chapter 7.

Haraway encourages us to strive 'to build attachment sites and tie sticky knots to bind intra-acting critters, including people, together in kinds of response and regard that change the subject-and the object'.<sup>155</sup> These attachment sites or 'contact zones' are places where inter-species entanglements can come to the fore.<sup>156</sup> The specifics of how commons can act as such contact zones, resulting in catalysts for change, will be explored in Chapter 5 and 7. The shared nature of common land allows us to stand back and take a considered and wider view of what might constitute a 'good neighbourhood' without seeking to 'eliminate either our own interest or our own locatedness', in such places.<sup>157</sup> This approach allows the isolation epitomised by the 'extinction of experience' to become a thing of the past.<sup>158</sup> Commons are, by their nature, sites of complex co-mingling and co-creation. They are physical and tangible

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<sup>153</sup> Serpil Oppermann, 'From Ecological Post-Modernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency' in *Material Ecocriticism* ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 21-36 (p. 27).

<sup>154</sup> Iovino and Oppermann, 'Introduction: Stories Come to Matter', p. 8.

<sup>155</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p.287.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>157</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Pyle, 'The Extinction of Experience', *Horticulture*, 56 (1978), pp. 64-67 in Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405).

examples of communality. As with all planetary relationships, the sum of commons is greater than its parts. In this way, they represent an opportunity to explore connections in ways that are equitable and easy to grasp.

If we acknowledge the potential for mutually beneficial outcomes from greater contact between humans and other species, we should not, however, assume that all forms of contact are equally favourable. For example, a study by Richardson and others backed the call for greater connection across species boundaries, but found that simply spending time in nature or passively learning about it were not significant indicators of an increase in human wellbeing or improved mental health.<sup>159</sup> Crucially, they discovered that it was experiencing the enmeshment of humans and other species that had the greatest positive impact on wellbeing.<sup>160</sup> Close connections with others, human and non, are, they found, ‘a key component of a worthwhile life, a sustainable life—a good life’.<sup>161</sup> This crucial aspect appears to be missing from much discourse about the benefits of ‘getting out into nature’. Just being there is not enough. Instead, active connection and relationships are key, both to engendering greater human wellbeing and recognising kinship with other-than-humans. Places that highlight our ecological entanglements, such as commons, can provide opportunities for richer engagement that allows us to ‘become who we are in the company of other beings’.<sup>162</sup> In Chapter 7 I test Richardson and others’ findings by examining the impact of different types of engagement on the wellbeing and ecological consciousness of study participants.

Exploiting the potential of commons to facilitate these connections does,

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<sup>159</sup> Miles Richardson and others, ‘Moments, Not Minutes: The Nature-Wellbeing Relationship’, *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 11.1 (2021), pp. 8-33 (p. 25).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>162</sup> Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, p. 44; *Ibid.* p. 11.

however, run the risk of placing additional, unsustainable burdens upon them. As outlined in the introduction, despite a limited right to roam being granted in England and Wales with the passing of the Countryside Rights of Way (CRoW) Act in 2000, access to over 90% of the land is still restricted.<sup>163</sup> Breen and others estimate that open access areas average less than thirty square kilometres per county.<sup>164</sup> Whilst some counties do have far larger areas of open access lands, there are also 260 constituencies in England with little or no open access land at all.<sup>165</sup> Consequently, common land, particularly where it is easily accessible from large conurbations, has evolved in recent decades away from the imperatives of agriculture towards those of recreation and conservation.<sup>166</sup> Agriculture, however, remains ecologically and culturally important for lowland commons, but the imperatives of these three land uses are not always mutually agreeable. The multiple pulls they exert on common land can create tension, pressure, and an unhealthy level of expectation. The specific on-the-ground challenges of managing a site that is important for agriculture, recreation, and conservation will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

The relative scarcity of open-access land only adds to this pressure. A call for the restoration of greater access is promoted, for example, by the *Right to Roam* campaign, which advocates for ‘a right of responsible access to land and water, subject to responsible conduct and justified exemptions’.<sup>167</sup> At the British Ecological Society’s *People, Policy and Planet* event, attendees reported that the negative impacts of

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<sup>163</sup> Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass* (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 88-89.

<sup>164</sup> Tom Breen and others, ‘Whose Right to Roam? Contesting Access to the English Countryside’, *The Journal of Transport History*, 44.2 (2023), pp. 276-307, (p. 285).

<sup>165</sup> ‘Access Reforms for England: Proposals from the Right to Roam Campaign’, *Right to Roam*, n.d <[https://www.righttoroam.org.uk/\\_files/ugd/208274\\_c91bb2ff1d7640798373ba344a9e1807.pdf](https://www.righttoroam.org.uk/_files/ugd/208274_c91bb2ff1d7640798373ba344a9e1807.pdf)> [accessed 7 May 2025], p. 8.

<sup>166</sup> Christopher Short, ‘The Traditional Commons of England and Wales in the Twenty-First Century: Meeting New and Old Challenges’, *International Journal of the Commons*, 2.2 (2008), pp. 192-221 (p. 216).

<sup>167</sup> ‘Access Reforms for England’, *Right to Roam*, p. 12.

increasing recreational use on conservation habitats might be mitigated by dilution (i.e., by spreading recreational use over a wider area).<sup>168</sup> As the *Right to Roam* campaign points out, greater access should not involve a ‘free for all’ but should instead be based on responsible usage, as found in the Scottish model, a point that I will explore further in Chapter 5.<sup>169</sup> Rodgers and Mackay expand the access debate to argue for the creation of new physical commons on the urban fringes to address the huge inequalities in access to green places and to counter the ongoing privatisation of public spaces.<sup>170</sup> Whilst this thesis largely aligns with calls for greater access to the countryside, in Chapter 5 I go beyond these to advocate for the extension of sharing to explicitly include equity with other-than-humans.

## **2.4: Common Ecologies of Place: The Role of Place, Nostalgia, and Constructions of the Rural**

As those attending the *People, Policy and Planet* event pointed out, for the dilution of recreational impacts to take place, people must be enabled to access a wider range of green and blue spaces, which would require a rethink of infrastructure, in particular transportation.<sup>171</sup> They rightly observe that, without due consideration of this crucial aspect, dilution may be minimal, as people continue to visit only easily accessible sites, or those considered particularly beautiful.<sup>172</sup> Whilst there are undoubtedly physical and logistical barriers to enabling greater access to the countryside, these will not be

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<sup>168</sup> ‘People, Policy & Planet: Accessing and Maximising Nature in England’, *British Ecological Society*, 2023 <<https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/how-can-we-balance-wildlife-conservation-with-public-access-to-nature/>> [accessed 26 November 2024].

<sup>169</sup> ‘Access Reforms for England’, *Right to Roam*, p. 12.

<sup>170</sup> Christopher Rodgers and Duncan Mackay, ‘Creating ‘New’ Commons for the 21st Century: Legal Models for ‘Green’ Space’, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 61.5-6 (2018), pp. 1051-1069 (p. 1055).

<sup>171</sup> ‘People, Policy and Planet’, *British Ecological Society*,

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

explored in this thesis. There is, however, a great deal concealed in the idea of 'beauty'. Underlying what constitutes a 'beautiful' place, and how attached people are to it, are accrued layers of individual and shared place memories, that make somewhere special and treasured. For Buell, 'place-sense is a kind of palimpsest of serial place-experiences', a site of memory and imagination.<sup>173</sup> According to James, 'when people value particular environments, they often do so [...] because the environments in question have played significant positive roles in their lives'.<sup>174</sup> Place is also considered by many to have a 'crucial political, social and cultural function', that it may be 'unwise to dismiss' when looking to foster 'a caring attitude toward the environment'.<sup>175</sup> Tsing agrees that 'familiar places are the beginning of appreciation for multi-species interactions'.<sup>176</sup> Dilution therefore cannot be considered a quick fix as, in some cases, these attachments can take years, and even generations to establish.

Heise, however, argues that a sense of place based on an 'ethic of proximity' is a problematic concept in a globalised society where 'intimately known local places' are subject to 'the distortions of modernization'.<sup>177</sup> Views which find the idea of place unhelpful or damaging are generally predicated on Heidegger's narrow 'ontological essence of a place' where "'to dwell means to belong to a given space'", suggesting a parochial, exclusionary sense of entitlement that seems less relevant in a globalised society facing globalised problems.<sup>178</sup> Plumwood agrees that place

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<sup>173</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Blackwell, 2005), p. 73.

<sup>174</sup> James, *Environmental Philosophy*, p. 131.

<sup>175</sup> Axel Goodbody, 'Sense of Place and Lieu de Mémoire: A Cultural Memory Approach to Environmental Texts' in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 55-70 (p. 66).

<sup>176</sup> Anna Tsing, 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as a Companion Species', *Environmental Humanities*, 1 (2012), pp. 141-154 (p. 142).

<sup>177</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 33; *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>178</sup> Marilena Vecco, 'Genius Loci as a Meta-Concept', *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 41 (2020), pp. 225-231,

attachment based on such restricted 'Heideggerian singularity of focus legitimates a narrowing of place relationship' that is not likely to help address global environmental challenges.<sup>179</sup> Some argue, however, that place as a concept can expand to incorporate the global. Buell for example claims that the idea of place is important even, or perhaps especially, when it is predicated on the 'archipelago' of place attachments that comprise much of modern human experience.<sup>180</sup> Trower agrees, stating that because places are subject to forces way beyond their geographic locality, they become inextricably linked to these wider forces.<sup>181</sup> In this way, 'the global does not erode place, but [instead] produces new forms of localization'.<sup>182</sup> Meanwhile, Kallio and LaFleur remind us that 'local ways of knowing landscapes are entangled with global power structures—colonial, scientific, capitalist—that are 'external' to them'.<sup>183</sup> For Amin and Thrift, place can be a fluid concept, not fixed in space or time, 'best thought of not so much as enduring sites, but as moments of encounter' representing 'twists and fluxes of interrelation'.<sup>184</sup> This conceptualisation supports Richardson and others' findings that human wellbeing is most effectively augmented when people find connection with others, in particular with other-than-humans, through meaningful engagement.<sup>185</sup> When seeking ways to repair broken planetary relationships, parochial, narrow, static senses of place are, therefore,

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(p. 226); C. Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling on the Way to Figurative Architecture* (Rizzoli, 1985), p. 12 in Vecco 'Genius Loco as a Meta-Concept' (p. 226).

<sup>179</sup> Val Plumwood, 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling', *Australian Humanities Review*, 44 (2008), <<https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2008/03/01/shadow-places-and-the-politics-of-dwelling/>> [accessed 24 November 2024], para. 15.

<sup>180</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 72.

<sup>181</sup> Shelley Trower, 'Introduction' in *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, ed. by Shelley Trower (Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1-24, (p. 14.).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>183</sup> Galina Kallio and Will LeFleur, 'Ways of (Un)knowing Landscapes: More-than-Human Relations in Regenerative Agriculture', *Journal of Rural Studies* (2023), pp. 1-13 (p. 4).

<sup>184</sup> A. Amin and N. Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Polity, 2002), p. 30 in Owain Jones, 'After Nature: Entangled Worlds', in *A Companion to Environmental Geography* ed. by Noel Castree and others (Wiley Blackwell, 2009), pp. 294-312, (p. 304).

<sup>185</sup> Richardson and others, 'Moments, Not Minutes', p. 25.

best avoided.

Recognising this, Heise instead calls for localised senses of place to be grounded in an 'environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism' that has 'a thorough cultural and scientific understanding of the global'.<sup>186</sup> Commons, as well-loved places that are at the same time rich in multi-species agential beings, may offer ideal sites for such an outward-looking place appreciation to develop and thrive. In Chapter 6 I will expand on this by examining, in the context of Rodborough Common, place's potential role in aiding (or otherwise) efforts to extend care beyond the individual, and beyond the human.

If we are to encourage outward-looking place attachments predicated on embodied and meaningful connections, we must also, however, understand the construct of 'landscape'. As Cresswell puts it, 'we do not live in landscapes—we look at them' which indicates an automatic disconnection.<sup>187</sup> The idea and ideals of landscape involves a passive aesthetic that sees humans observing a sanitised version of particular rural places, which automatically excludes embodied encounters. Landscape is not, however, a straightforward construction, but is an oft-disputed concept full of 'symbolic significance and social meaning'.<sup>188</sup> Along with place, landscape is based on 'relational, dynamic, and nested social-ecological systems'.<sup>189</sup> According to Daniels and Cosgrove, as with treasured places, a fixed image of the iconography of landscape can serve as an anchor in a modern world that can feel chaotic or out of control.<sup>190</sup> This fixed image

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<sup>186</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, p. 59.

<sup>187</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 18.

<sup>188</sup> Richard Muir, *Approaches to Landscape* (Macmillan, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>189</sup> Lindsay P. Galway and others, 'Mapping the Solastalgia Literature: A Scoping Review Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16.15 (2019), pp. 1-24, (p. 10).

<sup>190</sup> Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove, 'Introduction: Iconography and Landscape' in *The Iconography of Landscape* ed. by Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-11 (p. 8).

might, however, be considered troubling; its passive observation belying the often messy realities of living in and working with the land. Trower suggests that such a passive outlook is common only amongst those who are detached from the landscape, whilst those who work in it have a more functional and realistic view, their understandings 'bound up with personal working histories'.<sup>191</sup> Trower's view supports the idea that more potentially meaningful connections can be forged by active interaction and activities that allow individuals to feel part of a landscape; contributors to its health and wellbeing, rather than simply 'consumers' of it. In Chapter 7, I will detail my experiments in establishing these more meaningful connections.

Idealised constructs related to a static, purely aesthetic landscape, or a fixed, Heideggerian sense of place can also be equated with a negative form of nostalgia that seeks to preserve an imagined optimum past, rather than working to conserve and support a dynamically evolving present. Nostalgia as a concept has its roots in the diagnosis of a pathology, which combines a longing for home (*nostos*) with sadness, or an ache (*algos*) that has physical manifestations.<sup>192</sup> The ache of missing a potentially available, physical place is, however, now generally conceptualised as an ache for a fondly remembered past, a place that can never physically be revisited; a bittersweet emotion that may be considered pleasant to indulge in.<sup>193</sup> The original pathological meaning has been replaced by a purely emotional state which is 'a normal part of everyday life'.<sup>194</sup> For some, nostalgia provides a bridge of continuity, between past,

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<sup>191</sup> Shelley Trower, 'Regional Writing and Oral History, from China Clay to Eden', in *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, ed. by Shelley Trower (Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 87-106, (p. 88).

<sup>192</sup> Michael Hviid Jacobsen, 'Introduction' in *Nostalgia Now: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, ed. by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-28 (p. 7).

<sup>193</sup> Janelle L. Wilson, 'Future Imaginings: Nostalgia for Unrealized Possible Selves' in *Nostalgia Now: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, ed. by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Routledge, 2020), pp. 66 - 77, (p. 66).

<sup>194</sup> Jacobsen, 'Introduction', p. 9.

present, and future and is an emotion with ‘the capacity to increase one’s optimism, evoke inspiration, boost creativity, and facilitate prosocial behaviour’.<sup>195</sup> Unlike utopian visions, relying only on present realities and possible futures, nostalgic recollections can, in this interpretation, provide elements of cultural memory and fondly remembered past learning and experiences, which have the potential to enrich and enhance future visions. ‘What we are nostalgic for reveals what we value, what we deem worthwhile and important’, making it a possibly useful tool when seeking ways of extending care and advocacy for places, communities, and other species.<sup>196</sup>

As with the idea of using place attachment to forge more positive environmental futures, making use of nostalgia in this way also involves treading a fine line. Some see nostalgia, particularly for the imagined pasts represented in the works of English authors such as Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen, as a ‘cultural disease’ representing the ‘sickness of the present’; a fantasy of a golden age that never actually existed.<sup>197</sup> Nostalgia in this guise can be used in the service of a parochial and nationalist brand of politics predicated on exclusion and division, fueling racially and socially exclusionary policies.<sup>198</sup> Landscapes, especially rural landscapes, can become easily correlated and conflated with mythologised national identities.<sup>199</sup> These ‘retrotopian’ narratives’, where the past is ‘filtered through nostalgia and imagined ways in which the past was preferable to the present’ draw on senses of ‘dissatisfaction, mistrust and uncertainty’.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Wilson, ‘Future Imaginings’, p.67; Jacobsen, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>197</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>198</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, p. 47.

<sup>199</sup> Keith Halfacree ‘Landscapes of Rurality: Rural Others/Other Rurals, in *Studying Cultural Landscapes* ed. by Iain Robertson and Penny Richards (Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 141 - 164 (p. 143).

<sup>200</sup> Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If: Harnessing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019), p. 106; Ibid. p. 106; Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ‘Retrotopia Rising: The Topics of Utopia, Retrotopia and Nostalgia in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman’ in *Nostalgia Now:*

Beyond this, nostalgia can also be an emotion that is vulnerable to exploitation for commercial or political gain.<sup>201</sup> Hierarchical notions of superiority, entitlement, and dominance over others, human or otherwise, are at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous. Romanticisation and idealisation of an imagined past, where only certain peoples belonged to the soil and it to them, reached its disastrous zenith in the nationalistic and murderous 'blood and soil' philosophy of Nazi Germany.<sup>202</sup> At its worst, encouraging a sense of belonging and identity rooted in nostalgia, landscape, and place can, when those notions are anchored in opposition and othering, be exclusionary, inward-looking, and downright deadly. Exclusion and othering are counterproductive and counterintuitive when seeking to re-establish vital kinship and connection with others. Whether place, identity, and nostalgia are binding or exclusionary for those living and working on Rodborough Common will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Retrotopian narratives lean heavily into idealised and mythologized versions of the rural that belie messy realities. These views rely on the presentation of contrasts, between the urban and rural and the present and past, with the former generally compared unfavourably to the latter.<sup>203</sup> The separation and value judgements inherent in such contrasts are deeply rooted in the culture of the Global North, which has ramifications for rural peoples and places today. This is true not only for visitors to rural places who might be considered by some to be outside of an imagined, majority 'norm', but also for rural communities, human and otherwise. This is particularly true when the reality of rural lives does not live up to rose-tinted expectations, or when

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*Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, ed. by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Routledge, 2020), pp. 78-97 (p. 88).

<sup>201</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 36; Jacobsen, 'Introduction', p.3.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>203</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 39.

people are viewed as in some way transgressing socially constructed boundaries.<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, as the human population globalises and urbanises, localised cultural attributes, such as language, food, dress, and housing, that are often influenced by physical places, have been packaged up, sanitised, and 'sold' to a globalised and homogenised urban audience desperate to find difference and authenticity.<sup>205</sup> The idealised 'landscape of the rural idyll is gendered, racialised and settled' making it automatically exclusionary, exploitative, and commodified.<sup>206</sup> Once again, this is counter-intuitive when seeking to expand ideas of 'good neighbourhood' to others of any species. Commons can, however, act as a counterpoint to commodified, automatically exclusionary lands, providing opportunities for embodied, equitable, and meaningful encounters. In Chapter 6, I will cover manifestations and expressions of place attachment, landscape iconography, and nostalgia regarding Rodborough Common, interrogating whether these create distrust or harmony, inclusion or exclusion.

## **2.5: Storying the Commons: Forging Connections Through Narrative and Encounter**

When carefully managed and actively engaged with, English commons can offer equitable spaces for connection, allowing encounters with places and others to move beyond the superficial. Harnessing the positive aspects of commons to encourage such encounters depends, however, on understanding the rich cultural context within which commons operate and the telling of their stories equitably and imaginatively. An

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<sup>204</sup> Richard W. Butler & C. Michael Hall 'Image and Reimaging of Rural Areas' in *Tourism and Recreation in Rural Areas*, ed. by Richard Butler, C. Michael Hall and John Jenkins (John Wiley & Sons, 1998), pp. 115-122 (p.116).

<sup>205</sup> Muir, *Approaches to Landscape*, p. 276.

<sup>206</sup> Halfacree, 'Landscapes of Rurality', p. 153.

encounter with commons, predicated on these principles, has the potential to provide a rich, nourishing, and mutually beneficial experience. Sadly, for many humans, particularly those living in urban areas, such encounters, and the resultant attachments they may forge, are rare indeed. Missing attachments accelerate cyclically as successive generations fail to pass on a love for or knowledge of other-than-human encounters, resulting in self-perpetuating reductions in ecological literacy.<sup>207</sup> Further, as many other-than-human species decline in volume and abundance, their lack leaves a self-perpetuating hole in knowing and encountering.<sup>208</sup> This decline leads to a shifting baseline, making the gradual loss of species abundance and range seem normal, resulting in neglect for species that are rendered invisible.<sup>209</sup>

To counter this shifting baseline, according to Matthews, 'Western peoples are in need of places where the dramas of encounter and recognition between humans and other living beings, and between humans and flourishing ecosystems, can occur'.<sup>210</sup> For Bollier and Helfrich, the development of 'sustainable' policies is not enough.<sup>211</sup> Instead, they argue, people must be given 'opportunities to deepen their relationships to natural systems, and in doing so, come to know them, love them, and protect them'.<sup>212</sup> Those who encourage such encounters need, however, to be cognisant of the risks to other species and the *genius loci* of place that volumes of visitors can cause. The 'etiquette of an interspecies encounter' must be sought and respected; the thoughtful, considered, and imaginative forms of engagement this entails will be

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<sup>207</sup> Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7, pp. 405-411, (p. 405).

<sup>208</sup> Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap', p. 405.

<sup>209</sup> Richard Mabey, *The Common Ground* (Dent, 1993), p. 18.

<sup>210</sup> Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, p. 62.

<sup>211</sup> Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive*, p. 112.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

explored in Chapter 7.<sup>213</sup>

Education is an oft-cited solution to the issue of species isolation or irresponsible environmental behaviours. For example, Johns and Pontes state ‘a geographically and environmentally literate citizenry is a necessity for ameliorating wide-ranging and urgent problems at both local and global scales’.<sup>214</sup> Shackley observes ‘most harassment [of wildlife] is quite unintentional, innocent and uninformed and often, ironically, carried out by those who see themselves as harmless users of countryside or wilderness areas’.<sup>215</sup> There is a belief that knowledge when added to experience results in behaviour changes, but this is not always the case, with attempts to improve eco-literacy through education meeting with mixed success.<sup>216</sup> Hoydis, Bartosch, and Gurr suggest the idea that knowledge will automatically result in action is a ‘cognitive fallacy’.<sup>217</sup> Instead an ‘intention-behaviour gap’ exists between the knowledge of technical, scientific, and solutionist data and positive action.<sup>218</sup> Following this logic, not all those who engage directly or indirectly in potentially damaging environmental behaviours are unaware that they are doing so. As Leopold reminds us, whilst more conservation education is desirable, its content needs to instil an imperative to fundamentally change our relationship with the other-than-human world from one of possession to one of community and reciprocity.<sup>219</sup> The intention gap is therefore located in the will to employ informed, thoughtful behaviour situated within

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<sup>213</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 192.

<sup>214</sup> Rebecca A. Johns and Rachelle Pontes, ‘Parks, Rhetoric and Environmental Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Ecoliteracy’, *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 22.1 (2019), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

<sup>215</sup> Myra Shackley, *Wildlife Tourism* (Cengage Learning, 2010), p. 18.

<sup>216</sup> Monty Hempel, ‘Ecoliteracy: Knowledge is Not Enough’ in *Governing for Sustainability*, ed. by Lisa Mastny (Worldwide Institute, 2014), pp. 41-52 (p. 41).

<sup>217</sup> Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and Jens Martin Gurr, *Climate Change Literacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 17.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>219</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 207-210.

relationships of inter- and intra-species connection, community and kinship.

Is then the solution to filling the intention gap to appeal to the emotions and tug at the heartstrings, hoping this will lead to a guilt-induced alteration of behaviour? As well as Hoydis, Bartosch, and Gurr's cognitive fallacy they also identify a 'sentimental fallacy' that holds that emotional responses are on their own are reasons for people to act.<sup>220</sup> Hempel suggests that to override self-interest and preconceived values and world views, issues need to be framed in a sense of urgency and immediacy, people need to have knowledge about them that is relatable, and individuals must feel they have agency to bring about tangible change.<sup>221</sup> Hoydis, Bartosch, and Gurr propose that this endeavour demands 'cultural and educational innovation and mediation, alongside, or even in fruitful tension with, scientific understanding'.<sup>222</sup> Beyond this, Hempel argues that we need to find ways to 'develop emotional connections to the natural world' that weave 'together attachment to place with scientific knowledge' that is rooted in a 'cultural ecoliteracy'.<sup>223</sup>

Cree and Gersie suggest 'engaging everyone physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually: that is doing things that involve their hands, head, heart, and spirit'.<sup>224</sup> So sharing 'facts' and data, alongside storytelling, art, and literature, can act as a 'trigger and a means of inciting transformation by powerfully re-framing ways of seeing and thinking'.<sup>225</sup> The imperative to come up with positive stories, to educate without becoming alarmist, to inform without telling off, follows Neimanis, Åsberg and

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<sup>220</sup> Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr, *Climate Change Literacy*, p. 17.

<sup>221</sup> Hempel, 'Ecoliteracy', pp. 45-46.

<sup>222</sup> Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr, *Climate Change Literacy*, p. 2.

<sup>223</sup> Hempel, 'Ecoliteracy', p. 42.

<sup>224</sup> Jon Cree and Alida Gersie, 'Storytelling in the Woods', in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 54-73 (p. 57).

<sup>225</sup> Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr, *Climate Change Literacy*, p. 20.

Hedrén's advice that negative discourse 'must be balanced with alternative narratives that can inspire more creative problem-solving and a strong sense of participation and involvement'.<sup>226</sup> The desire for positive stories is reflected in the knowledge that 'high exposure to physical environmental problems' can provoke feelings of eco-anxiety that can prove paralysing.<sup>227</sup> Whilst worry and anxiety 'can motivate people to focus on the threat at hand', 'people need to perceive the situation as somewhat controllable' if they are to engage with it positively.<sup>228</sup> I will explore examples of eco-anxiety experienced by study participants in Chapter 7.

One way of achieving a more nuanced, positive, and enabling encounter with other-than-humans, without having to come into physical contact with them, is to encourage imagination via the employment of narrative structures and creative storytelling; visual, oral, or otherwise. Narratives can be 'the spark that illuminates the ethical proximity of others'.<sup>229</sup> Neimais, Åsberg and Hedrén suggest that 'questions of value, meaning, difference, and competing world views must be *re-enlivened* as crucial parts of the [environmental] conversations'.<sup>230</sup> King asserts that using the naturalist literary tradition, which can 'empower the landscape through the figure of metonymy', may be one way of changing hierarchical and consumptive narratives.<sup>231</sup> Naturalist literature, he suggests, enlivens the 'facts' of the natural sciences, creating a bridge

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<sup>226</sup> Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén, 'Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene', *Ethics and the Environment*, 20.1 (2015) pp. 67-97 (p. 77).

<sup>227</sup> Panu Pihkala, 'Eco-Anxiety' in *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, ed. by C. Parker Krieg and Reeta Toivanen (Helsinki University Press, 2021), pp. 119-133 (p. 123).

<sup>228</sup> Maria Ojala and others, 'Anxiety, Worry, and Grief in a Time of Environmental and Climate Crisis: A Narrative Review', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 46 (2021), pp. 35-58, p. 46; *Ibid.* p.49.

<sup>229</sup> Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, p. 5.

<sup>230</sup> Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén, 'Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities', p. 76.

<sup>231</sup> Roger J.H. King, 'How to Construe Nature: Environmental Ethics and the Interpretation of Nature' in *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. by David R. Keller, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 352-359 (p. 357).

between emotion and reason, mind and matter, thereby overcoming the dualist divide.<sup>232</sup> Daniels also suggests that in-depth case studies, analysis, and rigorous investigations [of commons] can usefully be augmented with storytelling, recognising ‘the importance of storytelling in pushing the literature forwards’.<sup>233</sup> Chapter 7 acknowledges these calls for storytelling in the interests of improved multi-species relationships, exploring how multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by the Environmental Humanities, can be deployed to enable imaginings and narratives that extend the idea of ‘good neighbourhood’ more widely.

It is not, however, enough to tell straightforward stories to a passive audience. Much as Richardson and others found when examining the impact of different types of nature encounters on human wellbeing, deeper engagement is necessary if meaningful connections are to be formed.<sup>234</sup> Whilst Nalau and Cobb tested the use of storytelling in future visioning specifically to respond to climate change, their approach is relevant to wider environmental concerns.<sup>235</sup> They found that although it can be difficult for people to envision future timescales that appear distant or remote, connection to the site being envisioned was helpful.<sup>236</sup> Situated stories can help to overcome such imaginative barriers, allowing us to deal with deep time in a digestible way, locating humans relationally in place and time.<sup>237</sup> In the absence of direct experience of natural phenomena, narratives can give ‘specific shape and human

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<sup>232</sup> King, ‘How to Construe Nature’, p. 357.

<sup>233</sup> Brigham Daniels, ‘Commons Storytelling: Tragedies, Comedies, and Tragicomedies’ in *Routledge Handbook of the Study of the Commons*, ed. by Blake Hudson, Jonathan Rosenblum and Dan Cole, (Routledge, 2019) pp. 91-105 (p. 91).

<sup>234</sup> Richardson and others, ‘Moments, Not Minutes’, p. 25.

<sup>235</sup> Johanna Nalau and Gemma Cobb, ‘The Strengths and Weaknesses of Future Visioning Approaches for Climate Change Adaptation: A Review’, *Global Environmental Change*, 74 (2022), pp. 1-15.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; p. 9.

<sup>237</sup> Malcolm Green and Nick Hennessey, ‘By Hidden Paths’, in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 74-85 (p. 81).

meaningfulness to [...] natural events'.<sup>238</sup> Smith's call to expand the archive beyond the human enables material ecocritical and biosemiotic readings of the land and its inhabitants; approaches that are supportive of situated storytelling.<sup>239</sup> On a practical level, MacLellan agrees that the exploration of homes or places in stories can establish an emotional connection between the narrative and the listener or reader.<sup>240</sup> Salisbury also comments on the importance of setting on the impact (or lack thereof) of storytelling.<sup>241</sup> He agrees with Nalau and Cobb's assertion that effective storying is a process of two-way communication between storytellers and listeners, the latter of whom should be encouraged to be active, 'feeding the story' as it is told, thus becoming co-creators of the tale.<sup>242</sup> He also encourages thoughtful and creative use of space, sound, setting, and visual tools to enable the kind of close engagement required to take storytelling beyond the superficial.<sup>243</sup> When seeking to encourage nature connectedness, Nalau and Cobb identify a need for co-created stories, enabled by tools that support visualisation.<sup>244</sup>

Beyond storytelling, there are a wealth of other methods available to encourage deeper and more meaningful encounters between humans and other species. For example, citizen science projects and citizen humanities projects have the potential to excite the imagination, deepen connections, and enhance knowledge. In Chapter 7 I discuss the range of methods available for encouraging greater inter-species connection

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<sup>238</sup> Lehtimäki, 'Natural Environments in Narrative Contexts', p. 132.

<sup>239</sup> Smith, 'Anxieties of Access', p. 255.

<sup>240</sup> Gordan MacLellan, 'Stories in Place' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 98-109, (p. 100).

<sup>241</sup> Chris Salisbury, 'Feeding the Story' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 168-179, (p. 172).

<sup>242</sup> Salisbury, 'Feeding the Story', p. 171.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>244</sup> Nalau and Cobb, 'The Strengths and Weaknesses of Future Visioning Approaches for Climate Change Adaptation', p. 4.

and present two examples of applied Environmental Humanities projects: the Landscapes of the Lark festival and Storying the Commons.

## 2.6: Conclusion

As this literature review demonstrates, the ‘wicked problems’ of environmental degradation have many facets and many potential solutions.<sup>245</sup> The scale of the problems, as well as their urgency, demands that we, as scholars, citizens, and neighbours, engage all our imaginative powers and deploy all the tools available to us to re-frame human relationships with our ‘planetary partners’.<sup>246</sup> The necessity for new narratives and ways of telling our stories of entanglement in support of this are already making their way out of academic discourse and into popular culture. Much like the mycelium described in Sheldrake’s *Entangled Life*, the understanding of complex inter-species relationships is creeping, oftentimes unnoticed, into the human mainstream.<sup>247</sup> The scale and severity of environmental problems means that it is now urgent and imperative to reach beyond the echo chamber of committed environmentalists and academics. Environmental Humanists can encourage this spread through their work, inside and outside the academic canon. This thesis reflects this imperative by telling the stories of all of Rodborough’s multi-species commoners.

Overall, this thesis focuses on the role that commons, as sites of ‘specific, situated connection’ can play in helping humans ‘to increase our felt responsiveness to environmental bodies not only locally, but in various temporal and spatial modes’.<sup>248</sup> It

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<sup>245</sup> Ana Carolina de Almeida Kumlien and Paul Coughlan, ‘Wicked Problems and How to Solve Them’, *The Conversation*, 2018 <<https://theconversation.com/wicked-problems-and-how-to-solve-them-100047>> [accessed 5 December 2024], para. 1.

<sup>246</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 36.

<sup>247</sup> Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life* (Penguin, 2020).

<sup>248</sup> Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén, ‘Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities’, p. 20.

offers a rounded and comprehensive account, by considering the historical, managerial, political, ecological, and biocultural aspects of relationships with Rodborough Common. It goes past the written archive to incorporate the stories told by a wider and sometimes forgotten cast of actors in the landscape. It reaches beyond academia by including case studies of co-created projects that feed and are fed by my research for this thesis. It is multi-disciplinary in its scope, using a range of methods, based on a foundational theoretical framework. These frameworks and methods are now described in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **3. Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods**

The range of subjects covered by the literature review in Chapter 2, including historical enquiries of the commons, questions of human exceptionalism and isolation, multi-species communication, and ways of expanding the English common land ideal of ‘good neighbourhood’, reflects the breadth of this study. Underlying this breadth are consistent methodological and theoretical foundations, located in specific ontological, epistemological, and theoretical approaches. These embrace the study’s breadth and its multi-species contexts, uniting the potentially disparate methods employed that are drawn from the social sciences and humanities.

In this chapter, I outline these foundations and methods, explaining their relevance to the aims of the project and, where appropriate, their primary location in the thesis. I begin by briefly outlining my ontological position, followed by my epistemological approach. I move on to explain the study’s theoretical frameworks, including the underlying premises of multi-species studies and common pool resource theories. I then describe the different methods used, including historical enquiries, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis, and auto-ethnography. I also include a section on the conservation biology methods I employed in my professional practice which, for this study, I viewed from a biosemiotic perspective. I close the chapter by explaining the ethical considerations of the study, and how these were addressed. This thesis also incorporates elements of creative narrative and storytelling. As these are an intrinsic part of the applied Environmental Humanities projects described in Chapter 7, the methods used for this aspect of my research are discussed in context in Section 7.6.

### 3.1: Ontology and Epistemology

My ontological position for this study is most closely aligned with critical realism.

Critical realism sits between a realist position, which accepts there is a single or definitive knowledge waiting to be discovered, and relativism, which claims that all knowledge is constructed, fluid and therefore unknowable.<sup>249</sup> Critical realism takes a middle path, recognising that knowledge is socially situated (thus allowing for multiple knowledges to exist with equal validity) but also that, beyond subjectivity, there are realities that can be partially accessed.<sup>250</sup> Critical realism also ‘assumes a world exists independently of the observer’ and that reality does not need to be restricted to those things that can be described.<sup>251</sup> When seeking, as I do in this thesis, to acknowledge and accept the often unknowable ontologies of other beings, be they plants, other-than-human animals, or non-biotic entities, embracing this assumption is crucial. This approach also allows theories to be concluded that have practical and real-life applications, giving purpose to studies that go beyond the accumulation and documentation of situated knowledges.<sup>252</sup> This thesis aims to investigate how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships. Critical realism, which accepts multiple valid knowledges whilst allowing for the practical application of outcomes, is therefore best suited to achieving my major research aim.

Leading on from this and reflecting the relational nature of this project, I

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<sup>249</sup> Victoria Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (Sage, 2013), p. 27.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>251</sup> Sian Sullivan, ‘What’s Ontology Got to Do with It? On Nature and Knowledge in a Political Ecology of the Green Economy’, *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24 (2017), pp. 217 – 242 (pp. 224-225), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20802>; Ibid, p. 222.

<sup>252</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 27.

initially approached it from a constructionist epistemological position. This position is based on a dynamic interplay between actors across different social phenomena.<sup>253</sup> Constructionist positions believe no single truth is waiting to be discovered, but that multiple knowledges can co-exist and dynamically interact.<sup>254</sup> The fundamental tenet of this study is that there are differently situated and equally valid knowledges, not only among humans but also among other species, which is compatible with a constructionist philosophy.

Allowing, however, that study of these knowledges and interplays can produce useful information, albeit based on subjective viewpoints, I have progressed towards a contextualised position that is most supportive of a critical realism ontology. Contextualism allows knowledge to be situated and produced collaboratively between researcher and researched but also recognises that certain knowledge (singular) is valid in certain contexts.<sup>255</sup> This approach is the most practical and appropriate, as my project incorporates the interpretivist bias of the humanities and social sciences, whilst acknowledging and utilising positivist knowledge gained from the natural sciences. Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, combining contextualism with critical realism allows this study to recognise that situated experiences and events have causal mechanisms.<sup>256</sup> It also acknowledges that individual agency exists within influential social structures and that the study of this interplay can produce useful knowledge. Given the central focus of this study is commons, which are an ongoing combination of human and other-than-human individual agencies acting in symbiosis with wider social

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<sup>253</sup> Robert Lee and Radoslaw Stetch, 'Mediating Sustainability: Constructivist Approaches to Sustainability Research' in *Researching Sustainability: A Guide to Social Science Methods, Practice, and Engagement* ed. by Alex Franklin and Paul Blyton (Earthscan, 2011), pp. 175-189 (p. 181).

<sup>254</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 30.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>256</sup> Tom Fryer, 'A Short Guide to Ontology and Epistemology', *Tom Fryer*, 2022 <<https://tfryer.com/ontology-guide/>> [accessed 24 May 2024].

and environmental forces, contextualism provides a logical foundation.

### 3.2: Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

Critical realism also provides the methodological foundations for this study. In line with a constructionist and contextualism epistemology, I have sought throughout to allow theory to be drawn from data, rather than using data to 'prove' or 'disprove' predetermined theories. In line with this, I have employed a qualitative research paradigm, which allows for multiple versions of reality that 'are very closely linked to the contexts in which they occur'.<sup>257</sup> The study is therefore naturally inductive and interpretivist, holding that theory is built from the data upwards; the data, in this case, being the words, thoughts, behaviours, and feelings of the study's participants, human (including the researcher) and otherwise. Qualitative research is aligned with the aims and premise of this study as it is interested in searching for meaning in the data and intrinsically including the researcher as an active participant in the process.<sup>258</sup> Even when using biological survey data from the natural sciences, which may be more positivist, empirical, and quantitative, I have looked beyond the numbers for a deeper understanding of wider causes, meaning, and effects.

In line with this, I used elements of Grounded Theory (GT) as guiding principles for my data collection and analysis. GT suggests a systematic set of procedures is used to develop inductively derived theories about a phenomenon.<sup>259</sup> It also has 'an emphasis on understanding social processes'.<sup>260</sup> In its fullest application, it

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<sup>257</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 6.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>259</sup> W.L Neuman, *Social Science Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches: 7th Edition* (Pearson, 2011), p. 71.

<sup>260</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 176.

requires that no prior reading or research is carried out and that data gathering and analysis continues cyclically until it reaches saturation point.<sup>261</sup> Given the requirements of this thesis, and its necessarily temporally and corporally bounded nature, a full GT approach was not possible. Instead, I have applied what Braun and Clarke term a 'GT Lite' approach, which allows conclusions to be drawn from more limited data sets based on prior knowledge and understanding while recognising that resulting theories cannot be considered all-encompassing.<sup>262</sup>

Sitting underneath the GT Lite approach I have taken are two primary frameworks, relating to common pool resource management, and multi-species studies. Commons theory falls into two main categories; those who advocate that commons are inherently unsustainable and prone to failure, and those who rebut this view. From a theoretical perspective, those who claim that common pool resources are inherently unsustainable do so based on the free-rider principle. This holds that individuals in a common system will always, to one degree or another, seek to maximise their advantage and minimise their inputs. Three main areas cover such positions; Olson's logic of collective action, the Prisoner's Dilemma, and Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons (Fig. 3.2.1).<sup>263</sup> Olson's logic of collective action holds that group cooperation and common resource management is only possible where 'there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest'.<sup>264</sup> The Prisoner's Dilemma is a game theory that uses a hypothetical situation to highlight the likelihood of cooperation in a group model, where each player can only guess the behaviour of the

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<sup>261</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 187.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>263</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 5-6.

<sup>264</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Harvard University Press, 1971) in Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, p. 6.

other players.<sup>265</sup> In this situation, if one player cooperates and the other does not, there will be an uneven distribution of costs and benefits, leading to the eventual failure of the model. Finally, Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons is predicated on all parties acting solely for their advantage, leading to rapid depletion and failure of the resource.<sup>266</sup>

### Free-Rider Models of Common Pool Resource Use

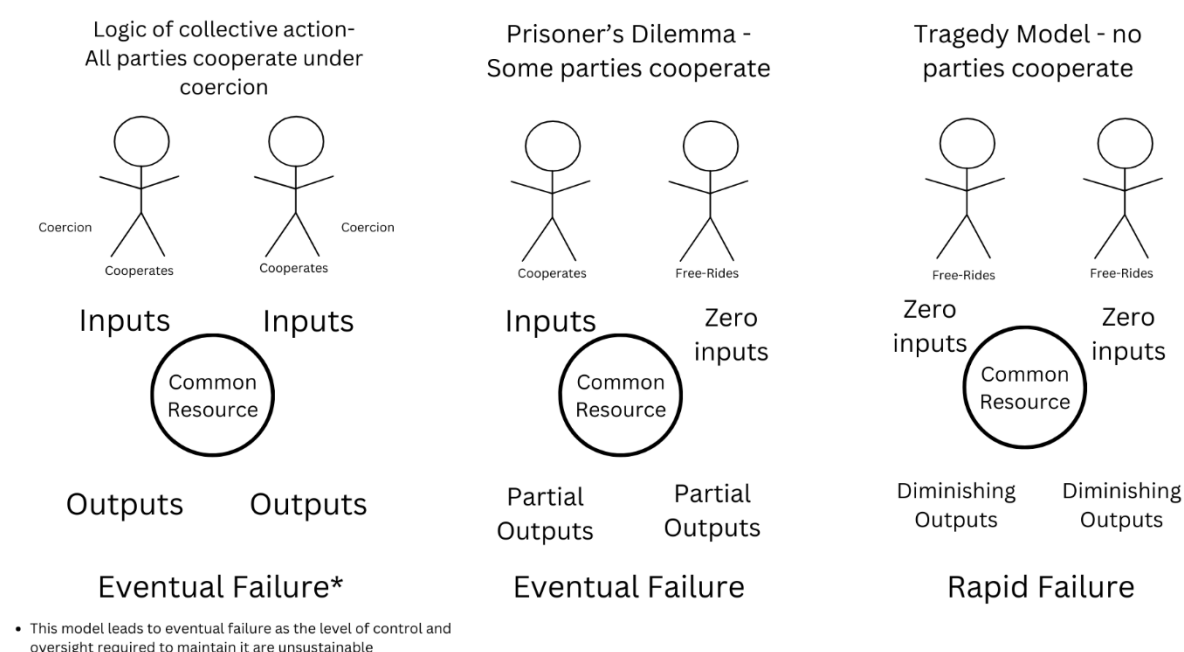


Figure 3.2.1: Free rider models of common pool resource management  
Source: Author after Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* © Sharon Gardham

Whilst these models are all useful for explaining certain universal challenges, they have at times been applied without the benefit of empirical knowledge to justify extensive privatisation, elimination of common resources, or centralised control of assets.<sup>267</sup> Each inevitable failure of resources managed using the logic of these models emboldens the calls for removal, privatisation, or centralised control of common

<sup>265</sup> 'Prisoner's Dilemma', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d.  
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>> [accessed 3 January 2025].

<sup>266</sup> Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162.3859 (1968), pp. 1243 - 1248.

<sup>267</sup> Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, p. 9.

assets in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. In contrast, Ostrom advocates for a model that allows local users of resources to govern, monitor, and control them (Fig. 3.2.2). In this model, resource users agree on use and penalties and work with an independent arbitrator when disagreements occur. The advantage is that every person is invested in maintaining the resource, enabled by their involvement in devising its rules; and transgressions can be dealt with swiftly and easily.<sup>268</sup> As Ostrom recognises, however, models are merely useful ways of illustrating generalised rules.<sup>269</sup> To accurately predict the outcomes of individual resource management we require forensic studies of individual commons.<sup>270</sup> This thesis runs with that recommendation, adding the historical and current management of Rodborough Common to the collection of case studies of common pool resources. I will reflect on Rodborough's past and present 'fit' with each of these models in Chapter 4.

#### Ostrom's Model of Successful Common Pool Resource Use

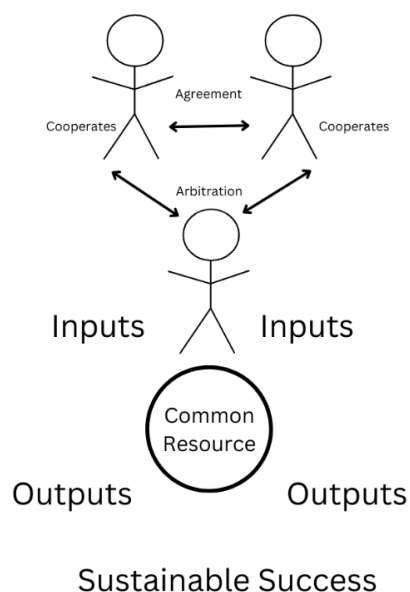


Figure 3.2.2: Ostrom's model of successful common pool resource management  
Source: Author after Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 2011 © Sharon Gardham

<sup>268</sup> Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, p. 17.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Finally, at a fundamental level, this project is concerned with the recognition and celebration of the multi-species entanglements that co-construct common land. For this reason, I have incorporated and expanded social science methodologies, which are traditionally human-focused, to accommodate the more-than-human. As an Environmental Humanities study it pushes the inherently anthropocentric humanities to become 'more-than-humanities', thus naturally incorporating other species. When borrowing observations and techniques from the natural sciences, I concentrated on multi-species entanglements and interrelatedness. In short, in line with the guidance of van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, I have taken 'inspiration from the natural sciences and beyond, bringing diverse bodies of knowledge into conversation and pushing them in new directions'.<sup>271</sup> As Bastian reminds us, such an undertaking encourages us to be methodologically bold to give voice to those who are quasi-invisible in much research; in particular, ignored or occluded other-than-human voices.<sup>272</sup> Fair and McMullen agree with Bastian that methodological imagination, particularly when working with plants and fungi, is needed to fully refocus our gaze away from humans, pointing out this will 'demand distinctive theoretical approaches and novel conclusions'.<sup>273</sup> Attempting to rise to this challenge, I have sought throughout this project to locate and respond to the multi-species interconnectedness evident on Rodborough Common and to reflect the stories of multiple commons-dwellers. In this context I define 'commons-dwellers' as those of any species who visit, live on, or interact in any way, no matter how enduring or how fleeting, with the Common. The

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<sup>271</sup> Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey and Ursula Münster 'Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness', *Environmental Humanities*, 8.1 (2016), pp. 1-23 (p. 2).

<sup>272</sup> Michelle Bastian, 'Towards a More-than-Human Participatory Research' in *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds*, ed. by Michelle Bastian and others (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 19-37 (p. 30).

<sup>273</sup> Hannah Fair and Matthew McMullen, 'Towards a Theory of Non-Human Species Being', *Environmental Humanities*, 15.2 (2023), pp. 195-214 (p. 197).

stories I relay are, however, ultimately my own, reflecting my inherent interconnectedness with Rodborough as a researcher and as one of a multitude of past, present, and future commons-dwellers. In this way, I heed van Dooren and Bird Rose's urging not to 'slip into the hubris of claiming to tell another's stories', instead allowing 'multiple meanings to travel alongside one another'.<sup>274</sup> My choice of methods and their application has been driven by this foundational multi-species aspiration.

### 3.3: Methods

As mentioned, the multi-disciplinary, multi-species nature of this project has required the use of a range of methods. Each method was carefully chosen and intermingled with others to support the aims of the project. My original research therefore uses aspects from history, thematic discourse analysis, and auto-ethnography.

#### 3.3.1: Historical Enquiry

My historical examination of the Common incorporates aspects of economic, political, environmental, and cultural history, with no central dominating focus. The examination of each of these different aspects equally offers, a 'greater opportunity for experimentation, choice, and learning' which can be translated into more effective commons management practices and policies further down the line.<sup>275</sup> This approach also reflects the diversity of value that can be ascribed to the environment, which can be 'ecological, historical, cultural, economic, ethical, and aesthetic'.<sup>276</sup> Investigating and

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<sup>274</sup> Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, 'Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds', *Environmental Humanities*, 8.1 (2016), pp. 77-94 (p. 85).

<sup>275</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *A Polycentric Approach for Coping with Climate Change: Policy Research Working Paper*, 5095 (World Bank, 2009), in Daniel H. Cole, 'Advantages of a Polycentric Approach to Climate Change Policy', *Nature Climate Change*, 5 (2015), pp. 114-118 (p. 114).

<sup>276</sup> Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior, 'Environmental Aesthetics: A Synthetic Review', *People and Nature*, 2.2 (2019), pp. 254-266 (p. 255).

telling the stories of past commoners, of different species, provides context to present-day relationships, enables recognition of the co-created nature of Rodborough's present, and provides illuminating information regarding hopes for its future.

I have drawn on primary and secondary written historical sources relating to Rodborough Common, as well as on wider county and national histories. Rodborough is a well-documented common, that was incorporated within the larger manor of Minchinhampton. In the 1930s, the Reverend Charles Watson thoroughly translated the extensive rolls of the fourteenth century Minchinhampton Custumal, as well as a later document, the Spillman Cartulary, which detailed the tenants of the manor, their holdings and their obligations.<sup>277</sup> Although I have accessed both documents at the National Archive (NA), I was unable to make a direct reading myself, so relied on Watson's translation for these early sources, which are predominantly used in Chapter 4 where I discuss the Common's medieval management systems. Sources from the seventeenth century onwards, held at the NA, the Gloucestershire Records Office (GRO) and the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), which includes the archives of the Open Spaces Society (OSS), were also accessed and interpreted directly. Where possible and practicable, I have utilised original primary sources in preference to secondary sources. In addition to the translations of the custumals, Rodborough's secondary sources, whilst they are not extensive, do exist, primarily in the form of either memoirs of childhood, or general overview histories. Additionally, the Victoria County Histories have been useful for providing context. Rodborough, or Stroud more generally, features in sources authored during the era of parliamentary enclosure, for

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<sup>277</sup> Charles Ernest Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal and its Place in the Study of the Manor', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 54 (1932), pp. 203-384; Charles Ernest Watson, 'The Spillman Cartulary', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 61(1939), pp. 50-94.

example, Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (1830), and Marshall's *The Rural Economy of Gloucestershire* (1796).<sup>278</sup> Where possible, I have sought to confirm assertions made in secondary sources via reference to primary ones. Post-medieval sources are used predominantly in Chapters 5 and 6.

For more general histories relating to the English countryside, I relied largely on secondary sources. These sources date from the late nineteenth century to the present day and so can, in some cases, be considered primary material. When using these I took into consideration the context of their publication, and the specialisms of their authors, which in some cases indicate particular emphasis, interest, or bias, which impact what is (and crucially what is not) included.

Recognising the importance of often untold stories of the past, I also moved beyond these written sources to incorporate learnings from archaeology, landscape studies, environmental history, oral history, and ecology. These alternative archives have been accessed via accounts of archaeological investigations, using findings from geological and other natural sciences, by 'reading' the physical features of the land, and by comparing ecological investigations against other forms of evidence. Findings from these sources are present in all main research chapters. Drawing together the available primary and secondary written sources, framing them in the context of these wider disciplines, comparing their evidence against theories relating to common pool resources, and extending my investigations beyond the human has allowed me to create a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of Rodborough's past than currently exists.

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<sup>278</sup> William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (Penguin, 2001); William Marshall, *The Rural Economy of Gloucestershire* (Redwood Burn Limited, 1979).

### 3.3.2: Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

Recording and analysing the stories of Rodborough's present-day human commoners (in this context encompassing all those with an interest in the Common) has resulted in an oral history that answers the call to pay attention to the 'cranny in the wall'.<sup>279</sup> This oral history is based on audio recordings of interviews and a focus group carried out during 2022 and 2023 with a variety of individuals, couples, and groups who have an interest in Rodborough Common. Carrying out interviews is a popular qualitative data-gathering method, favoured for its flexibility in terms of style and composition.<sup>280</sup> I chose to carry out semi-structured interviews, where 'the researcher has a list of questions, but there is scope for the participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated'.<sup>281</sup> Following this convention, the interviews carried out were conversational, but each was structured around the same broad set of questions (see Appendix 1). The interview questions were designed as a framework for a conversation between the researcher and the participant(s), rather than a prescriptive list of questions to which answers were always expected. Occasionally, depending on the participant(s) and their responses, some questions were omitted, and others were elaborated on. This was entirely according to the circumstances of the interview and at the discretion of the researcher, who guided the participant(s) but did not dictate entirely the subjects covered. Interviews were carried out with 'the goal of getting a participant to talk about *their* experiences and perspectives, and to capture *their* language and concepts', in this case concerning Rodborough Common and indeed

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<sup>279</sup> Linebaugh, 'Enclosures from the Bottom Up', *Radical History Review*, 108 (2010), pp. 11.27 (pp.25-26).

<sup>280</sup> Gerard Guthrie, *Basic Research Methods: An Entry to Social Science Research* (Sage, 2010), p. 113.

<sup>281</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 78.

commons in general.<sup>282</sup>

Braun and Clarke identify many potential pitfalls the researcher can encounter while carrying out interviews.<sup>283</sup> For example, I was particularly aware of the issue of power in interviews and the danger of stalling them by acting as the 'expert'.<sup>284</sup> Participants would sometimes ask questions in response to my questions, make statements such as 'you'll know more about this than I do', or ask me what others had said. The question 'what is your understanding of what a 'common' is in England and Wales?' was apt to draw a particularly unsure response from participants, who were worried about getting it 'wrong'. I sought to reassure them the questions were not a test of any kind, and that I was interested in their thoughts and understandings, rather than seeking 'correct' answers. Whilst it was not always possible to avoid imparting information in response to direct questions from participants, I endeavoured to avoid personal monologues or going into too much detail regarding my own experiences and knowledge. I was also aware of a desire to please me or say what might be perceived as the 'right' thing by some participants, particularly those I was already acquainted with. I sought to counter this by once again providing reassurance I was interested in a diversity of views rather than seeking 'correct' answers to my questions. Participants were also less willing to be forthcoming when asked to describe what the future of the Common may look like. This reluctance informed my approach to the Storying the Commons workshops described in Chapter 7.

The approach to participant recruitment and selection focused on purposive sampling, meaning participants were chosen 'on the basis that they will be

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<sup>282</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 77.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-93.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96

able to provide information-rich data to analyse'.<sup>285</sup> Participants were therefore largely recruited because they would be able to provide relevant and useful insights concerning the research aims, either because of their primary interest in the Common, or because of their association with it. There were three rounds of participant recruitment. In the first round, participants were gathered from my pre-existing acquaintances. In line with purposive sampling, I identified people who lived on or near the Common, who worked on it, or who were members of particular interest groups, such as mountain bikers and horse riders. Specific ethical considerations were due to this group, and I worked hard to ensure that participants were comfortable with this 'new' way of interacting with me as a researcher before they agreed to participate. To avoid blurring boundaries, I ensured that information they disclosed was not discussed in future social discourse.

Initial analysis of interviews completed in the first round suggested that in order to gather a diversity of perspectives I needed to speak to a wider range of stakeholders. I therefore widened participation, recruiting individuals who were strangers to me. These new participants were gathered from advertising on social media, taking recommendations from round one participants, and recruiting at a local history event. Through these efforts, I was able to include an expanded list of interest groups and fill some demographic gaps (specifically length of residence in the vicinity of the Common). In the final round, in order to widen the age-range of participants, I altered my approach, arranging a focus group with pupils from the local boys' grammar school, facilitated by their sociology teacher, to ensure that some younger voices were heard. My efforts to recruit a variety of participants resulted in me gathering views from people aged between thirteen and eighty-plus, and people who had lived in the area for

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<sup>285</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 56.

between eighteen months and eighty-plus years. Those I categorised as ‘special interest’ representatives were those whose use and needs of the Common were specific and, in some cases, conflicted with the specific needs of others. These special interests included professional dog walking, horse riding, mountain biking, and wider land access promotion.

Interviews, which lasted between thirty and ninety minutes, were carried out in different settings, including homes, pubs, cafés, workplaces, and a school. Conversations with interviewees and focus group participants yielded 18.5 hours of audio recordings captured on a digital recording device. To enable easier transcription, if interviews exceeded an hour in length, the recording was paused and restarted, as noted in the subsequent transcripts.

For analysis, participant descriptors were added to the data specifying age, length of residence, primary Common use, and interviewee type (see Appendix 2). In terms of sample size, Braun and Clarke advise that the involvement of between fifteen and thirty individuals is usually sufficient when searching for thematic patterns across data.<sup>286</sup> I followed this advice, interacting with twenty-nine individuals in interviews or focus groups. As previously stated, data could not be claimed to have reached saturation point, or the ‘point when additional data fails to generate new information’, but it was possible to derive clear patterns from the interviews.<sup>287</sup>

In addition to interviews that were conducted formally and went through the transcription and analysis process detailed below, I also spoke with several others involved in particular aspects of commons management and policy; including, the current general secretary of the OSS, a project manager involved in a previous

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<sup>286</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 55.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

engagement project on the Chiltern Commons, and a volunteer manager of a site elsewhere in the Cotswolds. These conversations followed the same consent process as the formalised interviews, but the data gathered has not been subjected to thematic analysis, due to its specific nature. These conversations were instead used to gain insight and knowledge and were therefore largely treated as field notes. In addition, to include more general views on the common from a larger number of users, I have drawn on the findings of a general visitors' survey carried out as part of the RCCP by ecological consultants Footprint Ecology in 2019.<sup>288</sup>

Despite attempts to include as wide a range of commoners as possible, one of the inherent weaknesses of the approach taken to participant recruitment and selection was that it depended on individuals willingly offering their time to talk about Rodborough Common, meaning those who participated largely had an existing interest in it. Individuals who might indulge in anti-social behaviour, illegal, or inconsiderate acts, or who were merely indifferent to the Common, were unlikely to offer their time to take part in my research. Additionally, although enquiries were not made into specific personal characteristics of participants, it was clear they largely, but not exclusively, comprised what Braun and Clarke term 'the usual suspects', who they describe as 'educated, white, middle-class, straight people'.<sup>289</sup> In part, this is reflective of Stroud itself, which is 96.4% white, 90.3% straight, with higher educational attainment and employment rates than the national average.<sup>290</sup> Seeking to address these gaps has

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<sup>288</sup> C. Panter and Z. Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', *Footprint Ecology*, 2019 <[https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final\\_redacted.pdf](https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final_redacted.pdf)> [accessed 6 September 2023].

<sup>289</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 58; Ibid. P. 58.

<sup>290</sup> 'Demographics of Stroud', *Varbes*, 2023 <<https://www.varbes.com/demographics/stroud-demographics>> [accessed 21 June 2023]; Alice Knight, 'Revealed: How Many People in Stroud Identify as LGBT+', *Stroud News and Journal*, 13th January <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/23240869.revealed-many-people-stroud-identify-lgbt/>> [accessed 21 June 2023]; 'Local Indicators for Stroud', *Office for National Statistics*, n.d

involved a multi-faceted approach. For example, during the interview process, I was alert to mentions of behaviour from participants they may consider acceptable, but that others may not. I also identified instances of the opposite behaviour where participants were the ones regulating others who they considered to be involved in a misdemeanour or other negative actions. Additionally, I studied social media posts and comments on new stories relating to the Common. These publicly available channels offered some insight into the kinds of conflicting views held about the Common, in particular regarding what behaviour or management interventions were widely considered acceptable. Finally, informal observations were made of those who were completely new to the Common and its wildlife when engaging with the Landscapes of the Lark (LotL) festival. This latter in part informs my auto-ethnography, which will be explained and explored fully in Chapter 7.

### *3.3.3: Interview Transcription and Analysis*

Once interviews were completed, digital recordings were transferred from the device to the hard drive of my computer. A broadly orthographic approach to transcription was followed to produce ‘a thorough record of the words spoken’ which would be suitable for thematic analysis.<sup>291</sup> Recordings were put into Microsoft Word and its automated feature was used to produce an initial ‘raw’ transcript. Using the ‘find and replace’ function, speakers were allocated a code which identified them as me (I = interviewer) or the interviewee. Each interviewee was allocated an identifying code according to their primary participant type (LM = land manager, R = resident, IG = interest group, C = conservationist, FG = focus group), followed by a unique numbered identifier, removing

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<<https://explore-local-statistics.beta.ons.gov.uk/areas/E07000082-stroud/indicators#economy>> [accessed 16 April 2025].

<sup>291</sup> Braun & Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 168.

all participant names. In Word, a basic clean-up of the transcript was then carried out which included removing unnecessary gaps between sentences and paragraphs, and extraneous speakers (e.g., hospitality venue staff). This transcript was copied and pasted into the online tool OTranscribe, along with the original recording, and corrections were made to words that had been incorrectly transcribed by the automated function.<sup>292</sup> Spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors were corrected only where the automated transcript did not reflect the original conversation. Repeated words were removed unless they were necessary for adding emphasis or understanding. Similarly, non-semantic sounds and short pauses were removed unless they were necessary to aid clarity of meaning. Where other identifiable individuals were discussed, full names were replaced with initials. Redactions were made in a few extraordinary circumstances where discussions, mostly with acquaintances, veered significantly away from the topic at hand. Where redactions were made, the reasons for this are made clear in the transcript. Cleaned transcripts were copied back into Word, deleted from OTranscribe, saved on the encrypted hard drive of my computer, and backed up on the Bath Spa University drive. Final transcripts comprise some 176,000 words and are available in the Bath Spa University Data Depository under a CC-BY Creative Commons Licence, as detailed in the project's data management plan.

Once the first batch of transcripts was complete, they were printed out to enable an initial close reading of the data to take place. The research questions were revisited, and initial areas of interest gleaned from the data were noted. Using a complete coding approach, where '*anything* and *everything* of interest or relevance to answering your research question, within your entire dataset' is noted, I began to

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<sup>292</sup> Elliot Bentley, *OTranscribe*, MuckRock Foundation, n.d <<https://otranscribe.com/>>.

develop codes relating to the research questions.<sup>293</sup> Codes were largely researcher rather than data derived, in that they 'go beyond the explicit content of the data [...] to identify *implicit* meanings'.<sup>294</sup> The exception to this was codes relating to specific issues participants identified on the Common, for example, littering or dog fouling, where the meaning was unambiguous and explicit. In total seventy-seven discrete codes were developed which were concise and expressly designed to capture the essence of meaning in the data. Excerpts of data relevant to the research questions were manually highlighted, and one or more shortened codes were applied (see Appendix 3 for an example). Code development was iterative throughout the process, with candidate codes sometimes removed, merged, or redefined to aid clarity. This iterative process continued throughout the analysis stage, and early scripts were revisited to ensure consistency of code application across interviews.

As codes were applied, I started to derive patterns in the data that allowed me to organise codes under concepts relating to the research questions. Via this process, candidate themes were identified, and as with codes, these were removed, merged or redefined as the coding process developed. Themes and codes were organised under broader concepts related to the research questions and chapters. This approach to coding and theme identification is suitable for inductive, interpretivist research where theory is driven from the data upwards. In total, 2,832 codes were applied to 1,850 excerpts. Full details of all excerpts are available on the Bath Spa data repository under a CC-BY Creative Commons licence, as detailed in the project's data management plan. Nine themes were developed and named following the guidance of Braun and Clarke who recommend using names that are accessible and communicative

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<sup>293</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 206.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

(see Appendix 4 for the full list of themes and codes).<sup>295</sup> The names used are designed to communicate certain ideas and cultural constructions, playing into the content and my analytic take on it and the preconceptions and cultural constructions of the reader. Many of the theme names play with ideas relating to nostalgic or nationalistic notions that are often applied to the British countryside, for example, *England's Green and Pleasant Land?* which is taken from the well-known hymn *Jerusalem*. Themes were associated with one or more of the research questions and each was allocated a letter, colour and code. The theme *Money Talks*, which identifies participant discussions of issues relating to capitalism, alternative systems, and other economic issues was included in initial analysis but excluded from the thesis on the basis that, whilst its focus is of interest to wider commons debates, it is not directly relevant to this thesis. In line with the primary aim of each chapter, all other themes, codes, and excerpts are discussed in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Once derived, the list of themes and codes was entered into the analysis software tool Dedoose.<sup>296</sup> After paper coding had been carried out, transcripts were also loaded into Dedoose, paper coding was transferred, and a sense check of the original coding was carried out. I also re-read the data in detail at this stage and identified and coded any additional quotes I had not originally picked up. Similarly, if I thought a manually coded excerpt was no longer needed, I excluded it after careful consideration. At this stage, an overview sense check of all coding was completed, having examined whether codes were being consistently applied and whether any transcripts needed to be revisited. Where necessary, codes from previously entered transcripts were examined in detail.

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<sup>295</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, p. 260.

<sup>296</sup> 'Dedoose Version 7.0.23', *SocioCultural Research Consultants*, 2016 <[www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)> .

Once a batch of transcripts had been processed, I sorted excerpts using the analysis function in Dedoose, looking for commonly occurring aspects. Due to the varying length of interviews completed and the theoretical framework of this project, a quantitative analysis of codes was not relevant. Instead, the primary approach to analysis was to re-read the data on a code-by-code basis, examining commonalities and differences between participants concerning particular codes and themes. Some quantitative analysis was carried out, however, and showed some interesting aspects which will be explored in the relevant chapters. All analysis outputs are available in the Bath Spa University Data Depository under a CC-BY Creative Commons Licence, as detailed in the project's data management plan.

### *3.3.4: Ecology/Conservation Biology/Biosemiotics*

Whilst I have not carried out original ecological research specifically for this thesis, I have accessed and used details of ecological surveys made of Rodborough Common in 2017 and 2021.<sup>297</sup> The former comprises a drone survey of footpaths and a vegetation survey of prevalence, species composition, and sward height on narrow and wider paths found on the Common. I was not involved in the design or implementation of the 2017 survey, but I was involved in the design, implementation, and reporting of the 2021 survey as part of my professional practice with SVP. In 2021, we repeated the 2017 narrow paths vegetation survey, expanded the widening paths survey, carried out a fixed-point photography exercise, and included a transect and citizen science survey

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<sup>297</sup> 'Reports on Aerial and Botanical Surveys Conducted to Monitor Pathway Erosion on Rodborough Common (SAC)', *Stroud Valleys Project*, 2017  
 <[https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/3ntjyfap/rodboroughcommon\\_sac\\_patherosionreport\\_svp\\_dr\\_final\\_march2019\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/3ntjyfap/rodboroughcommon_sac_patherosionreport_svp_dr_final_march2019_lowres.pdf)> [accessed 16 April 2025]; 'Stroud Valleys Project: Rodborough Common Footpath, Botanical and Skylark Surveys', *Stroud Valleys Project*, 2021,  
 <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607bc3d09f6f9a4d161b5da2/t/616ed0e7817ecd546af5bd42/1634652394061/Stroud+Valleys+Project+Rodborough+Common+Surveys+Report+2021.pdf>> [accessed 8 February 2024].

of skylark breeding territories. Both the 2017 and 2021 survey objectives were to understand the impact of recreational use on Rodborough Common's biodiversity. My aim in this thesis is to expand the conclusions of Rodborough's ecological surveys, recognising them as broader sources of multi-species narrativity. By accessing data relating to abundance, presence, or species composition, I attempt to listen to and understand Rodborough Common as a site of multi-species communication.

This approach supports my aims to expand bioculturalism beyond the human and to incorporate elements of biosemiotics, which recognise the potential for cross-species communication via the observation of biological processes.<sup>298</sup> By accessing and participating in ecological surveying on Rodborough Common, I have undertaken the kind of close attention and listening required for recognition and amplification of the voices of other-than-humans.<sup>299</sup> This has taken place alongside my research for this thesis, allowing me to recognise and incorporate multiple types of knowledges. The observation of the behaviour of other species, their reactions to certain multi-species interactions, and relationships of cooperation and harm found on the Common allows the voice of the other-than-human to be foregrounded.

This manifests itself in several ways in this thesis. Throughout, there is general recognition and celebration of the contribution of other-than-humans to the co-creation of Rodborough's habitats and *genius loci*; its distinctive atmosphere and the spirit of this place. The agency and independent culture of multiple species, including domesticated animals, free-living animals, and plants are also acknowledged and appreciated. The vital and underlying contribution of the Earth others located in deep

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<sup>298</sup> Timo Maran, 'Biosemiotization of Matter' in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 141- 156 (p. 141).

<sup>299</sup> 'What is Animals in the Room?', *Animals in the Room*, 2024 <<https://animalsintheroom.org/>> [accessed 28 November 2024].

time is investigated and pushed to the forefront via the presentation of an environmental history of Rodborough Common in Section 4.1. In Chapter 5, I provide details of the importance of the Common to the local survival of particular species of other-than-human and detail how symbiotic relationships, between land, elements, , plants, and human and non-human animals are enmeshed in these processes. The cultural contribution of other-than-humans to the construction of Rodborough's *genius loci* is examined in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7, I explore how my close interactions with skylarks during the process of surveying allowed me to hear beyond their song, enabling a co-created programme of public and ecological engagement; the LotL festival.

### *3.3.5: Auto-ethnography and Storytelling*

As outlined previously, I am both personally and professionally entangled with Rodborough Common, a connection that has strengthened and expanded in complexity since the start of this PhD project. The journey I have taken during this project simultaneously as a practitioner and researcher has been cyclical, with one position feeding into the other and vice versa. Each role has been enriched by the other, with my experiences of practical conservation and public engagement informing my research and, in turn, my research guiding my practice. In this way, I am very much part of the story that I am seeking to tell. Recognising that 'methods don't just describe worlds, but make worlds', I have made use of the techniques associated with auto-ethnography to enhance the contribution my positionality makes to the academic and practical value of this thesis.<sup>300</sup> The use of auto-ethnography 'allows researchers to insert their personal

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<sup>300</sup> Michelle Bastian and others, 'Introduction: More-than-Human Participatory Research: Contexts, Challenges, Possibilities, in *Participatory Research in More-Than-Human Worlds*, ed. by Michelle Bastian and others (Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-18, p. 2.

and subjective interpretation into the research process' in a methodologically sound and valid way.<sup>301</sup> To move beyond self-storying to relevant and valid content, I needed to collate and treat my data in much the same way as all other data collected. In other words, to treat it 'with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes', and focus on 'interconnectivity of self and others'.<sup>302</sup> 'Auto-ethnography seeks to connect the personal to the cultural and locate both the 'self' [...] and others within a social context' making it a suitable method for the circumstances and aims of this project.<sup>303</sup> In particular, using auto-ethnography allowed me to avoid claiming to tell the stories of others on their behalf, whilst applying academic rigour and relationality to my work. For this study, I was keen to ensure I extended this relationality beyond human social contexts to encompass wider ecological ones with other humans and other species. In this way, I hope to acknowledge those who are 'traditionally excluded from dominant knowledge-making processes, in particular other-than-humans'.<sup>304</sup>

At the start of my PhD journey, I began collecting data in the form of field notes. These took various written forms and included reflections on meetings I had attended, activities carried out both on and off the Common, and snippets of useful information I came across in casual settings such as walks and talks, or events I was involved with. These entailed activities with people of all ages, including children and young adults. Where children or young adults were directly involved in my research, their explicit consent was sought and gained, alongside that of their parent or carer. Incidental interactions as part of my professional practice were guided by the contract

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<sup>301</sup> Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Routledge, 2016), p. 45.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 49; p. 54.

<sup>303</sup> Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson 'Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other, Self/Culture, Self/Politics and Selves/Future' in *Handbook of Autoethnography* ed. by Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2016), pp. 281-299, p. 283.

<sup>304</sup> Michelle Bastian and others, 'Introduction: More-than-Human Participatory Research, p. 4.

between my employer and those adults responsible for the care of the children (i.e., schools, clubs, families attending events). I subject to an enhanced DBS check and school, youth/children's clubs and my employer's protocols and safeguards were always followed. From an ethical point of view, I ensured that I had permission from my employer, the Chair, and other members of the MRCAC to record and include data and observations made during my professional and voluntary interactions. I have also included some data from social media interactions and comments from online forums. These are publicly available online and the names and 'handles' of individual contributions have been removed where quoted. Although I viewed and have on occasion referenced relevant posts, I did not contribute to them in any way or engage in any debates. All references to others have been anonymised unless their involvement in activities or events is a matter of public record. At all points in the recording, analysis, and presentation of my experiences, I sought to carry out an ethical balancing act that 'attends to others carefully and respectfully'.<sup>305</sup>

Chapter 7, which details the LotL festival, and the Storying the Commons (StC) workshops, is the primary location for much of my auto-ethnographic reflections. Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, I have, however, maintained a self-reflective stance, and some field notes are presented within the text of other chapters, where appropriate. At all points throughout the project, I have tried to be concerned with and cognisant of the needs and wants of other species, and how these might be best represented. When designing LotL in particular, I was aware of the potential harm that could be caused to other species via their unwitting, non-consensual participation in the project. Gillespie advises of the need to undertake a process of self-

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<sup>305</sup> Grace A. Giorgio, 'Reflections on Writing Through Memory in Autoethnography' in *Handbook of Autoethnography* ed. by Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2016), pp. 406-424, p. 414.

reflexivity to interrogate our complicity in relations of harm.<sup>306</sup> My reflections on this aspect are included in Chapter 7. Attempts to consider and expand my attention to the independent wants and needs of other species are therefore most evident through the design and implementation of these two sub-projects. I also used a variety of storytelling methods, which I detail in Chapter 7, to encourage a deeper, more considered interaction between humans and others.<sup>307</sup>

### **3.4: Ethical Considerations**

Project ethics clearance was obtained in December 2022. It encompassed all aspects of my study, as outlined above, namely, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and collection of field notes and recollections as part of my professional and voluntary activities. All participants in semi-structured interviews were given a copy of the approved project information sheet before the interviews. Consent forms were completed and signed in paper or electronic format before interviews were conducted. Consent for participation in the study by under-18s was gained electronically from parents/carers and participants. Copies of all consents/assents are filed with the researcher. As they contain names of participants, these are not generally available but can be viewed by members of the examination panel, or other interested Bath Spa Post-Graduate Research Management Committee members on request. The consent of the members of the MRCAC was gained and minuted in March 2022 and a letter of support was obtained from the Chief Executive Officer of SVP. This was submitted to the Ethics Committee alongside my ethics application. All conditions of the submitted and agreed

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<sup>306</sup> Kathryn Gillespie, 'For Multispecies Autoethnography', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5.4 (2022), pp. 2098-2111 (p. 2107).

<sup>307</sup> Kevan Manwaring, 'Stepping Through the Gate' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 304-315 (p. 302).

data management plan have been met.

### **3.5: Summary**

As the above indicates, the multi-disciplinary nature of this project has involved drawing on methods from a range of subject areas. Both the aims of this study and the current environmental crisis demand such an approach, as well as warranting an innovative and reflexive methodology. The study is consistently and firmly located in a rigorous theoretical framework with an unambiguous ontology and epistemology. The methods chosen were deployed consistently to support the collation of contextualised, relational data from the ground upwards. Perhaps most importantly, they also allow a multi-species approach to be naturally and sensibly adopted. The research for this thesis has therefore been carried out ethically, consistently, and with due academic rigour.

I will now present the outcomes of this research, beginning in Chapter 4 by exploring how historical and contemporary stories of the commons might inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species sharing, reciprocity, and kinship.

## 4. Our Common Home: Historical and Contemporary Stories of the Commons

Far spread the moorey ground a level scene  
Bespread with rush and one eternal green  
That never felt the rage of blundering plough  
Though centurys wreathed springs blossoms on its brow  
Still meeting plains that stretched them far away  
In uncheckt shadows of green brown and grey  
John Clare, *The Mores*

In these opening lines of *The Mores*, John Clare paints an idyllic picture of the land as open, eternal, green, and swathed in spring blossoms.<sup>308</sup> In this work, he is, of course, recollecting a past landscape, one that predates the era of English parliamentary enclosure. Such lands are now only found in rare pockets, often in marginal spaces. Rodborough Common is one such place.

Following on from the introductory chapters which made the case for this study and explained the methodology and methods used, this chapter examines how historical and contemporary stories of the commons might inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species sharing, reciprocity, and kinship.

I begin to tell these stories by giving a more fulsome introduction to Rodborough Common, tracing its journey from deep time and examining the origins of its own ‘eternal green’.<sup>309</sup> In line with the ambition to tell a wider set of stories of the

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<sup>308</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, ‘The Mores’, ‘Poems of the Helpston Period’ in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 167).

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167

commons, using an expanded definition of the archives, I show how Rodborough is founded on millennia of multi-species co-creative processes, tracking its environmental history to the present day. This serves to situate the Common, and its multi-species commoners, giving space and attention to different stories and enabling a decentering of the human by locating human stories in their wider temporal and spatial contexts. It also responds to Smith's call to go beyond the written archive, accepting wider sources as valid sites of narrativity.<sup>310</sup> Opening the research findings chapters in this way sets my intention to present Rodborough's multi-species commoners relationally and equitably.

I briefly explain how a 'common' was and is defined in England, before exploring Rodborough during the medieval period. I then present the evolving management of Rodborough Common through the centuries, followed by a comparison of this evolution against the Ostrom common pool resource management principles discussed in Sections 2.2 and 3.2. This leads to an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of localised over centralised governance, followed by the presentation of the first of my interview themes: *What's YOUR Problem?* This is the first of the oral histories presented in this thesis and it shares participants' views about the issues the Common faces, despite the protections afforded by its long tradition of careful management. Following that, I present the analysis of the theme *Your Common Needs YOU!* which reflects on who is responsible for caring for the Common.

This chapter begins to answer the call, outlined in the literature review, for forensic, relational studies of common land, which allow us to learn lessons from past commoners, apply their learnings to current-day situations, and inform future

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<sup>310</sup> James L. Smith, 'Anxieties of Access: Remembering as a Lake', *Environmental Humanities*, 13.1 (2021), pp. 245-261, (p. 255).

plans. In this way, the efforts of past commoners are acknowledged, and the benefits we gain from these in the present day can be ‘paid forward’ to future generations.

The chapter concludes by summarising how stories of the commons can inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species cooperation and kinship.

#### **4.1: Rodborough Common’s Environmental History**

A more fulsome introduction to Rodborough Common involves a delve into its dim and distant past. The Common forms part of the spiny backbone of western England, now known as the Cotswolds, whose story began in the Jurassic period, between 210 and 140 million years ago.<sup>311</sup> At that time, the area of land now known as Rodborough Common was underwater, at the bottom of a warm, shallow sea that was home to countless sea creatures, living, breeding, and dying according to their individual rhythms and imperatives.<sup>312</sup> Global upheavals, including a major shift of its tectonic plates, carried this warm seabed from the equator to the north, heaving layers of deceased and fossilised sea creatures upwards to form the Cotswold’s rocky spine (Fig. 4.1.1).<sup>313</sup> Rodborough Common is, therefore, built on the lives and deaths of millions of others who lived in the distant past, brought to the surface by global geological and meteorological processes that took place over many thousands of years. When we walk on Rodborough Common, we are treading on over 150 million years of more-than-human labour and agency whose limestone presence sits just below the shallow soil.

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<sup>311</sup> ‘Cotswolds Geology’, *Gloucestershire Geology Trust*, n.d  
<[http://www.glosgeotrust.org.uk/cots\\_geology.shtml](http://www.glosgeotrust.org.uk/cots_geology.shtml)> [accessed 1 February 2024], para. 1.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.

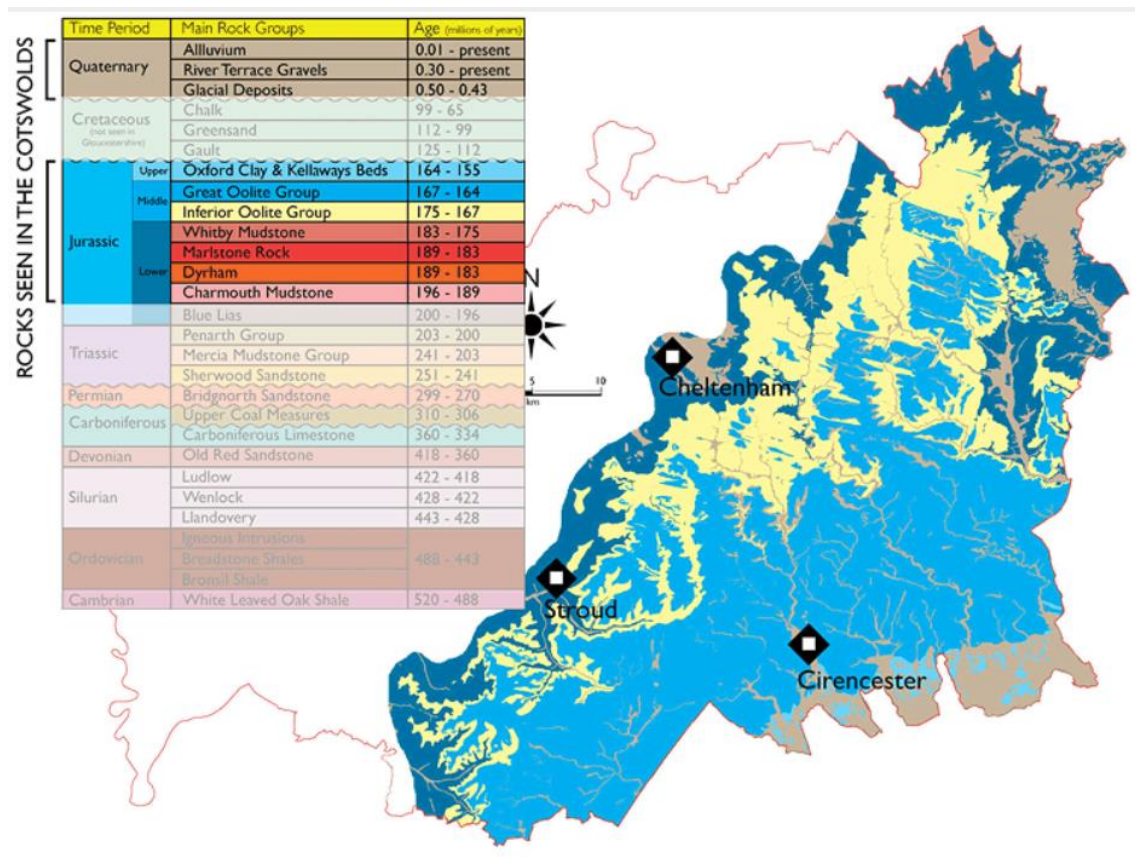


Figure 4.1.1: Map of Cotswolds geology  
Source: Gloucestershire Geology Trust. Reproduced with permission

Across the ages, the Earth has been through many periods of vast temperature fluctuation, including periods of complete and no ice coverage.<sup>314</sup> We are currently in an interglacial period that began with the retreat of the glaciers around twelve thousand years ago.<sup>315</sup> During this icy retreat, Rodborough Common began to take a form that is more familiar to the modern eye. As the ice departed, and the climate gradually warmed, trees began to colonise Britain, with species such as lime, hazel, oak, and elm developing in the South.<sup>316</sup> Wooded areas would have been interspersed with clearings grazed by large herbivores.<sup>317</sup> Human hunter-gatherers would occasionally

<sup>314</sup> Ian Francis, Stuart Holmes and Bruce Yardley, *Lake District: Landscape and Geology* (The Crowood Press, 2022), p. 23.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>316</sup> Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020), pp. 68-69.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

have been seen, but until larger settlements of humans arrived from the south, trees largely dominated the landscape.<sup>318</sup> Rodborough Common would have been no exception to this scenario, although its windy position and shallow, limestone-underlaid soils may have resulted in slower-growing, smaller trees here than those found in the neighbouring Severn Vale.<sup>319</sup>

The reign of the trees in southern Britain was to last for some eight thousand years or more until larger numbers of human settlers arrived and began to clear the land for agricultural cultivation.<sup>320</sup> On the exposed slopes of the Cotswold Scarp the trees likely held dominion for longer, with widespread clearances not taking place until the middle Iron Age (300-100 BCE).<sup>321</sup> As a result, Rodborough's neolithic settlers (4000-2000 BCE) would likely have been walking through, by now ancient, woodland rather than enjoying the fine views of the Severn Vale and Wales that we see today (Fig. 4.1.2).<sup>322</sup>



Figure 4.1.2: View from Rodborough Common over the Severn Vale  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

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<sup>318</sup> Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>319</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, August 2022.

<sup>320</sup> Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, p. 16.

<sup>321</sup> Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Gloucestershire* (Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1987), p. 16.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

Despite archaeological indications of an enclosure at Rodborough dating from the medieval period, there is no evidence of large-scale shared arable agriculture being practised here. Instead, the Common remained largely wooded until at least the sixteenth century.<sup>323</sup> Whether the enclosure was built to keep something inside protected, or conversely to prevent straying onto the neighbouring land, is unclear as excavations are incomplete and the evidence is contradictory.<sup>324</sup> Irrespective, human settlers lived sustainably alongside their sylvan neighbours for many centuries, harvesting the limbs and branches of the ‘custom wood’ trees, allowing domesticated pigs to feast on their nuts, and grazing animals in the woodland pastures.<sup>325</sup> These humans understood very well that the trees could give a certain amount and no more, and so the harvest of wood was closely controlled and heavily monitored.<sup>326</sup>

In the custom wood, new members of the woodland were nurtured and cared for over many thousands of years so they could take the place of the dying and the fallen and ensure the woodland’s regeneration. Due to an increasing number of humans harvesting wood and greater numbers of sheep being grazed this balanced arrangement came to an end.<sup>327</sup> As sheep nibbled the ground to the quick and old trees fell and were not replaced, so the custom wood began slowly to disappear. Humans continued to harvest timber, but the trees grew fewer and farther between.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> C. Parry, ‘An Earthwork on Rodborough Common, Gloucestershire: A Review of the Evidence’, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 114 (1996), pp. 143-157.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Note: Excavations from the 1930s and 1950s have suggested differing dates for the enclosure, including Iron Age and Roman. Housing on the site prevents further excavations, but anecdotally, finds suggesting Roman occupation have been unearthed in modern domestic gardens (Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, March 2023).

<sup>325</sup> Charles Ernest Watson, ‘The Minchinhampton Custumal and its Place in the Study of the Manor’, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 61 (1932), pp. 203-384 (p. 260).

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>327</sup> N. M Herbert, ‘A Minchinhampton Custumal, c.1180’, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 93 (1974), pp. 181-182.

<sup>328</sup> Watson, ‘The Minchinhampton Custumal’, p. 361.

When over-thinned in this way beech trees, which likely predominated on these shallow-soiled slopes, are prone to fall in a self-perpetuating cycle of loss.<sup>329</sup> Rodborough's geographical position on the high ground overlooking the Severn Vale made the remaining trees vulnerable to adverse weather. Two major storms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought about the demise of the remains of the custom wood.<sup>330</sup> The final trees succumbed and fell, their traces now only visible in the dips and mounds of the tree throws they left behind, or in the occasional out-of-space, out-of-time woodland flower that still shows on the Common each spring (Fig. 4.1.3).<sup>331</sup>



Figure 4.1.3: Wood anemones flowering on open grassland, Rodborough Common  
Source: Deborah Roberts © Deborah Roberts. Reproduced with permission

As the old order broke down pioneers came to Rodborough Common. Taking advantage of the open areas created by weather, sheep, and humans, limestone-loving grassland species, including pyramidal orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), pasque

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<sup>329</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes of conversation with aboriculturalist*, March 2024.

<sup>330</sup> Note: The 1607 Bristol Channel Flood, or Bristol Channel Tsunami and the Great Storm of 1703.

<sup>331</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes of Archaeological Walk with Professor Timothy Darvill*, August 2022.

flowers (*Pulsatilla vulgaris*), upright brome (*Bromus erectus*), wild marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*) and wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) expanded their range. They brought with them myriad other settlers too: invertebrates such as grasshoppers, beetles, butterflies, and moths all arrived to take advantage of this newly hospitable land.

That domesticated animals were also present was a bonus for these free-living others. Cattle mimicked the large herbivores of the past, processing the grasses and flowers for the benefit of future generations of the same. Cow dung was recognised as a valuable commodity by Rodborough's humans, who guarded in much the same way as their forebears had once protected its trees.<sup>332</sup>

The abundance of wildflowers and grasses and their accompanying crowds of invertebrates gave life to others in their turn, including birds such as the much-loved skylark. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the limestone bedrock was so commercially prized that quarrying caused an accelerating loss of the grassland habitat.<sup>333</sup> In 1937 butterflies indirectly stepped in to prevent further damage: the landowner at that time was a well-known entomologist who offered Rodborough Common to the National Trust, in part to prevent further destruction of this vibrant habitat.<sup>334</sup>

Rodborough's ecological history can be read, to an extent, from the land today. As a largely undisturbed area of 'unimproved' grassland, Rodborough Common reveals to the careful observer the complex acts of more-than-human co-creation required for its evolution into its present-day form. Dynamic interactions between plants, fungi, humans, other-than-humans animals, geology, and weather have all contributed to the

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<sup>332</sup> 'Proceedings of Nailsworth Police Court', *Stroud News*, 22 July 1921, GRO D2219 1/9.

<sup>333</sup> Lapage, Norris, Sons and Saleby of Stroud, Solicitors, 1609-1944 Collection, *Court papers including schedule of common fines, lists of chief rents and quit rents, and documents relating to common rights, printed regulations, 1739-1876*, GRO, D846 II/I.

<sup>334</sup> J.V Smith, *Where the Cow is King* (The Choir Press, 2001), p. 73.

evolution of Rodborough's habitats. These symbiotic and co-creative relationships can be seen in every biotic and non-biotic interaction on the Common. Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than in the lifecycle of large blue butterflies (*Phengaris arion*) who were reintroduced to the Common in 2019 after a 150-year absence.<sup>335</sup>

Rodborough's original ancestors, now found in its limestone rock, provide ideal growing conditions for the wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) favoured by large blues seeking to lay their eggs. Large blues in their larval stage will feast on the flower-heads of these delicate herbs until their fourth stage of development, at which point this rather picturesque tale takes a rather gruesome turn.<sup>336</sup> Dropping to the ground, large blue larvae will then imitate the grubs of the red ant (*Myrmica sabuleti*) whose familial concern causes them to take the large blue into the safety of their nests. They prove to be poor guests, returning this favour by fattening up on the offspring of their unwitting hosts, before emerging in their adult form. Cattle play a vital role in this process too; their grazing maintains ideal conditions for wild thyme to thrive and the action of their hoofs 'poaches' the ground, which makes ant nest building easier. Humans are not absent from this story either, directing the cattle to the areas where the large blue is most at home, carefully keeping scrub at bay, and monitoring the health of this rare population.

This assiduous care supports other rare invertebrates on Rodborough too, including the rugged oil beetle (*Meloe rugosus*). The fascinating lifecycle of this species, which involves hatched larvae 'hitching a ride' on the backs of solitary mining bees, getting off when they reach their nests, and feeding on the pollen stores and bee larvae

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<sup>335</sup> 'Large Blue and Other Rare Insects Thriving on Grasslands Restored as Part of RES Project', *Royal Entomological Society*, 2025 < <https://www.royensoc.co.uk/news/large-blue-and-other-rare-insects-thriving-on-grasslands-restored-as-part-of-res-project/> > [accessed 12 November 2025].

<sup>336</sup> 'Large Blue', *Butterfly Conservation*, n.d < <https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/large-blue> > [accessed: 12 November 2025].

they find there, also encapsulates the wonder of life found in every corner of this special place.<sup>337</sup>

The social and economic history of the area is also influenced strongly by its geography and geology. Rodborough Common's neighbouring valleys and rivers were perfect sites for the mills that processed sheep's fleeces and wove them into scarlet cloth that marched on the backs of British soldiers across the globe.<sup>338</sup> The Common is hemmed in on either side by the River Frome and its tributaries, and the Stroud Valleys and their surrounding hills result in a lot of water flowing regularly down into the river. This regular and relatively predictable flow enabled the early development of industry in the Stroud area.<sup>339</sup> Water mills are in evidence as early as 1300, with Watson estimating that there were at least eight in the valleys surrounding the commons in this period (Fig. 4.1.4).<sup>340</sup>

Another factor in the development of the cloth trade was the abundant availability of fuller's earth which could be mined locally due to the region's geology.<sup>341</sup> With all these factors in place, the number of mills in the Stroud Valleys grew exponentially, and in contrast with the largely agricultural community of 1300, by 1545 many of Rodborough's human residents were employed in the cloth-making industry.<sup>342</sup> They were not, however, divorced from their means of subsistence, being still largely reliant for their livelihoods on other-than-human forces.

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<sup>337</sup> 'Rugged Oil Beetle', *Buglife*, n.d <https://www.buglife.org.uk/bugs/bug-directory/rugged-oil-beetle/> [accessed 12 November 2025].

<sup>338</sup> Stephen Mills 'The Origins, Development, Decline and Reuse of the Cloth Mills of the Stroud Valleys of Gloucestershire' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Leicester, 1997) <[https://figshare.le.ac.uk/articles/thesis/The\\_origins\\_development\\_decline\\_and\\_reuse\\_of\\_the\\_cloth\\_mills\\_of\\_the\\_Stroud\\_Valleys\\_of\\_Gloucestershire/10166669?file=18322295](https://figshare.le.ac.uk/articles/thesis/The_origins_development_decline_and_reuse_of_the_cloth_mills_of_the_Stroud_Valleys_of_Gloucestershire/10166669?file=18322295)> [accessed 16 January 2025], p. 4.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1; p. 4.

<sup>340</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 324.

<sup>341</sup> 'Textile Heritage', *Stroudwater Textile Trust*, n.d <<https://www.stroudtextiletrust.org.uk/history-textile-heritage>> [accessed 22 January 2025].

<sup>342</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 371.

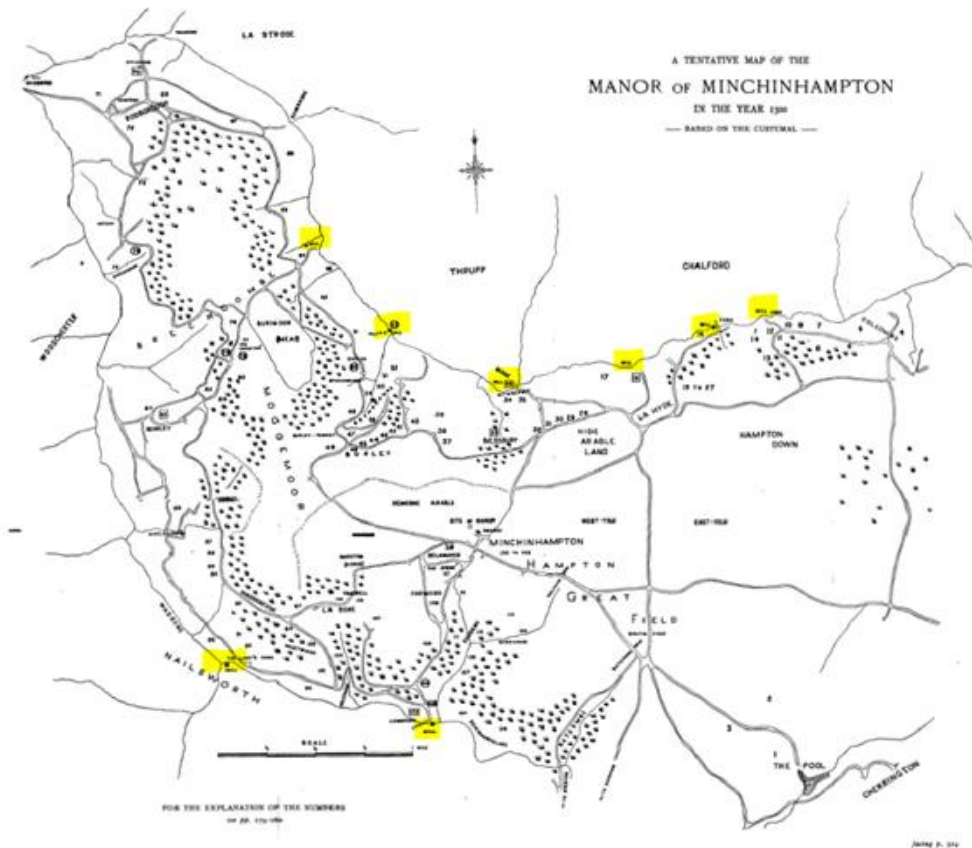


Figure 4.1.4: A tentative map of the Manor of Minchinhampton c. 1300 with added highlighting showing the location of riverside water mills  
 Source: Watson, *The Minchinhampton Custumal*. Reproduced with permission of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

In times past, the Common would have been a busy, industry-supporting hub, a convergence that is still evident today. Former quarries can be seen in the colloquially named ‘dilly dumps’ beloved of sledgers and mountain bikers (Fig. 4.1.5). As the scars of former industry are slowly erased, micro habitats are created at these former industrial sites, creating ideal breeding grounds for rare species such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly.



Figure 4.1.5: Evidence of former quarries on Rodborough Common  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

Despite changes in flora, fauna, and human activity, the geological and geopolitical boundaries of the Common have remained largely unchanged for at least 700 years. Fig. 4.1.6 shows the parameters of the Common as they are today; in the first edition Ordnance Survey map from the middle of the nineteenth century; and in a tentative map based on the 1300 custumal. As these three maps demonstrate, Rodborough Common's size, location, primary transport routes, and boundaries have barely changed in the past seven centuries. The enclosed fields shown in the Southeast corner of the modern maps in Fig. 4.1.6 are areas that have probably never been part of the Common, being bounded by ditches and banks dating back possibly to the Iron Age. Rodborough Common's immunity from widespread enclosure and the roots of this success are likely to be due to a combination of resistance to enclosures in the demesne woods, the assiduous care of generations of commoners, and its geographical and geological features, both of which make it largely unsuitable for arable or other

intensive farming uses, but profitable from a quarrying perspective. I will go on to explore each of these aspects in more detail in this thesis.



Figure 4.1.6: Rodborough Common today, in the nineteenth century and c.1300  
Current map and nineteenth century map source: [www.kypwest.org.uk/](http://www.kypwest.org.uk/). Reproduced with permission of Know Your Place, Gloucestershire. 1300 Map Source: Watson, *The Minchinhampton Custumal*. Reproduced with permission of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

As this section of the thesis demonstrates, Rodborough's evolution, alongside its sense of timelessness, is due to the work of more-than-humans over countless generations. Its survival to the present day, in its largely ancient form, is attributable to a complex mix of geography, geology, social, environmental, and political factors; a story of co-dependent human and other-than-human co-creation. Its geography, geology, and the complex mix of species they support, have led directly to the human interactions it has experienced and vice versa. One leads to the other, in a self-supporting cycle.

By beginning the presentation of my research findings with this story of mutually supportive co-creation, rooted in deep time, the role of human actors and the agency of other-than-humans can be put in relative proportion, setting the tone for the remainder of this thesis. By locating ourselves within a broad spectrum of past and

present commoners, we can envisage future commoners, of all species, in turn. As we ask what the future of commons might be, the ability to see ourselves as one link in a long chain of commons-dwellers allows us to take the necessary imaginative leap needed to care for the Common with future generations in mind. For humans, this future is necessarily entangled with the past and the construction of the land as a 'common'. This entanglement brings particular considerations to bear and has undoubtedly played its part in Rodborough's survival. To explore the role this construction might play in current-day commons relationships it is important to answer the fundamental question: just what is 'common land'?

## **4.2: What is a Common?**

In order to tell the stories of the commons, it is important to understand their historical and current human usages and definitions. The definition of a 'common' in England and Wales has evolved over the centuries. Broadly, common land comprises areas of heath, down, grassland, or woodland previously classified as 'wastes' or 'commons' under the English medieval feudal system.<sup>343</sup> Historically these areas were communally managed, and their resources shared according to customary practices. Today, alongside their agricultural use, they are also likely to be areas for recreation, where members of the public can exercise their limited right to roam.

The legal basis of commons goes back to the 1217 Charter of the Forest, cousin of the more famous *Magna Carta*, which was designed to limit monarchical land grabs and protect the 'freemen' who used the forests (forests having a broader meaning

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<sup>343</sup> 'Frequently Asked Questions: What is a Common?', *The Open Spaces Society*, n.d  
<<https://www.oss.org.uk/frequently-asked-questions-commons/>> [accessed 14 January 2025].

at this time than it has today) for subsistence.<sup>344</sup> This charter stated that benefits the monarch allowed to his Lords and barons must be shared with others in turn.<sup>345</sup> The 1235 Statute of Merton did allow lords to enclose areas of land for their exclusive use, but only if sufficient land remained for their tenants to subsist.<sup>346</sup> Laws relating to commons are therefore deeply rooted in and based on centuries of communal use and customary practice, undertaken by individuals with prescribed rights and responsibilities, known as ‘commoners’. As I have already touched on, the commons are tied up in what Clayden describes as ‘legal thickets’ reflecting their complexity and longevity.<sup>347</sup> Whilst there are a variety of surviving common land types in England, for this thesis I will focus on areas traditionally associated with medieval systems of agriculture, specifically lowland (i.e., less than 200m above sea level) commons such as Rodborough. I also expand the definition of today’s ‘commoner’ to all those of all species who use, work on, or visit such spaces.

Customary practices that underpin commoners’ rights dating back to at least the Saxon period (410-1066 CE) were formalised after the Norman Conquest in 1066.<sup>348</sup> These rights ‘are in all probability older than the modern conception of private property in land’.<sup>349</sup> As defined in law, they primarily cover six areas, although there are specific rights on some commons; for example, those in coastal areas fall outside these definitions. The right of *pasturage* allows commoners to graze a specific number of farmed other-than-humans, including ‘beasts’ (which usually refers to larger other-

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<sup>344</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (University of California Press, 2008), p. 42.

<sup>345</sup> James Clark Holt, *The Magna Carta* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 319.

<sup>346</sup> Paul Clayden, *Our Common Land: The Law and History of Commons and Village Greens* (The Open Spaces Society 1992), p. 1.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>348</sup> Graham Bathe, *Common Land* (Pitkin Publishing, 2015), pp. 2-5.

<sup>349</sup> Laurence Dudley Stamp and William George Hoskins, *The Common Lands of England and Wales* (Collins, 1963), p. 6.

than-humans such as cattle, horses, or donkeys), sheep, goats, or geese.<sup>350</sup> *Estovers* allows the harvesting of wood and other plant materials for fuel, bedding or building repairs.<sup>351</sup> *Turbary* is the right to cut peat for fuel, whilst *pannage* covers feeding pigs on beechmast and acorns in woodland.<sup>352</sup> *Piscary* is the right to take fish from rivers, lakes and ponds. Finally, *rights in the soil* allow sand, gravel, marl, walling stone, or lime to be extracted from below the ground.<sup>353</sup> At Rodborough, the lucrative *rights in the soil* were afforded exclusively to the landowner, allowing them to make money directly from the land, even whilst other common rights were being exercised.<sup>354</sup> In addition to legal rights, unofficial customary rights made commons important places for wider communities over the years. A landowner's right to do as they please (to an extent) with the land they own is therefore curtailed on commons. While landowners may have exclusive rights to quarry for example, or can sell or transfer the land to another, commoners hold rights over the land's usage which effectively constrains the activities landowners can undertake. Where the rights of commoners and the rights of landowners conflicted, this could (and does) cause conflict as demonstrated in Section 4.4.

The type and number of rights for each common were originally determined by its carrying capacity (i.e., its ability to support a particular number of farmed other-than-humans), as well as the land holdings, status, and tenancies of commoners. They are also specific to that common's location, geology, prevailing habitats, and soils. In lexicology rather than law, Linebaugh reminds us that the act of

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<sup>350</sup> Bathe, *Common Land*, p. 6.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>354</sup> GRO, D846 II/I.

‘commoning’ is ‘independent [...] of the temporality of the law and state’.<sup>355</sup> Commoning in this context is instead concerned with the acts of communal co-creation, sharing, and cooperation of labour that shape and react to the land and to the influences of all commons dwellers. Traditionally, commoners shared land, resources, and a binding culture; a ‘neighbourliness [that] involved reciprocity, or give and take, between those who were effective equals’.<sup>356</sup> Commoning was therefore an intrinsic part of English society for centuries.

Changes in use, centuries of enclosure, and poor legislative protection have drastically reduced the area of land classified as common from an estimated 30% of England in the sixteenth century to around 3% today.<sup>357</sup> Many traditional rights now exist only in theory instead of practice, as archaic indications of past habitats and uses. For example, whilst rights of *estovers*, *pannage*, and *pasturage* are still registered on Rodborough, only the latter is still actively pursued.<sup>358</sup> Here, as in many other places, use has evolved in the last 70 or so years, with the emphasis switching from agriculture to recreation and conservation. Nonetheless, agriculture remains important to Rodborough’s habitat and culture. Its occasionally narrow escape from the ‘blundering plough’, and the continuation of traditional grazing practices, has allowed the now rare calcareous grassland habitat to evolve and survive.<sup>359</sup> The symbiotic relationship between humans, land, and other species necessary for this habitat survives only with careful and assiduous attention. Whilst today’s graziers may not have to ‘pay’ for their grazing rights by providing direct services or payment to the landowner, they pay via

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<sup>355</sup> Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, p. 45.

<sup>356</sup> Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 43-44.

<sup>357</sup> Guy Shrubsole, *The Lie of the Land* (William Collins, 2024), pp. 218-219.

<sup>358</sup> ‘Commons Registrations for CL157, Rodborough Common, Gloucestershire County Council, 1970.

<sup>359</sup> Clare, *The Mores*, p. 167.

their reciprocal care for and maintenance of the land and its other-than-human inhabitants. The ties that bind Rodborough's commoners, of all species, have resulted in a tradition of care and attention that has ensured its survival as a valued communal space.

### 4.3: Medieval Rodborough

In Section 2.2 I explored the different views of the relative benefits of commons and enclosure presented by historians. Pro-enclosure historians claimed that commons were inefficient, a barrier to progress, and of little or no real value to the rural poor.<sup>360</sup> Conversely, pro-commons historians recognise the unwritten value of common land, not only for subsistence but for identity and community.<sup>361</sup> In this section, I test both these assertions via a presentation of Rodborough Common's endurance, careful management, and importance to the community, as evidenced in the written archives.

Rodborough's survival to the modern day as a rich habitat, a communal resource, and a continuously farmed common, has its origins in the past. Before the arrival of the Norman conquerors in 1066, Rodborough, in line with wider English society, was likely managed on a well-established, largely non-monetary system, with complex and often localised models of reciprocity and land use that governed class relations.<sup>362</sup> When the Normans arrived, all English lands passed into the hands of the new monarch, William I, at which point land officially became 'property' that could be

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<sup>360</sup> For example, Edward Carter Kearsay Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (Macmillan, 1912); G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution* (A&C Black, 1977) and J.D. Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 5.3 (1953), pp. 319-343.

<sup>361</sup> For example, J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832: A Study of the Government of England Before the Reform Bill* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1979); Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*.

<sup>362</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 31; Stamp and Hoskins, *The Common Lands of England and Wales*, p. 6.

disposed of at will amongst William's followers and acolytes.<sup>363</sup> This model gave the monarch direct control in a way not previously experienced by the majority of the English population, which often 'bypassed the customs of the forests that had prevailed from Anglo-Saxon times'.<sup>364</sup> Norman manors were superimposed onto the communal system that had existed before the Conquest and the hitherto customary practices of the English rural population were documented and formalised.<sup>365</sup>

Under this newly formalised system, the land was categorised as arable, pasture, common, or waste and was farmed collectively by the occupants of the manor.<sup>366</sup> This was not a one-sided arrangement and all those who benefited from the land's resources were expected to return the favour, through providing physical labour or by paying tithes of surplus produce.<sup>367</sup> The majority of England's inhabitants were physically tied to their immediate locality and their actions were closely governed by long-held and legally-binding traditions, compliance with which was enforced by manorial courts.<sup>368</sup>

Despite its loosely communal nature, early medieval social relations were not always a model of equality or fairness, with autonomy and mobility not generally experienced by most people.<sup>369</sup> Nor were inter-species relations wholly ones of respect or understanding, as evidenced by the hunting to extinction of many species, in particular larger mammals such as wild boar, wolf, lynx, and beaver.<sup>370</sup> The wastes and

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<sup>363</sup> Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>364</sup> Linebaugh, *The Magna Cart Manifesto*, p. 34.

<sup>365</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p. 27.

<sup>366</sup> Di Palma, *Wasteland*, p. 26.

<sup>367</sup> Bathe, *Common Land*, p. 5.

<sup>368</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 31.

<sup>369</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004), p. 24.

<sup>370</sup> 'Extinct Mammals in Britain', *Natural History of Britain*, n.d

<<http://iberianature.com/britainnature/miscellaneous/extinct-mammals-in-britain/>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

forests of the medieval manors, with their real and substantial perils, existed physically and spiritually, on the margins of settled human society.<sup>371</sup>

Beyond the unequal relation between tenant and lord there was little stratification in medieval English village society.<sup>372</sup> What inhabitants of medieval England did have was a direct link to their means of subsistence and an accord to live sustainably alongside their neighbours; an ancestral link to the soil passed between generations.<sup>373</sup>

From the accession of William I, the manor that included Rodborough Common came under the ownership of his eldest daughter Cecily, the Abbess of Caen in France.<sup>374</sup> Rodborough and the wider manor of Minchinhampton were, therefore, part of a royal estate, so had slightly different rules to less regal landholdings. These included a delineation between common lands, over which all tenants had rights, and demesne lands, where the landowner exercised greater, although not total, control. Commoners' status could be conferred by ancestry or land holding, with the latter able to move holdings for appropriate payment (*chevage*), enabling a degree of freedom not experienced by commoners in non-royal manors.<sup>375</sup> Rights passed between generations could not be removed or services varied as they might be in other types of manor.<sup>376</sup> Rodborough's commoners therefore had an enduring sense of their rights, freedoms, and obligations.

After Cecily's death, the Manor passed to successive abbesses, a situation

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<sup>371</sup> William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in *Global Environmental History: A Reader* ed. by J.R McNeill and Alan Roe (Routledge: 2013), pp. 339-363 (pp. 340-341).

<sup>372</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'The English Medieval Village Community and its Decline', *Journal of British Studies*, 33.4 (1994), pp 407-429 (p. 419).

<sup>373</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p. 91.

<sup>374</sup> Smith, *Where the Cow is King*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>375</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 223; *Ibid.* p. 257.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

that endured for 350 years, only being interrupted by occasional wars with France, when the incumbent English monarch usually took the manor back into their direct ownership.<sup>377</sup> Around 1300, one such temporary transfer of ownership necessitated the drawing up of a custumal, which detailed the occupants of the manor, their holdings and their obligations (Fig. 4.3.1).<sup>378</sup> This document shows that until the mid to late 1300s, payments in kind were due to the abbess as Lady of the Manor, although in reality this business was conducted on her behalf by her bailiffs and seneschals, a circumstance that, whilst not unusual, could cause tensions.<sup>379</sup>

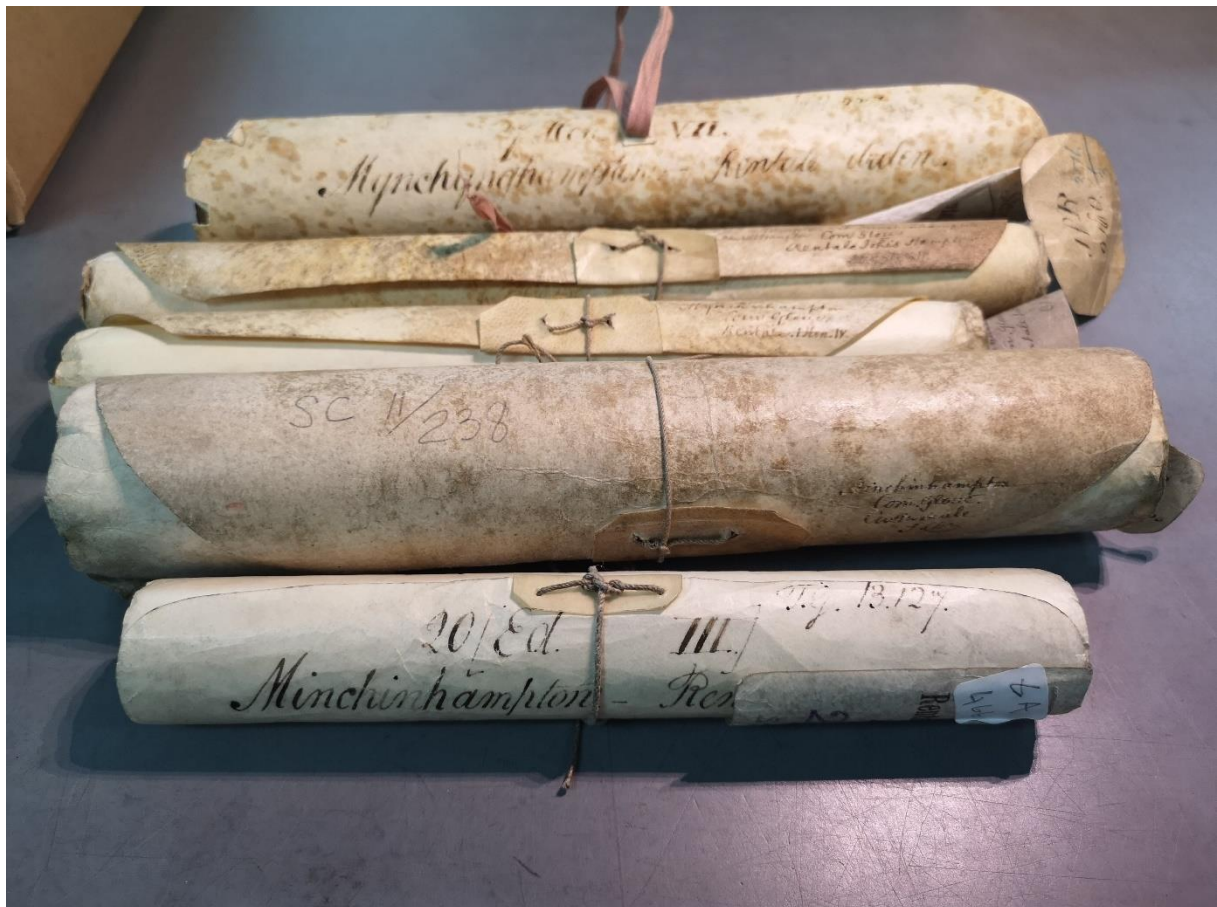


Figure 4.3.1: Minchinhampton Manor custumal and rent rolls  
Source: Author's Photograph of NA SC 11/238 © Sharon Gardham

<sup>377</sup> Smith, *Where the Cow is King*, p. 16.

<sup>378</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 216.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

These payment-in-kind duties varied according to the status or gender of the commoner, and productivity and size of their land holding. Some duties were commutable for a fee and other taxes and payments came either in monetary form or as tithes. For example, a tenant's best animal was payable as a tax when they died (*heriot*), a fee was payable on the marriage of a daughter (*merchat*), and some husbands chose to pay an exemption charge so their wives did not have to participate in the ritual of watching for souls of the dead on St John's (or midsummer) eve, an event which reputedly could result in debauchery and drunkenness.<sup>380</sup> For managing the manor's woodlands, the Wood Wardens received a fowl at Christmas and five eggs at Easter from each commoner.<sup>381</sup> All customary tenants were also expected to annually pay Peter's Pence, a non-voluntary contribution to the central Catholic church.<sup>382</sup> This, and other cash profits from the manor, were transported across the country to the port of Southampton by those of higher status, either on horseback or on foot.<sup>383</sup> Irrespective of whether you were a knight or a native, you were expected and obliged to exchange labour for land use and vice versa, with all considered part of the community of commoners. During the act of cutting and gathering the hay (*haylone*) from the demesne meadows, for example, knights were expected to set the pace at the front of teams of native reapers.<sup>384</sup> Those of different statuses worked alongside each other, contributing proportionately to the resources of the entire community. The relationship between the use of resources and obligations in kind was two-way and clearly understood.

#### Social relations across England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

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<sup>380</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p.257.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., pp. 220-221.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

continued to be widely predicated on this customary sharing of resources. The gradual erasure of serfdom or villeinage as feudalism declined, combined with a recognition of customary rights, allowed rural populations of the post-medieval period a degree of economic independence and social mobility rooted in the communal farming system.<sup>385</sup> Continuing access to communal resources meant that 'the villagers lived their own lives and cultivated the soil on a basis of independence'.<sup>386</sup> Relations of 'kinship and neighbourliness, served to maintain stability in rural society'.<sup>387</sup> Landowners and common rights holders often lived cheek by jowl, so encroachments by neighbours were visible and offenders could be held accountable, making neighbourly relations as important, if not more important, than familial ones.<sup>388</sup> Customary rights were linked to occupancy, not ownership, a seemingly subtle but crucial difference.<sup>389</sup> This was still a somewhat stratified society but, regardless of social status, 'anyone occupying commonable land in the common fields of a parish, and in some parishes, those occupying none, had common right'.<sup>390</sup>

Rodborough's residents were similarly linked to the land and their neighbours via common endeavour and subsistence as a result of shared labour. The sense of communality typified by the common-land system can be juxtaposed against individualism, exploitation and removal from the land (both physical and cultural) wrought by the later development of the capitalist, money-based economy. Whilst some historians argue that the peasantry in England effectively ceased to exist by the

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<sup>385</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>387</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 43.

<sup>388</sup> Trevor Wild, *Village England: A Social History of the Countryside* (I.B Tauris & Co, 2004), p.9; Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 43.

<sup>389</sup> J.M Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

sixteenth century and that rural dwellers were instead ‘rampant individualists [...] market-oriented and acquisitive’, even supporters of later enclosures generally recognised that rural populations under the common field system ‘shared a common culture based on their common rights’.<sup>391</sup> In the poetry of John Clare, this shared culture includes traditional entertainments, which provided an opportunity for communal gathering and celebration, but also acted as ‘an expression of the labourers’ customary rights, unwritten rules that limit the master’s power and grant the labourers standing in the social body’.<sup>392</sup> At Rodborough, it is likely the medieval occupants of the manor were clear on what was due to them and what their obligations were long before the writing of the custumal.

At Rodborough, as on many commons, encroachments were not unheard of, but it appears to have run with relative efficiency, with few prepared to ‘prejudice the parish’s livelihood for their profit’.<sup>393</sup> Here this efficiency was backed by clearly understood and enforced limits and customs that had endured through the centuries to the present day. In this system we can see a population linked by a common understanding; of their rights and obligations, their reliance on their neighbours of all species, and their status as one in a wider web of kin-relatives. In this sense, the medieval system of management, which was widespread across Europe, reminds us of the possibility and workability of sharing resources with other humans, and by extension, with other species. The continuing importance to commoners of their rights can be inferred by their enduring nature, the effort put into its maintenance by generations of commoners, and the strict, yet democratic and broadly accepted,

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<sup>391</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 43.

<sup>392</sup> Theresa Adams, ‘Representing Rural Leisure: John Clare and the Politics of Popular Culture’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), pp. 371-392 (p. 372).

<sup>393</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 155.

enforcement of its rules.

#### **4.4: Rodborough's Historic and Present Management**

As the previous section shows, the foundations of Rodborough's good management and the tenacity of its commoners in maintaining their rights were laid during the medieval period. The capacity to manage and enforce the rules of commons was traditionally backed by manorial courts, or court leet, which were localised, or neighbourhood, courts with jurisdiction over one area of land.<sup>394</sup> These local courts had powers to oversee the day-to-day running of manors, decide on rules and regulations, receive presentments regarding perceived wrongdoing, judge these, and issue penalties where necessary.<sup>395</sup> Rodborough, as part of a royal manor, was outside the control of the Hundred or Shire courts, giving the landowner and commoners a greater degree of localised autonomy.<sup>396</sup> Attendance at Rodborough's court leet was an obligation for all male ratepayers within the bounds of the common, and non-attendance without good cause could attract a fine.<sup>397</sup>

Although continuous records of the court are not available, its later documented presence suggests it ran consistently from the medieval period until its demise in 1918, at which point many of its functions were replaced by a local police court, the equivalent of a modern magistrates court.<sup>398</sup> Country-wide, the court leet or manorial courts slowly died out as the structure of society altered and the introduction of national legislation rendered them obsolete. Their legal remit was finally and

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<sup>394</sup> Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, p. 113.

<sup>395</sup> GRO, D846/II/I.

<sup>396</sup> Smith, *Where the Cow is King*, p. 15.

<sup>397</sup> GRO, D846 II/I.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid..

decisively removed by the passing of the Administration of Justice Act in 1977, with just a few notable exceptions remaining today (for example, in the New Forest and at Northleach, Gloucestershire).<sup>399</sup> Reflecting the Rodborough court leet's changing role, during the nineteenth century it delegated day-to-day management to a committee of commoners who appointed officials, including a Constable and a Hayward, to carry out its duties.<sup>400</sup>

During the period when Rodborough was still largely tree-covered, Wood Wardens were also appointed to monitor and control the amount of wood taken.<sup>401</sup> Commoners were able to harvest timber in the custom and demesne woods through a process of pollarding, where limbs and branches are removed in such a way that the tree can regenerate.<sup>402</sup> After being marked by the Wood Warden, or 'axe bearer', the marked limbs of trees in the custom wood could be harvested for fuel, building materials (*housebote*) or to repair fencing (*haybote*).<sup>403</sup> Rights of pannage were also a major contributor to the local economy, with the woodlands of Minchinhampton and Rodborough at one time supporting more than 3000 pigs.<sup>404</sup> The felling of a tree was therefore an offence, an example of sustainable practices that only came under pressure from the sixteenth century onwards, as demand began to outstrip supply and sheep grazing prevented sustainable regrowth.<sup>405</sup> These increasing pressures are reflected in the formation in the sixteenth century of a specific custom wood court, which was

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<sup>399</sup> Clayden, *Our Common Land*, p. 48.

<sup>400</sup> A E Smith and Son of Nailsworth, Solicitors, 1536-c.1954, *Decisions and Presentments about Minchinhampton, 1847 - 1871*, GRO, D2219 1/5.

<sup>401</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 361.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361; p. 260.

<sup>404</sup> Herbert, 'A Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 182.

<sup>405</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 362.

instigated solely to control the use of the woodlands.<sup>406</sup>

Even in an industrialising economy, common rights remained important to residents but, despite their long standing, they were by no means guaranteed. During the seventeenth century, increasing attempts were made to enclose the demesne woods and plant them with arable crops; attempts that were strenuously resisted across several generations.<sup>407</sup> Despite this staunch defence, the demesne woods were eventually enclosed and remain to this day largely closed off to the general public. Alongside their enclosure and subsequent arable conversion, the demesne woods were being extensively cleared for the sale of timber. In 1516 for example, 894 oaks were sold by the landowner, at that point the Abbey of Syon, for a sum of £40.<sup>408</sup> There is no evidence regarding to whom or for what purpose the demense's oak trees were sold, but this period coincided with an increase in ship building during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547) and a rapid increase in the population of the capital that drove increased building development, which created a heavy demand for wood.<sup>409</sup>

In addition to the money-making potential of timber and arable land, the presence of valuable Cotswold stone made quarrying an appealing prospect for later landowners, who took advantage of their *rights in the soil*, either by employing people to quarry on their behalf or 'sub-letting' this right for a fee.<sup>410</sup> As Britain industrialised, the Rodborough and Minchinhampton court leet records of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries make increasing reference to tensions between quarriers and graziers, as more quarries meant less grazable land, and some unfenced quarries were considered

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<sup>406</sup> Watson, 'The Minchinhampton Custumal', p. 362.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>409</sup> Adilyne McKinlay, 'Urban Infrastructure and Environmental Interaction in Late Medieval and Tudor Period England', *New College of Florida*, 2018 < [https://digitalcommons.ncf.edu/theses\\_etds/5562](https://digitalcommons.ncf.edu/theses_etds/5562) > [accessed: 12 October 2025], (p. 44); Ibid, pp. 46-47.

<sup>410</sup> GRO, D846/II/I.

hazardous (Fig. 4.4.1). A draft court case was prepared in 1834 to determine whose rights took precedence when they came into conflict.<sup>411</sup> It quotes the case of *Bateson versus Green* where ‘it was held that the rights of commoners in a common may be subservient to the right of the Lord’.<sup>412</sup> The Rodborough and Minchinhampton commoners disagreed, and in response appointed a committee to argue that ‘rights that are repugnant to one another cannot exist’ and that ‘the Lord cannot have the right to do that which tends to deprive them of it [i.e., their common rights] altogether’.<sup>413</sup> That only a draft case is evidenced and no actual case brought suggests that on this occasion the Lord decided to abandon his attempt to overturn the rights of the commoners.



Figure 4.4.1: Fencing around a disused quarry, Rodborough Common  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

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<sup>411</sup> GRO, D846 II/I.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

Any inclinations to rampant individualism that impacted the commons were therefore largely kept in check by customary practices and related laws laid down in the medieval period; under this system, no one was exempt from the rulings of the court leet. For example, in 1849, the Lord of Rodborough was charged with planting trees illegally and erecting a fence on the Common, which the court ordered him to remove within one month; in 1848, the local Reverend was instructed to remove a heap of manure that was illegally obstructing a road.<sup>414</sup> The manorial courts and, during the nineteenth century, the commoners' committees, held dear the legitimacy endowed by their longevity. Presentments and appeals made to the courts often explicitly referred to this tradition, appealing to customs held since 'time immemorial', to 'long tradition', or 'to the customs of this ancient court'.<sup>415</sup>

The Common's annually reviewed and published rules and regulations stated who could graze, and where and when. Rules generally tended to be consistent year on year, but an annual review process allowed for changes to be made relatively dynamically in reaction to issues encountered through the previous twelve months, or to pressures on the carrying capacity of the land. Accusations were often made by those in favour of enclosure that commons were prone to overstocking and filled with diseased livestock.<sup>416</sup> The careful management reflected in Rodborough's democratically applied rules and regulations largely avoided such problems arising here. These rules were, and still are, overseen on the ground by the Hayward, who could

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<sup>414</sup> GRO, Lapage, Norris, Sons and Saleby of Stroud, Solicitors, 1609-1944 Collection, *Draft court rolls and court papers, 1799-1856*, D846 11/4.

<sup>415</sup> GRO, A E Smith and Son of Nailsworth, Solicitors, 1536-c.1954 Collection, *Stroud Journal, Report of the Court Leet*, 15 May 1880, D2219 1/6; GRO, D846/II/I; GRO, Lapage, Norris, Sons and Saleby of Stroud, Solicitors, 1609-1944 Collection, *Court papers, correspondence and miscellaneous documents, 1869-1890*, D846/II/6.

<sup>416</sup> For example, W.E Tate, 'Gloucestershire Enclosure Acts and Awards', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* (1943), 64, pp. 1-70 (p. 29); Gonner, p. 360.

impound the animals of miscreants and sell them onwards if fines were not paid (Fig. 4.4.2). By these means, the courts and committees maintained what was, at times, a fragile and fractious balance between competing interests. Management was localised, dynamic, and rooted in long precedent, with its rules clearly understood and effectively enforced. The last set of rules and regulations agreed upon in 1897 still form the basis of the common rights exercised today.<sup>417</sup>



Figure 4.4.2: Notice of sale of impounded brown mare

Source: Author's Photograph of GRO, D2219 1/6. Reproduced with permission of WSP Solicitors

Despite the cessation of the court leet in 1918 and the subsequent demise of the Nailsworth Police Court, commoners' committees have been active since their inception and continue to operate, empowered and inspired by long traditions and legends of resistance to encroachments. Rodborough's neighbouring commoners' committee at Minchinhampton still decides on the appointment of the Hayward to look after the Common's farmed other-than-humans, pays their salary, and determines

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<sup>417</sup> LM2, interview with the author, 25 May 2023.

processes for Marking Day, which is when livestock were traditionally branded (nowadays ear tagged) to show that they are allowed on the Common.<sup>418</sup> Rather than regularly republishing the rules and regulations, alterations to grazing dates are nowadays made by way of careful negotiation.<sup>419</sup> Rodborough and Minchinhampton graziers now meet as one body, but each retains its individual autonomy. The broader management committee that previously existed for both commons was altered in the early 2000s to the MRCAC, which is purely advisory and has no direct management function.

Rodborough's long tradition of continuous localised management shows congruence with many of the eight principles of common pool resource management outlined in Sections 2.2 and 3.2. The presence of commoners at the court leet, and latterly on the commoners' committee and MRCAC, supports principle three; fair and inclusive decision making. The long tradition of commoners' rights also facilitates principle one; a strong group identity and understanding of purpose, as I expand on below in Section 4.7. A carefully managed relationship with the National Trust and other interested bodies who are represented on the MRCAC (such as parish councils, commercial commons users, residents) reflects principle eight; appropriate relations with other groups. To an extent, the commoners' committees also enable principles two and four; the fair distribution of costs and benefits and monitoring of agreed-upon behaviours. The enduring success of this localised model of management, despite the many challenges it faces, aligns with the findings of Larcom and van Gevelt, who found that 'commons managed by voluntary commons associations are approximately 84%

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<sup>418</sup> LM2.

<sup>419</sup> LM2; Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, March 2025.

more likely to produce sustainable grazing outcomes than those that are not'.<sup>420</sup> Congruence with Ostrom's principles, therefore, sees Rodborough's commoners continuing to operate with a degree of autonomy bounded by a strong sense of tradition, a shared identity, and feelings of personal responsibility. Without the backing of an enforcing body such as the court leet, and considering the extension of those who now enjoy rights of access, compliance with the remaining principles, namely graduated sanctions for misbehaviour, fast and fair conflict resolution, and the authority to fully self-govern, is, however, compromised.

#### **4.5: Centralised versus Localised Control**

Despite attempts by various acts of parliament passed throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fig. 4.5.1 shows primary legislation relating to common land from the mid-nineteenth century) to replace the functions of the court leet and reflect the changing nature of common land use, the demise of local legal bodies with autonomous authority has left an enduring gap in the ability of commons to self-govern effectively. Centralised attempts to replicate and replace the medieval system stretch back nearly 150 years. For example, the Commons Act of 1876 allowed the appointment of legally constituted boards of conservators, but they needed the approval of the Secretary of State so were expensive and difficult to instigate.<sup>421</sup> Further acts, including the Commons Act of 1899 and the Law of Property Act in 1925 attempted to simplify the process and place access for recreation at the heart of commons management.<sup>422</sup> More recently the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order act

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<sup>420</sup> Shaun Larcom and Terry van Gevelt, 'Do Voluntary Commons Associations Deliver Sustainable Grazing Outcomes: An Empirical Study of England', *Environmental and Resource Economics*, 73 (2019), pp. 51-74 (p. 66).

<sup>421</sup> Clayden, *Our Common Land*, p. 42.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

curtailed the right of free assembly that had customarily been enjoyed on common land as I explore further in Section 5.3. Latterly, the importance of commons' habitats to other-than-humans has been recognised in the many conservation designations applied to these lands, as I explain further in Chapter 5.

Access	Management	Conservation/Protection
Local Government Act (1894)	Commons Act (1876)	
	Law of Commons Act (1899)	
Open Spaces Act (1906)	Commons Act (1908)	
National Trust Acts (1907, 1919, 1937, 1971)		
National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949)	Law of Property Act (1925)	Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act (1953)
National Trust Byelaws (1961)		Town and Country Planning Act (1971)
Criminal Justice & Public Order Act (1994)	Commons Registration Act (1965)	Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981)
Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000)	Administration of Justice Act (1977)	Acquisition of Land Act (1981)
	Commons Act (2006)	Habitats Directive (1992)

Figure 4.5.1: Commons-relevant legislation since c. 1850  
Source: Author © Sharon Gardham

Despite these efforts, many commons remained in legal limbo, leading to the establishment of a Royal Commission on Common Land in the latter half of the 1950s. The frustration at a lack of localised legal control is expressed by commoners who advocated for a reinstatement of the court leet, when interviewed by the Commissioners during their visit to Gloucestershire.<sup>423</sup> The Commissioners' draft report of their visit to Rodborough Common in 1956 suggested its commoners would welcome the return of the court as they felt their legal position was unclear.<sup>424</sup> However, this did

<sup>423</sup> NA, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Collection, *Royal Commission on Common Land: Visit to Gloucester. Notes, correspondence, newspaper clippings and draft report*, 1956, MAF 96/260.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid..

not come to pass and the court leet was never revived on Rodborough. Instead, to bring commons into the twentieth century, the Commission made three broad recommendations: that a national register of land and rights be established; the public be granted a general right of access to common land; and provision be made for the effective local management of commons.<sup>425</sup>

The Commons Registration Act of 1965 was an attempt to enact the first of these recommendations. This act allowed one-off, point-in-time registrations of commons and common rights. The remaining recommendations were not, however, actioned; also the 1965 Act contained many flaws.<sup>426</sup> It did not, for example, allow rights to be updated, amended or added to, leaving in place the inevitable mistakes it contained.<sup>427</sup> As a result, some lands were left erroneously registered as commons, whilst others, with long-standing but unrecorded customary rights were not registered at all, resulting in large tracts of common land being lost.<sup>428</sup> In the Forest of Dean, for example, of the 3000 hectares of open, grazed common present in 1958, just 125 hectares were registered, the rest disappearing into general private ownership.<sup>429</sup> Once the deadline for registration had passed, errors could not be corrected and the Act's many limitations led to it being, 'in practice, routinely ignored or subverted'.<sup>430</sup> It also did not make provision for the management of common land, leading Clark to observe in the early 1980s 'for those engaged in dealing with the problems of commons the mood ranges—and sometimes oscillates—between high aspiration on the one hand and

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<sup>425</sup> Clayden, *Our Common Land*, p. 2.

<sup>426</sup> Christopher P. Rodgers and others, *Contested Common Land: Environmental Governance Past and Present* (Earthscan, 2016), pp. 55-56.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid. pp. 55-56.

<sup>428</sup> MERL, Open Spaces Society Collection, *Report of Conference: The Future of Common Land and its Management*, 2 June 1983, DSEL A/18.

<sup>429</sup> Suzanne Parrott and Jeremy Doe, *Gloucestershire Commons: Their History, Wildlife and Future* (The Gloucestershire Trust for Nature Conservation, 1989), p. 47.

<sup>430</sup> Rodgers and others, *Contested Common Land*, p. 11.

deep despair on the other'.<sup>431</sup> Without a localised court, or legally constituted management committees, there was no ability to locally enforce grazing limits or impose sanctions when encroachments committed by the widened population of commoners took place.<sup>432</sup>

These ongoing frustrations led to a forum on common land, composed of the main interested parties, being convened in 1983.<sup>433</sup> This forum reiterated the 1950s Royal Commission recommendations that access be granted freely to common land and management schemes be introduced.<sup>434</sup> Members also proposed ways to rectify mistakes made in the original register, allowing them to be altered in specific circumstances.<sup>435</sup> However, it was not until the Commons Act of 2006 that a consistent and relatively straightforward process for establishing management committees and correcting mistakes in specific circumstances was enacted.<sup>436</sup> This meant that some commons had, by this time, been largely outside legal frameworks of management for more than one hundred years, whilst commons that had been lost from the record had not seen 'official' customary use for more than a generation. Even with the benefits of the 2006 Act, effective localised management remains challenging and the vast majority of 'lost' commons have not been reinstated or replaced.

The effective removal of localised legal powers had practical and cultural impacts. Rodborough's nineteenth century commoners could, for example, deal relatively quickly and autonomously with a wide range of local challenges, including

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<sup>431</sup> L. Clark, *Common Land County Notes for Gloucestershire* (Commons Preservation Society, 1981).

<sup>432</sup> Larcom and van Gevelt, 'Do Voluntary Commons Associations Deliver Sustainable Grazing Outcomes', p. 54.

<sup>433</sup> 'Common Land: Report of the Common Land Forum (TP1681)', *Natural England*, 1 July 1986 <<https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/216081>> [accessed 19 October 2023].

<sup>434</sup> 'Common Land', *Natural England*, p. 13.

<sup>435</sup> Paul Clayden, *Our Common Land: The Law and History of Commons and Village Greens*, 6th Edn. (The Open Spaces Society, 2007), p. 170.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

illegal turf cutting, encroachments, keeping stock without entitlement, illegal quarrying, watercourse diversions, illegal planting, or ‘acts that may cause common annoyance’.<sup>437</sup> Presentments regarding these offences were made to the court and rectification notices often resulted.<sup>438</sup> Failure to carry out rectification could incur a fine.<sup>439</sup> Many of the same issues are still experienced, but in contrast with the court leet, who could make immediate and enforceable decisions within their jurisdiction to deal with encroachments, the modern process is cumbersome, slow, expensive, and highly inefficient. For example, at a 2022 meeting of the MRCAC, encroachments on the Common by local homeowners were on the agenda.<sup>440</sup> Whilst the National Trust’s legal team is investigating these, any rectification will be a long, expensive and drawn-out process, hindered by a lack of clarity about the boundary of the Common or the extent of the Trust’s land holdings.<sup>441</sup>

Fig. 4.5.1 shows the complexity of centralised commons legislation, providing a flavour of the ‘legal thickets’ that commons managers must navigate.<sup>442</sup> The continued relevance of ancient laws, rights and precedents, coupled with multiple layers of more modern legislation creates an inflexible centralised system whose administration is a complicated and specialist job. For commons without an interested or large landowner, such as the National Trust, the situation is markedly worse, with many commons gradually disappearing, dying a death by a thousand cuts.<sup>443</sup>

In practical terms, over the past one hundred years, on-the-ground

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<sup>437</sup> GRO, D846 II/I.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid..

<sup>439</sup> Ibid..

<sup>440</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, March 2022.

<sup>441</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, March 2022.

<sup>442</sup> Clayden, *Our Common Land*, p. 1.

<sup>443</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

commons governance has changed from a long-established, two-tier process of committee and autonomous court, managed and administered locally, to a complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted, national and international legal framework. Even with the legally constituted enablement of commons management committees allowed for by the 2006 Act, commons remain suspended between the need for dynamic localised decision-making and a requirement to comply and follow centrally controlled legislation. This complicated and inflexible situation prevents commons from fully complying with Ostrom's principles, having a direct and deleterious impact on the land's current and future health. The current situation hobbles the ability of commons managers to care for their lands autonomously, effectively allaying them with Olson's Logic of Collective Action, which requires unsustainable levels of centralised coercion, oversight, and control that will contribute to their eventual failure. The impacts of this unsuitable halfway house are found in the ongoing frustrations of commoners everywhere, the number of failing commons that are no longer actively worked, the reduction in the area of common lands and the degradation of their habitats.

#### **4.6: What's YOUR Problem?**

Even where common land is as well managed as possible under current economic and political restrictions, a lack of local autonomy can lead to challenges. Alongside the hobbling of localised authority to effectively care for common land, the definition of who might be considered a commoner has expanded to include the entire general public. The 2000 Countryside Rights of Way Act (CRoW) made all common lands in England and Wales open access, finally enacting the last of the Royal Commission's 1950s recommendations. This has effectively resulted in conferring common rights (at least those of access) to all, without concurrent acceptance of any reciprocal

responsibilities. Increasing demand for access to the countryside, limited areas where full access applies, wider geopolitical and environmental issues, the ability to ‘consume’ the land without obligation, and an inability to effectively govern locally have resulted in commons facing a multitude of problems. These problems are experienced on the ground by other-than-humans, land managers, conservationists, and visitors to places such as Rodborough Common.

In the first of my interview themes, *What’s YOUR Problem?*, I share participants’ views about issues experienced on, or by, the Common. Beginning with this theme lays practical foundations for the themes to come, allowing a comparison between today’s issues and those of the past. The range of issues identified and the percentage of excerpts that relate to each are detailed in Fig. 4.6.1. Whilst most themes will not be presented quantitatively, the frequency of excerpts regarding issues on the Common made a degree of quantitative analysis relevant to the presentation of this theme.

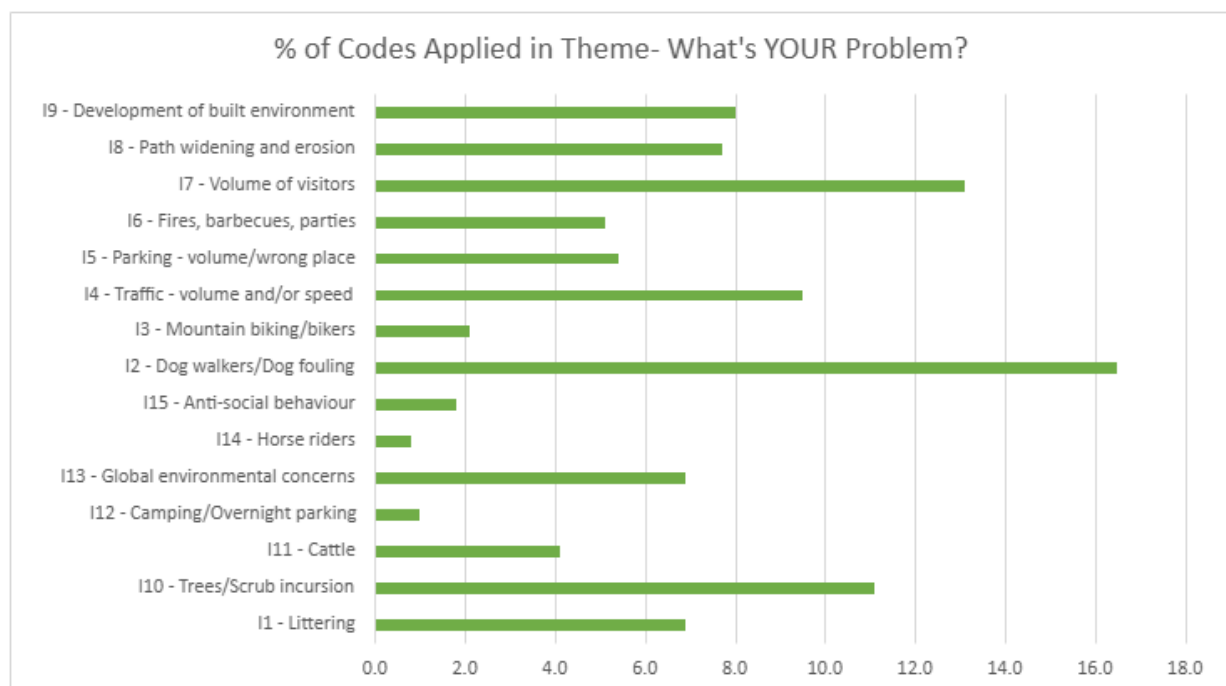


Figure 4.6.1: Codes applied in theme - What’s YOUR Problem?

Source: Author © Sharon Gardham

The issues described by participants were numerous but had notable similarities. As the chart above shows, problems caused by dog walkers, particularly dog fouling, were most frequently mentioned. As the largest single user group on the Common (the Rodborough Common Visitor survey in 2019 found that 61% of visitors were dog walkers), it is not surprising that issues involving dogs and dog walkers predominated.<sup>444</sup> These included walkers not picking up after dogs, dogs not being under sufficient control and bothering livestock and/or ground-nesting birds, dogs bathing in cattle troughs (Fig. 4.6.2), and dog walkers' overall contribution to visitor numbers. R13, for example, felt dog fouling was so prevalent that 'like I can go up there with a bucket and pick up dog poo all day every day'.<sup>445</sup> Some also mentioned the littering problem created by what R6 described as 'the whole phenomena which you could do your project on, of why do people leave dog poo in plastic bags?', a problem not sadly unique to Rodborough Common.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Chris Panter and Zoe Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', *Footprint Ecology*, 2019 <[https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final\\_redacted.pdf](https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final_redacted.pdf)> [accessed 6 September 2023], p. ii.

<sup>445</sup> R13, Interview with the author, 26 April 2023.

<sup>446</sup> R6, interview with the author, 25 August 2022; 'Plastic Bags Swinging from Branches: How Britain's Dog Waste Nightmare Grew Even Worse', *The Guardian*, 8 January 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/jan/08/plastic-bags-swinging-from-branches-how-britains-dog-waste-nightmare-grew-even-worse?ref=upstrack.com>> [accessed 29 June 2024].



Figure 4.6.2: Dogs entering cattle troughs create a problem for grazers and graziers  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

Whilst dog fouling is an ongoing complaint for many publicly shared spaces, a high level of uncleared dog fouling poses a particular threat to the Common's habitat and its cattle.<sup>447</sup> Dogs are the primary hosts of a parasitic infection called neosporosis, which causes cows to miscarry their calves.<sup>448</sup> The infection takes hold in adult cattle when it is ingested via contaminated feed or grassland, and once infected, cows will carry the disease for life, potentially passing it on to unborn female calves, and other cows in the herd.<sup>449</sup> In short, they are no longer viable to keep as they are a risk to others and are no longer suitable for use as breeding stock. If infected dog faeces are left

<sup>447</sup> Gary Lee and Louise Melville, 'Dog Fouling - Why it is Difficult to Tackle and Potential Solutions', *APSE Membership Resources*, Briefing 19-41, December 2019  
<<https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/briefings/2019/19-41-dog-fouling-why-it-is-difficult-to-tackle-and-potential-solutions/>> [accessed 29 June 2024].

<sup>448</sup> 'Neospora', *National Beef Association*, n.d (18 September 2007)  
<<https://www.nationalbeefassociation.com/resources/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheets/655/neospora/>> [accessed 12 November 2023].

<sup>449</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

on the Common, they can become a spreader of this disease. This issue can become so acute that grazing any breeding cows becomes unviable. This has been the case at the smaller, but nearby, Edge Common, where the last remaining commoner no longer exercises their rights due to high levels of neosporosis infection.<sup>450</sup> This not only creates an issue for Edge Common's site managers Natural England, who now have to 'import' non-breeding beef cattle onto the site to compensate, but has also ended a tradition upheld by centuries of commoners.<sup>451</sup>

Neosporosis is not the only dog-related challenge for breeding cattle on the Common. On neighbouring Minchinhampton Common, a small herd of Highland cattle is a much-loved sight for many visitors. However, the owners of this small herd told me in conversation at 2023's Marking Day event (a celebration of the cattle being released onto the Common after the winter months) that they were no longer breeding from their cows, due to increasing incidences of calf birth defects and stillbirths they were experiencing.<sup>452</sup> Their vet attributed these to drinking water contaminated with salmonella, caused by dogs using the cattle troughs to drink from and bathe in, an issue mentioned by several participants.

As well as the negative impacts on biodiversity caused by decreasing numbers of cattle when graziers are reluctant to expose them to such dangers, dog fouling also directly impacts the Common's grassland. Dog walkers may perceive that dog fouling is not an issue on a common covered in cow pats, especially if it takes place away from the main paths. The opposite is in fact true, as Rodborough Common's floral biodiversity is predicated on its unimproved nature (i.e., it has never been fertilised).

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<sup>450</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>451</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, November 2022.

<sup>452</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, May 2023.

Cattle excreta is part of a closed system; grasses and herbs from the Common are consumed by the cattle and the resulting cow dung in turn provides low-level nutrition that supports plant life sensitive to rich nutrients. The introduction of high levels of alien nitrogen and phosphorus from dog fouling, at levels that a recent study of nature reserves found would be illegal if resulting from farming activities, causes rapid growth of vigorous grasses which can crowd out more delicate species, thus posing a direct threat to the Common's rare biodiversity.<sup>453</sup>

Also worth noting, however, is that modern farming methods can also threaten the efficacy of this closed system, with insecticidal worming treatments causing harm to dung beetles, which are a vital part of the grassland ecosystem.<sup>454</sup> The worming systems used by graziers are unregulated and are unlikely to be consistent, meaning their impact on the health of the Common's biodiversity is unknown.<sup>455</sup>

Dog attacks were also mentioned as a cause of concern for cattle and farmers, an indirect cause of road traffic accidents, and a threat to other Common users. LM2 shared harrowing stories of cattle injury and death due to dog attacks. For example:

'we had a dog that attacked a calf once and it ripped its ears to shreds because it was just biting it, you know, just grabbing hold of it and biting at it. This old calf was running about, blood pouring everywhere'.<sup>456</sup>

LM2 reported a complete lack of understanding of the dangers to dogs and cattle from

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<sup>453</sup> Damian Carrington, 'Deluge of Dog Pee and Poo Harming Nature Reserves, Study Suggests', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/07/dog-pee-and-poo-harming-nature-reserves-study>> [accessed 12 November 2023].

<sup>454</sup> Stephanie Allen, 'Common Treatments Used on Cattle Have Devastating Impacts on Wildlife, New Study Reveals', *University of Sussex*, 18 March 2020 <<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/51578>> [accessed 29 June 2024].

<sup>455</sup> LM4, email to the author, 24 July 2024.

<sup>456</sup> LM2.

some members of the public:

‘and people are totally, can be, completely irresponsible about it, you know. I’ve actually heard somebody say, well, it’s nature. The dog is chasing an animal about, oh well, it’s nature, that’s what they do. Therefore it’s all right’.<sup>457</sup>

LM4 felt the only way to get dog owners to curb this behaviour was to outline the threat cattle could in turn pose to dogs:

‘I know you spooked the cattle but you do realise that once they start running, they don’t stop? Couldn’t care less about your dog. Cause they’ll kill it. ‘Uh, what do you mean they’ll kill it?’ You know. ‘Yeah, they’ll kill it. They’ll kill your dog. They’ll trample it, they’ll kick it’. You know, I’ve seen that happening’.<sup>458</sup>

This is no idle threat. Cattle, particularly cows with calves, are considered to be the most dangerous large animals in Britain (aside from humans), with walkers accompanied by dogs particularly vulnerable to attack on public rights of way and open access land.<sup>459</sup>

Other species, such as the skylark, were perceived to be at risk from large numbers of dogs, particularly those off-lead.<sup>460</sup> These concerns are backed by studies showing the negative impact on ground-nesting bird breeding success where there are high levels of dog disturbance.<sup>461</sup> C3b felt that an enhanced level of visitor management, at least during the skylark breeding season, might be appropriate.<sup>462</sup> On the other hand, LM4 was keen that dog owners should not be unjustly singled out for blame saying, ‘you

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<sup>457</sup> LM2.

<sup>458</sup> LM4, interview with the author, 3 December 2022.

<sup>459</sup> Jess Staufenberg, ‘Cows Officially the Most Deadly Large Animals in Britain’, *The Independent*, 9 November 2015 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cows-officially-the-most-deadly-large-animals-in-britain-a6727266.html>> [accessed 12 September 2023].

<sup>460</sup> ‘Bird Facts: Skylark’, *British Trust for Ornithology*, n.d <<https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/skylark>> [accessed 18 July 2024]

<sup>461</sup> D.A Showler and others, ‘What is the Impact of Public Access on the Breeding Success of Ground-Nesting and Cliff-Nesting Birds’, *Collaboration for Environmental Evidence Review*, 05-010 (2010), pp. 3 - 75 (p. 5) <<https://www.environmentalevidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/SR16.pdf>> [accessed 12 November 2023].

<sup>462</sup> C3b, interview with the author, 30 March 2023.

got to be so careful, you know you can't ostracise a user group'.<sup>463</sup>

Undoubtedly many dog owners behave responsibly on the Common and, as regular and numerous visitors, they are able to keep an eye on it. Several interviewees were also dog owners who displayed many self-regulating behaviours whilst walking their dogs. Keeping an eye on your dog, putting it on a lead when around cattle, or during the ground-nesting bird breeding season, and most of all picking up after it and using one of the many dog poo bins situated around the Common (Fig. 4.6.3) are all easy ways for dog walkers to lessen their impact and, in fact, make a positive contribution. These simple behaviour changes have been the focus of publicity campaigns in recent years.



Figure 4.6.3: Dog bins with advisory signs, Rodborough Common  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

A perceived increase in the volume and frequency of visitors to the

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<sup>463</sup> LM4.

Common, whether with dogs or not, was a concern for interviewees. Several participants commented on widening, increasing, and eroded footpaths caused by large numbers of visitors. Their concerns were shared in the 2021 SVP biodiversity report, which found widening paths increasing in number and lower biodiversity in areas with heavy footfall (Fig. 4.6.4).<sup>464</sup>



Aerial image of Rodborough Common taken in June 1950



Drone survey composite image of Rodborough Common, July 2017

Figure 4.6.4: Increase in footpath prevalence on Rodborough Common since 1950  
Source: 1950 image CC-BY (NLS). Drone survey image source: Stroud Valleys Project. Reproduced with permission

LM4 drew a direct correlation between increasing numbers of footpaths and increases in volumes of visitors, particularly those who during the pandemic had

<sup>464</sup> 'Rodborough Common Footpath, Botanical and Skylark Surveys', *Stroud Valleys Project*, 2021  
<<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607bc3d09f6f9a4d161b5da2/t/616ed0e7817ecd546af5bd42/1634652394061/Stroud+Valleys+Project+Rodborough+Common+Surveys+Report+2021.pdf>> [accessed 22 March 2023].

used the Common as a place to escape other people; ‘there’s more people spread out to find their little corner of peace, that little corner of peace becomes a little desire line, which then encourages more and more and more’.<sup>465</sup> R11 observed ‘I think it’s notable that [since the pandemic] there is more bare exposed stone, from, I guess from erosion’.<sup>466</sup> I asked lifelong Rodborough resident R7 what had changed in their 70-odd years of using the Common; ‘I suppose they’ve got more worn. You’ve got all the pathways now that are worn on the Common which weren’t there years ago, you know? So it has wear and tear on that Common really. I’ve noticed that’.<sup>467</sup>

Despite a perceived increase in the number of visitors in recent years, concerns about visitor numbers are not new. As early as 1891, commoners in neighbouring Minchinhampton were worried that visitors to the golf course were driving their carriages over the Common, thereby ruining grazing.<sup>468</sup> This problem was solved by installing an access track, which, 130 years later, is causing its own damage to the grassland due to the number of cars parked adjacent to it (Fig. 4.6.5).<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> LM4.

<sup>466</sup> R11, interview with the author, 17 March 2023.

<sup>467</sup> R7, interview with the author, 4 October 2022.

<sup>468</sup> GRO, D2219 1/6.

<sup>469</sup> GRO, D2219 1/6; Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, December 2024.



Figure 4.6.5: Grassland damage caused by cars parking on the Golf Club access road, Minchinhampton Common

Source: MRCAC What's App Group Chat, January 2025

The number of visitors arriving on the Common by car has been creating issues since at least the 1960s (Fig. 4.6.6). In 1989, the Trust tried to address these problems by clearing space for three car parks on Minchinhampton Common.<sup>470</sup> Some residents and the OSS felt they had been poorly consulted about the plans and that the car parks would disproportionately benefit private interests (e.g., a local private school and an ice cream shop).<sup>471</sup> There was acknowledgement, however, that some formal car parking was needed, so some of the car parks did go ahead.<sup>472</sup> A 1997 feature in the *Stroud News and Journal* observed that at least some car parks were firmly established and height barriers had just been introduced, presumably to prevent overnight parking by larger vehicles.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> MERL, The Open Spaces Society Collection, *Gloucestershire: Minchinhampton and Rodborough Common: Various correspondence, newspaper clippings*, SR OSS CF/15/19.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Emma Sims, 'Common Land with a Right Royal History', *Stroud News and Journal*, 5 February 1997, p. 20.

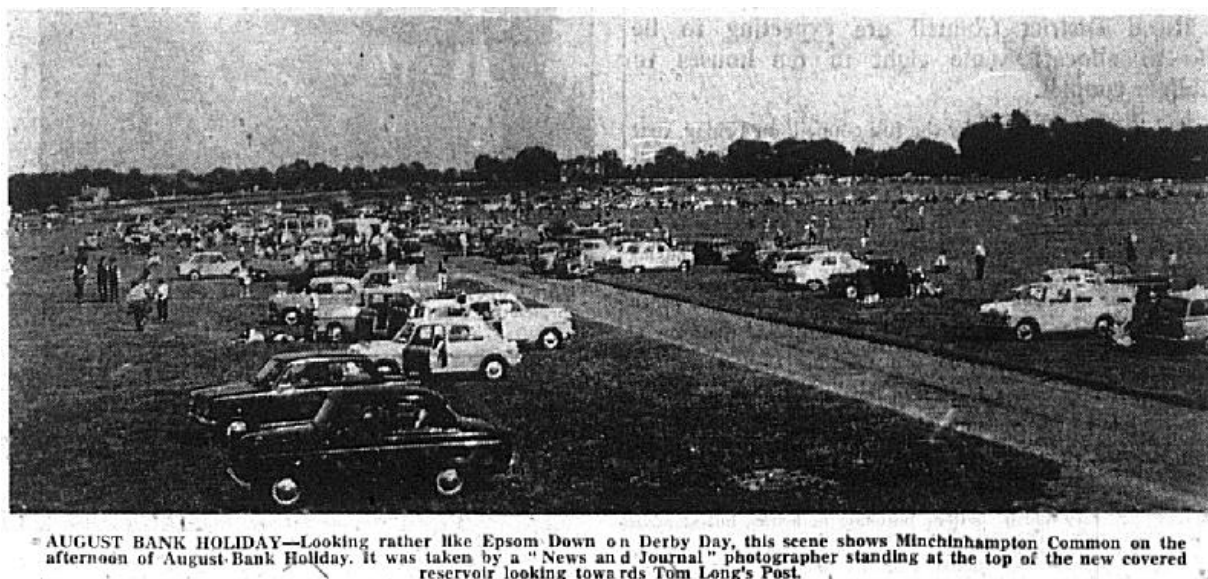


Figure 4.6.6: Cars parked on neighbouring Minchinhampton Common, August Bank Holiday 1964  
Source: Stroud News. © Stroud News and Journal. Reproduced with permission

Despite the provision of dedicated car parks and other measures to alleviate problems, inappropriate parking is still prevalent in some areas during peak times.

Ways of preventing this, including committee members engaging directly with these illegal parkers, have been the subject of many discussions at the MRCAC.<sup>474</sup>

Interviewees' opinions ranged from wanting more parking to wanting all parking prevented, or somewhere in between. Restrictions on parking areas have also been mooted at several meetings of the RCCP, but the temporary closure of some parking areas for resurfacing in 2020 caused huge problems with people parking illegally, so this suggestion has, for the time being, been shelved.<sup>475</sup>

Fig. 4.6.7 also shows significant numbers of people were enjoying 'holiday-time [sic]' as early as 1910, indicating the Common has been an important gathering place for the community for many years, and that high volumes of visitors are not new. As this postcard shows, while the Common has historically been a popular

<sup>474</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

place for community gatherings, most likely on ‘high days and holidays’, use i recent years has evolved to far more frequent and regular visits, with people, dogs, and cars heaping additional pressure onto fragile grassland habitats. The relative rarity of these habitats now, compared to even one hundred years ago, means the issue has implications beyond the Common, compounding the problem.<sup>476</sup>

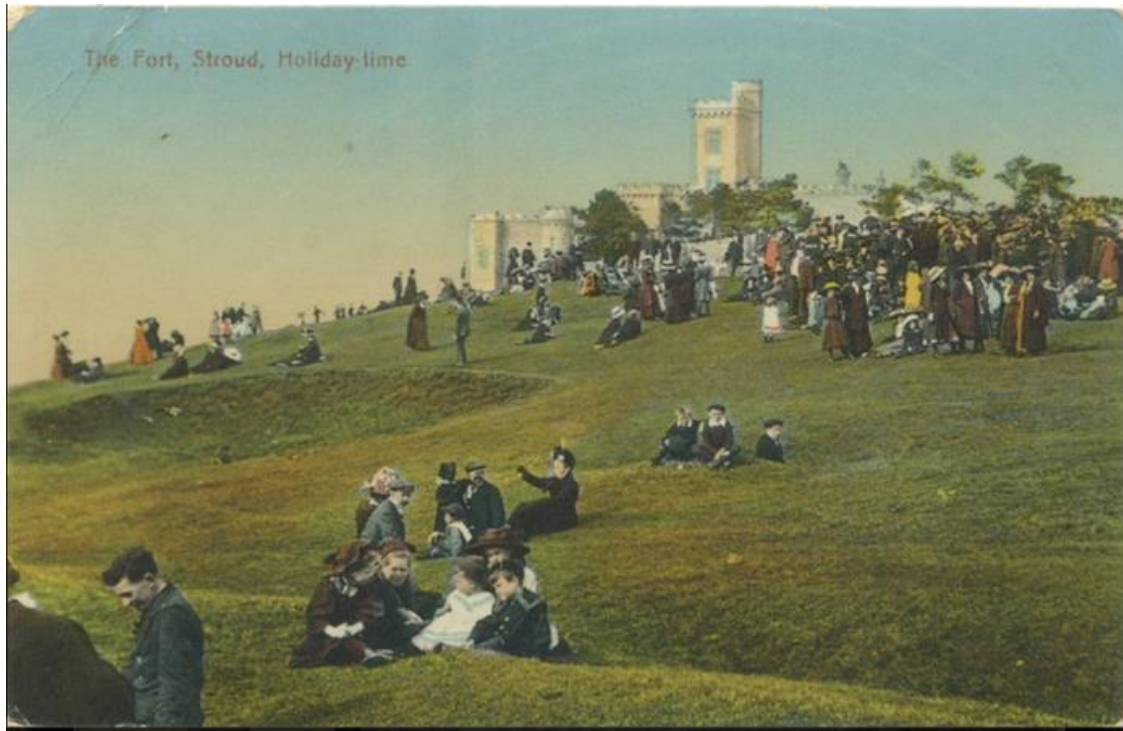


Figure 4.6.7: Holiday time on Rodborough Common, c.1910  
Source: rodboroughfort.co.uk. Reproduced with permission

C1 shared there had been a recent suggestion that gravel paths be installed on the Common, to reduce people free-ranging over the grassland, but felt this wasn't a solution as it would negatively impact its *genius loci*: 'I think you know this wanting to keep the Common, the sympathies for it. It must be, commoners would say oh it shouldn't be parkland, you're parklandifying it and I would see it as a scar'.<sup>477</sup> Instead, they felt strongly that areas of the Common should be 'rested' by excluding the public at

<sup>476</sup> 'Limestone's Living Legacies', *Back from the Brink*, n.d  
<<https://naturebftb.co.uk/projects/limestones-living-legacies/>> [accessed 19 August 2022].

<sup>477</sup> C1, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

certain times of the year, to allow the grassland to recover, a recommendation made in the 2021 SVP report whose implementation was still under discussion at the time of writing.<sup>478</sup>

Increased recreation and tourism is a widespread challenge that was enabled by the rise of motorised transportation in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>479</sup> Aside from issues created by car parking, vehicles create particular challenges for unfenced grazing areas such as Rodborough. The 1950s Royal Commission found livestock were increasingly at risk of accidents, due to traffic on the roads crossing the Commons. A report from the RSPCA to the Commission recorded sixteen accidents involving vehicles and livestock in 1956.<sup>480</sup> Since the Commission visited, private car ownership in Britain has increased 75-fold from around 400,000 to more than thirty million.<sup>481</sup> A similar 75-fold rise in traffic accidents has only been prevented by a reduced grazing season, reduced cattle numbers, and the introduction of a forty mile per hour speed limit.

The Common's main road is used by many people to leave Stroud in the direction of Cirencester and Swindon and onwards to London, making it a popular commuter route and meaning the volume of traffic is increasingly problematic. A recent survey of traffic volume and speed carried out by Rodborough Parish Council found on average more than 2000 vehicles crossing the Common each day.<sup>482</sup> LM2 observed that the traffic 'just gets busier, yeah. Oh yeah, there are statistics about how much each year the traffic increases across the Common and it does it gets worse and worse and worse

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<sup>478</sup> C1; Stroud Valleys Project, 'Footpath, Botanical and Skylark Surveys'.

<sup>479</sup> V.T. Middleton and L.J. Lickorish, *British Tourism: The Remarkable Story of Growth* (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>480</sup> NA, MAF 96/260.

<sup>481</sup> Simon Gun, 'The History of Transport Systems in the UK', *Government Office for Science*, 2018 <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/761929/Historyoftransport.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/761929/Historyoftransport.pdf)> [accessed 16 February 2022].

<sup>482</sup> Rodborough Parish Council Deputy Clerk, email to the author, 22 July 2023.

and worse'.<sup>483</sup> C3b agreed 'I mean in the morning, the traffic on the main road at the, you know, just up the bit that comes up from the Butts, you know, past the Albert, that is just relentless now it's just car, car, car, car, car, the whole morning pretty much. And it wasn't like that even three years ago, I would say'.<sup>484</sup>

Despite improvements in road safety measures, fewer cattle, and amended grazing times (cattle are no longer grazed over the darker autumn and winter months) since the 1950s, vehicle-caused cattle injuries and deaths are still prevalent. After an encouraging year in 2022 of no cattle deaths in both 2023 and 2024, four deaths and numerous injuries were reported.<sup>485</sup> In 2025, the first incident occurred just two days after the cattle were released for the grazing season.<sup>486</sup> A campaign for traffic calming measures and/or a reduction in the speed limit by members of the MRCAC and others has been ongoing for many years.<sup>487</sup> Rodborough Parish Council's study found the forty miles per hour speed limit was generally followed with only around 1% to 2% of drivers exceeding it.<sup>488</sup> The same study found that where the limit decreases to thirty miles per hour as the road drops down into Rodborough's main housing areas, a far higher percentage of drivers (up to 52%) exceeded the limit, suggesting that any decrease would require rigorous enforcement.<sup>489</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly for a shared space adjacent to an urban centre, participants also raised issues relating to anti-social behaviour. The most frequently referenced was littering, although littering on the Common was not thought to be as bad

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<sup>483</sup> LM2.

<sup>484</sup> C3b.

<sup>485</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes* November 2023; Ibid. December 2024.

<sup>486</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Rodborough Parish Council Deputy Clerk email to author, 22 July 2023.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

as in other places, partly due to the efforts of local litter-picking volunteers. It also tends to be fairly localised, with car parks being a site of occasional fly tipping and littering from takeaways.<sup>490</sup> In 1997 the *Stroud News and Journal* featured a resident whose voluntary wardening on the common was motivated by a desire to do something about the littering.<sup>491</sup> Whilst littering problems are not, therefore, new, they are thought to have become more widespread in recent decades.<sup>492</sup>

There were also reports of parties around benches, particularly during the pandemic. Fires and barbeques were of particular concern during long dry spells. During a particularly dry summer in 2022, the Trust made efforts to discourage the lighting of fires and barbecues, and the fact that major fires were avoided suggests people did undertake some self-regulation in that regard. This was certainly not the case in the past when arson was not infrequently committed on the Common, usually by young boys. Local lad J.B. Cooper recollected that he and his peers used to set fire to the dry grass all over the Common 'just for fun'.<sup>493</sup> This practice was not confined to Cooper and his friends, however, with several youths being fined £1 each at Nailsworth Police Court in 1921 for this same practice.<sup>494</sup> In contrast, R7 observed that 'it's not been so bad this year', with no reports of the fire service being needed on the Common.<sup>495</sup>

Instances of other anti-social behaviours were, however, fairly scant, and those that occurred seemed to be isolated incidents rather than symptoms of generalised patterns of behaviour. LM2 and IG1 mentioned people driving onto the

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<sup>490</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>491</sup> Sims, 'Common Land with a Right Royal History', p. 20.

<sup>492</sup> 'A Rubbish Reality: Our Littering Problem and Why it Matters', *Keep Britain Tidy*, 2025 <<https://www.keepbritaintidy.org/news/rubbish-reality-new-report-reveals-shocking-scale-litter-problem>> [accessed 12 March 2025].

<sup>493</sup> J.B Cooper, *Early Days*, (Downfield Press, 2009), Museum in the Park Stroud, E.999, p. 56.

<sup>494</sup> GRO, D2219 1/9.

<sup>495</sup> R7.

Common and tearing up the grassland.<sup>496</sup> LM2 mentioned that ‘it’s one of the battles with the public, isn’t it, you get people that drive all over the Common, that use it as a skid pan, do all sorts of horrendous things’.<sup>497</sup> IG1 also observed ‘I see it regularly, or the result of it; somebody goes up and does doughnuts up there in their car’.<sup>498</sup>

During a brief warm spell in early spring 2024, several would-be ravers also caused damage to the grassland by driving onto the Common to set up a mini rave (Fig. 4.6.8). This incident was dealt with by local police who visited the site for a ‘friendly word’ with the ravers, who have not since repeated their event to my knowledge.<sup>499</sup>

LM2 told me that they would generally try and resolve problems with anti-social behaviour directly, but there were situations where they did not feel safe to intervene:

‘We get lads up here with remote-control cars. And had a bunch up here once who thought it was funny to chase the cows with their remote-control cars. So I didn’t want to mix with them, to be honest. I rang the police up and they came up and sorted it out’.<sup>500</sup>

IG1 on the other hand found that recourse to the police was ineffective; ‘so there was a big fire up there and there’s like if you phone the police, they’re like, well, unless they’re hurting themselves, there’s nothing you can do. And we’re like, but it’s what about the flowers and stuff?’.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> LM2; IG1, interviewed by the author, 29 March 2023.

<sup>497</sup> LM2.

<sup>498</sup> IG1.

<sup>499</sup> MRCAC What's App Group chat, 17 March 2024.

<sup>500</sup> LM2.

<sup>501</sup> IG1.



Figure 4.6.8: Still from a video of damage to the Common caused by spring ravers, March 2024  
Source: MRCAC What's App Group

Whilst grassland biodiversity is declining in some areas of the Common due to heavy recreational usage and damage from vehicles, trees and scrub cover were thought to be increasing, with participants observing that the number of trees on the Common's borders and scrub incursion in general had significantly increased. R10a had a particular interest in the Common's trees, having been an arboriculturalist before their retirement.<sup>502</sup> They observed numbers and types of trees and shrubs had altered, with non-native species such as cotoneaster and evergreen holm oak threatening native and sometimes rare orchid species.<sup>503</sup> C3b also observed the increasing amounts of holm oak, and R7 commented on non-native species 'but there is more like bushes and almost like garden bushes I've seen like some of the berries and stuff on, which aren't common to the Common'.<sup>504</sup> LM3 observed: 'I look at the Gloucestershire postcards sometimes and there's usually a few of the Common and often showing it completely

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<sup>502</sup> R10a, interview with the author, 9 March 2023.

<sup>503</sup> R10a.

<sup>504</sup> C3b; R7.

treeless'.<sup>505</sup> This observation was supported by a comparative photography exercise carried out with students from Bath Spa University's MA Environmental Humanities course in 2023 (Fig. 4.6.9 and 4.6.10).<sup>506</sup>



Figure 4.6.9: View of Rodborough Fort, c. 1900  
Source: [www.rodboroughfort.co.uk](http://www.rodboroughfort.co.uk). Reproduced with permission



Figure 4.6.10: View of Rodborough Fort, 2023  
Source: Author's Photograph. © Sharon Gardham

Along with the loss of native biodiversity and threats to the composition of the grassland, scrub incursion and tree growth can also cause restrictions to access and potentially compromise the views for which the Common is so loved. Kate

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<sup>505</sup> LM3, interview with the author, 20 October 2022.

<sup>506</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, May 2023.

Ashbrook, chair of the OSS, shared how deliberate tree planting and general scrub incursion threaten open access on other commons, particularly when grazing is limited or ceases.<sup>507</sup> Allowing a degree of scrub incursion on the Common is, however, a deliberate conservation measure, particularly in areas where the unimproved grassland has been disturbed by past quarrying and subsequent rubbish dumping.<sup>508</sup> LM4 explained that while some scrub was considered useful for encouraging greater biodiversity, it has to be carefully managed.<sup>509</sup>

Under-grazing, partly due to decreasing numbers of active commoners, is certainly making keeping the balance of scrub to open grassland harder. Whereas the commoners of the mid-twentieth century were worried about their ability to manage the carrying capacity of the grazing in the face of potential over-stocking, the land managers of the twenty-first century have the opposite problem.<sup>510</sup> During 2021 for example, cattle numbers grazing on Rodborough were reduced from an ideal 120 to 150 to just twenty, due to TB and the ill-health of a single grazier.<sup>511</sup> Of more than 250 registered common rights holders, only two regularly exercise those rights, placing a heavy reliance on those few commoners who do still turn out grazing animals.

IG6 noted the changes in the way the common was managed had resulted in more tree cover; 'you know, things like the lonely tree being an important feature in the [Common's landscape] ...that's less so now because of the way the environment of the common has actually changed'.<sup>512</sup> Despite this view, the importance of the (no-longer-very) 'lonely tree' (Fig. 4.6.11) was strongly evident when it fell during a storm

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<sup>507</sup> Kate Ashbrook, interview with the author, 6 April 2022.

<sup>508</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>509</sup> LM4.

<sup>510</sup> NA, MAF 96/260; Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>511</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, March 2022.

<sup>512</sup> IG6.

in late 2023. Many people publicly expressed grief and loss, some took flowers to the site (Fig. 4.6.12), and a short story competition was launched in its honour.<sup>513</sup> The Trust's initial instinct to clear it away was advised against by MRCAC members, and it has instead been left in situ to naturally degrade and in doing so nurture other species.<sup>514</sup>



Figure 4.6.11: The (not-so-lonely) tree (on the right) prior to its fall  
Source: Author's Photograph. © Sharon Gardham

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<sup>513</sup> Sharon Gardham, Field Notes, Autumn 2023; Michelle Ruminski, 'Storm Gerrit: Sadness as Lonely Tree Blown Over During Storm', *BBC News*, 28 December 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-67833303>> [accessed 2 July 2024]; Ashley Loveridge, *Award-winning Author Plays Emotional Tribute to Fallen Tree*, *Stroud Times*, 31 December 2023 <<https://stroudtimes.com/award-winning-author-pays-emotional-tribute-to-fallen-tree/>> [accessed 2 July 2024].

<sup>514</sup> MRCAC What's App Group chat, 27 December 2023.



Figure 4.6.12: Floral tributes to the fallen 'Lonely Tree', December 2023  
Source: Stroud Times. © Matt Bigwood. Reproduced with permission

In addition to specific threats faced by the Common, participants also talked in some cases about indirect threats from wider, global environmental degradation, and broader policy issues such as housing and development. FG1D was concerned that 'I guess with the temperature getting hotter and like global warming, everything the grass will start to like dry out much easier'.<sup>515</sup> Many of the participants were aware of and concerned about wider issues, from pressures created by planetary warming to population rises increasing visitor numbers and causing pressure on land for development, relating these directly to impacts on the Common. Development, for example, presents a particular challenge to the retention of active commoners, as common rights are linked to property, and the sale of farms for development results in more commoners being lost. Participants were, however, more likely to view

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<sup>515</sup> FG1D, focus group with the author, 9 June 2023.

development as a direct threat to the Common's outlook or to fear that the Common itself would be built on.

As this theme shows, at Rodborough, we see a common that is well loved and largely well cared for by the landowner and the large majority of the extended population of commoners. At a micro level, problems are generally spotted, reported, or dealt with directly. Littering, isolated incidences of anti-social behaviour, and to an extent, undesirably high levels of scrub incursion, can be dealt with by committed individuals locally, but other issues are largely outside of the control of today's commoners. A rise in visitor numbers concentrated in a relatively small space leading to footpath erosion, problematic incidents with dogs, illegal parking, increased traffic leading to more cattle deaths and injuries, as well as fears regarding development, are all symptomatic of general population pressures and a lack of open access to the majority of the countryside. A decrease in grazing is partly due to the same pressures, but is also indicative of wider challenges in farming; for example, an ageing farming population, farmland being sold for development, the decreased viability of farming in non-industrialised ways, and the prevalence of TB in cattle. Fears regarding wildfires and non-native species incursion are reflective of a warming climate.

While stringent efforts can be made to deal with the on-the-ground outcomes of these broader issues, these will become increasingly unsustainable without wider environmental, cultural, and political changes. When we consider the combination of a lack of localised autonomy over common land with broader environmental, political and social challenges, we can easily see how commons may become increasingly unviable, especially as working-farmed environments. As we examine the possible future of commons in the interests of commoners of all species, we must be aware of these broader contexts and plan, campaign, and influence accordingly.

This theme shows that the stakeholders I spoke with have a considered and thoughtful view of on-the-ground issues. Generally, participants shared many of the same concerns about the Common and talked about these carefully and reasonably. Issues were numerous, but many participants felt that these were moderated to some degree by self-regulating behaviour, resulting in the Common being space that was seen as largely well respected.

#### **4.7: Your Common Needs YOU!**

Participants also shared considered views about who might be responsible for helping care for the Common, at both micro and macro levels. The theme '*Your Common Needs YOU!*', explores examples of interviewees' thoughts on this subject. Whilst thinking about challenges the Common might face, participants were asked to say who or what might be responsible for addressing these. Responses included discussions about personal or individual responsibility, the role of various agencies that might be involved, and broader contexts, such as the importance of local and national government, laws, and policy.

As indicated in the last theme, it was clear from interviews that many individuals felt a great deal of personal responsibility towards the Common, but the degree and type of care varied. As might be expected, those who work on the Common as land managers felt a particular weight of responsibility. What was perhaps more surprising was that in addition to professional responsibility, they also expressed high levels of *personal* responsibility. The land managers I interviewed are paid to look after the Common, but professional responsibility, money, or career were not their primary motivations for doing this oftentimes difficult job. For example, LM2, whose role is to care for the Common's cattle, said:

‘Well, my job is fundamentally hell, you know. I gave a talk once to this [...] The woman before the talk, she said, well, I’m just going to introduce you, she said, what is it you like about your job? I said absolutely nothing at all. I said it’s bloody hell from dawn till dusk! And it is. Well, it is really, I mean. I’m just at the sharp end of sorting problems out all the time’.<sup>516</sup>

I asked them why they did the job if that was the case. The response was simply ‘I think the Common’s worth it, that’s the principal reason’.<sup>517</sup> LM4 also mentioned the challenges of caring for the Common:

‘You know ‘cause a lot of people do ask me, you know, so God, how the hell do you put up with it? You know, the problems, the chaos, the mayhem, the you know, the silliness, the, you know, the way people can speak to you or treat you sometimes’.<sup>518</sup>

LM4 stated they were motivated by ‘that sort of amazing connection’ of being one in a chain of Commons carers, who were ‘still you know, putting into practice beliefs [...] and philosophies which were established nearly 600 years ago’.<sup>519</sup> LM2 agreed that the heritage of the commons was important to their role, but also stated that pride in being part of the community of commoners was key:

‘I think also the graziers and the people associated with the Common. We are a bit of a family, actually, you know. And we have that sort of thing about this and we are the commoners you know. Stick your chest out. It’s part of being part of the family. I think it has a lot to do with it. I don’t know. I suppose also that [...] I don’t know, you can get very sort of technical, very psychological about it all can’t you? But I don’t know, the sort of sense of belonging, sense of worth, sense of doing something worthwhile you know, all of those crazy things’.<sup>520</sup>

These examples support Ostrom’s principle that a strong shared group identity is a key factor in successful commons. For these land managers, the challenges

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<sup>516</sup> LM2.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> LM4.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> LM2.

of their job were somewhat alleviated by feeling they were part of a long tradition of commons carers.

The conservationists I interviewed were not generally paid to care for the Common but also felt personal responsibility, despite a sometimes personal cost. C3a described themselves as a 'social policeman', who would challenge perceived irresponsible behaviour amongst others whilst on the Common, despite the unpleasantness of doing so.<sup>521</sup> When I mentioned I thought they were brave to challenge people they replied, 'yeah, it's horrible. It usually ruins a walk. You're always ready to be sworn at', going on to say, 'it's often really stressful, but then not doing it's really stressful as well'.<sup>522</sup> For C3a this was about giving voice to those who could not speak for themselves:

'I know the cows are probably being raised for meat anyway, but the idea of a cow being poisoned by somebody [washing their dog in a cattle trough]. Yeah, it's all just [...] Someone's got to speak up for these things, haven't they? They haven't got their own voices'.<sup>523</sup>

C1 has been involved in voluntary conservation work on grasslands for some time and is a vociferous and determined advocate for the wellbeing of the Common's wildlife; 'well, I feel very passionate about it. The more I've learned about the situation, the more I feel impassioned to try and literally save the Common'.<sup>524</sup> C2 was also strongly motivated by the unique nature of the Common's wildlife and felt everyone should do more to protect the Common; 'it's irreplaceable. It [losing the grassland] is like chopping down a rainforest basically'.<sup>525</sup> The motivations of those

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<sup>521</sup> C3a, interview with the author, 30 March 2023.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> C1.

<sup>525</sup> C2, interview with the author, 5 May 2022.

involved in conservation efforts mirror the feelings of personal responsibility described by the Common's land managers, though conservationists were apt to be motivated by feelings of ethical responsibility rather than by a sense of tradition, identity or history. Familiarity with the Common's other-than-human inhabitants led to caring, which in turn led to a desire to do something positive to help the Common's wildlife survive and thrive.

Several of the residents also shared feelings of personal responsibility, but these tended to be in line with their interests. For example, anti-litter campaigner R5 told me when they walked their dog on the Common they 'sort of do collect litter when I'm, I'll try and do a two-for-one if I got to collect one of his [dog's] poos I pick something else up at the same time'.<sup>526</sup> Long-term resident R7 agreed helping to keep the Common litter-free was important; 'I mean, I do carry a carrier bag in my little thing and I do pick some stuff up, especially on the Common'.<sup>527</sup> R6 told me their attitude to caring for the Common was changed by an encounter with another member of the public, who admonished them for riding their bike over the grassland:

'She had a real go at me, she said, 'do you realise what you're doing?' And she was absolutely right. You know, I've realised and I haven't forgotten it. You know that basically I was cycling over where all little beasties [...] So... I've ever since I've really taken that to heart'.<sup>528</sup>

Proportionally, one of the groups who talked most about personal responsibility was the focus group, which was made up of teenagers from a local school. Their motivations tended to be ethical. The shared ownership perception was important for FG1E:

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<sup>526</sup> R5, interview with the author, 21 April 2022.

<sup>527</sup> R7

<sup>528</sup> R6.

‘I think because since it’s like a public space that everyone can use, it should be everyone’s responsibility to take care of it as well, rather than just like one organisation or like a group of people. It should be everyone that’s looking after it’.<sup>529</sup>

For FG1B it was simple: ‘I think we should leave it as we arrived, end of’.<sup>530</sup> This group also expressed feelings of personal responsibility for the wellbeing of the environment more generally, with FG1B adding ‘the environment is important, you know, and we’ve got to protect it. So who’s going to do it but us, you know?’.<sup>531</sup>

In tandem with personal responsibility, this theme also looked at the potential role of volunteers in helping to care for the Common. Unpaid workers are hugely important to conservation activities. In 2019 a JNCC survey of fourteen large conservation charities recorded over 9.5 million volunteer hours being spent on activities such as surveying, recording, countryside management and general conservation.<sup>532</sup> Although this already seems high, the true number of hours spent by volunteers working to conserve the environment is likely to be far higher when smaller organisations and informal volunteering are taken into account. For example, LM2 observed that ‘there are quite a few volunteers that wander around the Common just clearing things up. There’s an old lady that’s been doing it for years. You see her every now and again, she just goes around picking litter up’.<sup>533</sup> R5 attributed the relative lack of litter on the Common to local litter picking group the Five Valleys Wombles; ‘the level of voluntary litter picking, it’s going on through the Wombles. It is generally very clean’

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<sup>529</sup> FG1E, focus group with the author, 9 June 2023.

<sup>530</sup> FG1B, focus group with the author, 9 June 2023.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

<sup>532</sup> ‘UK Biodiversity Indicators 2022, Indicator A2: Taking Action for Nature: Volunteer Time Spent in Conservation, A2 Datasheet’, JNCC, 2024 <<https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/16412589-accf-4591-a66c-32e05649cd4d>> [accessed 3 November 2023].

<sup>533</sup> LM4.

(Fig. 4.7.2).<sup>534</sup> R7, C5, FG1A and FG1D all agreed that volunteers might have an important role in the Common's future, by taking part in surveying, education, and general care.<sup>535</sup>

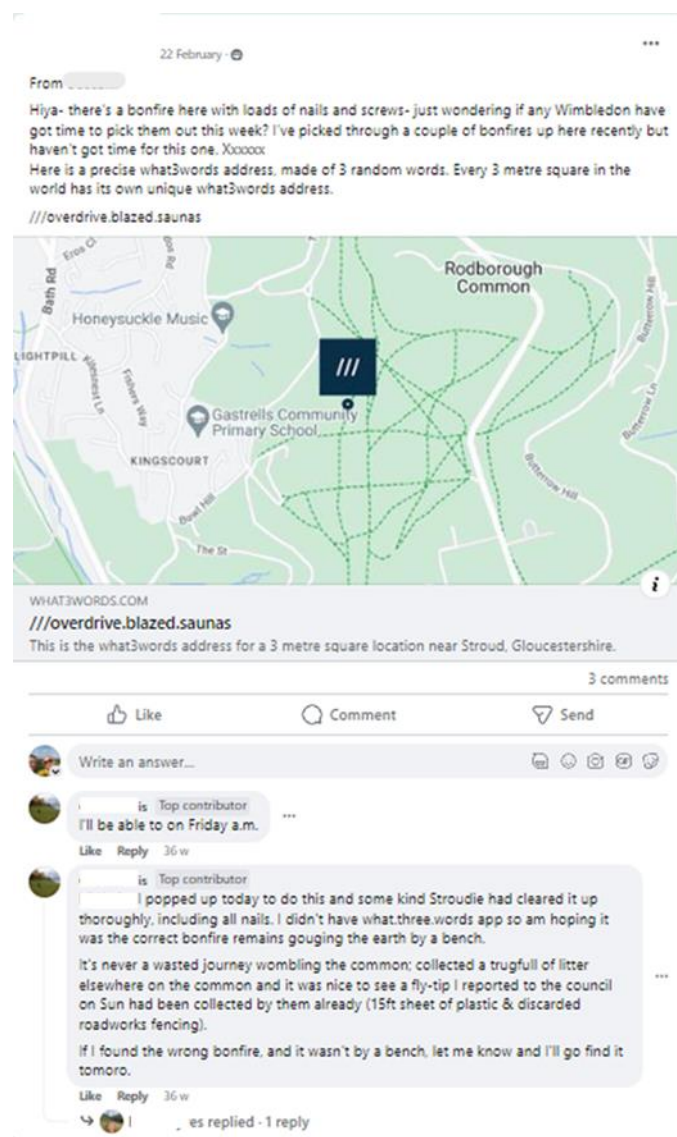


Figure 4.7.1: Five Valleys Wombles in action on Facebook  
Reproduced under Facebook's Fair Use policy

The role of the graziers and their livestock was a common thread through many of the conversations I had, although the emphasis and focus varied. In terms of relative responsibilities to care for the Common, grazers and graziers came up most

<sup>534</sup> R5.

<sup>535</sup> R7; C5, interview with the author, 7 September 2022; FG1A focus group with the author, 9 June 2023; FG1D.

frequently, followed by the role of the Trust, and then the role of individuals. Whilst residents or interest group representatives were most likely to talk about the contribution the cattle make to the *genius loci* of the Common, land managers and conservationists emphasised the importance of grazing for the continued health of the Common's habitat. The continuation of physical grazing on the Common might be under constant assault, but the tradition of grazing and its importance was clear. LM2 expressed this by saying: 'I mean, these grazing rights are absolutely sacrosanct. You know, they really are. And they always will be. And they're fiercely defended. That's one thing that's never going to change'.<sup>536</sup>

LM2 described farming on the Common: 'it really is what's sometimes known as 'dog and stick' farming really. They don't use pesticides, they don't use fertilisers. They take from the land what they can get, more or less'.<sup>537</sup> They contrasted this to large-scale, industrialised farming; 'these people are not like barley barons or, you know, people that grow sugar beet or whatever, you know, people that sort of make, are capable of making a lot of money'.<sup>538</sup> The importance of cattle grazing to the habitat was highlighted by LM4, who said: 'grazing is the essential tool to keep that biodiversity alive on our Commons'.<sup>539</sup> C2 agreed on the importance of the graziers for the continued health of the Common; 'so I do think that maybe the future of the Commons is to protect the graziers really and really work with, more with them', adding 'they are absolutely key to it. They're key to the Commons'.<sup>540</sup>

#### The role of subsidies in enabling the continuation of traditional farming

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<sup>536</sup> LM2.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid. Note: 'Dog and Stick' farming refers to a minimalist style of farming characterised by low inputs (i.e., a farmer, a dog, and a stick) and low outputs.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> LM4.

<sup>540</sup> C2.

on the Common was also discussed. All the land managers I spoke with acknowledged the importance of subsidies, but expressed concern about funding uncertainty, the suitability of schemes for common land, and long-term viability:

‘So they [the graziers] really believe in the system and they’re working very hard to maintain that system within a very uncertain and very difficult economic situation that we’re currently going through, you know, and there’s lots of uncertainty through payments and this, that and the other’.<sup>541</sup>

R13 worried about the sustainability of commoning: ‘the way that subsidies work has enabled people to do it, but like I can’t see that continuing in the long term’.<sup>542</sup> LM2 agreed: ‘and it’s the grants really, the grant money, that’s helping to keep things going. So if we lose that and it declines in profitability then, will they keep on doing it? You know, the answer is probably not’.<sup>543</sup> The unsustainable nature of the system in the absence of effective subsidies was also highlighted to me during an informal conversation with two commoners who carry out winter conservation grazing on the Common. I asked them whether there was any economic advantage in grazing animals on the Common as opposed to on private land and the answer was an emphatic ‘no’.<sup>544</sup>

Subsidies have traditionally been structured for those involved in large-scale, industrialised farming, rather than the ‘dog and stick’ farmers of the Common. An House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on the transition to post-Brexit farming subsidies, for example, observed that ‘those farming the uplands, and tenanted and common land, will face particular challenges during the

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<sup>541</sup> LM4.

<sup>542</sup> R13.

<sup>543</sup> LM2.

<sup>544</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, May 2023.

agricultural transition'.<sup>545</sup> It reported concerns raised by the Foundation for Common Land that farmers on commons, who were already at risk of collapse, would be finally forced out of business and that 'again we see commons being put into the too difficult box and schemes not commons proofed to account for multiple legal interests'.<sup>546</sup> The report recommended 'that the particular needs of tenants and commoners are properly accounted for in the scheme's design, rather than forcing them into a scheme designed for owner-occupiers' and that 'DEFRA must not squander the considerable potential of this land to deliver public goods'.<sup>547</sup> The Foundation for Common Land is working with DEFRA on a pilot scheme for the application of Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) on both upland and lowland commons, but it is unclear whether its recommendations will be adopted.<sup>548</sup> The commitment required to continue farming on the Common despite the challenges it represents, was alluded to by R13; 'So most of the guys and girls that you meet who are graziers, you know, K and E and S and stuff, are doing it mainly because they love it'.<sup>549</sup> LM4 felt the commoners were keenly aware of their position as a link in a long chain but did not see this as a regressive outlook:

"So they're very forward thinking in so much that they still believe in this way of life. They still believe in the tradition and are, you know, at best they want to continue and pass that baton on as best they can'.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> 'Environmental Land Management and the Agricultural Transition: Second Report of Session 2021–22', *House of Commons, Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Committee*, 21 October 2021 <<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7663/documents/79987/default/>> [accessed 1 November 2023] p. 4.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25; p. 4.

<sup>548</sup> Joanna Swiers, 'Ensuring ELMs is Effective on Commons: Test and Trial Report', *Foundation for Common Land*, March 2022 <

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d5fcdc672b2a400016bf1bb/t/627d5e20d819247f0562a660/1652383293383/Commons+T+and+T+final+report.pdf>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

<sup>549</sup> R13.

<sup>550</sup> LM4.

However, relying on this motivation for the continuation of commoning is highly risky, despite the steadfast commitment shown by commoners over many generations. Given the currently low number of farmers actively commoning, it only takes the cessation of grazing of one or two, for whatever reason, to drastically alter the Common's trajectory. This is quite simply a system with no in-built resilience.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of individual and landowner responsibility in caring for the Common, interviewees also spoke about the wider role policy and government had to play. The statutory bodies with responsibility for the Common, including DEFRA, Natural England and the District and County Councils were mentioned to varying degrees. The primary concern with these bodies was the perception of a chronic lack of central government support and funding to enable them to carry out their roles satisfactorily. C2 summed up this problem by saying:

'The vast majority of work for those people [conservationists/ecologists] would have been with governmental organisations, probably you know, the DEFRA-type organisations, Natural England, the Environment Agency, they've shelved so many positions, so many jobs, they can't really effectively operate any more I don't think really'.<sup>551</sup>

R13 agreed; 'I know how those kinds of organisations [work], partly because of like, you know, people being underpaid and working hard and things can just like you know, decision making isn't always the best'.<sup>552</sup> *The Guardian* has been highlighting for some time the threat to the effectiveness of bodies such as Natural England caused by direct and indirect attacks from central government.<sup>553</sup> The fragility of Natural England and other quasi-autonomous bodies entrusted with caring for the

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<sup>551</sup> C2.

<sup>552</sup> R13.

<sup>553</sup> Phoebe Weston, 'Natural England 'Cut to the Bone' and Unable to Protect Wildlife, Say Staff', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/10/natural-england-cut-to-the-bone-and-unable-to-protect-wildlife-staff-claim-aoe>> [accessed 3 November 2023].

environment highlights the inherent lack of sustainability in trying to maintain centralised control over localised assets. In a highly political and restricted funding climate, inadequately resourced central governing bodies compound issues created by a lack of localised control, leaving both centralised organisations and local land managers ill-equipped to care for spaces that are important for other-than-human thriving.

The above reflections on the role of centralised bodies highlights the importance of individuals in the Common's continued survival. Even where larger organisations are involved, it is still those on the ground who are making the difference. Vital to the effective management of the Common is these individuals' ability to maintain good relations between different commons stakeholders; relations that, in the past, have not always been cordial. LM2 shared: 'I'm afraid there are graziers who not so much now, but in the past would have sort of blundered in with a fist flying almost, you know' and that 'there was one time on Rodborough Common where I had a Minchinhampton grazier and a Rodborough grazier, literally standing each either side of me having an argument and using words that began with 'c' and things like that'.<sup>554</sup> Reportedly, however, relations between graziers have improved in recent years. LM2 reported that 'the two committees [Minchinhampton and Rodborough graziers] meet together now and the change in my lifetime on the Common that's occurred between graziers has been absolutely phenomenal'.<sup>555</sup>

In addition to inter-grazier relationships, the relationship between the Trust, as relative newcomers (they have only been involved in caring for the Common for the past 86 years) and the graziers has not always been an easy one. LM2 shared that 'I was taken aside one day at a Marking Day dinner [by the Trust manager], you do

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<sup>554</sup> LM2.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

know that we do own the Common, don't you?' I thought, all right, OK, you know. And the sort of position really now is that the Trust own the Common but the graziers own the grass'.<sup>556</sup> LM3 also acknowledged the challenges of the past; 'historically there were people very antagonistic against the Trust with the graziers'.<sup>557</sup> LM4 acknowledged the importance of a healthy two-way relationship between Trust and graziers saying 'It's a common. We may be landowners, but it's their Common'.<sup>558</sup> Improvements in the relationship between the Trust and the commoners have been due in no small part to the efforts of the individuals currently involved, whose motivations are, as we have seen, both professional and personal. Once again, however, this is a potentially precarious situation, that could be upset by just one or two changes in personnel.

From an organisational perspective, the relationship between the Trust and the wider public was also seen by some participants as a key factor in the success, or otherwise of managing the Common. To place this relationship in context, the Trust has almost six million members and is the eighth largest UK charity in terms of income.<sup>559</sup> It is the self-proclaimed largest conservation organisation in Europe.<sup>560</sup> A 2023 YouGov poll found that 96% of respondents had heard of the Trust, and 74% of them had a positive opinion of it (17% were neutral and 6% disliked it).<sup>561</sup> It has around 65,000 volunteers, and, despite some poor publicity in recent years due to its alleged

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<sup>556</sup> LM2.

<sup>557</sup> LM3.

<sup>558</sup> LM4.

<sup>559</sup> 'Top 10 Charities in England and Wales', *Charity Commission for England and Wales*, 13 October 2023 <<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/sector-data/top-10-charities>> [accessed 8 November 2023].

<sup>560</sup> 'People and Nature Thriving: Our 2025 to 2035 Strategy', *The National Trust*, 2025 <<https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/nationaltrust-strategy-2025-english.pdf>> [accessed 16 January 2025], p. 32.

<sup>561</sup> 'The Most Popular Charities and Organisations', *You Gov UK*, Q3 2023 <<https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/politics/popularity/charities-organisations/all>> [accessed 8 November 2023].

‘woke agenda’, during 2021 it had record numbers of new subscriptions.<sup>562</sup> Although the Trust has weathered past storms of adverse press coverage, and despite its apparent financial stability, it is undoubtedly still sensitive to the tide of public opinion and is therefore, as an organisation, conscious of generating poor publicity. C3a, who works for the Trust in another capacity (i.e., not on the Common), thought conflicting priorities and a lack of income from the Common might mean it was not as prioritised as it might be; ‘I can sort of imagine that if they were doing an analysis of, you know, whether it was worth the intervention, you know, that they might conclude that there were other places where things could be protected more easily’.<sup>563</sup> C1 worried about conflicts in the Trust’s agenda, between care and conservation versus opening up spaces to more people:

‘Quite often I find some of the National Trust advertising for things to do. You’ll see aerial shots of people cycling across ... ‘Come to Stroud, come and cycle all over our Commons. You’ll have such fun’ you know, being at odds with looking after this area’<sup>564</sup>.

C2 expressed concerns about potential conflicts between doing the ‘right’ thing and being seen to do the ‘right’ thing; ‘the Trust [...] they’re in terrifying fear of bad publicity, so they won’t put people right on certain things in case they offend. They don’t want to offend, because that means loss of revenue’.<sup>565</sup> IG6 pointed out a specific debt the Trust owed to the public regarding the acquisition of Rodborough Common:

‘It’s important to remember that this land only became National Trust owned because you know, people raised the money to transfer it in. So there’s clearly an endowment fund, which is [...] Actually, one of the questions is what’s the value

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<sup>562</sup> Rachel Hall, ‘Record Numbers Join National Trust Despite Claims of Anti-Woke Critics’, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/29/record-numbers-join-national-trust-despite-claims-of-anti-woke-critics>> [accessed 8 November 2023].

<sup>563</sup> C3a.

<sup>564</sup> C1.

<sup>565</sup> C2.

of that endowment fund and are we getting the value for the money for that?’<sup>566</sup>

Despite the inherent challenges in maintaining a good relationship between the public and the Trust, LM4 recognised the value of public support and collaborative management in maintaining the Common; ‘I don’t wanna sort of see this as an organisation of ‘don’t do that’. You know, because it doesn’t work’.<sup>567</sup> The success of this approach was attested to by the fact that many interviewees who spoke about the Trust acknowledged its key role in helping to care for the Common. C1 said ‘I mean, we’re very lucky that we’ve got the National Trust really to protect these places’, going on to discuss fears about the land otherwise being sold off to an unsympathetic manager or developer.<sup>568</sup> R10a agreed that the Trust’s ownership was positive; ‘the National Trust own it and that’s yeah, gotta be a fantastic thing really because it safeguards it’<sup>569</sup>. IG6 was reassured by the Trust’s statutory obligations; ‘one of the benefits of the National Trust owning it is, is their wider statutory responsibilities’.<sup>570</sup> There were several interviewees, however, who did not know that the Trust were involved in the Common at all, notably new resident R14 and the focus group teenagers, perhaps giving some support to C7’s view that the Trust could benefit from a little more outreach work, and LM3’s belief that a more visible presence on the Common would be beneficial.<sup>571</sup>

As this theme demonstrates, a healthy, mutually supportive relationship between all interested parties is desirable, not to say essential, for the continued

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<sup>566</sup> IG6, interview with the author, 31 March 2023.

<sup>567</sup> LM4.

<sup>568</sup> C1.

<sup>569</sup> R10a.

<sup>570</sup> IG6.

<sup>571</sup> R14, interview with the author, 10 May 2023; C7 interview with the author, 20 October 2022; LM3.

thriving of the Common. However, as I have hinted here, this is not easily achieved in a shared space with many conflicting priorities. Once again, generally, participants showed a good understanding of the kinds of issues facing those who are officially responsible for caring for the Common. They also generally displayed good knowledge of the range of people and organisations who have a role to play in caring for shared spaces. This theme shows the Common enduring primarily due to the level of care, personal responsibility and love that individuals feel for this space and the organisational and statutory obligations of the landowner. The role of centralised governance wasn't as clear to participants, particularly the challenges of trying to farm common land, with its wealth of public goods, in an uncertain funding environment and within an economic system that does not specifically accommodate it.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that motivations for individual care for the Common are rooted in a combination of things: sense of place, ethical beliefs, tradition, history, and identity. The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the Common has successfully endured over the years due to two primary factors; the continuity of careful management since at least the eleventh century, and the efforts of successive generations of commoners to ensure this continuity. Rodborough commoners' stories of care and consideration demonstrate the viability of long-term, widespread sharing of resources within localised structures of control. They also highlight the problems of trying to fit a medieval system of land management into twenty-first century use patterns. Careful consideration of Rodborough's past allows us to 'cherry pick' the best examples of historic management and to suggest their use in adapting to modern challenges and to the revitalisation and extension of 'good

neighbourhood’.

In Section 2.2, I lamented the absence of other species from many accounts of the commons. In this chapter, I have attempted to bring other species more equitably into the story, interweaving other-than-human stories with the predominantly human ones found in the written archive. Using this approach, we see that human interaction with this land, as with many others, is relatively recent and, in geological terms, brief. Despite this brevity it has disproportionately shaped and influenced the land and continues to do so. The temptation to view this disproportionate impact as central and overriding risks denying the wider other-than-human influences that have worked to co-create the Common we see today. Understanding and appreciating our brief and recent role in the life of the Common by exploring and relaying its deep-time stories can start to redress this balance.

Furthermore, in human terms at least, understanding and appreciating the centuries of human care that have preserved this as a place for all, situates us as one in a long line of past, present, and future carers, helping us all to find a ‘sense of belonging, sense of worth, sense of doing something worthwhile’.<sup>572</sup> Outlining Rodborough’s medieval history in Section 4.3 laid the foundations for understanding its tradition of careful human-led management, which has been tenaciously, if at times precariously, maintained over more than seven centuries. This tradition lends legitimacy and strength to Rodborough’s current commoners, who have inherited a custodial spirit from previous generations. On Rodborough Common, tenacity and resistance to encroachments have become a self-fulfilling prophecy as commoners of each generation are cognisant of the attitudes of those who have gone before. This

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<sup>572</sup> LM2.

understanding allows commoners to be emboldened in their approach to their rights, feeling a responsibility to maintain those rights for the generations to come. As discussed in Section 4.7, this understanding strongly contributes to feelings of personal responsibility and shared identity for the Common's present-day commoners.

In the past, commoners' attitudes of care were supported by the court leet, backed from the early nineteenth century by an active committee of commoners. The combination of court and committee meant that during the era of parliamentary enclosure, that most turbulent of times for the commons, Rodborough was efficiently and appropriately run and managed. By examining past management, we see that the job of retaining and maintaining the Common has never been an easy one; attempts to encroach on the land and deny the rights of commoners have been a constant for 700 years or more. In the past the highly localised, dynamic, and diligent attention of the combined court leet and commons committees by and large protected the Common and the shared interests of commoners.

Whilst today's commoners' committees continue the excellent work of their forebears, they do so in the absence of the court leet's dynamic legal legitimacy. Enforcement of rules may be a last resort for the Common's modern managers, but this is not only due to the preference for a 'carrot over stick' approach: when collaborative management and usage fail, modern legal frameworks make it time-consuming and expensive to take the route of enforcement. In this respect, whilst grazing commoners' management still shows congruence with some of Ostrom's CPR management principles, complete congruence is hampered by a lack of localised legal control. This absence removes the ability to manage commons to best effect; dynamically, resiliently, and democratically. The reliance on centralised control also makes commons vulnerable to falling between the cracks of legislation, funding, and policy setting, rendering their

future precarious.

The definition of commoners today is also far broader than it once was, and rights have largely been granted without widespread acceptance of any associated responsibilities. There is a lack of understanding or recognition in some quarters of the two-sided nature of being a commoner (i.e., that you must give to receive and vice versa). There are too few amongst the wider definition of commoners with a 'sense of belonging, sense of worth, sense of doing something worthwhile' concerning other-than-humans and the spaces we share with them.<sup>573</sup> With so few commoners acting for all the Common's species and spaces, it's not certain that the tradition of care will sustain for the next 700 years, especially given its reliance on a dwindling number of individuals and increasingly distant centralised organisations. This is particularly true of commons that don't have a statutorily obligated landowner such as the National Trust. Though common land access rights for all *humans* may have widened, there has been no concurrent extension of obligation towards maintaining these spaces and securing them for the future of all species. This is not sustainable, or ethical.

The pressures on commons such as Rodborough brought about by the external and internal factors described in this chapter must be alleviated if they are to continue as sites of multi-species thriving, as I now go on to consider in Chapter 5. In part, multi-species encounters can provide humans with the motivation to know and feel kinship for their other-than-human planetary partners, but commons currently bear a disproportionate burden for enabling these encounters. These challenges find resonance in the arguments of many who are seeking to restore access to greater areas of the countryside. How greater access and increased chances for a meaningful multi-

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<sup>573</sup> LM2.

species encounter can be enabled, without introducing undue risks to other-than-humans who may become unwitting or unwilling partners in the enterprise, forms the basis of the following chapters.

## 5. Common Contact Zones: The Multi-Species Community of Commoners

These paths are stopt—the rude philistines thrall  
Is laid upon them and destroyed them all  
Each little tyrant with his little sign  
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine

John Clare, *The Mores*

I began Chapter 4 with the opening lines from John Clare's *The Mores*, which shares a vision of unenclosed fields, freedom, and fecundity.<sup>574</sup> The chapter showed how Rodborough Common was one such place, its 'eternal green' developed through complex acts of more-than-human co-creation over millennia. I also showed that a long tradition of human commoners caring for and managing the land in cooperation with a committed and legally obligated landowner aligns with some, if not all, of Ostrom's principles of good CPR management. As a result, the Common, though not without its problems, has survived, its open aspect giving us a small glimpse of John Clare's pre-enclosure vision. As we move into Chapter 5, however, this excerpt from Clare's poem brings us a changing view of the English countryside from 'unchecked' to constricted, exclusionary, and, as a result, beyond the grace of God.

The purpose of this chapter is the exploration of some of the issues experienced by humans and other species when in so many places the 'paths are stopt' and 'each little tyrant with his little sign, shows where man claims earth glows no more

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<sup>574</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, 'The Mores', 'Poems of the Helpston Period' in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 169).

divine'.<sup>575</sup> This chapter will explore how encouraging more frequent and meaningful multi-species contact based on the model of English common land can foster opportunities for improved inter-species relations. Highlighting the acute shortage of places where other-than-human nature can thrive in today's industrialised agricultural landscape, I begin by expanding on the importance of common land for the survival of many other-than-humans. Recognising the multifaceted approach needed to address complex environmental problems, I then summarise the conservation legislation and policies designed to protect these and other biodiverse spaces, reflecting also on some of their shortcomings.

Similarly, highlighting the historical and ongoing dispossession of the majority of humans from many areas of English land, I examine the pressure experienced by places where access is allowed. I then consider the roots of this human and other-than-human displacement via an exploration of the enclosures of the long nineteenth century, including a timeline showing the history of English access to the land. This helps to locate the current debates on access restoration that I will then discuss within their wider socio-political contexts.

Recognising the importance of multi-species encounters in addressing speciesism and human species isolation, and the potential risks these pose to other-than-humans, I then present the main arguments for and against the extension of human access rights, linked to the theories regarding CPR management I discussed in Sections 2.2 and 3.2. I go on to share the thoughts of my study participants on the need for greater inter- and intra-species kinship and the Common as a locale for encouraging this via the theme *Common Contact Zones*, whose name is inspired by Haraway's 'When

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<sup>575</sup> Clare, *The Mores*, p. 169.

Species Meet'.<sup>576</sup> Finally, in the theme *For Everyone, For Ever*, named after the National Trust's strapline, I discuss the importance of open access to humans, particularly concerning their relationship with other species, alongside some of the challenges these can create. Finally, I consider the impacts of current access arrangements on multi-species rural dwellers before concluding the chapter.

## 5.1: A Common Problem

In the past seventy years farming in the UK, as in many other countries, has become largely techno-industrial, concentrating on producing maximum yields via increases in mechanisation and the use of chemical inputs. Due to concerns after the Second World War about population increases and possible food shortages, the 1947 Agriculture Act introduced farming subsidies that encouraged large increases in agricultural production.<sup>577</sup> Whilst widespread hunger and food shortages have been avoided in Britain, the addressing of those post-war fears has come at a huge and devastating cost to other species.<sup>578</sup> Other-than-humans across all taxonomic categories, including mammals, invertebrates, plants, and fungi have seen significant declines in range and abundance.<sup>579</sup> Forty-one per cent of monitored species have declined since 1970.<sup>580</sup> Two-thirds of the UK's rivers are failing environmental standards due to pollution from

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<sup>576</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>577</sup> 'Multi-functional Landscapes: Informing a Long-Term Vision for Managing the UK's Land', *The Royal Society*, 2023 <[https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/living-landscapes/des7483\\_multifunctional-landscapes\\_policy-report-web.pdf](https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/living-landscapes/des7483_multifunctional-landscapes_policy-report-web.pdf)> [accessed 30 January 2025], p. 14.

<sup>578</sup> Robert A. Robinson and William J. Sutherland, 'Post-War Changes in Arable Farming and Biodiversity in Great Britain', *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 39, pp. 157-176, doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2664.2002.00695

<sup>579</sup> 'State of Nature Report', *State of Nature Partnership*, 2023 <[https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report\\_2023\\_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf](https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf)> [accessed 20 October 2023], p. 4.

<sup>580</sup> The Royal Society, 'Multi-functional Landscapes', p. 14.

agriculture.<sup>581</sup> Ninety-seven per cent of wildflower meadows have disappeared since the 1930s.<sup>582</sup> Ninety-five per cent of the unimproved limestone grassland habitat once ubiquitous in the Cotswolds has also been lost in the same period.<sup>583</sup> A plant atlas compiled in 2020 found that UK native wild species were in ‘catastrophic decline’ with non-native species now outnumbering natives.<sup>584</sup> The same report suggested that some parts of the British countryside would be ‘unrecognisable to someone who grew up just seventy years ago’.<sup>585</sup> Once ubiquitous farmland bird species such as starlings, skylarks, and lapwing, who have thrived alongside human agriculture for centuries, have seen the largest declines of any bird group; a 61% decrease in numbers between 1970 and 2023 (Fig. 5.1.1).<sup>586</sup> For many other-than-humans, the countryside has become a hostile environment. Clare’s ‘eternal green’, which represented a thriving multi-species pre-enclosure environment, has been transformed in many places to monoculture crops existing in biodiversity deserts.<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> ‘The State of Our Rivers’, *The Rivers Trust*, 2021  
<<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/6730f10b64184200b171a57750890643?item=1>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

<sup>582</sup> The Royal Society, ‘Multi-functional Landscapes’, p. 14.

<sup>583</sup> ‘Limestone’s Living Legacies’, *Back from the Brink*, n.d  
<<https://naturebftb.co.uk/projects/limestones-living-legacies/>> [accessed 19 August 2022].

<sup>584</sup> Georgina Rannard, ‘Native UK Plants in Catastrophic Decline, Major Report Finds’, *BBC News*, 8 March 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-64842402>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1.

<sup>586</sup> ‘Wild Bird Populations in the UK and England, 1970 - 2023’, *DEFRA*, 2024  
<<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/wild-bird-populations-in-the-uk/wild-bird-populations-in-the-uk-and-england-1970-to-2023#breeding-farmland-bird-populations-in-the-uk-and-england>> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>587</sup> Clare, *The Mores*, p. 169.

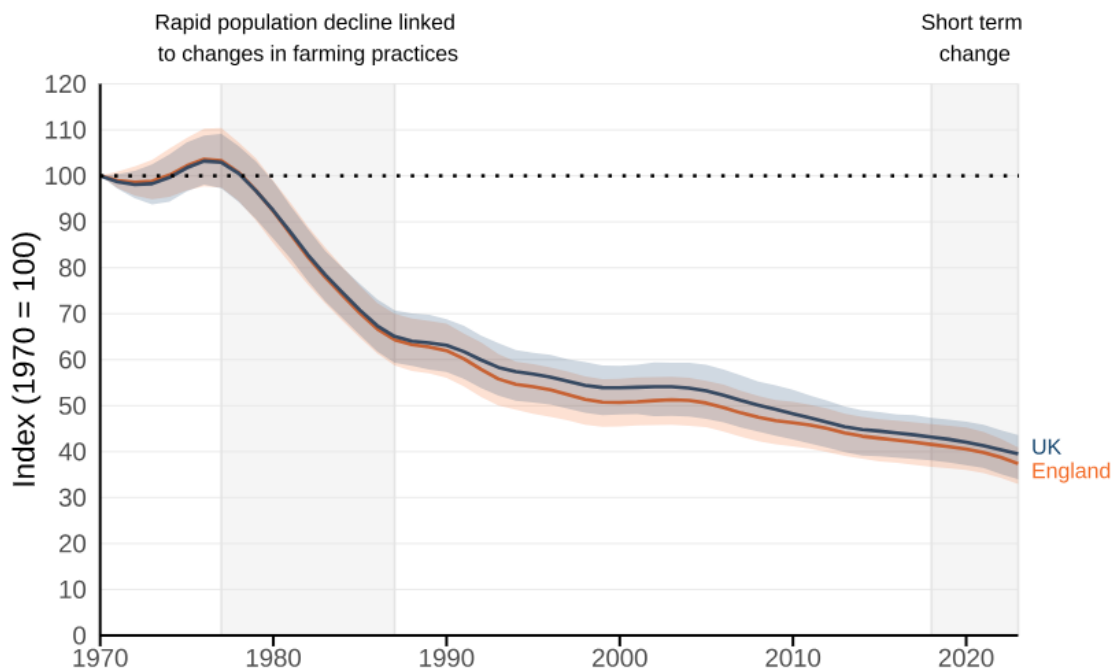


Figure 5.1.1: Farmland bird species declines since 1970

Source: British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) via DEFRA. Reproduced under Open Government License v3.0

In contrast to industrially farmed land, commons and other open access lands such as heaths and moorland, which are largely undeveloped and often undisturbed by the ‘blundering plough’, can provide a vital refuge for free-living other-than-humans.<sup>588</sup> The importance of common lands for other-than-human survival is reflected in its disproportionate representation in areas designated for conservation. For example, 55% of open access land, which includes commons, is also designated as a SSSI.<sup>589</sup> Additionally, ‘over 82% of common land in England is in designated landscapes [i.e., National Parks or National Landscapes] and over 53% is protected for nature

<sup>588</sup> Clare, *The Mores*, p. 169.

<sup>589</sup> Graham Bathe, ‘Political and Social Drivers for Access to the Countryside: The Need for Research on Birds and Recreational Disturbance’, *IBIS International Journal of Avian Science*, 149.1 (2007), pp. 3-8 (p. 3), doi: 10.1111/j.1474-919X.2007.00639.x.

compared with 8% of the rest of our land'.<sup>590</sup> The importance of Rodborough Common for other species was observed by several interviewees, primarily, but not exclusively, land managers and conservationists. LM4 stated the Common offered an opportunity to improve biodiversity more widely, adding that we need to 'just get the stuff out, get it moving' as 'it provides a really good function for emigration and immigration of species you know from that lump of land which can spread around the Stroud Valleys'.<sup>591</sup> The success of this emigration of species was noted by C7; 'the fact that I have downland bee flies in my garden, they probably wouldn't be there if they hadn't perhaps existed on the Commons around Stroud'.<sup>592</sup> When prompted, the focus group participants acknowledged the importance of the Common for wildlife, in particular birds, including raptors, which they stated were supported by 'the flowers and stuff'.<sup>593</sup>

Keen wildlife photographer R6 agreed 'it's just got a huge mass of creatures and of, I mean you could spend hours just looking in one section'.<sup>594</sup> C2 observed that Rodborough's status as a common was probably instrumental in its survival as an important wildlife habitat:

'Yeah, it's the Cotswold grassland basically, so just those few little remnants left, which are just, which are common land because if they weren't common land they would have been erm, probably improved grasslands basically, or built upon'.<sup>595</sup>

Horticulturalist C3a observed that floral biodiversity on the Common

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<sup>590</sup> Julia Aglionby, 'Iconic Places Created by Iconic People - Our Common Land', *Campaign for National Parks*, 2025 <<https://www.cnp.org.uk/blog/iconic-places-created-by-iconic-people-our-common-land/>> [accessed 31 October 2023], para. 3.

<sup>591</sup> LM4, interview with the author, 3 December 2022.

<sup>592</sup> C7, interview with the author, 20 October 2022.

<sup>593</sup> FG1E, focus group facilitated by the author, 9 June 2023.

<sup>594</sup> R6, interview with the author, 25 August 2022.

<sup>595</sup> C2, interview with the author, 31 March 2022.

meant that ‘it’s infinitely better than any garden you could create. It’s so good’.<sup>596</sup>

Common land such as Rodborough might, therefore, be seen to carry a disproportionately heavy burden in the fight to halt and reverse the decline of British biodiversity.

Attempts to counteract these catastrophic impacts on the UK’s biodiverse lives have led to legal designations that are designed to protect specific areas, species, and habitats. These designations are backed by government policies and some land-based conservation subsidies for farmers and landowners. Protection for non-human nature in the UK is largely dealt with by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which was drawn up to satisfy international obligations under the 1979 Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats Convention (also known as the Bern Convention).<sup>597</sup> It tidied up several former wildlife-related laws and granted special protection to areas which are particularly rich in terms of their ‘flora, fauna, geological, geomorphological or physiographical features’, by allowing them to be designated as SSSI.<sup>598</sup> The Bern Convention also led to the designation of areas of pan-European special conservation interest described as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs).<sup>599</sup> As ‘the most extensive area of semi-natural dry grassland surviving in the Cotswolds of central southern England’, Rodborough Common is one of 282 designated SACs in England, meaning it is subject to additional scrutiny and regulation.<sup>600</sup> The Habitats Directive, for example, places additional

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<sup>596</sup> C3a, interview with the author, 30 March 2023.

<sup>597</sup> ‘Bern Convention’, *JNCC*, 16 March 2023 <<https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/bern-convention/>> [accessed 31 October 2023].

<sup>598</sup> ‘SSSI Guidelines’, *JNCC*, 28 October 2022 <<https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/guidelines-for-selection-of-sssis/>> [accessed 19 October 2023], para. 1.

<sup>599</sup> ‘Bern Convention’, *JNCC*.

<sup>600</sup> ‘Rodborough Common’, *JNCC*, n.d <<https://sac.jncc.gov.uk/site/UK0012826>> [accessed 31 October 2023], para. 2.

obligations on local authorities when considering developments within the catchment of a SAC.<sup>601</sup> Domestically, Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 also impels local authorities, and other public bodies to fulfil a 'biodiversity duty' to fifty-six priority habitats and 943 priority species.<sup>602</sup> Landowners and funders are also advised to prioritise these habitats and species, which include Rodborough's calcareous grasslands and many of its resident wildflowers and invertebrates.<sup>603</sup> These include the large blue butterfly (*Phengaris arion*) (Fig. 5.1.2), described in section 4.1.



Figure 5.1.2: Large blue butterfly (*Phengaris arion*)  
Source: PJC&Co. CC BY-SA 3.0

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<sup>601</sup> 'Council Directive 92/431/EEC', *Legislation.Gov.UK*, n.d  
<<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eudr/1992/43/article/6>> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>602</sup> 'Habitats and Species of Principal Importance in England', *DEFRA*, 2022  
<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/habitats-and-species-of-principal-importance-in-england>> [accessed 22 May 2024], para.2.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*

Before the UK departed from the European Union it was also subject to a range of EU-wide laws relating to nature, water and air quality, and other environmental protections.<sup>605</sup> Post-Brexit, these were replaced in 2021 by UK-based legislation under the Environment Act, which imposed statutory targets in key areas, including biodiversity.<sup>606</sup> As well as replacing EU legislation, the Act created a new environmental watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, whose goal is to ensure statutory obligations are met.<sup>607</sup> The Act is underpinned by the Environmental Principles Policy statement, which follows five internationally agreed standards.<sup>608</sup> These principles are predicated on the ideology of sustainable development, as outlined in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (also known as the Brundtland Report).<sup>609</sup> This states that ‘sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’, a widely adopted but controversial mantra.<sup>610</sup>

Agricultural subsidies and controls also required a refresh post-Brexit, which was addressed by the passage of the Agriculture Act in 2020.<sup>611</sup> Underpinning the Agriculture Act, and replacing EU subsidies, Environmental Land Management Schemes

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<sup>605</sup> ‘The UK Environment Act: What’s Happening Now’, *Client Earth Communications*, 1 April 2022 <<https://www.clientearth.org/latest/latest-updates/news/why-the-uk-environment-bill-matters/>> [accessed 31 October 2023].

<sup>606</sup> Tony Juniper, ‘The Environment Act 2021 - A Key Turning Point for Nature’, *Natural England*, 2021 <<https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/11/23/the-environment-act-2021-a-turning-point-for-nature/>> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>607</sup> ‘The UK Environment Act’, *Client Earth Communications*.

<sup>608</sup> ‘Environmental Principles Policy Statement’, *DEFRA*, 2023 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-principles-policy-statement/environmental-principles-policy-statement>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 9.

<sup>611</sup> ‘Farm Funding: Implementing New Approaches’, *House of Commons Library*, 15 March 2023 <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9431/>> [accessed 1 November 2023].

(ELMS) provide payment for around 280 different actions that aim to support farming and the environment.<sup>612</sup> ELMS are a complicated and much-delayed set of measures, which contain no specific references to conserving commoning, despite the extensive public goods it delivers.<sup>613</sup>

Sitting beneath both acts are policies which are designed to enact legislation. The 2023 Environmental Improvement Policy (EIP) outlined the UK government's approach to dealing with challenges from climate change to biodiversity loss.<sup>614</sup> This has undergone a 'rapid' review following a change in the governing party in May 2024.<sup>615</sup> The 2023 policy had a stated aim to address the wide-ranging inequalities of access to green and blue spaces but had no concrete plans to extend access rights, instead relying on voluntary permissive access extension and existing areas of open access land being even more utilised.<sup>616</sup> It also featured an apex aim of 'thriving plants and wildlife'.<sup>617</sup> It is not yet clear, however, how this will be interpreted or adopted, if at all, by the current government, although early signs are not very promising.<sup>618</sup> At the time of writing, the rapid review of the EIP had not resulted in a replacement policy, and agricultural payment schemes were still in flux, creating ongoing uncertainty for

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<sup>612</sup> Fiona Harvey and Helena Horton, 'Post-Brexit Farm Subsidies in England Revealed', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/26/details-long-awaited-farming-subsidies-overhaul-england-revealed>> [accessed 1 November 2023].

<sup>613</sup> 'Written Evidence Submitted by the Foundation for Common Land (ELM0031)', *Committees: Parliament*, 2021 <<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22043/pdf/>> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>614</sup> 'Environmental Improvement Plan 2023', *HM Government*, 2023 <<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a6d9c1c531eb000c64fffa/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

<sup>615</sup> 'Interim Statement on the EIP Rapid Review', *DEFRA*, 2025 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan-rapid-review/interim-statement-on-the-eip-rapid-review>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

<sup>616</sup> 'Environmental Improvement Plan 2023', *HM Government*, p. 10.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>618</sup> Liam Geraghty, 'Rachel Reeves Sets Labour on Collision Course with Environmentalists over Bats and Newts', *The Big Issue*, 29 January 2025 <<https://www.bigissue.com/news/politics/rachel-reeves-economy-nature-bats-and-newts/>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

farmers and land managers.

As discussed in Section 2.3, despite the raft of legislative and policy-based protections afforded the UK's habitats and other-than-human lives, biodiversity is still declining, suggesting the problem is endemic and systemic and cannot be solved in a piecemeal fashion. Reflecting this, whilst commons may provide in many cases a 'gold standard' of human and other-than-human co-creation, they operate in defiance of hegemonic political and economic norms. Persistent dualistic ideas of human superiority and the depersoning of all other-than-human life enable and excuse the 'mechanomorphism' of other species.<sup>619</sup> For those caring for the dynamic and vital habitats often found on common land, political and economic uncertainty cause additional challenges. This state of affairs highlights the constraints inherent in managing highly localised systems within a web of complex, precarious, and politicised controls. The systemic and underlying exploitation of other species prevents legislation, policies, and funding schemes from achieving anything other than surface-level change.

## **5.2: The Right to Roam?**

As this thesis has touched upon, it is not only other-than-humans who have been excluded from much of the English countryside. From the Norman Conquest onwards, the majority of the English population experienced centuries-long diminishments of land access rights. During the nineteenth century, increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, along with widespread enclosure of common land to which people had previously had customary access, led to the formation of pressure groups, including the

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<sup>619</sup> Danielle Celemajer and others, 'Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics', *Trajectories in Environmental Politics*, 20.1-2 (2022), pp. 116-137 (p. 128), doi: 10.1080/09644016.2020.1827608.

Commons Preservations Society (now the OSS) and the National Trust.<sup>620</sup> Successive generations have campaigned for the restoration of greater access to the countryside for the public; attempts to enshrine these rights in law go back to the 1880s.<sup>621</sup> Despite long and ongoing campaigns by various groups, it was not, however, until the CRoW Act in 2000 that the poorly named ‘right to roam’, or ‘freedom to roam’ was embedded in English law.<sup>622</sup> Its roll-out took five years, effectively putting back the introduction of a right to roam in some places until 2005.<sup>623</sup> Fig. 5.2.1 briefly overviews the history of land access in England. The timeline ends by highlighting that, whilst the legal status of commons is unlikely to change, their future survival as sites for free recreation and multi-species thriving is uncertain and precarious in the face of development and population pressures, changes to farming practices, and the increasing demands made on them from sometimes conflicting parties.

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<sup>620</sup> Elizabeth Baigent, ‘What Was the Open Space Movement?’ *National Trust*, n.d <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/discover/history/gardens-landscapes/what-was-the-open-space-movement>> [accessed 6 February 2025]; ‘Saving Open Spaces: The Catalyst for the Commons Preservation Society’, *The Open Spaces Society*, 2022 <<https://www.oss.org.uk/about-us/our-history/saving-open-spaces-catalyst-for-the-commons-preservation-society/>> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>622</sup> Bathe, ‘Political and Social Drivers for Access to the Countryside’, p. 3.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

# ENGLISH LAND ACCESS TIMELINE

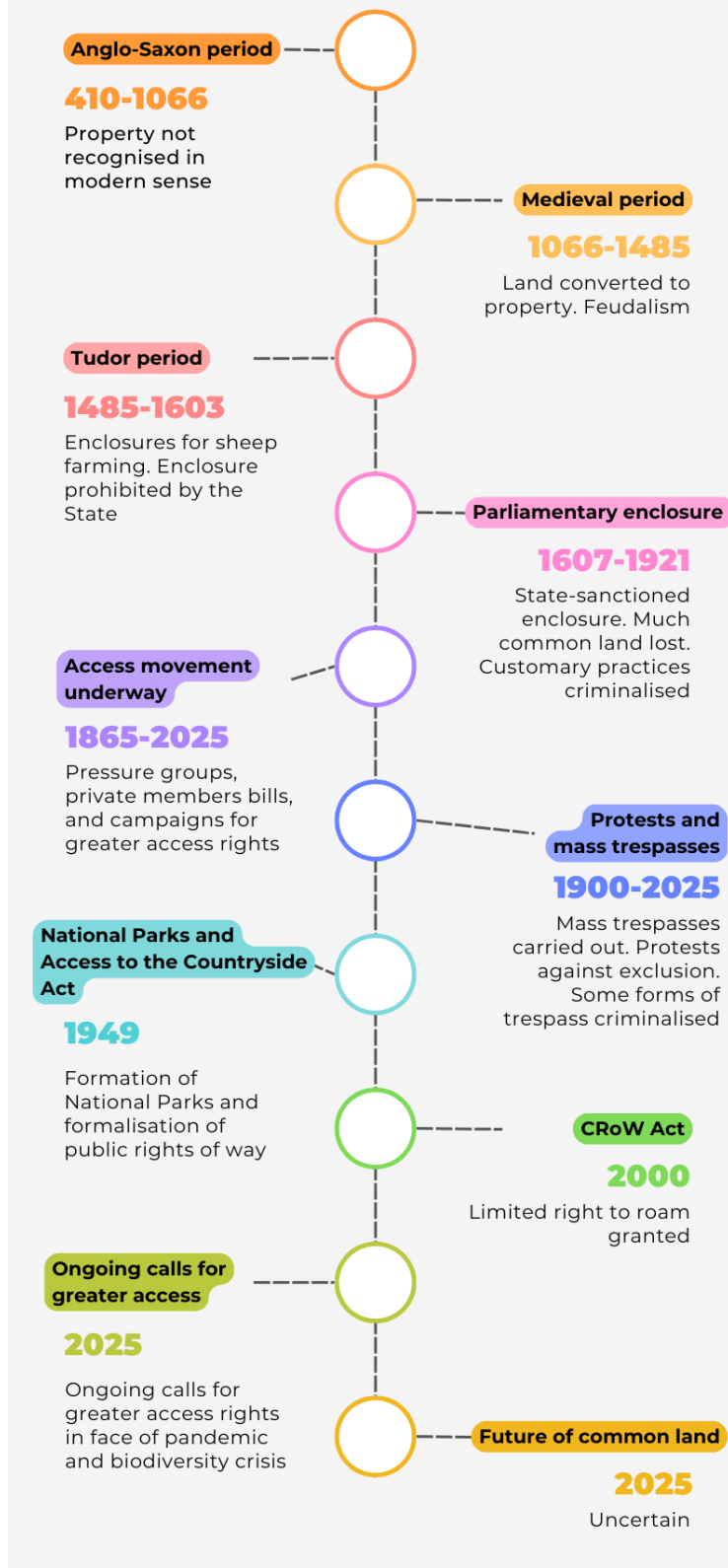


Figure 5.2.1: Timeline of English land access  
Source: Author © Sharon Gardham

The terms ‘right to roam’ or ‘freedom to roam’ may give an impression to many that they can go anywhere, but this is very far from being the case. As Hayes points out, the right to roam is the result of ‘150 years of campaigning to gain [access to] what to this day amounts to only 8% of the landscape’.<sup>624</sup> The full right to roam only applies to areas of open access land, such as ‘mountains, moors, heaths and downs’, registered common land, and ‘some land around the King Charles III England Coast Path’.<sup>625</sup> Some areas within these definitions are also excluded from the right to roam, including those used for golf courses, parks, and growing crops.<sup>626</sup> Common land that falls outside of these exceptions is, therefore, one of the few areas of England where the general public does have a full ‘right to roam’, meaning they are not constrained to walk only on footpaths but can walk freely across the landscape. As well as walking, the right to roam also allows for running, watching wildlife, and climbing.<sup>627</sup> Some activities, such as horse riding and mountain biking, are explicitly excluded from the CRoW Act, leaving it to landowners to decide if these activities are tolerated. Wild camping, or camping on land without the landowners permission, is not allowed in England, except on Dartmoor, where the right to backpack camp is covered by the 1985 Dartmoor Commons Act; despite it being the subject of a recent unsuccessful attack by landowners.<sup>628</sup> People are permitted to walk their dogs on open access land, but dogs must be kept on a lead when around livestock, or during the ground-nesting bird season between 1 March and 31 July.<sup>629</sup> Unless individuals study the CRoW Act, and have a

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<sup>624</sup> Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass* (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 88-89.

<sup>625</sup> ‘Rights of Way and Accessing Land’, *HM Government*, n.d <<https://www.gov.uk/right-of-way-open-access-land/use-your-right-to-roam>> [accessed 19 October], para. 2.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>628</sup> Miles Davis and Jonathan Morris, ‘Supreme Court Backs Wild Camping on Dartmoor’, *BBC News*, 21 May 2025 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwywwq5zkqwo>> [accessed 12 June 2025].

<sup>629</sup> ‘Rights of Way and Accessing Land’, *HM Government*.

thorough understanding of local landowner preferences, there is little clarity about what people can do on open access land. Given this, it is not surprising that there are frequent misunderstandings about what common land is, how it is cared for, and whether it actually 'belongs to us all', as quoted in this bench plaque on Rodborough Common (Fig. 5.2.2).

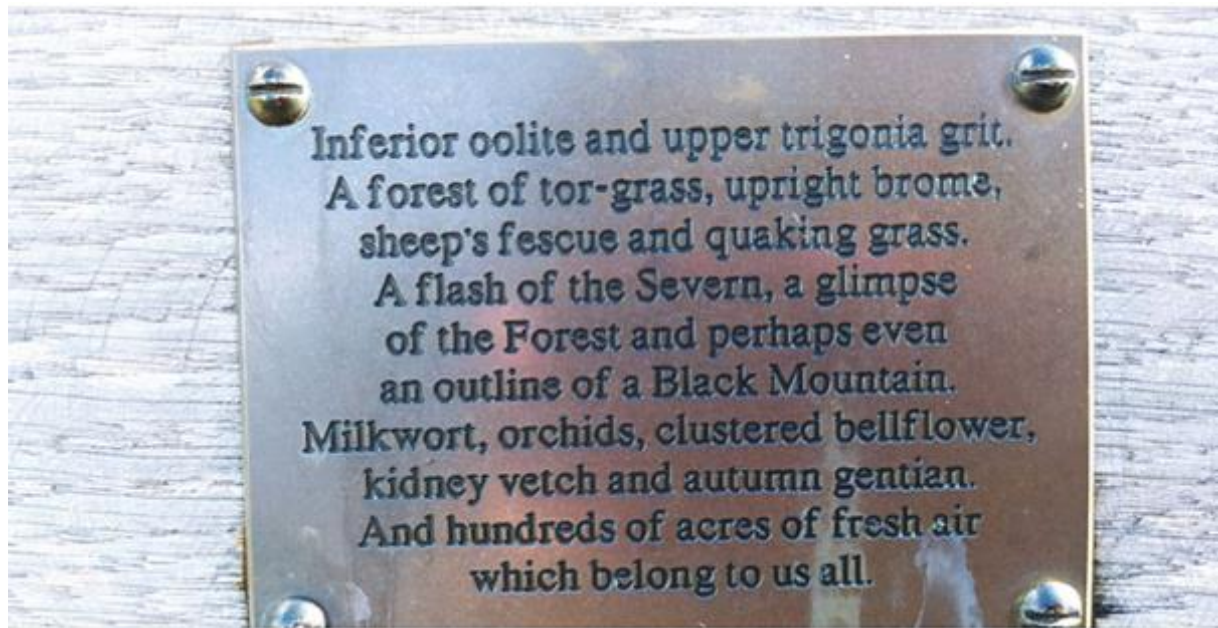


Figure 5.2.2: Bench plaque on Rodborough Common  
Source: Remembering Rodborough. Reproduced with permission

The distribution of common land throughout England is also hugely unequal (Fig. 5.2.3), with many commons located on farming land of relatively low financial agricultural value in the northern uplands (i.e., land lying more than 200 metres above sea level).<sup>630</sup> The size of common land has also decreased markedly over the years due to centuries of deliberate enclosure, undefended encroachment, building development, and commons not being registered. It was estimated that, at the end of the seventeenth century, more than half of the land, some twenty million acres out of a total thirty-seven million, was 'of pasture, meadow, forest, heath, moor, mountain, and

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<sup>630</sup> Bathe, 'Political and Social Drivers for Access to the Countryside', p. 6.

barren land'.<sup>631</sup> At one time, at least 50% of land in England was held in common.<sup>632</sup> Today that figure stands at just 3%.<sup>633</sup> Even these small remaining areas are under threat, necessitating a continual defence by the OSS, and others, from further loss and appropriation.<sup>634</sup> The remaining commons are relatively few and bear a disproportionate burden for facilitating human access to the land, whilst existing in a sometimes hostile environment. Given the propensity of humans to visit areas within five and eight kilometres of home and the general preference of many visitors for open spaces, commons lying near urban conurbations bear even more of this pressure.<sup>635</sup>

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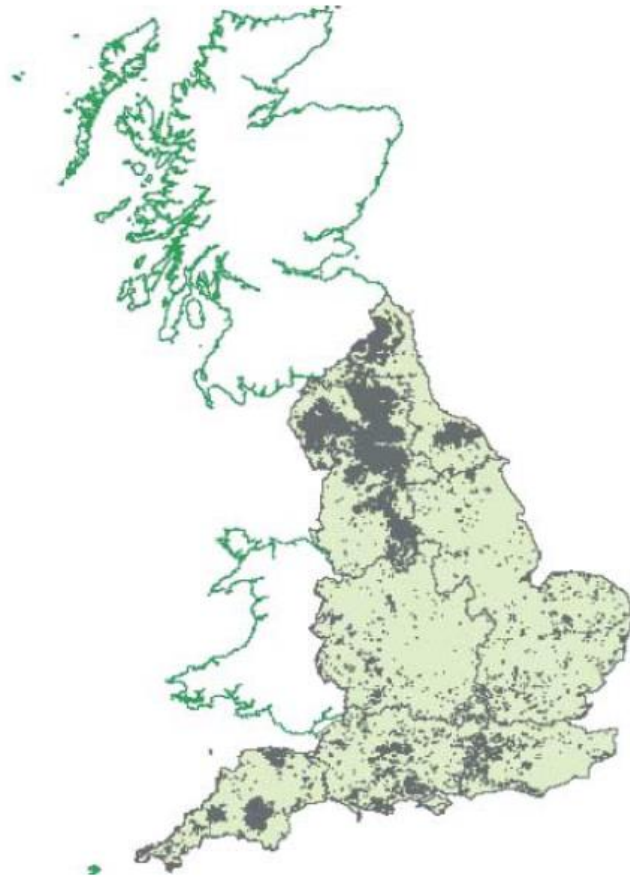
<sup>631</sup> Peter Linebaugh, 'Enclosures from the Bottom Up', *Radical History Review*, 108 (2010), pp. 11-27 (p. 13), doi: 10.1215/01636545-2010-007.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>633</sup> 'A Guide to Common Land and Commoning', *The Foundation for Common Land*, 2025 <<https://foundationforcommonland.org.uk/a-guide-to-common-land-and-commoning>> [accessed 27 June 2024].

<sup>634</sup> 'What Do We Fight For?', *The Open Spaces Society*, n.d <<https://www.oss.org.uk/what-do-we-fight-for/>> [accessed 30 January 2025].

<sup>635</sup> Karen Hornigold, Iain Lake and Paul Dolman, 'Recreational Use of the Countryside: No Evidence that High Nature Value Enhances a Key Ecosystem Service' *PLoS ONE*, 11.1 (2016), pp. 1-14 (p.3).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of land in England mapped by the Countryside Agency as Open Country and Registered Common Land (shaded) under the CRoW Act.

Figure 5.2.3: Distribution of land in England with common land and open country highlighted  
Source: Graham Bathe. Reproduced with permission

### 5.3: A History of Exclusion

The roots of the general public's exclusion from 92% of land in England lie in the past. The commodification of land and the subsequent exclusion of people from it began in the Norman period with the conversion of land from communal resource to private property. Despite this, however, the system of communal farming that was in place before 1066 persisted for centuries following the Conquest, although its longevity varied from region to region. For example, in the counties lying within relatively easy reach of London's markets and urban population, there was little communal farming

still in place by 1700.<sup>636</sup> In general, however, although the correlation between profit and land became more widespread during the Tudor period, enclosures were not considered in the wider public interest and were therefore censured by the state.<sup>637</sup> Despite this censure, many communally farmed areas were still turned over to pasture (and profit) during this period, leading Thomas More, to observe that ‘sheep, which are naturally mild and easily kept in order, may be said now to devour men, and unpeople, not only villages, but towns’.<sup>638</sup> The motivations behind many Tudor enclosures were symptomatic of the beginning of a breakdown of the social and economic contract between landlords and tenants that had formed the foundations of medieval society.<sup>639</sup> This breakdown is evidenced by uprisings throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where rioters demanded a return to long-held customs of paternalistic relations between the classes rather than an upheaval of the social order.<sup>640</sup> Even though enclosures did take place, by the end of the Tudor period, the land given over to commons continued to account for large tracts of the country.

By the eighteenth century, in contrast with the Tudor period, widespread enclosures were actively enabled by Parliament.<sup>641</sup> As England entered the Industrial Revolution, its overall economy became increasingly monetised and intra-species relations suffered a further breakdown.<sup>642</sup> Common lands, or ‘wastes’, that had largely escaped the enclosure of open arable fields and meadows were targeted by landowners

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<sup>636</sup> W.G. East, ‘England in the Eighteenth Century’ in *Historical Geography of England before 1800*, ed. by H.C Darby (Cambridge University Press, 1935), pp. 465 - 527.

<sup>637</sup> Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge University Press), p. 148.

<sup>638</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia* (Dover Publications Inc., 1997), p. 15.

<sup>639</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 190.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>641</sup> Marion Shoard, *A Right to Roam: Should we Open Up Britain's Countryside?* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 105.

<sup>642</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 147; Graham Bathe, *Common Land* (Pitkin Publishing, 2015), pp. 10-11.

for enclosure.<sup>643</sup> As enablers of economic independence for the rural poor, and refuge for those on the margins of society, commons appeared to threaten landowners' desire for profit by producing and harbouring 'the wrong kinds of life—plants, humans, and other animals that resisted domestication and hindered the progress of agriculture'.<sup>644</sup> Locke's theory of property, written specifically for the colonisers of North America, held that all land had been gifted to man in common, but that property ownership was conferred by the application of labour, by planting, tilling and cultivating.<sup>645</sup> It was via this mechanism that, 'he by his labour does, as it were, enclose it [the land] from the common'.<sup>646</sup> Irrespective of whether a coloniser laboured personally, or outsourced the effort to employees, slaves, or other-than-human farmed animals, the land was still removed from the common state and became 'private right'.<sup>647</sup> For Locke, there was a moral imperative to apply labour to the land via obvious cultivation; an imperative which acted, rather conveniently, as 'a formulation that ultimately was used to legitimise both enclosure and the colonial enterprise'.<sup>648</sup>

Against this backdrop, commons came in for further criticism due to their supposedly valueless and not obviously cultivated state. In monetary terms, they were considered worthless and were thought to be an active blocker to so-called improvement.<sup>649</sup> Areas such as Hounslow Heath and Finchley Common were considered only fit for 'Cherokees and savages', in other words, dangerous places, a preserve of the 'other', and a dangerous 'other' at that.<sup>650</sup> The likening of commons and their

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<sup>643</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 149.

<sup>644</sup> Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 44.

<sup>645</sup> John Locke, *Political Writings* (Penguin, 1993).

<sup>646</sup> Locke, *Political Writings*, p. 276.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>648</sup> Di Palma, *Wasteland*, p. 39.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>650</sup> East, 'England in the Eighteenth Century', p. 473.

inhabitants to the native people of North America would have been no accident, demonstrating the correlation between the treatment of customary rights holders in England and the attitude towards native populations and lands in the colonies. The English model of abstraction and commodification of the productive and reproductive labour of the 'other', epitomised by the denigration and enclosure of the commons, 'went global' with the expansion of the British Empire. Processes first embodied by English enclosure continue unabated today through acts of privatisation, dispossession, urbanisation, and compulsion towards waged labour; an ongoing act of vandalism to the relations between different humans, and between humans and the rest of the planet.<sup>651</sup>

During the era of parliamentary enclosure, the commons were considered a waste of both land and labour productivity, apparently encouraging idleness amongst those who occupied the physical and cultural margins. The old ways of communality and sharing were considered barriers to progress.<sup>652</sup> Any lingering misfortune experienced by those who were displaced by enclosure was laid at the door of the individual, not the state. If you were poor, hungry, or had no means of supporting yourself, you had only yourself to blame. The hunger of the rural poor of southern England was, for example, attributed to their fussy appetites, rather than want of money or means.<sup>653</sup> The benefits of the commons were claimed to be 'largely illusory'.<sup>654</sup> It was further claimed that 'the undeserving poor—especially the insubordinate squatters—living in riotous squalor in their tumbledown hovels on the common', would be both

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<sup>651</sup> Caroline Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character and the Commons* (Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 40.

<sup>652</sup> J.L Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760 - 1832: A Study of England Before the Reform Bill* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995), p. 37.

<sup>653</sup> G.E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution: Changes in Agriculture 1650-1850* (A&C Black, 1977), p. 204.

<sup>654</sup> W.E. Tate, 'Gloucestershire Enclosure Acts and Awards', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 64 (1943), pp. 1-70 (p.13).

better off and better paid if they were compelled to work regularly for an employer'.<sup>655</sup>

In 1794 Rennie claimed, as a result of enclosures in Knaresborough, for example, 'the poor cottager and his family exchanged their indolence for active industry, and obtained extravagant wages'.<sup>656</sup> Everyone would, therefore, benefit 'as soon as the common ceased to form a constant attraction to all the beggars, wastrels and drunkards in the district'.<sup>657</sup> By fencing, cultivating, and subduing, these lands could be considered fully 'improved', 'civilised', and firmly privatised.

This process also applied to former customary practices such as vagrancy and hunting of free-living animals for food, which were outlawed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Until that period, rural dwellers could supplement their income and diet by collecting and consuming wild game, a right that had been protected in law since the Charter of the Forest in 1217. The enthusiastically enforced Game Laws of 1816 introduced harsh penalties for what was now termed poaching; hunting free-living animals on enclosed land was now a criminal act with penalties including impossible-to-pay fines, hard labour, or transportation.<sup>658</sup> From 1827 to 1830 a seventh of criminal convictions in England were for poaching.<sup>659</sup> Free-living animals were instead increasingly appropriated for the exclusive exploitation of the ruling classes, during a period when rural poverty and hunger were at their most widespread.<sup>660</sup>

By the end of the era of parliamentary enclosure land, property, human labour, and many free-living animals were effectively privatised. Farming had changed

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<sup>655</sup> Tate, 'Gloucestershire Enclosure Acts and Awards', p.13.

<sup>656</sup> G. Rennie, *General View of Yorkshire* (1794) in J.D Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 5.3 (1953), pp. 319-343 (p. 333).

<sup>657</sup> Tate, 'Gloucestershire Enclosure Acts and Awards', p.14.

<sup>658</sup> Trevor Wild, *Village England: A Social History of the Countryside* (I.B Tauris & Co, 2004), p. 48.; Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 185.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

from a communal to an individualistic activity.<sup>661</sup> Villages no longer consisted of landlords and tenants living side by side. Instead social separation was coupled with physical separation.<sup>662</sup> Landowners retreated behind the high walls of their enclosed country estates, turning them over to pleasure and ignoring the true cost of exclusion.<sup>663</sup> The presence of the rural working class was literally and metaphorically erased from the scene (Fig. 5.3.1), creating an unrealistic image of the countryside that has repercussions today, as I explore further in Chapter 6.



Figure 5.3.1: Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1749)  
Source: National Gallery, Public Domain

The cover description for the 1988 version of Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* claimed that he was able to 'explode the myth that the English landscape was "formed by enclosures"'.<sup>664</sup> Whilst it may be true the English landscape aesthetic cannot be entirely attributed to enclosures, they nevertheless played an important role in the

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<sup>661</sup> Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, p. 147.

<sup>662</sup> Wild, *Village England*, p. 33.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>664</sup> W. G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), cover text.

evolving use, occupation, and image of the countryside. The quintessential view of the English countryside as a patchwork of small fields bounded by hedgerows or dry-stone walls (see Figure 5.3.2) is certainly a product of enclosure. Exclusion from the land became the default position and enclosed fields were not only normalised but became desirable in the nation's collective psyche.



Figure 5.3.2: A quintessential view of the English countryside  
Source: Andy Beecroft. Reproduced under CC BY-SA 2.0

These exclusionary practices do not reside wholly in the past, however, and common lands, despite their particular, open access status, are not exempt from their implications. For example, the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act was introduced to restrict public activities on 'private' land via the criminalisation of previously civil laws relating to trespass. This Act introduced new criminal offences for the holdings of a 'trespassory assembly' and of 'aggravated trespass', terms which are open to interpretation, but that effectively outlawed the unofficial, but long-established,

practice of free assembly on commons.<sup>665</sup> The legislation was largely aimed at so-called ‘new age travellers’ who threatened the rural fantasy, challenging the idea of private property, suggesting that ‘the everything has its place/everything-in-its-place, *sedentary* character of the rural idyll was by no means either natural or timeless’.<sup>666</sup> Previously communally accessible lands have, therefore, been subject to centuries of first illegal, and then parliamentarily sanctioned, encroachment and exclusion that ‘defies our commonsense understandings of a historical event as discrete, locatable, and temporally bounded’, making them “attritional catastrophes’ that perpetrate a ‘slow violence’”.<sup>667</sup> This “slow violence” has practical implications for the ways the countryside is viewed and used today.<sup>668</sup>

## 5.4: Sharing Spaces

Thus, we reach the second quarter of the twenty-first century with ingrained and long-established ideas about who and what should be allowed into the countryside, with arguments regarding access extension often entrenched along class, political, and urban/rural lines. The history of exclusion from the countryside, and the debates that continue to rage around any reversal of that exclusion, highlight ‘how certain interests and groups have long had the privilege of deciding what constitutes appropriate uses of natural environments and resources’.<sup>669</sup> Those seeking to maintain the status quo of default exclusion can deliberately exploit constructions of rural idylls, which may be

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<sup>665</sup> Shoard, *A Right to Roam*, p. 14.

<sup>666</sup> Keith Halfacree, ‘Landscapes of Ruralty: Rural Others/Other Rurals in *Studying Cultural Landscapes* ed. by Iain Robertson and Penny Richards (Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 141 - 164, (p. 152).

<sup>667</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011) in Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, p. 7.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>669</sup> Erika Frikvist, “‘A Right to Roam’: Perceptions of Recreational Access to the Countryside Around Manchester, England’ (Unpublished Bachelor Thesis, Lund University, n.d) <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/289945877.pdf>> [accessed 30 January 2025].

eagerly taken up by an urbanised public who have lost touch with rural realities.<sup>670</sup>

The arguments made by some opponents of wider access against greater sharing of land with the general populace are that increased recreation would interfere with rural operations such as farming and hunting and recreational users would cause damage to land and habitats.<sup>671</sup> The incompatibility of access enablement and running a rural business is a common thread in these arguments. For example, in 2022, when then Leader of the House Mark Spencer explained a decision to shelve a review into the constricted right to roam that was called for in the wake of the pandemic, he did so on the basis that ‘the countryside is not just a place of leisure, but it is also a place of business and food production’.<sup>672</sup> Additionally, according to the Country Landowners Association, a ‘strong argument against increasing public access is the need to better inform members of the public about respect for the environment’.<sup>673</sup> This somewhat contradictory argument implies the public will be better informed about how to interact with the wider environment by continuing to be restricted and excluded from it. There is also an assertion that there is ‘sufficient’ access available already and an extension of access is therefore unnecessary.<sup>674</sup> This argument takes inspiration from the Statute of Merton (1235) which allowed the enclosure of land, as long as the manor’s freemen still had enough land to satisfy their subsistence needs.<sup>675</sup> The disproportionate burden

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<sup>670</sup> Shoard, *A Right to Roam*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>671</sup> Gabriella Parkes, ‘Where Next for the Right to Roam?’, *RICS Land Journal*, 12 January 2024 <<https://ww3.rics.org/uk/en/journals/land-journal/right-to-roam-legal.html>> [accessed 30 January 2025].

<sup>672</sup> Helena Horton, ‘Minister Defends Shelving Right to Roam Report: “The Countryside is a Place of Business”’, *The Guardian*, 22 April 2022 <<https://amp.theguardian.com/environment/2022/apr/22/uk-minister-defends-shelving-of-right-to-roam-report-ahead-of-kinder-scout-trespass>> [accessed 5 February 2025], para. 5.

<sup>673</sup> Andrew Gillett, ‘In Focus: What the Law Says About Public Access and Why the Term ‘Right to Roam’ is Incorrect’, *CLA*, 4 December 2023 <<https://www.cla.org.uk/news/in-focus-what-the-law-says-about-public-access-and-why-the-term-right-to-roam-is-incorrect/>> [accessed 30 January 2025], para. 36.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>675</sup> Shoard, *A Right to Roam*, p. 142.

borne by common land, both to satisfy right-to-roam requirements and to provide a place for other-than-human thriving, mean the definition of what can be considered 'sufficient' is, however, debatable.

Those arguing for an extension of access do so broadly on the basis that current access is inherently unfair and unequal, with residents of the most deprived areas in England, for example, needing to travel almost 50% further than those in more affluent areas to exercise their right to roam, despite their being the least well-equipped to do so.<sup>676</sup> Those campaigning for greater access also quote the proven benefits to human mental and physical health of access to the outdoors, and the need for greater cross-species connection.<sup>677</sup> Access campaigners also rebut the idea that the current network of public footpaths is sufficient for public need, pointing out that it accounts for just 0.3% of the land area of England.<sup>678</sup> Furthermore, path types are inconsistent, what can be done on them is sometimes unclear, and they are often poorly maintained.<sup>679</sup>

The Right to Roam campaign also points out that permissive pathways and non-registered customary use can be rescinded at any time, even after centuries of precedent.<sup>680</sup> Fears of sudden access restrictions are not unfounded, as demonstrated recently in places close to Rodborough Common, including Cirencester Park, where the general right of free access was withdrawn after more than 350 years, at Verney Fields in Stonehouse after a new landowner sought to restrict customary access when they purchased the site, and at Juniper Hill, near Stroud where owners woodlands.co.uk

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<sup>676</sup> 'Expand the Freedom to Roam', *Ramblers*, 2025 <<https://www.ramblers.org.uk/what-we-care-about/expand-freedom-roam>> [accessed 5 February 2025], para. 9.

<sup>677</sup> 'What We are Campaigning For', *Right to Roam*, 2025 <<https://www.righttoroam.org.uk/about>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

<sup>678</sup> 'Access Reforms for England: Proposals from the Right to Roam Campaign', *Right to Roam*, n.d <[https://www.righttoroam.org.uk/\\_files/ugd/1c8b2a\\_504dc6d4adf2415996367873d01d0a46.pdf](https://www.righttoroam.org.uk/_files/ugd/1c8b2a_504dc6d4adf2415996367873d01d0a46.pdf)> [accessed 4 February 2025], p. 7.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

proposed enclosure of the site into small plots.<sup>681</sup> In the latter two of these cases, years-long campaigns by residents saved access rights for the public and protected the sites for biodiverse lives. There are, however, many communities around the country without sufficient social or economic capital to enable these kinds of campaigns who continue to lose their customary rights.<sup>682</sup>

An argument is also made that extending access would effectively share the load of recreational use more evenly across sites, which would alleviate pressure on 'honey pot' sites that see particular wear and tear.<sup>683</sup> Extension access rhetoric also appears to be founded on a general sense of injustice and a need for reparation for the denial of rights in the past. As access rights champion R11 explained, when challenged as a trespasser they politely respond that they do not recognise the legitimacy of the laws that excluded them from the land in the first place.<sup>684</sup> Pro and anti-access extension campaigners do, perhaps surprisingly, find common ground in the confusion caused by the CRoW Act, which results in poor or unexpected behaviour on the one hand, or people not taking advantage of the limited rights they do have on the other.<sup>685</sup>

Arguments against access extension broadly correlate with free-rider models of communal resource management. An assumption that free use of a communal resource will lead to its destruction, either rapidly, in the case of Hardin's Tragedy

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<sup>681</sup> Maisie Lillywhite and Georgia Stone, 'Protest as Cirencester Park Introduces Access Charge', *BBC News*, 15 April 2024 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-68818077>> [accessed 5 February 2025]; Carmelo Garcia, 'Move to Register Footpaths Applauded by Town Residents', *Stroud News and Journal*, 11 December 2024 <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/24788057.move-register-footpaths-applauded-town-residents/>> [accessed 5 February 2025]; 'Update', *Friends of Juniper Hill Fields*, 4 November 2024 <<https://www.savejuniperhillfield.co.uk/progress-update>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

<sup>682</sup> 'Don't Lose Your Way: Saving Lost Paths', *Ramblers*, 2025 <<https://www.ramblers.org.uk/support-us/dont-lose-your-way>> [accessed 5 February 2025].

<sup>683</sup> 'Access Reform for England', *Right to Roam*, p. 19.

<sup>684</sup> R11 interview with the author, 17 March 2023.

<sup>685</sup> 'Access Reform for England', *Right to Roam*, pp. 12-13; Gillett, 'In Focus', para. 8.

scenario, or eventually, as with Olson's logic of collective action, or the Prisoner's Dilemma, does have some credence—if you further assume that all users of extended access to the land would merely consume the land and not care for it. Offsetting this potential scenario by aligning access extension more closely with Ostrom's principles would, however, require a comprehensive system of communal resource management that goes beyond a voluntary, centrally imposed code of behaviour. Conditional to this would be an assumption that the resource is communal and so everyone has responsibility for its care. On common land such as Rodborough, some congruence with Ostrom's principles ensures ongoing care, but this care is founded on a strong tradition of group identity and fair and inclusive decision-making. Whether comparable levels of care are achievable on land that has been in private ownership without communal access for a long period is open to debate.

## 5.5 Common Contact Zones

Aside from improvements in human health and addressing access inequality, another of the main arguments for increasing access to the countryside is a drive for meaningful nature connection that will create a shared purpose, identity, and self-perpetuating cycle of care and advocacy for the other-than-human world. In this theme, *Common Contact Zones*, I examine the thoughts of study participants on the role of the Common in facilitating more meaningful multi-species connections.

A 2019 study by Alcock and others found a correlation between pro-environmental behaviour and spending recreational time in the natural environment.<sup>686</sup>

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<sup>686</sup> Ian Alcock and others, 'Associations Between Pro-Environmental Behaviour and Neighbourhood Nature Appreciation: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Survey in England', *Environment International*, 136 (2020), pp. 1-10 (p. 7) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2019.105441>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

This need for a deeper encounter with the other, both human and non, can, in part, be facilitated by a trip to the Common. As Bollier and Helfrich put it 'Commons give people practical vehicles for deepening their engagement with nature'.<sup>687</sup> The divisions between humans who live in different environments and the advantage that is taken of these in support of an unequal status quo, also suggest that greater interaction between rural and urban populations is needed to redress the balance. Put simply, encountering others allows common ground to be sought and found, perhaps resulting in an extension and revitalisation of 'good neighbourhood'. There are, however, increasingly fewer places where these encounters can authentically take place, leaving a vacuum of experience that can too often be filled by polarised online debate.

Places such as Rodborough Common, which is actively farmed and abundant in biodiversity, can offer equitable opportunities for the listening and close contact advocated by those who strive for greater inter- and intra-species recognition and respect. From skylarks to robber flies, pasque flowers to fungi, the mention of other-than-humans motivating visits to the Common by the conservationists and land managers I interviewed were, not surprisingly, numerous. However, examples were not limited to these groups. Residents and interest group representatives also mentioned enjoying being outside and encountering other humans and other species. R11, for example, enjoys looking out for birds of prey; 'one of my favourite things to do is go and sit up there and watch the kestrels hunting in the long grass. You know, I can do that for hours'.<sup>688</sup> R6 agreed there were plenty of opportunities for encounters if you knew where to look; 'I've spent hours on various walks looking at grasshoppers and things'.<sup>689</sup>

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<sup>687</sup> David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2019), pp. 111-112.

<sup>688</sup> R11.

<sup>689</sup> R6.

Whilst commons are not the only shared green spaces that offer opportunities to encounter the ‘other’, their unbounded nature, their familiarity and the feeling of ‘wildness’ they encourage can ‘engender forms of identification and companionship that contrast to hyper-domestication and private property’ experienced in more obviously managed or controlled surroundings.<sup>690</sup>

The Common also offers tangible opportunities to connect with deep time, which can help place current human concerns within a much broader temporal context. As discussed in Chapter 4, its bedrock of limestone, formed of countless ancient sea creatures, is very close to the surface. R10a recounted how their children would search for ‘star stones’ (Fig. 5.5.1) on the Common, and how these were considered the equivalent of hard currency in the primary school playground of twenty years ago!<sup>691</sup> They explained the origin of these; ‘it’s the stalk of a, it’s called a crinoid or sea lily. It was at the bottom of the seabed’.<sup>692</sup>



Figure 5.5.1: Star stones or the fossilised remains of crinoid or sea lilies  
Source: John Radley, Our Warwickshire. Reproduced under CC BY-NC

<sup>690</sup> Anna Tsing, ‘Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as a Companion Species’, *Environmental Humanities*, 1 (2012), pp. 141-154 (p. 142).

<sup>691</sup> R10a, interview with the author, 9 March 2023.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid.

Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén lay down the gauntlet for ‘next-generation environmental humanities’ to seek out ‘nodes of specific, situated connection’, which can guide us to ‘increase our felt responsiveness to environmental bodies not only locally, but in various temporal and spatial modes’.<sup>693</sup> The visceral and easily accessible nature of Rodborough’s manifestations of deep time can facilitate such responsiveness. For example, when I visited Rodborough Common with local school children, they found several fragments of fossils resembling seashells lying on the surface.<sup>694</sup> I asked the children where they would usually expect to find seashells, to which they responded, ‘on the beach’. This allowed me to introduce them to the wonder of the Common’s ancient seabed in an engaging and immediate way.<sup>695</sup>

In contrast to the exclusionary nature of much of the countryside, which serves only to isolate and divide rural and urban populations, working commons are among one of the few places where farmers and the consumers of their labour can readily interact. LM2 recognised the opportunities the Common offers for encouraging a greater understanding of rural realities.<sup>696</sup> They told me educating the public about the farming practised here was an intrinsic part of their role: ‘In actual fact there’s a real need on the Common to have somebody who can communicate with non-farming people. A very significant need, because people don’t really know what’s going on’.<sup>697</sup> LM2 also commented on the role the graziers can play in promoting a positive view of farming on the Commons, although they may not always take advantage of this opportunity:

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<sup>693</sup> Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén, ‘Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene’, *Ethics and the Environment*, 20.1 (2015), pp. 67-97 (p. 82).

<sup>694</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, June 2023.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> LM2, interview with the author, 23 May 2023.

<sup>697</sup> LM2.

‘One of the things I get annoyed about with the graziers is that you know the Common today is an interface, to use an outdated word, it’s an interface between the general public and farming, and I’m very keen that they should put good cattle up there, you know, good clean cattle and they don’t always.’<sup>698</sup>

As we have seen, close human and human companion animal contact can, however, be detrimental to other species, whose only option for avoidance might be removing themselves from the Common entirely. Such an exodus from certain areas may be the only way for other-than-humans to communicate their objection to certain levels of contact that they find unacceptable. Unfortunately, this communication comes at a very high cost to those involved. For C1, the solution was clear: restrict access and encourage people to go elsewhere; in short, tell general users to ‘go away, go somewhere else’.<sup>699</sup> For them, ‘you know, [...] there are other places and it’s too important not to try and change people’s behaviour up on the Common, to try and save the biodiversity of species’.<sup>700</sup> For farmers and their domesticated other-than-humans, interaction with the general public is, as we saw in Chapter 4, not always positive either.

When I discussed with interviewees the challenges of encouraging multi-species encounters without damaging other-than-humans, many highlighted a need for greater understanding as a means of unlocking more responsible behaviours. I asked LM4 about options for enforcement of laws and bylaws, and they were keen to point out they felt this was the wrong approach, saying instead ‘It’s that sort of balance of you know [where] you can win an argument by obviously good education and you know, not by enforcement’.<sup>701</sup> They felt most irresponsible behaviour was due to a lack of knowledge rather than a fundamental lack of general care; ‘sometimes when you drill

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<sup>698</sup> LM2.

<sup>699</sup> C1, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

<sup>700</sup> C1.

<sup>701</sup> LM4.

down to it, a lot of it's misunderstanding. Not knowing, you know, and it's an educational thing', although they did also acknowledge 'sometimes you do see some really silly things'.<sup>702</sup> A belief in the need for education was echoed by many participants and was one of the most unifying topics that arose during interviewees. As discussed in Section 2.5, however, the gap that persists between knowledge of environmental challenges, intention, and action, belies education being the sole arbiter of healthier multi-species relations. To achieve the goal of improved multi-species relations, a deeper encounter is needed, as I will explore in Chapters 6 and 7.

## **5.6: For Everyone, For Ever**

For the National Trust, whose stated mission is to conserve places 'For Everyone, For Ever', the challenge of managing spaces that are sometimes conflicted can be acute. The Trust was founded on the principle of maintaining free access to commons, rights now enshrined in wider laws.<sup>703</sup> Yet, they must balance this against the needs of future generations of both humans and other-than-humans. This theme, *For Everyone, For Ever*, explores the challenges of making room for humans and other species in places such as Rodborough under current access conditions.

Reflecting this challenge, responses to this theme represent one of the most conflicted areas of coding, demonstrating that individuals are aware of the tensions created by allowing open access to sensitive habitats. IG3 observed that the Common, despite its large, open aspect, experiences a concentration of visitors, describing it as a 'honey pot'.<sup>704</sup> They also recognised the distinct nature of commons as

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<sup>702</sup> LM4.

<sup>703</sup> Baigent, 'What Was the Open Space Movement?'.

<sup>704</sup> IG3, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

public spaces, and, whilst they expressed concerns about potential overuse, they acknowledged this as an inevitable price of the land being open access:

‘That’s the thing, you don’t want it be kind of overused for want of a better description, but it’s I guess, you’ve got to look at it as a fact of life. It is common land you can’t say, you know, well, ‘we were here first’ kind of thing’.<sup>705</sup>

LM4 also used the ‘honey pot’ analogy when talking about the Common, and agreed you wouldn’t want to prevent people from visiting, despite the challenges it brings:

‘They’re [the commons] a problem in their own right because they’re so brilliant you know and so accessible you know you don’t want to stop people visiting. But then you look at the thing and you think, oh my God, you know what’s going on you know there’s lots of yeah...Well, you know there’s just too much you know, which causes conflict’.<sup>706</sup>

R11 acknowledged that the pressure on certain sites was an issue, but agreed that access should not be discouraged:

‘The problem isn’t necessarily that there are more people or that people aren’t respecting the land in the same way, but we still got the same, well in fact, shrinking amounts of land that people can do it in so it’s a honey pot problem’.<sup>707</sup>

C2 also expressed concerns about the overuse of the Common and its negative impact on other species, recognising also the need for open green spaces where people could experience open access, stating ‘without a doubt, you know people, absolutely, these places, they, we need more of them’.<sup>708</sup> C2 attempted to reconcile this conflict by suggesting ‘we could look at creating new open spaces for people, which

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<sup>705</sup> IG3.

<sup>706</sup> LM4.

<sup>707</sup> R11.

<sup>708</sup> C2.

might alleviate pressure', an idea they repeated several times throughout their interview.<sup>709</sup> R11 also thought that more land should be made available for people to enjoy:

'If you, you know, apply the framework and thinking that so many people like to, to this kind of thing. If any other good or service that you had in the economy got a massive increase in demand for it, you'd say the answer to this is to increase the supply. For some reason, this is the only exception I can think of to the rule. It's madness'.<sup>710</sup>

IG6 agreed; 'I think it isn't necessarily about what we do about controlling the use of Rodborough Common, but about how you create more opportunities for access on a wider area you know which has got less environmental sensitivity'.<sup>711</sup> Rather than trying to restrict freedoms on the few lands which are already open access, they felt: 'You know those sorts of things, get away from saying, oh, we must regulate this and it's about looking at what we can do to create more opportunities, not less opportunity'.<sup>712</sup> They felt this conflict could be eased if more agricultural land were managed better for biodiversity:

'The real challenge is that with those areas where there is high conservation issues the risks are that you're gonna put that land under increasing pressure and so that is important that we are actually managing that. But there is plenty of land around this valley that is not being used productively for agriculture'.<sup>713</sup>

R5, who carries out volunteer conservation activities at another local common, also recognised the potential conflicts that could be created by differing user groups; 'I suppose that's the well, that's one of the tensions, isn't it? I suppose it's about

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<sup>709</sup> C2.

<sup>710</sup> R11.

<sup>711</sup> IG6, interview with the author, 31 March 2023.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

conflicting use’.<sup>714</sup> At the same time R5, when asked about the future of the Common, said, ‘I feel very positive. It’s a very important common community resource, isn’t it?’, going on to cite the need for compromise and balance from the community in terms of managing those conflicting uses.<sup>715</sup> IG3 agreed, stating that successful commons use depended on cooperation and mutual understanding: ‘It’s just having that harmony for want of a better description I suppose’.<sup>716</sup> R6 also felt sharing the Common was important, saying ‘you know people want to come then wonderful, let them come’.<sup>717</sup> The importance of sharing the Common with others, and the contribution that made to its particular sense of place, also came through in other interviews. R7 and C1 both used identical phrases in their interviews: ‘It’s for all of us’.<sup>718</sup> IG2 and IG3 both expressed similar sentiments.<sup>719</sup> R11 recognised the issue of species loss but didn’t feel restricting access was the way forward. Highlighting this, they said:

‘My fear is that as people increasingly demand them [conservation measures] and the things we already talked about, you know you start to see the impact on them is that the instinct will be to close it off and protect it from people, but I think that gets things completely the wrong way round. That common land has been, you know that and the other commons, have been common since what the fourteenth century, something like that’.<sup>720</sup>

Conflicted views were expressed on the pros and cons of open access for both individuals and organisations. LM4 noted the innate clash in trying to balance the recreational needs of humans with other species’ survival; ‘How do you balance our own philosophy in an organisation that permits that access of freedom, fresh air and

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<sup>714</sup> R5, interview with the author, 21 April 2022.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

<sup>716</sup> IG3.

<sup>717</sup> R6.

<sup>718</sup> R7; C1.

<sup>719</sup> IG2, interview with the author, 27 April 2022; IG3.

<sup>720</sup> R11.

exercise for ever, for everyone, in perpetuity, and also preserve the ecology?'.<sup>721</sup> C3a agreed that this was a dilemma for the Trust; 'the National Trust desperately want more diverse audiences, different audiences, be as open to everyone. But then some of these places can't take it'.<sup>722</sup> IG1 twice used the phrase 'double-sided' when discussing the open access aspect of the Common saying 'So it's really tricky. So the fact that its common land is sort of double-sided, isn't it?'.<sup>723</sup> <sup>724</sup> Trying to maintain the balance was something that LM4 felt in a keenly personal way:

'It is a heavy weight on my shoulders as a land manager to ensure that I'm still fulfilling that amazing opportunity for people to access such a wonderful space and be free to wander, you know, which again, it's such an important thing to offer, but also that balance of how the hell does the ecology work around at the same time'.<sup>725</sup>

Many interviewees also commented on the feeling of freedom they experienced on the Common and how important this was to them. For R7, this was the crux of their relationship with the Common; 'that's what I love about going on the Common. I just feel free up there really'.<sup>726</sup> R6 agreed, citing the importance to them of 'I think that having the mental freedom to be able to walk where you wish'.<sup>727</sup> For C5, the feelings of being unencumbered were also key; 'what I like is the fact that there aren't fences and there isn't, it's not enclosed. I do think that's what makes it special'.<sup>728</sup> For R5, the sense of space was also crucial; 'yeah, it's the openness that's really

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<sup>721</sup> LM4.

<sup>722</sup> C3a.

<sup>723</sup> IG1, interview with the author, 29 March 2023.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid.

<sup>725</sup> LM4.

<sup>726</sup> R7, interview with the author, 27 September 2022.

<sup>727</sup> R6.

<sup>728</sup> C5.

important'.<sup>729</sup> FG1D agreed; 'it feels quite open [on] the Common, there's a lot of space'.

<sup>730</sup> The open-access nature of the Common was, for R13, a civilising force, and one they understood was not enjoyed everywhere for historical reasons; 'I do think that just the fact of land that you can be on, is you know it's a very civilised thing that unfortunately due to enclosure in the rest of the country it became much more restricted'. <sup>731</sup> IG6 recognised the importance of open spaces for people's wellbeing; 'you know, access to open space is really important to people and actually making sure that those things are protected for the future, it's really important'. <sup>732</sup>

Perceived threats to the unenclosed nature of the Common could engender strong feelings. When discussing the introduction of temporary fencing for conservation grazing, C3a noted that:

'I don't know if you follow the sort of Rodborough chat stuff, but did you see the other day a conversation some guy said, you know, 'Oh all the bits of the Common are fenced off, are they... You know, our right to roam' or whatever he's going on about. 'My freedom''.<sup>733</sup>

R11 shared the concerns of this social media poster about temporary fences, fearing they were the 'thin end of the wedge':

'When I first saw it, I got quite err, angry? Not angry. Not quite angry. Concerned. I was worried it was the sort of harbinger of starting to see that being, yeah, becoming a feature because it is, you know, in so many other open spaces, people are being blocked off'.<sup>734</sup>

R13, who also grew up adjacent to common land, and described

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<sup>729</sup> R5.

<sup>730</sup> FG1D.

<sup>731</sup> R13.

<sup>732</sup> IG6.

<sup>733</sup> C3a.

<sup>734</sup> R11.

themselves as ‘a real like diehard Open Spaces Society person’ shared similar feelings.

<sup>735</sup> Despite understanding why fencing might be needed to help protect other species, they still felt that its presence was something that caused a degree of discomfort:

‘You know I completely understand why they’re doing sort of targeted grazing and managed grazing. Completely understand why it is. Yeah, it’s just, you know, one of those like, not like heart, not head sort of things that when I see a fence up, I’m like, I don’t know if I like this. I don’t know where it’s going’. <sup>736</sup>

As discussed previously in this chapter, their fear that ‘often these things only, well in certainly in our history today, these things usually only go in one particular direction. Which is why I have this kind of visceral reaction to it’ is not unjustified. <sup>737</sup>

Several interviewees contrasted Rodborough’s openness and the feelings of freedom this engendered with other places and environments. R5 and R6 compared Rodborough Common favourably with their previous places of residence, Warwick and Bibury respectively, where walks were trammelled and controlled on specific footpaths.<sup>738</sup> R5 remembered their spouse had ‘worked at Warwick Hospital for a while and it was like there was nowhere to go really. We went for a walk. It was around the perimeter of a ploughed field’.<sup>739</sup> For R6, footpaths were a cause of frustration; ‘when I lived over at Bibury there were fields around there, and of course there are footpaths, but I was always conscious and fed up with the fact that I had to keep to the paths’. <sup>740</sup> Space was important for R11 as well. They noted that:

‘There aren’t many spaces, really that you can do that and still be in space. I mean, you can go to a park or whatever but it’s a bit more artificial and it’s

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<sup>735</sup> R13, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

<sup>736</sup> Ibid.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid.

<sup>738</sup> R5; R6.

<sup>739</sup> R5.

<sup>740</sup> R6.

difficult to have quite as much space to yourself'.<sup>741</sup>

IG6 noted the widespread inequity in access to green spaces and commons in particular; 'there is also unfairness about where it is, and certainly in Worcestershire you've got absolutely no access at all. But then other people have got loads and loads and loads'.<sup>742</sup>

As well as mentioning the emotional benefit of open access, some participants also noted material safety considerations. For horse rider IG2, the Common gave the freedom to explore off-road.<sup>743</sup> For horse riders off-road access is not just about feelings of freedom. During 2022 alone, there were 3552 reported incidents involving horse riders and cars reported to the British Horse Society, resulting in 193 horse deaths or injuries and 139 human injuries, making safe, off-road access for horses and riders of life-saving importance.<sup>744</sup> For cyclists, the hazards of road use are even greater, with an average of two cyclists killed and eighty seriously injured per week between 2019 and 2023.<sup>745</sup> For dog walkers too, the freedom for the dog to be off the lead was important, and offered an extra attraction to Rodborough Common, as opposed to other green spaces. This tallies with the 2019 visitors' survey, where 41% of respondents stated the ability to walk dogs off the lead was a primary motivator for visiting the Common.<sup>746</sup>

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<sup>741</sup> R11.

<sup>742</sup> IG6.

<sup>743</sup> IG2.

<sup>744</sup> 'Dead Slow', *British Horse Society*, 2025 <<https://www.bhs.org.uk/support-us/our-campaigns/dead-slow/>> [accessed 8 February 2023].

<sup>745</sup> 'Reported Road Casualties in Great Britain: Pedal Cycle Fact Sheet 2023', *Department for Transport*, 26 September 2024 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reported-road-casualties-great-britain-pedal-cyclist-factsheet-2023/reported-road-casualties-in-great-britain-pedal-cycle-factsheet-2023>> [accessed 26 March 2025].

<sup>746</sup> C. Panter & Z. Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', *Footprint Ecology*, 2019 <[https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final\\_redacted.pdf](https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final_redacted.pdf)> [accessed 6 September 2023], p. ii.

In summary, whilst interviewees understood the potential challenges of facilitating access, they also recognised its importance. Those who expressed an opinion felt extending land for human access and/or for other species to thrive could help address some of the issues encountered when people and fragile habitats are squeezed into the same spaces. Common land, such as at Rodborough, can act as a catalyst for improved multi-species relationships, as a trigger for pro-environmental behaviours, and as a key provider of human health benefits. Most participants, whether overtly in favour of increasing access or not, recognised the inherent inequality of current access policies and the desirability of sharing spaces with others. Even land managers who are at the sharp end of dealing with conflicts caused by different expectations of the land saw the benefits of sharing these spaces.

### **5.7: The Rural Idyll?**

The arguments against access extension focus on the potential damage caused by recreational visitors to rural livelihoods and fragile habitats. Yet centuries of exclusion from the land, little compensated for by the introduction of the ‘right to roam’ in 2000, does not appear to be helping rural dwellers, human or otherwise, to thrive. Far from embodying a rural idyll, country living can be hard for those of all species. For example, under current conditions, rural humans experience poorly paid and often precarious employment, a severe lack of affordable housing, and poor access to public services.<sup>747</sup> Ninety-five per cent of farmers under the age of forty identified poor mental health as ‘the biggest hidden problem facing the industry’.<sup>748</sup> Despite farming having the poorest

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<sup>747</sup> Jonathan Wentworth, ‘Horizon Scanning: Issues Facing Rural Communities’, *UK Parliament Post*, 21 November 2024 <<https://post.parliament.uk/issues-facing-rural-communities/#heading-2>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

<sup>748</sup> ‘Poor Mental Health is Identified as the Farming Industry’s Biggest Hidden Problem’, *Farming Life*, 12 February 2024 <<https://www.farminglife.com/news/environment/poor-mental-health-is-ranked-as->

safety record of any UK occupation, more agricultural workers died from suicide in 2021 than those killed in work-related accidents in 2022/23.<sup>749</sup> The accusation that recreational use of the countryside and rural business are incompatible is belied by the 11% of England's rural businesses that are tourist-related, the 15% of rural workers employed by tourism, and the £11.5 billion in gross added value derived from visitors to the countryside in 2018.<sup>750</sup>

Despite the value added to the rural economy by tourism businesses, however, a perceived divide between rural and urban populations can leave rural peoples feeling overlooked, their issues masked by a nostalgic vision of the countryside that is not supported by reality, and urban peoples excluded by definition from the land and less minded to care for it, and its occupants, as a result. The fears felt by rural populations are reflected in campaigns by organisations such as the Countryside Alliance whose aims include protecting 'the rural way of life', although they are not explicit about who, or what, they are protecting it from.<sup>751</sup> Movements such as No Farmers, No Food (Fig. 5.6.1) are indicative of the way many farmers may feel their voices are unheard and their realities overlooked when policy decisions are made.<sup>752</sup>

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farmings-industrys-biggest-hidden-problem-4514044> [accessed 4 February 2025], para. 7.

<sup>749</sup> 'Poor Mental Health is Identified as the Farming Industry's Biggest Hidden Problem', *Farming Life*.

<sup>750</sup> 'Statistical Digest of Rural England: Tourism', *DEFRA*, 2021

<[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/996644/Tourism\\_June\\_2021\\_final\\_with\\_cover\\_page.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/996644/Tourism_June_2021_final_with_cover_page.pdf)> [accessed 6 February 2025].

<sup>751</sup> 'About the Countryside Alliance', *The Countryside Alliance*, 2023 <<https://www.countryside-alliance.org/library/about-the-countryside-alliance>> [accessed 4 February 2025], para.1.

<sup>752</sup> 'New Campaign Group 'No Farmers No Food' Warns Farming is 'Under Threat'', *Farming UK*, 21 February 2024 <[https://www.farminguk.com/news/new-campaign-group-no-farmers-no-food-warns-farming-is-under-threat-\\_64203.html](https://www.farminguk.com/news/new-campaign-group-no-farmers-no-food-warns-farming-is-under-threat-_64203.html)> [accessed: 12 June 2025].



Figure 5.6.1: 'No Farmers No Food' banner, Gloucester, February 2025

Source: Author's Photograph. © Sharon Gardham

The perception that visitors cause major environmental damage whilst visiting the countryside is not supported by evidence. Whilst a small percentage of visitors undoubtedly behave inconsiderately when visiting rural areas, leisure use is not considered the primary cause of wildlife threat and habitat degradation at sensitive sites.<sup>753</sup> This conclusion is supported by an analysis of designated sites by Natural England which shows that agriculture, forestry, and game management are, when combined, responsible for a far larger percentage of adverse conditions on sites than access disturbance (Fig. 5.6.2).<sup>754</sup> Although there are proportionally more sites designated as important for other-than-humans on open access land when compared to other land types, there is no support for the assertion that an extension of access would significantly further damage sensitive habitats. Whilst 'recreationists can have

<sup>753</sup> 'People, Policy & Planet: Accessing and Maximising Nature in England', *British Ecological Society*, 19 April 2023 <<https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/how-can-we-balance-wildlife-conservation-with-public-access-to-nature/>> [accessed 26 November 2024], p. 11.

<sup>754</sup> 'Designated Sites View', *Natural England*, 2024 <<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/ReportUnitAdverseCondition.aspx?ReportTitle=All%20of%20England%20adverse%20conditions>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

undesirable effects on high nature value areas, that may be mitigated by re-distributing recreational pressure to other areas of lower nature value', for example, agricultural margins, broadleaved woodlands, or unproductive agricultural lands.<sup>755</sup> The British Ecological Society's English Policy Group agreed, stating that nature loss is not primarily being driven by public access and that pressure on high-value sites could be alleviated by dilution of visitor numbers to other areas.<sup>756</sup> These views chime with those expressed by my interviewees who thought the 'honey pot' effect experienced on Rodborough Common could be mitigated by more spaces for people and nature, not fewer. Hornigold, Lake, and Dolman found that high nature value, as defined by designation, does not particularly drive recreational value, suggesting factors such as land cover type, access to and within sites, and perception of species richness are more important in driving a site's attractiveness to visitors.<sup>757</sup> The inference is, therefore, that visitor pressure could be directed and diluted, at least in particular circumstances.

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<sup>755</sup> Hornigold, Lake, and Dolman, 'Recreational Use of the Countryside', p. 2.

<sup>756</sup> British Ecological Society, 'People, Policy & Planet', p. 11.

<sup>757</sup> Hornigold, Lake, and Dolman, 'Recreational Use of the Countryside', p. 10.

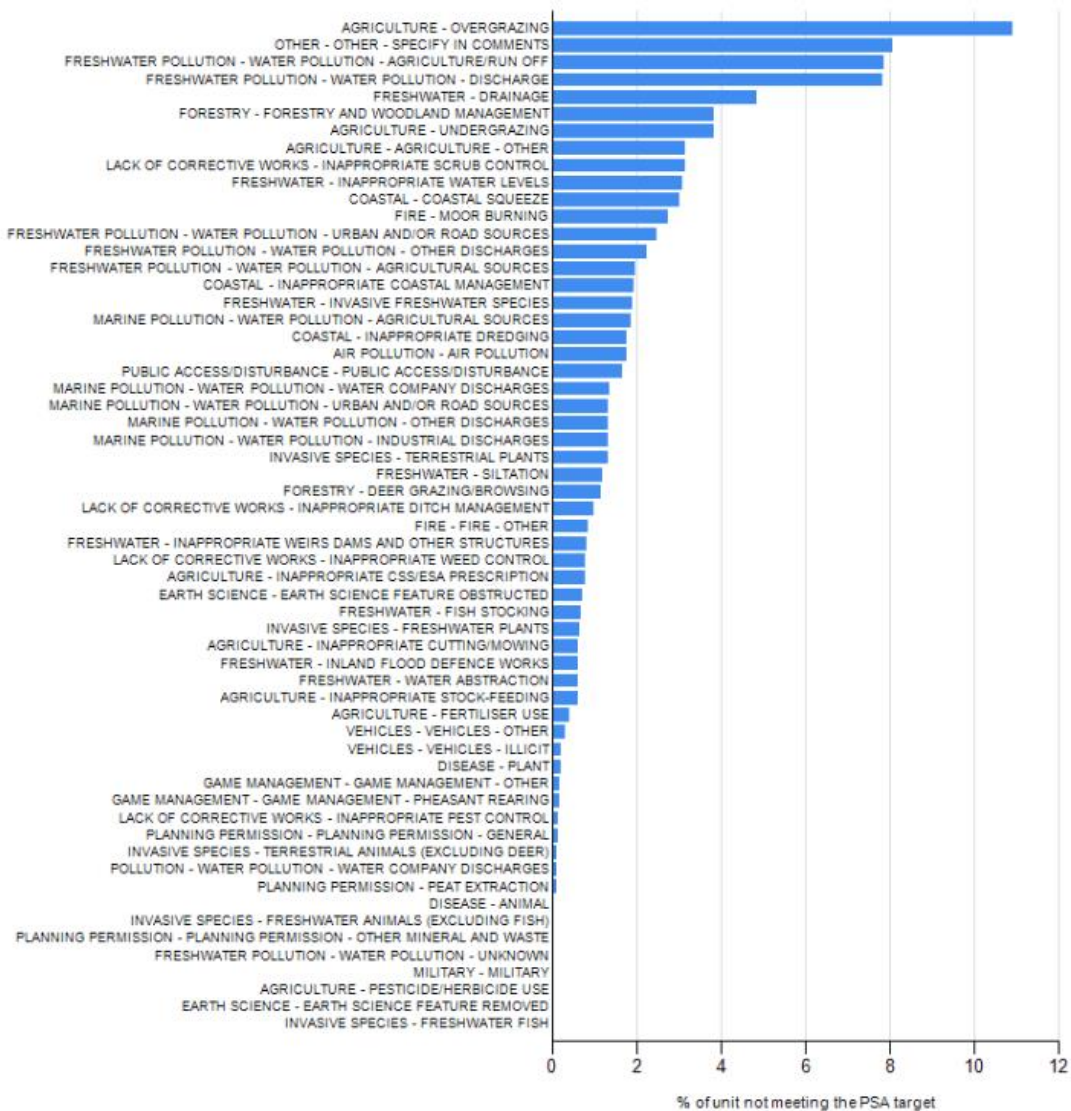


Figure 5.6.2: SSSI adverse condition causes

Source: Natural England. © Natural England. Reproduced under Open Government Licence

That is not to say, however, that the fears expressed by access extension opponents regarding recreational visitors are completely unfounded, or entirely politically or selfishly motivated. As we saw in Chapter 4, public access can cause problems, particularly for livestock. The National Farmers Union estimates that dog attacks on livestock cost between one and two million pounds per year, although the majority of attacks are thought to be from unaccompanied dogs (i.e., those that have escaped from properties) rather than those being walked on land due to a right of

access.<sup>758</sup> Failure to close gates can also be the cause of road traffic accidents and farmed other-than-human animal deaths.<sup>759</sup> Crops can be damaged by walkers not sticking to field margins or designated footpaths.<sup>760</sup> A search of news reports suggests that problems anecdotally increased during the pandemic when larger numbers of people were spending time outdoors, with suggestions made that some of these visitors were new to the countryside and not therefore familiar with concepts of responsible use.<sup>761</sup> Access extension campaigners are at pains to point out that they call for a right of responsible access that allows for exceptions to general access for legitimate reasons, including the protection of livelihoods and for conservation.<sup>762</sup>

Access extension should not, however, be viewed as a silver bullet that can alleviate all issues facing the countryside. For example, arguments based on dilution are predicated upon the potentially flawed assumption that one place is automatically interchangeable with another. This argument was considered in the context of Rodborough Common when discussions were held about the creation of a Suitable Area of Natural Greenspace (SANG) to alleviate visitor pressures.<sup>763</sup> SANGs are, however, based on the idea of substitution, that by providing an alternative site for recreation visitors will automatically visit there instead of an SAC; an inherently troubled concept. Assuming that one place is automatically exchangeable for another based on land area alone ignores complex and nuanced human and other-than-human relations with the

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<sup>758</sup> 'Access Reforms for England, *Right to Roam*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>759</sup> Gemma Mackenzie, 'Farmers Call for Responsible Access After Open Gate Leaves 11 Cows Dead', *The P&J*, 17 June 2020 <<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/business/farming/2267294/farmers-call-for-responsible-access-after-open-gate-leaves-11-cows-dead/>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

<sup>760</sup> William Kellett, 'CLA Warns of Crop Damage Caused by Walkers Not Sticking to Paths', *Agriland*, 19 January 2021 <<https://www.agriland.co.uk/farming-news/cla-warns-of-crop-damage-caused-by-walkers-not-sticking-to-paths/>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

<sup>761</sup> 'Covid: Crops 'Damaged Nationwide' by Lockdown Walkers Avoiding Mud', *BBC News*, 20 January 2021 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-55712672>> [accessed 4 February 2025].

<sup>762</sup> 'Access Reform for England', *Right to Roam*, p. 12.

<sup>763</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, 2021.

land. The term 'natural green space' also denies the co-creative agency of other-than-humans and past and current humans. Rodborough Common, for example, is far from being a 'natural' green space in the way that most people might mean; it is decidedly formed by interaction between multiple generations of cooperating species. Further, it is loved for its particular *genius loci*, its cultural value, and the accretions of memories it represents.

The questionable effectiveness of a SANG alleviating pressure on Rodborough Common was borne out by the 2019 visitors' survey, which looked specifically at the option of using SANGs as a mitigation measure.<sup>764</sup> When asked what could be done to make Stroud District's existing alternative green spaces more appealing, 54% of respondents stated that nothing could be done to encourage them away from Rodborough Common, with a further 30% saying they did not know.<sup>765</sup> The surveyed reasons for visiting Rodborough Common were selected by respondents from a set list, which did not allow for the perhaps less 'scientific' reasons, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, that are strongly associated with place attachment: love, memories, and how visiting makes people feel. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents did cite openness and rural/wild feel as reasons for visiting, but there was no further qualitative assessment carried out of what this meant.<sup>766</sup> When asked to name alternative sites they regularly visited, the top three answers given were other parts of Rodborough Common, neighbouring Selsley Common (Fig. 5.6.3), and Minchinhampton Common, suggesting the open access nature of the Commons, and the safety and feelings of freedom these engender may strongly contribute to visitor decision

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<sup>764</sup> Panter and Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', p. 30.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

making.<sup>767</sup>

Given the propensity of people to visit sites close to home, even with a default right of access, areas bordering large urban conurbations would still bear the brunt of recreational needs. Also, the granting of an extended right of access does not mean the rules would be complied with. The difficulties encountered in keeping existing English rights of way clear and open (there were 32,000 blocked footpaths recorded in 2024) would suggest a strong need to gain wide consensus from landowners before any change could successfully be made.<sup>768</sup> The wish for people to have greater equality of access will also not be solved purely via an extension of the same, with wider issues around belonging, identity, and logistics all playing an important part, as I explore further in Chapter 6.



Figure 5.6.3: A view from neighbouring Selsley Common over the River Severn  
Source: Author's Photograph. © Sharon Gardham

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<sup>767</sup> Panter and Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', p. 33.

<sup>768</sup> Malcolm Prior and Clare Marshall, 'Public Rights of Way Blocked in 32,000 Places', *BBC News*, 12 January 2024 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-67937253>> [accessed 7 February 2025].

## 5.8: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the move to industrialised models of farming has led to devastating declines in other-than-human populations, which are likely already measured from a lowered baseline. As other-than-humans' abundance declines, opportunities for unmediated encounters reduce, in a self-perpetuating 'extinction of experience'.<sup>769</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, encouraging unmediated and meaningful multi-species encounters is promoted as a way of improving human relations with Earth others, and working lowland commons can act as a site for such encounters. Nonetheless, in Section 5.2, I showed that the space available for such unmediated encounters is declining, following patterns of diminishing access over centuries. Despite extensive and partially successful efforts to redress these exclusions, the current 'right to roam' in England is confusing, geographically uneven, and unsatisfactory, both to those who advocate for greater access, and those who campaign against it. The few areas of common land, such as Rodborough, that are available to the public to feel 'unbounded freedom' and for other-than-humans to thrive, are scattered and unevenly distributed. Those relatively easily accessible 'honey pots' located near urban conurbations therefore bear the brunt of the human need for multi-species connections and space to roam freely.

As I detailed in Section 5.4, some argue the pressures on such sites, which are also often vital for other-than-human survival, can be diluted by making more land available for recreational access. This presents something of a catch-22 scenario, however, whereby care must be triggered by contact, but contact can result in damage

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<sup>769</sup> Robert Pyle, 'The Extinction of Experience', *Horticulture*, 56 (1978), pp. 64-67 in Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405).

where there is no starting point of care. In Section 5.6, participants showed good awareness of this dilemma, where one of the most conflicted areas of coding in this study pitted the desirability of open access against the dangers it may present to other-than-humans. Despite this, and the many valid arguments made by those opposing restoration of wider access to land, limiting opportunities for contact cannot improve human understanding of Earth others, or what sharing space means, instead creating a self-perpetuating cycle of further misunderstanding and alienation. Learning the 'etiquette of an interspecies encounter' and indeed the etiquette of intra-species encounters, can be more easily achieved on sites of connection where the close listening required to recognise other-than-human forms of communication and narrativity, and the co-creative efforts of more-than-humans is more easily accessed.<sup>770</sup>

Opportunities for realistic, meaningful, and authentic encounters are, therefore, increasingly important in a globally homogenised, urbanising world. Working commons such as Rodborough can provide just such an opportunity for a more authentic encounter, allowing divisions to be overcome and reconnecting urban humans with the reproductive labours of their rural-dwelling kin. Negotiating farmed, shared spaces such as Rodborough enables a more realistic, and therefore potentially enriching, encounter to take place, but to be successful this must be backed by two-way communication and engagement. In this context, the continuation of active commoning on Rodborough, and places like it, goes beyond a wish to preserve a relic from a bygone era for its cultural heritage or touristic value, instead reflecting a forward-looking ambition to repair intra- and inter-species relations.

Policies that seek to encourage more humans to access green and blue

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<sup>770</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), p. 192.

spaces should, therefore, be encouraged, not least as a means of countering human species isolation and resulting misunderstandings about human exceptionalism.

Without access restoration the few areas of open access lands will continue to come under unsustainable pressure. Their degradation then has the potential to be held up as further proof that land access causes environmental destruction, lending legitimacy to those who wish to exclude the public from rural spaces. As I showed in Section 5.6, there is, however, scant evidence that recreational use is a primary cause of habitat degradation, despite areas of open access land carrying a disproportionate burden for other-than-human thriving.

Access restoration is not, however, straightforward. Some arguments for greater connection with 'nature' do not, for example, highlight the reciprocal arrangements that are required to stop this being yet another way to inequitably consume other-than-human resources. Calls for a code of responsible access, much like the one promoted under the Scottish model of land access (Fig. 5.8.1) may only meet with partial success if centrally imposed without clear, democratically derived, reciprocal obligations. In the example shown in Fig. 5.8.1, obligations are passive rather than active; a 'don't' rather than a 'do'. Without actively reciprocal obligations, 'dos' rather than 'do not's', accessible land is in danger of aligning with Olson's logic of collective action, its balance decreasingly maintained by unsustainable centrally imposed controls, that increase the potential for degradation and failure. Instead, Rodborough's example suggests that ongoing buy-in, identity-building, and direct and local democratic involvement from all parties in any restoration of land access would be vital components of ensuring congruence with Ostrom's principles. Replacing consumption with care is key in avoiding taking without concomitant attitudes of giving. Furthermore, if the common land model of access were to become the default for

access more widely, commons would need to stop being viewed from funding, legislative, and philosophical perspectives as archaic anomalies.



Figure 5.8.1: Scottish Outdoor Access Code resource  
Source: Nature Scot. Reproduced with permission

If access extension does form part of the solution to the ‘honey pot’ pressure on sensitive habitats, gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the roots of place attachment, and the role that open access plays in this, is also key. If nature connection is the goal, the quality of the connection must also be examined, as well as any possible negative impacts on the other species encountered. If breaking down the barriers between rural and urban peoples is required, access extension must be democratically achieved based on mutual respect and responsibility. Garrard suggests that global discourses on biodiversity can constitute a form of neocolonialism whereby predominantly white, Western environmentalists impose their rules and norms onto indigenous peoples, in ways that can be both unwelcome and exploitative.<sup>771</sup> Somewhat reflective of this experience is how farmers and other rural dwellers in the English countryside may resent the imposition of rules set out in

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<sup>771</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2012), p. 180.

metropolitan Westminster that are decided on by bureaucrats and politicians who are perceived to have had little or no experience of the 'realities' of living with and working on the land. Feelings of being 'put upon', misunderstood, exploited, underrepresented, or demonised can quickly polarise debate and further increase divisions between rural dwellers and others. The answers that access extension advocates seek are, therefore, not straightforward.

English common land as a model encourages a spirit of sharing that was important to participants, as was the opportunity it offers for multi-species encounters. How this spirit might be extended to other lands with no living memory of common access, whilst respecting the importance of those lands for more-than-human thriving is more difficult to extrapolate. The roots of such place attachments, how they might be replicated, and whether they should be encouraged in the interests of an extension of 'good neighbourhood' are now discussed in Chapter 6.

## 6. Common Ecologies of Place: The Role of Place, Nostalgia, and Constructions of the Rural

Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours  
Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers  
Is faded all - a hope that blossomed free  
And hath been once no more shall ever be

John Clare, *The Mores*

In this chapter's excerpt from *The Mores*, John Clare again expresses his sadness at the loss of the 'sweet vision of his boyish hours'.<sup>772</sup> His words evoke a particular form of sadness, a mourning for a place that no longer exists and cannot be revisited except in memory. In this chapter, I consider the roots of such attachments and explore examples of loss, sadness, and nostalgia expressed by study participants. In doing so, I consider whether these feelings result in parochial feelings of belonging or instead offer opportunities to extend 'good neighbourhood'.

Following on from Chapter 5's discussion of the disconnect between urban and rural dwellers, and possible ways of addressing this, in this chapter, I delve more deeply into the cultural implications of commodification of the countryside and the default of exclusion. I examine how social constructs and personal experiences of spaces impact the day-to-day lives of those who live near, work on, and visit Rodborough Common. This chapter is not designed to comprehensively explore ideas relating to place. It does, however, use the construct of place explored in Section 2.4 to

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<sup>772</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, 'The Mores', 'Poems of the Helpston Period' in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 168).

consider why people may feel attachment to certain physical locales, and the practical implications such attachments can have, for them, and for the 'others' they encounter when negotiating these spaces. As we consider how and whether restoring access to wider areas of the countryside would benefit or harm inter- and intra-species relations, I examine what role place attachment plays in attitudes of care and advocacy and whether these attitudes can be replicated in so-called 'SANGs'. Whether the levels of care felt for common land, with its long tradition of shared endeavour can be replicated on land without this history of connection is debated in this chapter.

Ecology, in its purest sense, is the 'scientific study of relationships among communities of plants and animals (organisms) and their environments'.<sup>773</sup> In this chapter, I expand this definition to include how relations between different communities in shared environments engender emotional responses, including love, belonging, possessiveness, fear, and grief, entwining to create shared, and personal, ecologies of place. Examining such responses allows me to consider what role ecologies of place situated on English common land might play in encouraging wider love, care and advocacy for multi-species communities.

As I discussed in Chapter 5, processes of exclusion, particularly during the era of parliamentary enclosure, began to lay the foundations for an imagined ideal of the countryside that often overlooks the messy realities of rural lives. Appreciating that the construction of place as an entity, whilst highly individualised in some respects, also has shared societal roots, I begin this chapter by exploring the cultural construction of rural England. Following this general investigation, I present examples of manifestations of these cultural constructs in the language and attitudes of interviewees. Named for the

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<sup>773</sup> Peter N. Goggin, 'Introduction' in *Environmental Rhetoric and Ecologies of Place*, ed. by Peter N. Goggin (Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-15 (p. 6).

famous line in the hymn, *Jerusalem*, the theme *England's Green and Pleasant Land*? crucially is appended with a question mark, reflecting on how notions such as beauty and love can be juxtaposed against examples of 'othering' in the countryside.<sup>774</sup> Whether this 'othering' might lead to inclinations to exclude particular groups from the Common is then considered in this theme. Next, the theme *Oi! Gerroff My Land!* examines understandings of ownership of the Common and asks whether these result in self-serving behaviour, or a desire to exclude *all* others from it. Following this, '*Big Yellow Taxi*', named after Joni Mitchell's song lamenting ecological destruction, explores interviewees' expressions of fear, grief, and loss relating to community, way of life, and other species. This theme reflects the lyrics 'you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone', mirroring feelings of nostalgia, and concerns that 'a hope that blossomed free, and hath been once no more shall ever be'.<sup>775</sup> The chapter then contrasts inter- and intra-species isolation with feelings of identity, community, and kinship engendered by attachment and proximity to the Common, in the theme *Living in Good Neighbourhood*. As we seek ways to increase inter- and intra-species understanding, while minimising relations of harm, the chapter concludes by examining whether ecologies of place are useful constructs or not when attempting to encourage wider love, care, and advocacy for multi-species commons communities.

## 6.1: Constructions of the English Rural Idyll

As discussed in Chapter 5, the era of parliamentary enclosure was a time of great hardship and suffering for many rural people, who, along with their physical

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<sup>774</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poems/jerusalem.shtml>> [accessed 18 October 2023].

<sup>775</sup> Joni Mitchell, 'Big Yellow Taxi', from *Ladies of the Canyon* (Reprise, 1970); Clare, *The Mores*, p. 168.

dispossession from the land, saw their customary practices denigrated and sometimes criminalised. Alongside these processes of profit-motivated dispossessions, a myth was born that laid the foundations for how the English countryside is still viewed today. This view of the English rural idyll is world-famous, eagerly promoted by tourist boards and readily consumed by those seeking an alternative to their everyday lives. For jaded urbanites worldwide, 'with its rolling green hills, quaint villages, and rich tapestry of history, the rural landscapes of the UK offer a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of city life'.<sup>776</sup> This idyll has also been leveraged at times of national crisis, used as a rallying cry for the defence of a countryside which was, and still is, largely inaccessible to the majority of the public (Fig. 6.1.1).

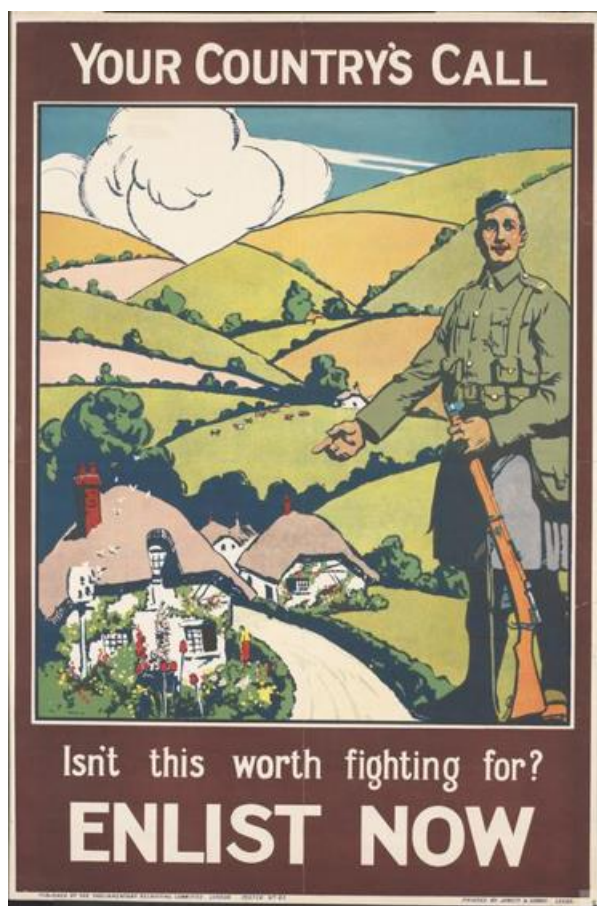


Figure 6.1.1: First World War recruitment poster, 1915

Source: Imperial War Museum (Art. IWM PST 0320). Reproduced under IWM Non-Commercial Licence

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<sup>776</sup> 'Why Do Tourists Love Exploring the UK's Countryside', *Scaper*, 6 November 2024 <<https://www.s-c-a-p-e-r.com/why-do-tourists-love-the-uk/>> [accessed 12 February 2025], para. 1.

Rodborough and its neighbours are not immune to this packaged and marketed view of the English countryside. On the contrary, as part of the well-known Cotswold region, they might even be said to embody it. For Rodborough and the other Stroud Commons, the 'quaintness' of unfenced grazing on shared green spaces is, for example, exploited by Stroud District Council's 'Discover' marketing campaign (Fig. 6.1.2). Campaigns such as this, along with the Arcadian image they portray, entirely mask the complex tensions that can exist between encouraging more people to visit the Stroud Commons and protecting safe grazing environments, to say nothing of rare and precarious habitats.



Figure 6.1.2: Stroud District Council tourism poster on the back of a bus, Stroud town centre, 21 August 2021

Source: Author's photograph © Sharon Gardham

During the period of parliamentary enclosure, many of the customs of the rural poor moved from lived experience to memory and myth, along with binding traditions that made individuals into communities.<sup>777</sup> In the process, such customs transformed into folklore, products to be consumed alongside the wider rural landscape

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<sup>777</sup> Theresa Adams, 'Representing Rural Leisure: John Clare and the Politics of Popular Culture', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), pp. 371-392 (p. 385).

aesthetic. Scenes depicting the grueling realities and crippling poverty of life under the enclosed system of agriculture were generally avoided.<sup>778</sup> Bolstering the myth that country people were happy, more virtuous, that 'the countryside [...] is a place of moral and physical health' conveniently disguised the negative and sometimes devastating effects of enclosure.<sup>779</sup>

Meanwhile, the humanity of the rural poor was often denied. For example, in 1852, Olmstead reported labourers in southwest England being 'the most degraded, poor, stupid, brutal, and licentious that we saw in the Kingdom', living purely on instinct 'like domestic animals'.<sup>780</sup> John Clare recounted a visiting gentleman asking him whether he and his fellow countrymen 'made their courtship in barns and pig styes'.<sup>781</sup> If the modern era had brought about a schism between humans and 'nature' that legitimated the exploitation of other species, poor treatment of the rural working classes could presumably be justified by perceiving them in this way.

In the art of the period, the rural working class, when they did appear, were often represented as 'contented, industrious, pious, deferential and full of family affection', the basis for a 'stable social system' (Fig. 6.1.3).<sup>782</sup> At a time of great societal turbulence on the continent, and indeed in many areas of southern England where protests against mechanisation and rural dispossession were spreading, a depiction of the rural working class as 'a contented, industrious workforce' acted as an antidote for the fears of the ruling classes regarding the prospect of an English revolution.<sup>783</sup>

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<sup>778</sup> Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England: 1780 - 1890* (Yale University Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>780</sup> G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution* (A&C Black, 1977), p. 218.

<sup>781</sup> Adams, 'Representing Rural Leisure', p. 386.

<sup>782</sup> Payne, *Toil and Plenty*, p. 45.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31; p. 45.



Figure 6.1.3: Thomas Uwins, *Haymakers at Dinner* (1812)

Source: Victoria and Albert Museum Explore the Collections Resource © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The pursuit of pleasure, enabled by the labour of, now invisible, human and non-human others, gave yet another dimension to countryside commodification. As the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed, there was a change in attitudes towards apparently wild places, which had ‘once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good’, but were now ‘frequently likened to Eden itself’.<sup>784</sup> ‘Untamed’ natural phenomena such as mountains and other ‘wilderness’ areas, that had previously been vilified and feared, were reinvented as the sublime.<sup>785</sup> As more tourists visited the so-called wilderness, the sublime’s original meaning of spiritual awe was domesticated and became ‘more like those of a pleasant parish church than those of a grand cathedral or

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<sup>784</sup> William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’ in *Global Environmental History: An Introductory Reader*, ed. by J.R McNeill and Alan Roe (Routledge, 2013), pp. 339-360 (p. 341).

<sup>785</sup> Emily Brady, ‘The Environmental Sublime’ in *The Sublime from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 171-182 (p. 173).

harsh desert retreat'.<sup>786</sup> For many artists, painters, poets and composers, lands that bore less obvious signs of human intervention were favoured purely for their aesthetic qualities. The resulting depictions in paintings, poems, guidebooks, and music in turn created a 'market' for the countryside that was enthusiastically consumed up by the newly leisured classes.<sup>787</sup> The awe and 'feeling of delight mixed with terror' evoked in early manifestations of the sublime was supplanted by a kind of sentimentality, a tamed, domesticated version of the rural world and its inhabitants.<sup>788</sup>

Whilst visitors to these lands may have appreciated their aesthetic beauty, the admiration of supposedly 'wild' nature overlooked the multiplicity of human and non-human agency involved in the land's co-creation, enhancing the separation of nature from humans, and different humans from one another.<sup>789</sup> This outcome was a sanitised version of the land that could be romanticised, viewed as aesthetically pleasing, a place for leisure and recreation of the few.<sup>790</sup> Wonder and enchantment with actual, embodied creatures were stripped away, replaced by a disembodied, tamed, separated (literally and metaphorically) 'other', that could be viewed distantly and safely in person, print, paint or sound.

Just as the countryside was being domesticated and packaged for the consumption of the leisured classes, the definition of 'value' was narrowing to numbers on a ledger; rational, analytical, forensic and wholly divorced from its wider meaning. The value of community, social bonds, and the 'variety of associations, grounded in feeling that lead to positive consequences' could be dismissed as insubstantial,

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<sup>786</sup> Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness', pp. 344-345.

<sup>787</sup> Anna Pavord, *Landskipping: Painters, Ploughmen and Places* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>788</sup> Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness', p. 344; Brady (2015), p. 172.

<sup>789</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>790</sup> Brady, 'The Environmental Sublime', p. 173.

irrational, and self-indulgent.<sup>791</sup> Ruskin's arguments to the contrary, for an economy encompassing multiple definitions of human value, including the cultural and the spiritual, were, and are, overlooked.<sup>792</sup> The domestic roots of the word 'economy' were largely forgotten, with value beyond the purely monetary becoming conflated with feeling, emotion, and other traits that apparently had no place or belonging in the rational modern world.<sup>793</sup>

This narrowing definition of value was reflected by the bands of agricultural inquirers visiting the countryside and seeing quite a different version of the aesthetic ideal than that experienced by those influenced by romantic-era poets and painters.<sup>794</sup> For the inquirers, beauty was found in an alternative taming that increased cultivation and productivity. Tate concludes that in the Cotswolds, 'the benefits of enclosure were quite indisputable', making the land 'worth at least thrice as much enclosed as open'.<sup>795</sup> James Donaldson praised John Clare's home county of Northamptonshire in 1789 by saying 'Here, there are no dreary wastes, nor rugged and unsightly mountains to offend the eye, or to interrupt the view'.<sup>796</sup> For those who, like John Clare, had a more intimate, working knowledge of the land, the open fields and commons contained beauty in abundance.<sup>797</sup> Areas that economically-minded observers viewed as 'harsh, wretched, and ugly' were those he most prized.<sup>798</sup> For Clare, it was the naked, enclosed lands that were barren, 'sterile and un-nurturing, the dark counterpoint

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<sup>791</sup> Dinah Birch, 'What is Value? Victorian Economies of Feeling', *Carlyle Studies Annual*, 28 (2012), pp. 31-48 (p. 33).

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>793</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>794</sup> Pavord, *Landskipping*, p. 93.

<sup>795</sup> W.E. Tate, 'Gloucestershire Enclosure Acts and Awards', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 64 (1943), pp. 1-70 (p.29).

<sup>796</sup> James Donaldson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northampton* (London, 1794) in Pavord, *Landskipping*, p. 98.

<sup>797</sup> John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 125.

<sup>798</sup> W.G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 157.

to the fecundity and variety of nature'.<sup>799</sup> Clare's world was instead full of small wonders, a complex mesh of relationships, understandings, and senses bounded by relations of reciprocity, customs, and flourishing life, that were disregarded under the new definition of value. Clare's lands were rich in a different way; alive and agential, with multiple species recognised as contributing to a holistic sense of wellbeing.<sup>800</sup> Those who worked on the land had their hands in the earth, weren't tourists, or seeking to maximise profit, and so were able to see, understand and appreciate the subtlety that made up their surroundings, the 'reproductive practice and knowledges [...] not understood in the terms of individual profit, exchange value or ownership'.<sup>801</sup> As these knowledges were lost, as customs became a memory and memory myth, the wonder of this everyday reality became obscured.

Agricultural change, urbanisation, and industrialisation allowed physical and spiritual separation from the land, for ideas of place to become untethered from dwelling.<sup>802</sup> In the process, the urbanised English experienced '*dematerialisation*', becoming 'more and more out of touch with the *material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable*'.<sup>803</sup> Supporters of agricultural improvement and those who appreciated the land for its aesthetic value alone may seem at first glance to be in diametrically opposing camps with very different ideas of 'beauty'. Both viewpoints, however, represented a pressure of expectation on the land to serve the needs of

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<sup>799</sup> Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* p. 132.

<sup>800</sup> Katey Castellano, 'Moles, Molehills and Common Right in John Clare's Poetry', *Studies in Romanticism*, 56.2 (2017), pp. 157-176 (p.162).

<sup>801</sup> Patrick Bresnihan, 'John Clare and the Manifold Commons', *Environmental Humanities*, 3 (2013), 71-91 (p. 74).

<sup>802</sup> Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (University of Virginia Press, 2004), pp. 69-70.

<sup>803</sup> Val Plumwood, 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling', *Australian Humanities Review*, 44 (2008), <<https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2008/03/01/shadow-places-and-the-politics-of-dwelling/>> [accessed 24 November 2024], para. 8.

particular, privileged humans. For lovers of the idealised countryside, its construction reflected their desires, longing and needs. For improvers, the land was 'mechanomorphised' in the interests of relentless progress and growth.<sup>804</sup> Either way, the relationship became unequal, non-consensual, and often exploitative. These processes have resulted in much of the English countryside being commodified for agricultural production, exclusive recreational pursuits, or aesthetic consumption. Those with a working relationship involving active reciprocity with the land are now few and far between. Common land once again proves the exception to the rule, although it is not completely immune to these imperatives either. The legacy of the discourses that sought to idealise or monetise the countryside are felt across different land types and have real-life consequences today for all rural dwellers.

## **6.2: England's Green and Pleasant Land?**

Interviewees for this project were a mixture of urban, rural, and urban/rural fringe dwellers. They had a variety of interactions with the Common, including working, visiting, and caring for the land and its multi-species commoners. Their individual experiences of this place were, therefore, to a degree located in their individual memories and interests. They also, however, showed evidence of the influence of the constructions of the countryside discussed above.

In this theme, *England's Green and Pleasant Land?*, I explore the influence of wider cultural constructions of the land and ask whether these led to disregard or attitudes of commodification in participants. These cultural influences were found, for example, in frequent expressions of an aesthetic appreciation of the Common. Language

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<sup>804</sup> Danielle Celemajer and others, 'Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics', *Trajectories in Environmental Politics*, 20.1-2 (2022), pp. 116-137 (p. 128).

conveying emotional feelings for the Common, which when coding I defined as anything in interviews that spoke of 'beauty', 'joy', 'wonder' and 'love', was often used. Codes relating to views of and from the Common and 'romantic' descriptors were possibly the most frequently occurring across the whole study, with nineteen out of twenty-one interactions featuring them, and a great deal of congruence between descriptions. The Common was often described as being 'lovely', 'wonderful', 'joyous', 'beautiful', and 'magical'. Whilst many of the codes I identified were in response to specific questions, excerpts coded here were scattered throughout the interviews, giving a real sense of participants' emotional connection to the Common.

In the context of the wider conversations, these descriptions were not, however, purely automatic, or necessarily representative of shallow or fleeting attachments, but instead seemed to indicate a deep-seated emotional connection to place. IG1, for example, told me the Common 'catches my breath every day. I love it'.<sup>805</sup> C3a stated 'those moments when you know it's all looking absolutely beautiful. They are just achingly perfect, aren't they?'.<sup>806</sup> C7 shared that when they first moved to the area, the Common was important in helping them to feel settled and established; 'if you'd have asked me at the time when I was up there all the time, but if you'd said what's your favourite place on the planet [...] I would have gone Rodborough Common'.<sup>807</sup>

Several interviewees mentioned the connection the Common gave them to the elements, seeing it as a place to watch the weather roll in and to feel secure and connected to the land and others. R10a described experiencing the joy of looking down on a fog-filled valley from a higher perspective 'getting that view of the Common on a

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<sup>805</sup> IG1, interview with the author, 29 March 2022.

<sup>806</sup> C3a, interview with the author, 30 March 2023

<sup>807</sup> C7, interview with the author, 20 October 2022.

clear day, it's clear on the Common, but the valleys are filled with fog and those sensational, just fantastic views that we get sometimes' (Fig. 6.2.1).<sup>808</sup> IG3 had also experienced this:

'We were out, I think it must have been a January, it was definitely cold and we were in the fog, and we met and it was like thick fog and we got up the main track onto the Common and all of a sudden we were above it and it was blue sky and the sun was out, and there's a photo of me on that track looking out at the view and it's literally like I'm looking at an ocean because literally all you can see is just this level of grey and then blue sky'.<sup>809</sup>



Figure 6.2.1: Rodborough Common above a sea of fog  
Source: Geoff March © Geoff March. Reproduced with permission

The changing, elemental nature of the Common was expressed by R6; 'every time you go up there, there's something different to see and the views are, you know, even though the views are the same, they're not 'cause there's always something,

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<sup>808</sup> R10a, interview with the author, 9 March 2023.

<sup>809</sup> IG3, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

a different aspect to it'.<sup>810</sup> Sunsets were also mentioned, with several participants recounting how they enjoyed watching the sunset from the Common and had observed others doing likewise. Individuals also shared how they waited with anticipation for evidence of the changing seasons. For example, LM2 spoke of spring:

'You get to this time of year and that cattle have come out and the whole place, sort of [...] And the orchids come out and the whole place just sort of springs into life, doesn't it you know? And it's absolutely beautiful. It really is. The Common comes alive again'.<sup>811</sup>

IG1 also expressed a connection to the seasons through regular visits to the Common; 'we see every season, see the weather coming in. Everything. Yeah, it's lovely. I love it'.<sup>812</sup>

In an example of less pleasurable manifestations of attachment, interviewees also described conflict, between self and others, rural and urban, incomers and locals, young and old, humans and other species. For example, reflecting perhaps a lack of understanding of rural practices by otherwise urban dwellers, LM2 recounted a story about a resident who had held a Holstein cow captive in their garden when it had strayed there in the incorrect belief that the animal was starving, when in fact their sparseness is characteristic of their breed.<sup>813</sup> LM4 worried that the vegan movement would harm perceptions of farming on the Common: '[There are] lots of pressures again from external pressures such as people talking about, you know, where meat comes from and do we really need to be producing beef and all the other things'.<sup>814</sup> They went on to say:

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<sup>810</sup> R6, interview with the author, 25 August 2022.

<sup>811</sup> LM2, interview with the author, 25 May 2023.

<sup>812</sup> IG1.

<sup>813</sup> LM2.

<sup>814</sup> LM4, interview with the author, 3 December 2022.

'You see all this social media stuff that's going on in Minchinhampton at the moment through Minch Life and Minch CAN [Climate Action Network], there's a big movement in Minch CAN at the moment wants to [get] rid of the cows and it's like whoa, hang on a mo'.<sup>815</sup>

When cattle injuries or deaths occur on the Common, debates are sometimes polarised along urban/rural lines. Those criticising cattle free roaming the Commons or animals being raised for consumption may be accused of being 'incomers' or 'townies' whilst those defending the right of cattle to roam and be raised on the Common may be accused of stupidity or hypocrisy (Fig. 6.2.2). Any casual scroll through comments on media reports or social media discussions of cattle being injured by traffic on the Common attests to the frequency of this polarisation.<sup>816</sup>

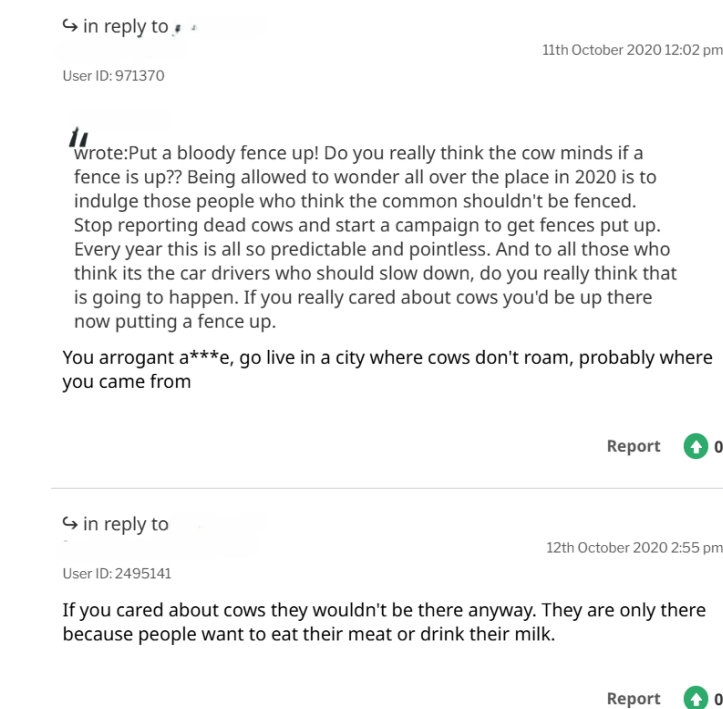


Figure 6.2.2: Comments on a report of a cattle death  
Source: Stroud News and Journal, 8 October 2020. © Newsquest Media Group

<sup>815</sup> LM4.

<sup>816</sup> For further examples see Huw Mabe, 'Cow Put Down After Being Hit by Car on Minchinhampton Common' *Stroud News and Journal*, 8 October 2020 <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/18781299.cow-put-hit-car-minchinhampton-common/>> [accessed 9 November 2023]; Sam Kyram-Wood, 'Police Forced to Shoot Cow Hit by Car on Minchinhampton Common', *Stroud News and Journal*, 29 August 2020 <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/18685188.police-forced-shoot-cow-hit-car-minchinhampton-common/>> [accessed 9 November 2023].

Out-of-towners are also sometimes blamed for accidents involving cattle, with views expressed that visitors or those without local knowledge are the cause of most accidents. However, as this social media post (Fig. 6.2.3) shows, this assumption is sometimes challenged.



Figure 6.2.3: Traffic accidents - incomers or locals?  
Source: Stroud Chat and Information Facebook Page. Reproduced under Facebook's Fair Use Policy

The perception that incomers and visitors are the primary cause of many of the issues experienced by the Common may be a popular one, but it is not borne out by the evidence. The 2019 visitor survey of Rodborough Common found that 90% of visitors lived in the Stroud District or the neighbouring Cotswold District.<sup>817</sup> Beyond this, just 6% of visitors came from outside Gloucestershire or South Gloucestershire.<sup>818</sup> LM2 shared that local people cause most traffic accidents on the Common; 'the thing that's very, very interesting. I know this because I do the insurance claims, is that 99%

<sup>817</sup> Chris Panter and Zoe Caals, 'Rodborough Common Visitors Survey', *Footprint Ecology*, 2019 <[https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final\\_redacted.pdf](https://www.stroud.gov.uk/media/1120946/rodborough-visitor-survey-final_redacted.pdf)>. [accessed 6 September 2023], p. 40.

<sup>818</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

of the accidents are caused by people who live locally'.<sup>819</sup> This is supported by a report of an accident from long-term resident R9:

'Another thing that happened to me, going from the Bear across the Common towards Amberley, there was a bush on the left of the road and from behind the bush, on one occasion a cow jumped out quite quickly, and I'm afraid I hit him. It wasn't killed, it wobbled off looking rather sorry for itself. So it did an awful lot more damage to the car than it did to the cow'.<sup>820</sup>

As well as the perception that issues are caused by 'outsiders', the adults I spoke with also indicated that some problems might be caused by younger generations of local people. Young people were seen by some as responsible for much anti-social behaviour on the Common, such as littering and lighting fires. C2 felt that some younger people might not appreciate all that the Common had to offer: 'whenever you talk to older people they know, they remember the flowers, the wildflowers, they can tell you some of the names. But young people, they don't even see them sometimes'.<sup>821</sup> The lack of representation of young people's views was acknowledged by LM2, who felt that the Common would benefit from having a youth section of the MRCAC.<sup>822</sup> The young people I spoke to for this project did not, however, display any evidence of irresponsible or uncaring behaviour, actually discussing the need to take personal responsibility for environmental problems more frequently than the adults I interviewed.

Conflict between different species, in particular between humans and farmed animals was also found in interviews. The idyllic living arrangements implied by an article in *The Guardian* naming Minchinhampton as the village where cattle roam

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<sup>819</sup> LM2.

<sup>820</sup> R9.

<sup>821</sup> C2, interview with the author, 31 March 2022.

<sup>822</sup> LM2.

free and ‘we all get on well’ do not quite give the full picture.<sup>823</sup> Complaints from some visitors to the Commons about cattle getting in the way of dogs, holding up traffic, making a mess, ‘fouling’ paths, and trampling skylark nests are not uncommon, reflecting a general lack of understanding about the rights of commoners or the important role that cattle play in maintaining the habitat.<sup>824</sup>

Despite some incidences of blaming specific groups of ‘others’ for some of the problems encountered by the Common, these were not generally symptomatic of an inherent hostility between different binaries. Rather, the conflicts discussed in interviews tended to reflect the challenges of managing the same limited spaces for humans and other species. This was summed up by R13:

‘It’s the only place people can be free to walk wherever they want. It’s the only place people can be free to cycle mountain bikes, wherever they want. But it’s also the only place where nature has free rein’.<sup>825</sup>

C2 agreed, blaming a post-war reverence of science for disconnection and lack of respect for the other-than-human world:

‘So we’ve taken their nature, their space away. And I think this is like what’s happened with the Commons, is that we’re dominating nature’s space, instead of being respectful and seeing us as fitting in with nature. It’s almost like human beings have almost got to the point where ‘well, we don’t actually need nature’ and I think that’s a really very dangerous place to be in and it’s almost like we’re having this revival of this post-war ‘science is god’’.<sup>826</sup>

Whilst interviewees expressed feelings in line with some of the cultural constructions inherited from the idealisation of the countryside, these appeared to be

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<sup>823</sup> Steven Morris, “We All Get On Well: The Town in England Where Cattle Roam Free, *The Guardian*, 21 June 2024 <[https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/21/minchinhampton-town-england-where-cattle-roam-free?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/21/minchinhampton-town-england-where-cattle-roam-free?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other)> [accessed 3 July 2024].

<sup>824</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>825</sup> R13, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

<sup>826</sup> C2.

grounded in genuine affection, pleasure, and crucially, in reality. There were no real incidences of ignorance of, or blindness to, the everyday challenges of caring for places like Rodborough Common. Nor did these feelings appear to inspire divisive, exclusionary attitudes towards others. In general, whilst interviewees expressed strong feelings for the Common, and to some extent, blamed others for problems it might experience, there was no accompanying desire to exclude specific groups to eliminate perceived misdemeanours. Feelings of love and affection for the Common were much more likely to provoke feelings of personal responsibility for its care.

### **6.3: Oi! Gerroff my Land!**

A love of the Common may not have provoked a desire to exclude certain groups, but I was interested to see if it led to a perception of ownership of the land that may create a desire to exclude *all* others or provoke feelings of entitlement leading to self-serving behaviour. *Oi! Gerroff my Land!* presents examples of proprietary behaviour towards the Common exhibited by interviewees or witnessed in others and considers whether these are helpful or not in caring for this shared space. It also explores the idea that the legal position of the general public regarding commons is often misunderstood and asks whether this results in damaging free-riding behaviour.

Several interviewees who had properties located on or adjacent to the Common spoke about feeling it was a part of, or extension to, their gardens. C5 for example spoke of Rodborough Common as ‘their green space’ and ‘their extended garden’.<sup>827</sup> R6 agreed; ‘I just think of the Common as an extension of our garden, really ‘cause that’s what it is’.<sup>828</sup> The negative impact such a belief can have was given in

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<sup>827</sup> C5.

<sup>828</sup> R5.

examples provided by LM3 and LM4. LM3 explained that those who live adjacent to the Common might indulge in behaviour that wouldn't be experienced at other Trust properties:

'No one would dream of siting a skip on one of our other sites when they joined it, but on the Commons it might suddenly appear because people that, misunderstanding of, not who owns the Common, but maybe who owns a common and what people can do on the Common from the general public and all that, is different to if we own a discrete property like Woodchester Park'.<sup>829</sup>

Incidences of neighbours fly-tipping garden waste (Fig. 6.3.1), the erection of illegal fencing, complaints about cattle 'invasions' into gardens, and illegal parking by residents' visitors are all regularly reported to and via the MRCAC, suggesting that some of the Common's neighbours are apt to indulge in negative behaviours.<sup>830</sup> LM4, for example, shared an incident with a property neighbouring the Common; 'somebody drove an access into the Common through Hyde Common to repair a wall early on this year said [when challenged], 'oh I thought I could''.<sup>831</sup>



Figure 6.3.1: Fly tipped garden waste, Rodborough Common, 17 February 2025  
Source: MRCAC What's App Group

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<sup>829</sup> LM3, interview with the author, 20 October 2022.

<sup>830</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>831</sup> LM4.

Confusion such as this about what is and isn't allowed on common land, or what a 'common' actually is, was found in many of the interviews. R13 agreed that many misunderstood the status of commons; 'the challenges are lots of people think the Common is just there and they don't think anybody controls it [...] they just think it's just like free land effectively'.<sup>832</sup> LM4 explained they were often confronted with the 'public ownership' argument when challenging undesirable behaviour. Detailing an incident where they had challenged a member of the public who was using the Common as a launch site for a powered paraglider, they told me the response was:

'I said, 'well, you know you can't use a power paraglider here' and before I could carry on saying anything else he was like, 'but this is public land, I can do what I want!' [*angry tone*] I thought, 'here we go'.<sup>833</sup>

LM2 also experiences this challenge from members of the public:

'I've heard that said many times. 'Ohh, it's a common we can do what we like', you know? I've tried to stop people having barbecues is one where they will say that, well, it's a common, we can do what we like up here'.<sup>834</sup>

#### Misunderstandings about what is and isn't allowed on Rodborough

Common also caused some interviewees to experience negative feedback from others themselves. For example, IG3 explained that they were once shouted at for mountain biking on the Common:

'I remember once, we were coming across the Common and we weren't doing anything mental, we were literally just riding across the flat of the Common, on the top, and this person, off in the distance, yeah, we were nowhere near this person, just shouted 'get off my Common!' And it's like, hang on, unless you're the CEO of the National Trust, it's not your Common mate!'<sup>835</sup>

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<sup>832</sup> R13.

<sup>833</sup> LM4.

<sup>834</sup> LM2.

<sup>835</sup> IG3, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

The confusion of both IG3 and their critic is perhaps understandable.

While mountain biking and horse riding are not included in the legal definition of the right to roam, the Trust tolerates both activities on the Common.

Whilst most interviewees appeared to know the Common's status didn't automatically invite a 'free for all' attitude, there were some general misunderstandings about what a common is. For example, when I asked R11 to tell me their understanding of what a common is, they replied 'I mean my understanding of common land is that it is land that is in, well, I don't know if they are in shared ownership anymore, but there is a shared ownership element'.<sup>836</sup> When I asked R14 the same question they responded 'No, I don't know. I mean, I could guess if you want me to guess?'.<sup>837</sup> I responded that a guess was absolutely fine and they said 'My assumption was that it is in some way state-owned'.<sup>838</sup> FG1B was worried their attempt to explain what a common was might not 'encompass the full definition'.<sup>839</sup> Further encouragement prompted them to say 'I mean I guess it's just general land that people can use for their own purposes, usually recreation'.<sup>840</sup> FG1C felt that the clue might be in the name; 'probably something which is, it's everywhere. There's a lot of it, it's quite common, hence the name'.<sup>841</sup> IG6 felt that confusion might at times be exploited by landowners to restrict public rights:

'I think one of the issues that get confused is about what you know about what rights do people get to [...] and certainly in the past [I've] seen correspondence with, and public statements by the National Trust, who want us to believe it's a privilege to be able to access [the Common] rather than it being a right'.<sup>842</sup>

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<sup>836</sup> R11, interview with the author, 17 March 2023.

<sup>837</sup> R14, interview with the author, 10 March 2023.

<sup>838</sup> Ibid.

<sup>839</sup> FG1B, focus group with the author, 9 June 2023.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid.

<sup>841</sup> FG1C.

<sup>842</sup> IG6, interview with the author, 31 March 2023.

While confusion about the exact nature of commons might lead to conflict, or examples of poor behaviour, a sense of ownership, even when misplaced, could also act as a force for good, encouraging care and advocacy for the Common. The greatest number of excerpts in this theme (forty-eight) related to examples of self-regulating behaviour being practised or witnessed by participants. For example, they shared with me they checked before riding a bike on the Common, kept largely to footpaths, no longer picked flowers as they had as a child, cleared up after their dogs, limited their number of visits, considered other users, kept their dog on a lead around livestock, and moderated their speed whilst driving over the Common.<sup>843</sup> As mentioned in Section 3.3.2, confessions of poor behaviour were, however, unlikely in the interview scenario, due to the dynamic between interviewer and subjects, and the self-selecting nature of participants.

In part I addressed this absence by examining times when subjects felt the need to regulate the behaviour of others. These included challenges to others who were variously allowing their dogs to swim in cattle troughs, not picking up after dogs, planting non-native 'memorial' plants, allowing their dogs to chase cattle, lighting fires, littering, parking, and driving on the Common.<sup>844</sup> The level of responsibility felt for the Common by individuals, who at times risked abuse or threatening behaviour to challenge the behaviour of others, attests to the level of care felt by participants and other visitors to the Common. Whilst being shouted at to 'get off my common!' may be located in a misplaced sense of ownership, it, along with the other behaviours discussed in this section, suggests a great deal of love and affection for the Common.<sup>845</sup> As LM4

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<sup>843</sup> R6; IG1; R9, interview with the author, 30 March 2023; IG2, interview with the author, 27 April 2022; R11, IG3, C1, interview with the author, 28th April 2022.

<sup>844</sup> C3a; C3b, interview with the author, 30 March 2023; R5; LM4; IG1; R7, interview with the author, 27 September 2022; R6

<sup>845</sup> IG3.

shared with me, the degree of attention management actions on the Common attract is a testament to that care:

‘The thing is I always start with, you know, even if it’s a view that goes like, oh crikey, that was harsh, about our management or whatever, but it’s like, well, actually, no, think about it in the positive way. You’re actually taking time to care for it’.<sup>846</sup>

The findings in this section give credence to the arguments that the current definition of the right to roam is confusing and widely misunderstood. Stroud is blessed with many commons in the vicinity yet, even here, misunderstanding about what a common is and what you can do on one is widespread. For those living in areas with few or no commons or other open access lands, such misunderstandings are likely to be even more prevalent. The current halfway house of access rights is, therefore, problematic, potentially leading to prohibited behaviours, or self-exclusion by those who are unclear about what they are allowed to do where.

The types of issues caused by some of the Common’s neighbours, along with those reported by participants more generally, may, in part, reflect the confusing status of common land in general. Whilst participants were not always clear on the precise nature of what a common is, who can do what and where, there was, however, clear recognition that this was a space to be shared. Sharing in this context often referred to sharing between humans, but concerns for other species and their right to occupy the land were also present in interviews. Love of the Common, and in some cases, a sense of ownership, did not seem to lead to self-serving or free-riding behaviour amongst those I interviewed, although a lack of understanding of what common land is did seem to cause this behaviour in some.

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<sup>846</sup> LM4.

## 6.4: 'Big Yellow Taxi'

In many interviews there was an acknowledgment of the precarious situation the Common faces, particularly in respect of its other-than-human inhabitants. I was keen to understand how these fears manifested and what impact they had on emotional and practical attachments to the Common. Participant responses in interviews in part reflected localised concerns around several subjects that are arguably rooted in wider, global, issues. In this theme, '*Big Yellow Taxi*', I explore some of these concerns, including the emotional response of participants to the loss of familiar, or treasured, aspects of everyday life. When coding for this theme, I was keen to understand whether the losses expressed by interviewees were tangible, or whether they were located in a longing for an imagined, idealised past. I was also interested to explore whether these concerns resulted in parochial, inward-looking attitudes towards the wider world. In this section, the focus shifts somewhat from threats experienced on or by the Common to the impact of fears, changes, and the Common's challenges on individuals. Bearing in mind the cultural contexts of individual place attachment already discussed in Sections 6.2 and 6.3, I wanted to explore whether these fears were well founded, or if they were reflective of potentially damaging forms of nostalgia based on an imagined, idealised past. The section explores loss as experienced by the extended community of commoners of other species, community, and identity.

The rights of other species to occupy the Common, their important role in helping it to thrive, and concerns about their ability to thrive in turn, were reflected in the prevalence of mentions of loss of, or threats to, other species. Perhaps not surprisingly, the emphasis and focus of these varied according to the situatedness of the interviewee. Most strikingly, mentions were most frequent in interviews with

conservationists and land managers, with 85% of the excerpts associated with this code coming from these two groups. For example, interviewee C2 is a professional ecologist who has been involved in surveying flora and fauna on the Common for some years.<sup>847</sup> They talked frequently about the Common and its other-than-human inhabitants being 'squeezed', a very evocative way of describing the pressures they felt the Common is subjected to; ecologically, socially and politically.<sup>848</sup> C2 expressed a deep concern and sense of injustice for the disregard of other species. The sense of loss in this interview concerning other species, and the sorrow and frustration this caused them on a personal level, was evident. They described the Common as:

'A squeezed space, it reflects everything really about people, society, history and nature. We're all being squeezed. You know, the people don't own land, they don't have money, and the same with the wildlife. It's all just being squeezed. They [commons] are our last remnants, the last bastions, the last stand'.<sup>849</sup>

The metaphor of the Common as a squeezed space was also reflected in the interview carried out with LM4. Reflecting the reality of trying to balance so many conflicting users, they said 'you know, there is an increasing squeeze you know of pressure, of trying to sort of accommodate all the wonderful, delicious things that the Common can offer from fresh air access, mental wellbeing, you name it'.<sup>850</sup> IG6 also recognised the issues experienced by the Commons and other areas; 'the real challenge is that with those areas where there is high conservation [...] the risks are you're gonna put that land under increasing pressure'.<sup>851</sup>

C3a expressed profound regret and loss when seeing evidence of the

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<sup>847</sup> C2.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> LM4.

<sup>851</sup> IG6.

Common being threatened. Highlighting problems with footpath erosion, they stated: 'when you walk along and you see, you know, the worn patches and only the toughest grass is surviving it genuinely hurts'.<sup>852</sup> C1, who has been involved in grassland conservation for many years, expressed a sense of urgency to do something to protect the Common's habitat and a frustration at the attitudes of others. They said, 'I've got that sense of urgency in trying to save these unique areas, not just in this area but in the country and in Europe'.<sup>853</sup> They felt others were either unaware or else uncaring about their impact; 'I wish people you know got an understanding that enjoying the great outdoors, that outdoors isn't just for you to trample on'.<sup>854</sup>

Although many interviewees recognised the need for action to protect the Common's other-than-humans, the types of interventions that might be suitable or acceptable were not always clear cut or universally agreed on. For example, invertebrate expert and keen educationalist C7 shared Clifford's concerns that 'if all you do is try and protect the rare, the special, the spectacular [...] you condemn the rest'.<sup>855</sup> They expressed concern that the reintroduction of iconic and headline-catching species such as the large blue butterfly threatened wider biodiversity:

'But I think that's the danger, is that if you try and take too large areas for just one or two iconic species. I can understand it to a degree, but I do fear then sometimes that, you know, we could, you could be jeopardising the existence of twenty commoner species'.

The language used by these interviewees regarding losses experienced by other-than-humans represents an awareness of processes of 'slow violence' that

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<sup>852</sup> C3b.

<sup>853</sup> C1, interview with the author, 28 April 2022.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid.

<sup>855</sup> Sue Clifford, 'Local Distinctiveness: Everyday Places and How to Find Them' in *Local Heritage, Global Context: Cultural Perspectives on Sense of Place*, ed. by John Schofield and Rosy Szymanski (Ashgate Publishing, 2011), pp. 13-32 (p. 15); C7.

epitomise global environmental degradation, with mention of variations of ‘loss’, ‘decline’, ‘suffering’, ‘disappearance’, and ‘destruction’ occurring forty-nine times in excerpts from this code alone.<sup>856</sup> C2 feared that a human ‘extinction of experience’, might lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of lowering baselines that went unnoticed, leading to losses of which we are not even aware.<sup>857</sup> The loss of multi-sensory experiences of sight, smell, and sound caused by the absence of other species was remarked upon by several interviewees. The relative rarity of the experience the Common offers to humans was noted. C5 observed; ‘up on the Common you go out there and you’re not surrounded by trees, you’re surrounded by grassland. How many places can you do that now? Not many. Not many’.<sup>858</sup> FG1A agreed that protecting the open, green space that contributes to the Common’s *genius loci* was key; ‘I think it’s very important to protect places like that because they are some, now some of the few places around in urban areas like this where there are just open grassland and things like that’.<sup>859</sup>

For those not actively involved in conservation, or who were perhaps less ecologically aware, references to losses experienced by other species were fewer. The types of losses or threats described also indicated a difference in knowledge and understanding about the Common’s wildlife. For example, R7 noted that they hadn’t seen glow-worms on the Common for a long time but observed this might be due to their changing habits such as not visiting the Common in the dark, rather than any

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<sup>856</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011) in Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character and the Commons* (Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 7.

<sup>857</sup> C2.; Robert Pyle, ‘The Extinction of Experience’, *Horticulture*, 56 (1978), pp. 64-67 in Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, ‘Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?’, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405).

<sup>858</sup> C5.

<sup>859</sup> FG1A.

reduction in species abundance.<sup>860</sup>

Whilst threats to other species were primarily discussed by those involved in conservation and land management, worries about threats to ways of life and community were more widespread across interviews. In the case of Stroud, the composition of the community has seen fairly radical changes in recent times, which is perhaps reflected in the experiences of interviewees. The area has experienced high inward migration from larger urban conurbations in the wake of the pandemic. The Cotswolds has been dubbed by some, slightly tongue in cheek perhaps, as ‘Londonshire’, and Stroud, which apparently ‘used to be a dump’ now regularly hosts the glitterati, comprising actors, designers and other ‘art types’.<sup>861</sup>

Some interviewees were concerned at the loss of multi-generational memories and vernacular knowledge as rising house prices, fueled by inward urban migration, forced long-term residents to move away. For example, C2 observed that many former occupants of the village of Chalford, which is across the valley from Rodborough Common, had moved out:

‘They ended up moving down into Gloucester to one of those endless housing estates, and the knowledge that their parents had, and their grandparents had and the connections, are just gone. They’re gone. So you have these vacuums really. And that, I think that’s very likely to happen with the Commons because [...] that’s what’s happening to Stroud’.<sup>862</sup>

This was considered a recent change of circumstances, particularly for R7.

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<sup>860</sup> R7; Note: Whilst glow-worms are still found on Rodborough, they are as a species facing huge challenges in the UK due to climate change and light pollution, with a 75% decrease in numbers recorded in England between 2001 and 2020. Source: Damian Carrington, ‘Glowing, Glowing, Gone: Plunge in Glow-Worm Numbers Revealed’, *The Guardian*, 5 March 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/05/glowing-glowing-gone-plunge-in-glow-worm-numbers-revealed>> [accessed 13 September 2023].

<sup>861</sup> Helen Kirwin-Taylor, ‘Meet the New ‘Londonshire’ Set Taking Over the Cotswolds’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 January 2022 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/life/meet-new-londonshire-set-taking-cotswolds/>> [accessed 27 January 2023].

<sup>862</sup> C2.

In her area of Stroud, traditionally people ‘they didn’t move. People didn’t move like they do. The only time they went was when they died really. So people lived in those houses most of their lives’.<sup>863</sup> They went on to explain that ‘It’s not the same. I mean, there’s no, the only real people that are left is Mr and Mrs M. I think they’re the oldest people now, lived in the village. So yeah, all the rest are gone, really’.<sup>864</sup>

The impacts of this change were thought to be exacerbated by a lack of community spaces. Local pubs, shops, churches, schools, and workplaces had been closed and converted to private housing, and alongside their demise went the opportunity for neighbours to meet and for communities to build enduring connections.

R7 lamented this loss frequently throughout their interview, explaining that:

‘I mean the village, what I call the village life. It’s ... I mean all the old people, all the older people that lived here then, I mean you knew everybody, they knew us and it was, it was nice. Whereas today, you could walk along and unless you make an effort, people wouldn’t speak to you. And that’s the bit I find difficult. And some people just drop their heads and just ignore, you know’.<sup>865</sup>

R7 recognised there had been attempts to revitalise the community in their part of Rodborough, but due to the lack of shared spaces, they felt those efforts were destined to fail; ‘there’s, you know, I think people have tried, they’re trying more now to make it more of a community. But without a pub or ...’.<sup>866</sup> They also raised concerns that many of the attempts were predicated on participants being digitally literate, leaving those who weren’t excluded.<sup>867</sup>

These narratives may seem to represent ‘Back to the Tribe’ forms of

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<sup>863</sup> R7.

<sup>864</sup> Ibid.

<sup>865</sup> Ibid.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid.

<sup>867</sup> Ibid.

retrotopia, where ‘the warmth of the cosy tribal fires of the past [...] in danger of being extinguished once and for all’.<sup>868</sup> These forms of retrotopia can lead to damaging forms of nostalgia, where individuals seek to restore an imagined past at the expense of the present and future; such attitudes have in part been blamed for nationalistic political agendas and the resurgence of the far right.<sup>869</sup> Whilst elements of this form of retrotopia may be identified in interviews, the observations of the interviewees should not be dismissed out of hand. For example, house price rises have made Stroud-based home ownership increasingly unattainable for many locals. Between July 2021 and July 2022, average house prices increased by more than 22%, rising to more than £50,000 over the average for England.<sup>870</sup> The average housing price on Rodborough Common reached a peak of £1.1 million in 2022, although prices have since subsided slightly.<sup>871</sup> Property ownership in these gated communities (Fig. 6.4.1), which are perceived by some to have been ‘stolen from the Common’ is, therefore, an elite affair.<sup>872</sup> Closure of shared spaces across the wider Stroud district, such as pubs, live music venues, and village shops, has only been prevented on some occasions by communities taking ownership of the businesses themselves.<sup>873</sup> Where this hasn’t been possible, many sites for community-building have been lost.

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<sup>868</sup> Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ‘Retrotopia Rising: The Topics of Utopia, Retrotopia and Nostalgia in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman’ in *Nostalgia Now: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, ed. by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Routledge, 2020), pp. 78-97, (p. 88).

<sup>869</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>870</sup> Katie Collier, ‘Stroud House Prices: Average House Prices Soar by £19,000’, *Stroud News and Journal*, 25 November 2022 <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/23148470.stroud-house-prices-average-house-prices-soar-19-000/>> [accessed 27 January 2023].

<sup>871</sup> ‘House Prices in Rodborough Common’, *Right Move*, 2025 <<https://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices/rodborough-common.html>> [accessed 12 September 2023].

<sup>872</sup> R13.

<sup>873</sup> For example, in the Stroud area: The Hog at Horsley; Woodchester Post Office; Stroud Subscription Rooms.



Figure 6.4.1: Gated entrance to the aptly named 'Private Road', Rodborough Common  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

These high house prices can also make areas desirable for developers, which presents a tangible and specific threat to the Common, in the form of the loss of graziers and grazing. Common rights on Rodborough are linked to property, therefore, if farms are sold off for development, their common rights are not transferable and are lost forever. LM4 highlighted this threat:

'I mean someone like E, you know, I mean, you know, he's got an amazing opportunity there [...] you know you think to yourself, E, you know you could get offered millions for your land, you know, but he wouldn't, he wouldn't do it, but somebody could'.<sup>874</sup>

I asked LM2 whether they thought that the graziers would continue into the next generation:

'That's the big question, isn't it? I mean, it's quite important... The history of the commons is that you had all these little farmers, smallholders, living within the parish with grazing rights that go way back to William the Conqueror, apparently'.<sup>875</sup>

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<sup>874</sup> LM4.

<sup>875</sup> LM2.

As LM4 highlighted in their interview, the loss of active commoners is not only a threat to the biodiversity of the Common but also its cultural heritage and *genius loci*. Whilst acknowledging the role that replacing commoners with Trust-sponsored conservation grazing might play in maintaining biodiversity in future, they said:

‘But I think that would be short-changing ourselves and I really don’t wanna see... I mean that’s your ultra sort of end game and for me that’s when we, you know, even though we’re still managing it and it’s still working, still functioning, that’s when for me, that’s it. The soul’s gone’.<sup>876</sup>

LM4’s interview was peppered with personifications of this type about the Common’s cultural and spiritual heritage.<sup>877</sup> For them, the continued tradition of commoners exercising their ancient rights was a unique contributor to the Common’s personhood; ‘you know the heart of these spaces is the commoner. You know, without that you know they’re not commons and I think you know they’re soulless’.<sup>878</sup>

They felt the heritage and history of commoning was intrinsic to the character and personification of the Common:

‘I mean I always call you know commons, lowland commons, they’re living landscapes, you know they breathe. They move, they evolve. They, you know they exist like some being you know, but to make that function like what we have you know in our bodies, it’s a heart, you know and the heart of a common, you know the heart of these spaces is the commoner’.<sup>879</sup>

As R13 neatly summed it up, without the commoners and grazing, the Commons might end up denuded of their character and *genius loci*, instead turning into sites where ‘it’s all just selling scones and charging for parking’.<sup>880</sup>

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<sup>876</sup> LM4.

<sup>877</sup> Ibid.

<sup>878</sup> Ibid.

<sup>879</sup> Ibid.

<sup>880</sup> R13.

The expressions of loss evident in this theme are not merely a longing for the past but are grounded in present realities. Concerns for the Common's multi-species communities are based on lived experience and evidence, rather than on a misplaced sense of loss for an imagined idealised past. The focus on losses experienced by other species also highlights an awareness of the Common as a shared, multi-species space.

The issues experienced and described are not unique to Rodborough but are reflective of wider issues experienced, particularly in rural areas. Participants recognised that the Common provides an anchor point for sharing and community, and a vital refuge for other-than-humans, which is at odds with capitalist imperatives of individualism, privatisation, and economic growth. There was recognition, however, that it bore an unfairly heavy load in this regard, with too many expectations squeezed into too small and too few spaces.

For interviewees, appreciation for the Common's alternative ways of being contributes to feelings of care, highlighting what they value. The Common's shared nature, epitomised by its importance for its multi-species commoners, provides the unique characteristics for which it is prized. There was a fear, however, that a loss of vernacular knowledge, in particular multi-generational memory and association with place, may dislocate the community from its shared spaces, leading to a loss of identity and ultimately, the loss of what makes Rodborough special. The ideals of sharing and reciprocity that it embodies are not, however, fixed, but are dynamic and flexible, giving the Common the potential to accommodate changes in the makeup of communities. The Common's physical ability to continue to take up the slack and fill the void created by the closure of other shared spaces is, however, debatable. Ongoing diligence and attention are needed if we are to heed the warning in Joni Mitchell's lyrics that we will

not 'know what we've got 'til it's gone'.<sup>881</sup>

## 6.5: Living in 'Good Neighbourhood'

The importance of Rodborough Common for the local community of all species cannot be doubted. As a communal, open, equitably shared resource, Rodborough Common, and places like it, provide a model of land interaction that helps to counter the loss of biodiversity, the 'extinction of experience', and threats to community cohesion and identity.<sup>882</sup> This theme, *Living in 'Good Neighbourhood'*, examines the roots of individuals' attachment to place, and the role of the Common in building feelings of identity and belonging. The theme further analyses participants' relationships with the Common; how they use it, what feelings it invokes, and the role it plays in their lives. Referring to the debate in the literature discussed in Section 2.4 regarding the usefulness of place attachment, I wanted to analyse whether the Common's role in localised identity building made its commoners inward-looking, or whether these identities were rooted in global consciousness.

The Common's importance for the community's shared identity is hinted at throughout the parish. For example, the local parish council magazine is called 'The Commoner' and classes at the primary school in nearby Amberley are named after different cattle breeds. Visiting the Common, growing up in its vicinity, and building memories there with family and friends are considered by some to be a vital component of belonging, connection and rootedness for 'Stroudies'. IG2 notes the role the Common plays in providing a shared space at the heart of the community:

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<sup>881</sup> Mitchell, 'Big Yellow Taxi'.

<sup>882</sup> Pyle, 'The Extinction of Experience', in Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap', p. 405.

‘You can get anyone on the Common and even just like have some time away from seeing everything, but you can see people because it’s like a common area for you to go. That’s the main thing, it’s like the main heart of Rodborough’.<sup>883</sup>

The Common’s importance in fostering a sense of belonging was echoed by R11:

‘We know people that are moving into the area that are just having their kids and I do think that them being able to access and use it in the way that we did is one of the things that will bind them to make them into Stroudies’.<sup>884</sup>

The Common’s position at the heart of the community means it is the site of many special memories for people. R9, who has lived in the area for more than eighty years, told me ‘I’ve found the Common a delight really. All my life’.<sup>885</sup> IG1 noted the Common was an ideal site to mark the passing of the seasons in a secular world, sharing ‘It’s like our church, I suppose’.<sup>886</sup> R10b recently published a collection of their works of poetry, a memoir of their life in verse. In verse one of ‘Walking Rodborough Common’ they liken their journey through motherhood to walking on the Common: ‘Motherhood always had a hill to climb; Walks across the Common or beneath scarp-tucked larches; stretched limbs and minds’.<sup>887</sup> The proximity to all of ‘the wonderful, delicious things that that Common can offer’ was explicitly stated by several interviewees as the reason they chose to live in the area.<sup>888</sup> C7, R13, R14, and IG1 all felt the Common had been instrumental in their choice of where to make a home.<sup>889</sup>

The Common has been used by residents as a site of community gathering for many years, making it an important place for community cohesion, as Fig. 6.5.1 and

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<sup>883</sup> IG2.

<sup>884</sup> R11.

<sup>885</sup> R9.

<sup>886</sup> IG1.

<sup>887</sup> Frances March, ‘Walking Rodborough Common’ in *Looking Out, Looking In* (Graffiti Books, 2022), p. 89.

<sup>888</sup> LM4.

<sup>889</sup> C7; R13; R14; IG1.

6.5.2 show.



Figure 6.5.1: Beacon on Rodborough Common erected to celebrate the coronation of George VI, May 1937  
Source: Remembering Rodborough. Reproduced with permission



Figure 6.5.2: Maypole erection on Rodborough Common, c. 1910  
Source: Remembering Rodborough. Reproduced with permission

Whilst it is unlikely that attempts to erect a maypole or light a giant beacon on the Common would be welcomed these days, historical shared traditions and customs are, in some cases, being revisited and reinvented. Until the 1960s, the Salvation Army band would meet at the nearby Prince Albert pub on May Day morning and lead a

march to Rodborough Fort, to welcome the summer.<sup>890</sup> All-female dance troupe Boss Morris has revived the May Day dawn tradition of visiting the Common with their Jacky-in-the-Green celebration, as well as leading events to celebrate the Spring Equinox (Fig. 6.5.3).



Figure: 6.5.3: Boss Morris celebrating the spring equinox, Rodborough Common, 2022  
Source: Boss Morris © Ben Edge. Reproduced with permission

As such events grow in frequency and popularity, the challenges of accommodating human community use while making space for fragile habitats was reflected on by R13, who pointed out that:

‘[The] Common used to be a place for community celebration and things. And now, unfortunately, you know, everyone still uses it in wonderful ways, but it does feel a little bit less like the community has a licence to use it for anything’.

<sup>891</sup>

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<sup>890</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>891</sup> R13.

Some respondents offered more personal memories of shared celebrations and events. Links between the Common and many of life's milestones can be traced through the interviews, from marriage to parenthood to death. R11 married during the pandemic, meaning their ability to celebrate with family and friends was restricted. The solution was to be found on the Common:

'We got married during Covid, which meant that we weren't allowed ... I think we were allowed eight people at the ceremony, and you were allowed [...] up to thirty people outdoors, but obviously all the venues and everything were closed so our outdoor venue was a picnic in the little dilly dumps where the BMXs go'.<sup>892</sup>

R13 was a new parent when the pandemic hit, and the Common was important for allowing the young family space and freedom; 'I had a very small four month old at the time that lockdown kicked in and he and I would go up and sit on the bench on the Common or find a hollow to lie in the spring sunshine'.<sup>893</sup> At the other end of life's journey, the Common also allowed people to gather together in mourning and acts of remembrance:

'It's less nice, I guess, one of my friends also over the pandemic passed away through suicide and we had our, we had the, his wake in the Bowl up there as well, which and I know a few others that have done, groups have gathered there for wakes for people as well'.<sup>894</sup>

The number of memorial benches (Fig. 6.5.4) further evidences the importance of the Common in acting as a site of remembrance. For recent resident R14, connecting with these tangible reminders of past commoners was one way of getting to know their new home; 'I love the benches up there, like so many benches. They've got the little names,

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<sup>892</sup> R11.

<sup>893</sup> R13.

<sup>894</sup> R11.

and we go around and we read the little plaques. This person loved this place and I don't blame him'.<sup>895</sup> The large number of requests the Trust receives (but is not able to fulfil) for memorial benches on the Common is also a testament to the breadth of place attachment felt here.<sup>896</sup>



Figure 6.5.4: Memorial bench to 'Little Boo', a long-lost, but not forgotten, family dog, as well as to Barrie and Timothy Davis, who 'loved this place'

Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

Many of the participants also commented on the important role the Common plays in supporting their overall wellbeing. It offers opportunities for participants to 'get away from it all' in contrast to busy and sometimes stressful lives. IG3 commented on the importance of this: 'I think it's, you need that, and certainly as I think lives get more and more hectic and filled with crap for want of a better description, people are going to need those spaces more and more'.<sup>897</sup> The release the Common offered from the pressures of daily life, particularly for younger Stroud

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<sup>895</sup> R14.

<sup>896</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>897</sup> IG3.

residents was echoed by C2; 'just you know, you're not on a screen, you're not having to achieve anything, you're just being there in that space'.<sup>898</sup> For R14, the opportunities the Common offers to add a full stop to the end of a day spent working from home was key to choosing Rodborough as a place to live: 'I need sometimes the peace, the quiet, the solitude. I need the colours. The nature, the green, the flowers'.<sup>899</sup> For R5, the Common offered an opportunity to be mindful, allowing space and time to be 'taking notice, just looking at what's around you, observing. You know the beauty in the ordinary'.<sup>900</sup> R7 agreed:

'It is important to me and I think it's for wellbeing as well. You go up and you might and you think, oh God, you know, it's raining or something. But you go up on the Common and you come back and think oooh!'<sup>901</sup>

For busy working parent IG1, the Common offered a chance to de-stress and find connection with other species; 'it's good for your mental health, isn't it? Doesn't matter how you feel once you get up there and you sort of you can give your stress to the trees, can't you? Give it away?'.<sup>902</sup>

For those with limited mobility or other chronic health conditions, the Common offered a safe, accessible place to get out and about. R6, whose mobility was impacted by a stroke, finds the Common offers a great chance to exercise outdoors.<sup>903</sup> R9 agreed: 'often I'll say, you know, especially now that my legs aren't very good and I can't walk huge distances, I'll go up onto one of the two Commons and just park and

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<sup>898</sup> C2.

<sup>899</sup> R14.

<sup>900</sup> R5.

<sup>901</sup> R7.

<sup>902</sup> IG1.

<sup>903</sup> R6.

have a saunter'.<sup>904</sup> R10b observed it was a way for them to reconnect with their partner:

'Well, we like going for a walk on the Common. I find it a bit of an effort cause I'm asthmatic etc. Sometimes I say to R10a, let's go for a walk. And he's thrilled to bits that I say that, you know, because he likes that. So we enjoy that'.<sup>905</sup>

As well as being important for individuals, the Common also plays host to informal sub-groups of users, who connect through common interests in this shared space. As the largest group of regular Common users, dog walkers, and their canine companions, formed a definite sub-community. Dogs were great icebreakers for those who walked them, with R7 commenting 'I mean they all know P [dog]. [...] Of course we get talking. I've met so many people then, you know, I mean, I mightn't know their names but they know P'.<sup>906</sup> For retired mental health professional R5, the connections made were a key contributor to maintaining good mental health; 'So yeah, you're just drawn into conversation [...] he's very sociable [the dog] and he might go across and see the dog and it just always leads to a conversation'.<sup>907</sup> It wasn't just the humans who enjoyed the chance for socialisation. C5 observed 'I think that's probably why there is such a big amount, such a large amount of dog walking up there because they [the dogs] can be sociable with each other'.<sup>908</sup> R5 also observed their dog seemed to particularly enjoy walking on the Common:

'Up there it's a fantastic environment for a dog just to sniff around, you know, walk, no well, sorry I don't know what a dog thinks, but there's lots of different smells up there and it's, you know it's completely different'.<sup>909</sup>

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<sup>904</sup> R9.

<sup>905</sup> R10b, interview with the author, 9 March 2023.

<sup>906</sup> R7.

<sup>907</sup> R5.

<sup>908</sup> C5.

<sup>909</sup> R5.

This unofficial community of dog walkers is represented each year by the decorating of the 'Dog Tree', where past dogs are remembered, and donations are made in the form of treats, food, and cash for a local animal shelter, Teckels (Fig. 6.5.5).



Figure 6.5.5: The 'Dog Tree' on Rodborough Common  
Source: Stroud Times © Matt Bigwood. Reproduced with permission

IG3 thought that the annual decoration of the Dog Tree reinforced tradition and connections to the Common; 'I think one of the nice things that I see up there is the dog walker tree at Christmas'.<sup>910</sup> Professional dog walker IG1 expressed the sense of community supported by the Dog Tree tradition; 'Christmas Day everybody walks to the dog walker tree. You might not have seen your neighbours for weeks and then on Christmas Day there they are'.<sup>911</sup> Recent resident R14 was still getting to know the Common but had observed the tree's listing on Google Maps, and the Christmas Day dog walking tradition; 'it's funny, on Christmas Day that first year we went for a walk

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<sup>910</sup> IG3.

<sup>911</sup> IG1.

and it's incredibly foggy. But it was like dogs kept appearing everywhere, everybody was walking their dog on Christmas Day'.<sup>912</sup> In a further act of community cooperation, local litter picking group the Five Valleys Wombles get together on Twelfth Night to clear the Dog Tree, ensure rubbish isn't left on the Common, and pass on any donations to Teckels.

A sense of the importance of Commons sub-communities was echoed by horse rider IG2. They liked that you would see other horse riders on the Common and be familiar with them: 'so there's loads of people who got livery yards around, but it's nice, yeah. You know where people are from'.<sup>913</sup> For IG3, mountain biking with others on the Common was an important way to build connections; 'I don't think I would see my brother and have the same relationship that I've got with him now if we didn't both ride'.<sup>914</sup>

For many, the Common provides a space to spontaneously meet others, chat, and connect in a way that is neither organised nor contrived. Long-term resident R5 explained that they often chatted to people whilst on the Common, either with or without their dog.<sup>915</sup> Retired R6 is a keen wildlife photographer, and has met a lot of people on the Common that way, saying 'I've made some good friends and I'm forever showing people my photographs that I take'.<sup>916</sup> R7 agreed the Common was a good place to meet people, observing 'you know, I've got, I've made a lot of friends walking on the Common. A lot of people that I talk to, and chat to, you know'.<sup>917</sup>

C2 thought that for Stroud's teenage residents, visiting the Common

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<sup>912</sup> R14.

<sup>913</sup> IG2.

<sup>914</sup> IG3.

<sup>915</sup> R5.

<sup>916</sup> R6.

<sup>917</sup> R7.

provided an opportunity to be comfortably free from adult supervision. They said: 'It's you know, it's almost as well for youngsters, it's for young people, it's a right of passage', further commenting that the Common, as a freely available open space, was a good leveller; 'also the sort of equality thing in that it didn't matter if they were rich kids on the Common or poor kids you all had access to it'.<sup>918</sup> C3a observed that 'I often do the afternoon walk. I go up and there's, you know... It's lovely. People are there, kids are having parties and taking pizza up there, people watching the sunset'.<sup>919</sup> IG1 commented on the importance of the Common for young people who had been otherwise isolated during lockdowns:

'It was an amazing place in lockdown. It was somewhere that the kids could be. Like my next-door neighbours are teenagers. They're nineteen and seventeen. And for them, they missed out on festivals and proms and all the end of year stuff. But they met their friends on the Common. And it was amazing'.<sup>920</sup>

R11 grew up in Stroud and shared their experiences of the Common being both a transit and meeting point for their group of teenage friends; 'when you're a kind of teenager and it becomes the kind of it becomes a place that's the sort of the free space you can go once you start getting a little bit of independence'.<sup>921</sup> R14 remembers the Common being a part of life as a young adult; 'I know quite a few people out of my contemporaries who especially there were pub crawls across the Common were like part of I guess growing up in the area'.<sup>922</sup> C7's son had the same experience:

'You'll get groups of maybe six formers as they pass exams they go out there in a group and they have they sit down there and they you know, OK so they have drinks or whatever, but my son used to do the same, go up there and that's a

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<sup>918</sup> C2.

<sup>919</sup> C3a.

<sup>920</sup> IG1.

<sup>921</sup> R11.

<sup>922</sup> R13.

good place to go ... away from the grown-ups'.<sup>923</sup>

The Common was also considered important for younger children.

Talking about their primary school-aged children, IG1 said 'they go and meet their classmates up there and yeah, it's really, really nice'.<sup>924</sup> R10a shared a memory of their now-grown-up children:

'Our son, who grew up here, spent almost his entire life on the Common with a bunch of friends with his mountain bike, near the Fort there was that particularly steep one that they nicknamed the bomb hole, and they were, I don't know, probably only seven or eight or something'.<sup>925</sup>

The focus group, consisting of under sixteens, shared memories of games on the Common with family and friends, throwing frisbees, playing cricket, or just going for walks.<sup>926</sup> The Common in particular allowed them space to socialise without getting in the way of others. FG1B said that; 'Yeah, the common feels more sort of isolated, like isolated in a good way I mean. Like you know, you're sort of away from people'.<sup>927</sup> FG1A agreed that the Common offered greater opportunities to play games more freely:

'I feel like a lot of people prefer to be in a more sparsely populated section like the green area, especially because you could be doing like a sport like frisbee or something that you don't want a lot of people in the way or things like that'.<sup>928</sup>

Common-based rituals can also act as a cohesive force between generations, becoming part of family traditions. One of the most commonly shared rituals amongst participants was a visit to the Common's resident ice cream factory,

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<sup>923</sup> C7.

<sup>924</sup> IG1.

<sup>925</sup> R10a.

<sup>926</sup> FG1.

<sup>927</sup> FG1B.

<sup>928</sup> FG1A.

Winstones (Fig. 6.5.6), which has been trading since 1925.<sup>929</sup> For C5, visiting the Common, and Winstones in particular, was something they always did with guests; ‘when I have people that come to visit me, I take them out for a walk on the Common and I take them to get an ice cream and I tell them that that’s a Stroud thing to do, you know’.<sup>930</sup>



Figure 6.5.6: A large queue for Winstones Ice Cream on the first sunny day of the year, Rodborough Common, March 2025

Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

IG3 remarked on how a visit to Winstones was the cornerstone of visits home by their uncle; ‘my uncle, who now lives in Denmark, my Dad’s brother [...] whenever they come back from Denmark, they always go and visit Winstones’.<sup>931</sup> IG3 regularly enjoys mountain biking and has been using the Common for this purpose since they were a child. They explained that:

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<sup>929</sup> ‘Our Story’, *Winstones Cotswold Ice Cream*, n.d <<https://www.winstonesicecream.co.uk/our-story/>> [accessed 1 February 2023].

<sup>930</sup> C5.

<sup>931</sup> IG3.

‘The one thing we always do is, it’s kind of turned into a bit of a tradition, is the last Sunday before Christmas, we always [do], what we call an ice cream ride, so we’ll ride over Rodborough and then we’ll stop at Winstones for an ice cream’.<sup>932</sup>

For IG3’s children, the ice cream factory proved the major draw; ‘I think they enjoy going to the ice cream more than the actual Common to be honest!’.<sup>933</sup>

Combining a walk and an ice cream is a tradition they have continued from their childhood; ‘I mean that was probably one of the first experiences with Rodborough Common was going for walks with them [my parents] up there, to Winstones and stuff’.<sup>934</sup> FG1C highlighted the importance of visits during the pandemic when asked about their favourite memories of the Common; ‘during COVID going up there, getting an ice cream, getting out of the house’.<sup>935</sup> R7 also explained the importance that Winstones also held for them and their family:

‘We’ve always walked up and down to Winstones ice cream. Even when I had the kids, both of them from when they were born really, my mum and I have walked up there on a Sunday for a walk to the ice cream and you know, so yeah, it’s been a big part of our life, Winstones’.<sup>936</sup>

For R9, Winstones was so much a part of the Common that when reading out their list of recollections they said ‘I’ve also written Winstones ice cream as I thought you might expect me to think of that and it was always a treat to go up there’.<sup>937</sup> IG6, who lived outside the county for a while commented ‘I can remember, seems crazy doesn’t it, but being up in Worcestershire and I was thinking, well, wouldn’t

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<sup>932</sup> IG3.

<sup>933</sup> Ibid.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid.

<sup>935</sup> FG1C.

<sup>936</sup> R7.

<sup>937</sup> R9.

it be nice to drive forty odd miles down to have an ice cream on the Common?’<sup>938</sup>

Whilst an ice cream shop may appear to be a prosaic instance of place attachment, it offers a good example of how ‘place’ can be collectively and individually manifested. The comments above demonstrate how this manifestation of place has been formed by the tangible (an ice cream treat) and the intangible (shared time with friends and family, memories), both of which are ‘fundamental in the denotation of [...] place’.<sup>939</sup> That the ice cream factory exists amidst a cattle-grazed Common contributes to its uniqueness and adds to its *genius loci*, making an otherwise commonplace visit to purchase an ice cream a peculiarly ‘Stroud’ thing to do. In a world where much food production is opaque, its processes hidden behind global corporations, Winstones offers an immediate, highly localised connection between consumer and producer, human and otherwise. It crosses boundaries between nature and culture in a real and tangible way, putting human consumers back in touch with the bounty other species share with us, even if, as C3a states ‘they’re [Winstones] really benefiting from being on the Common, aren’t they? And they’re sort of selling a myth, aren’t they?’.<sup>940</sup> In other words, it offers an easily accessible and popular opportunity for Haraway’s cross-species contact zones to be realised.<sup>941</sup>

The findings presented in this theme show the relationship between the interviewees and the Common is multi-faceted, dynamic and complex. Whilst highly individual, these relationships also have many commonalities, with a binding thread of sharing and community at their core. The Common, far from than being a separate,

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<sup>938</sup> IG6.

<sup>939</sup> Marilena Veco, ‘Genius Loci as a Meta-Concept’, *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 41 (2020), pp. 225-231, (p. 226).

<sup>940</sup> C3a.

<sup>941</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 4.

passive entity which is consumed and exploited, is actually an active partner in feelings of identity, wellbeing and connectivity, with its own heart and soul, co-created between land, humans, and other species. This is a many-headed relationship, between Common and individuals, individuals and communities, humans and other-than-humans, past, present and future. Without any of these aspects, the depths of place attachment demonstrated here simply would not be the same. Feelings run deep for this place, yet do not generally result in a desire to exclude. The reverse is the case; it is the communal nature of the Common that makes it so suitable and special for the rituals carried out there. The construction of a shared identity, that can welcome newcomers with a nod to past commoners, is one of the clearest precedents for care and advocacy for this place.

## **6.6: Conclusion**

This chapter explored the complex accretions that make up place attachments to Rodborough, situating them in their wider social and cultural constructs. Localised place attachment, formed at the intersection of memory, materiality, and social relations, was evident in almost all narratives explored in the themes presented in this chapter. Different interviewees used the Common for different purposes; mountain-biking, dog-walking, photography, wildlife surveying, working, running, or generally to assist with their wellbeing. Some had had the Common in their life for months, others for decades. Irrespective of uses, or length of association, for the vast majority, memory, materiality, and social cohesiveness, supported by the Common, were evident.

Attachment to and nostalgia for place can highlight what matters to people. As explored in Section 2.4, encouraging such feelings is not, however, without risks. There are dangers that, in certain circumstances, these can lead to exclusion of, alienation from, and fear of the 'other', all of which are self-defeating in the mission to

extend 'good neighbourhood'. Attachment to and affection for Rodborough did not, however, appear to result in a desire to exclude or expunge others, or a wish to return to an imagined, rose-tinted view of the past. On the contrary, almost without exception, the shared nature of the Common and the right of all to visit this space and use it respectfully, was accepted and acknowledged as an overall positive force and a key aspect of its *genius loci*.

The shared nature of the Common also proved to be a binding force for the wider community, as it allowed its influence to stretch beyond its physical borders. As detailed in Section 6.5, the types of events taking place on the Common, either communally or personally, many of which marked life's milestones (birth, marriage, death) opened the door for kinship with this place. The importance of the Common's role in these events allows for a natural extension of kinship with the land and its multi-species commoners. These commoners are present and play an intrinsic role in these life events, and so are part of the memories that they inspire. Links to human commoners past, present, and future also serve to reinforce feelings of kinship, which then can be logically extended to other-than-human commoners. The Common's sub-communities, as discussed in Section 6.5, also reinforce its potential to bring people together, to bind them in communal endeavour, and enable people to be invested in sustainable and reciprocal use of shared resources.

Places such as Rodborough can also lead to a desire to normalise such sharing, to widen the areas of land that communities can access freely in perpetuity. In Stroud, this has manifested itself in recent campaigns at sites such as Juniper Hill Field, Verney Fields, the Heavens Valley, and Rodborough Fields where residents are fighting (and investing) to conserve and protect access rights and habitats that have been placed

under threat (Fig. 6.6.1).<sup>942</sup> The community takeover of shops, post offices, and pubs in the wider Stroud district is further testament to the determination to maintain important shared resources. The construct of the plucky commoner, tenacious of their rights, and standing in defiance of those with more money and power, is a binding and inspiring totem for the retention of these shared spaces.



Figure 6.6.1: Graphic reflecting the fight for access rights in the Heavens Valley and at Juniper Fields, Stroud

Source: Good on Paper/Eleanor Harper. © Eleanor Harper. Reproduced with permission

<sup>942</sup> 'Friends of Juniper Hill Field', *Friends of Juniper Hill Field*, n.d <<https://www.savejuniperhillfield.co.uk/>> [accessed 14 May 2025]; 'Support Our Campaign', *Friends of Verney Fields*, 2024 <<https://verneyfields.mailchimpsites.com/>> [accessed 14 May 2025]; 'Let's Protect the Heavens Valley Forever', *For Heaven's Sake*, n.d <<https://www.heavensvalley.org.uk/>> [accessed: 14 May 2025]; 'Rodborough Fields and Fromebanks Preservation Group', *Rodborough Fields and Fromebanks Preservation Group* <<https://rodboroughfields.org.uk/>> [accessed 14 May 2025].

If the experience of Rodborough's visitors and residents is extrapolated more widely, the restoration of access in other places may trigger similar feelings of love, care, and advocacy for those locations, strengthening inter- and intra-species relations in a self-perpetuating cycle. These places may not have Rodborough's views, wildlife, or centuries-long tradition of commoning, but they may be places where new traditions can be born, new memories made, and new intra- and inter-species connections formed. If other lands can inspire such shared memories and be empowered by community management and participation, they too may experience similar levels of care and affection.

This is a big 'if', however, and debates on access restoration must reflect this. The complex nature of ecologies of place, which are built on accreted layers of encounter and memory, cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. Rodborough's openness and the subsequent feelings of freedom it inspires cannot, for example, be duplicated by a walk around the perimeter of a fenced field. The particular feelings of personal responsibility felt by being one in a line of commons carers are also key and may not be easily located on land that has experienced a long-broken relationship with the public. Just what makes a SANG 'Suitable' is not, therefore, straightforward. In this context, arguments that opening the countryside more widely would automatically alleviate pressure on popular 'honey pot' sites whilst restoring inter- and intra-species relations are built on flawed logic. Access debates must reflect on the attributes that make our relationships with shared lands like Rodborough so enduring, and the viability of replicating elements of them elsewhere should be explored.

Recognising the role of other humans, past and present, and other-than-humans, both biotic and non, in Rodborough's endurance and *genius loci*, opens the door for conversations about extension of care and kin, beyond our front doors, beyond

the present, and beyond the human. Acknowledging the catch-22 outlined in Chapter 5, we must also seek ways to trigger care for more places and their multi-species dwellers alongside, or in anticipation of, access restoration. Creative ways of encouraging quality encounters that engender strong place attachment in an attitude of reciprocity must be sought, as Chapter 7's examples of programmes of public engagement explore. Via the use of creative methods that establish connections, engender care, and trigger a greater cultural eco-literacy, the Environmental Humanities can significantly contribute to overcoming consumptive relations with other-than-human spaces as I discuss in Chapter 7.

## 7. Storying the Commons: Forging Connections Through Narrative and Encounter

Cows went and came with evening morn and night  
To the wild pasture as their common right  
And sheep unfolded with the rising sun  
Heard the swains shout and felt their freedom won  
Tracked the red fallow field and heath and plain  
Then met the brook and drank and roamed again  
The brook that dribbled on as clear as glass  
Beneath the roots they hid among the grass  
While the glad shepherd traced their tracks along  
Free as the lark and happy as her song

John Clare, *The Mores*

As I explored in previous chapters, more places where meaningful inter- and intra-species connections can be forged are vital for the health and wellbeing of humans, other-than-humans, and our shared planet. In this excerpt from *The Mores*, John Clare's vision evokes just such a site of sharing, where species come together for mutual, reciprocal, benefit.<sup>943</sup> He describes an open space, equitable and available to all, where you can be 'free as the lark and happy as her song'.<sup>944</sup> As discussed at the end of Chapter 6, commons can be sites of multi-species community connection. In this context, when

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<sup>943</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, 'The Mores', 'Poems of the Helpston Period' in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 168).

<sup>944</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

bound by attitudes of sharing, individual place attachment can be a positive indicator of care and advocacy for a place and its multi-species dwellers. That these places are inherently shared spaces is crucial in ensuring that attachment and care do not become exclusionary or possessive. This shared status can, therefore, facilitate a particular interaction that catalyses improved multi-species relations and overcomes human speciesism and isolation. As I explored in Chapter 5, common land is, however, unevenly distributed and is therefore not accessible to all, yet it carries the weight of many expectations.

Rodborough's commoners' deeply rooted sense of being one in a long line of people to care for this place is crucial in the Common's continuing survival as a shared, multi-species resource. As previously explored, the inherently shared nature of commons rooted in their cultural history of care cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. As we consider whether access restoration is a desirable way to improve inter-species relations, we must be aware that many places have been severed from their connection with many more-than-humans through centuries of deliberate exclusion from the land. In our current environment of restricted access and industrialised agricultural landscapes, how can we locate and expand these equitable spaces? This question challenges us to find creative, innovative, and imaginative methods to extend the common land principles of 'good neighbourhood'.

In support of this endeavour, in this chapter I examine how multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by the Environmental Humanities, can be deployed to enable imaginings and narratives that extend the English common land model of 'good neighbourhood' more widely. Given the relative rarity of commons in twenty-first century England, their inequitable distribution, and the need to engage with broad and often under-represented audiences, I consider options for bringing their spirit into

other spaces. In this chapter, I also refer to findings from interviews and my experiences of facilitating multi-species encounters to address questions relating to public engagement, depth and source of connection, and the potential pitfalls for humans of increasing cultural eco-literacy. Recognising the value of storytelling, as a means of conveying 'emotionality, relationality [and] embodiment', I recount my experience of carrying out co-created research on Rodborough Common during two programmes of public and academic engagement.<sup>945</sup>

I begin this chapter by outlining some of the different methods that can be used to encourage meaningful and reciprocal engagements with the other-than-human world, drawing on academic literature and my professional practice. I elaborate on these methods by sharing my experiences of running two programmes of engagement that tested many of these approaches: the Landscapes of the Lark festival and Storying the Commons workshops. Whilst acknowledging that engagements such as these are just one part in a web of measures needed to reset intra- and inter-species relations, I draw tangible lessons from the experience of running these projects that can be applied to future applied Environmental Humanities endeavours.

Recognising the necessity of increasing cultural eco-literacy in the interests of improved multi-species relations, despite the difficulties it can create, I then examine how cultural ecoliteracy can be encouraged. I summarise the roots of care for Rodborough amongst study participants, asking what it is about their specific interactions with this place that engender such relations. I also examine whether participants in the Landscapes of the Lark festival and Storying the Commons workshops experienced changing attitudes to multi-species sharing via their

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<sup>945</sup> Kathryn Gillespie, 'For Multispecies Autoethnography', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5.4 (2022), pp. 2098-2111 (p. 2099).

participation in these programmes.

I then discuss the potential issues for humans that can result from knowing and caring about environmental damage, focusing on how participants demonstrated differing levels of eco-anxiety and how engagements such as those described might mitigate this. Finally, I reflect on my evolving relationship with the Common via a brief auto-ethnography, examining how my experiences have shaped my responses to the Common and wider environmental questions. The chapter concludes by summarising my experiences of researching Rodborough Common and co-creating programmes of public engagement focusing on common land with wider questions around increasing cultural eco-literacy and resetting human/other-than-human relations.

## **7.1: Methods of Engagement**

There are a range of options open to the practitioner who wishes to engage the wider public with environmental concerns and facilitate multi-species encounters. Citizen science, for example, is a well-established method for engaging members of the public with conservation-focused activities. At a basic level, it is defined as ‘a purpose-designed collaboration in which the general public take part in the scientific research process to support knowledge generation’.<sup>946</sup> In addition to generating knowledge, Schuttler and others suggest the use of citizen science may be one way of ‘bridging the nature gap’; of overcoming human alienation and isolation from the other-than-human world.<sup>947</sup>

Despite this opportunity, many citizen science surveys are focused on recording data

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<sup>946</sup> Luke Somerwill and Uta Wehn, ‘How to Measure the Impact of Citizen Science on Environmental Attitudes, Behaviour and Knowledge: A Review of State-of-the-Art Approaches’, *Environmental Science Europe*, 34.18 (2022), 1-13 (p. 1).

<sup>947</sup> Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, ‘Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?’, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405).

but are less concerned with the impact on participants' environmental literacy.<sup>948</sup> Schuttler and others noted that, of the citizen science papers they reviewed, fewer than 7% 'included data on the motivations ( $n=4$ ), outcomes ( $n=13$ ), or both ( $n=9$ ) of volunteers participating'.<sup>949</sup> Those that had taken the trouble to record these found an increased emotional environmental affinity, with one reporting a 'deepened sense of place from regular participation, which led to a strong sense of belonging and ownership'.<sup>950</sup> One might, however, assume that participants in citizen science projects take part directly because of existing levels of care. Those with no or low levels of existing care may not be motivated to get involved, meaning baseline levels of environmental engagement amongst participants may not be representative of those of the wider population.

Conservation organisations can also offer opportunities for direct action to help support other-than-human habitats and species. SVP's overarching aim, for example, is to bring together people and nature in the interests of mutual thriving. The charity does this in a variety of ways, not least by providing volunteering opportunities for a diverse public to get involved in activities that support our multi-species community. Whilst large organisations often offer similar opportunities, their hierarchy and infrastructure can create barriers to localised decision-making and prevent the flexibility required when working in dynamic ecosystems.<sup>951</sup> Despite being more flexible and dynamic, SVP is, however, still constrained by challenging financial environments that make it vulnerable to the changeable priorities of funders. As a small

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<sup>948</sup> Somerwill and Wehn, 'How to Measure the Impact of Citizen Science on Environmental Attitudes, Behaviour and Knowledge', p. 2.

<sup>949</sup> Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap', p. 411.

<sup>950</sup> Ibid., pp. 409-410.

<sup>951</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

charity, it is especially susceptible to shocks caused by larger, sometimes global, geopolitical and economic forces. These usually increase costs, whilst reducing available funding and limiting the scope of individuals to support charitable causes with their money or time, restricting opportunities to take environmental action. As with citizen science activities, voluntary work with conservation organisations also requires an underlying, base level of care that leads individuals to seek out opportunities.

Furthermore, the unpaid nature of voluntary conservation work immediately renders it off-limits to many people, whose economic needs prevent participation. The issue for charities of absorbing financial shocks and the economic imperatives that prevent people volunteering, again highlights the constraints inherent in trying to heal human/other-than-human relations whilst having to operate within a capitalist model that seeks to monetise every action, prioritising profit over public goods. As Shaikh reminds us ‘if science and business is the dominant way to serve nature, then these institutions [i.e., large conservation organisations] sit as a barrier to Wild Service [...] we are left with an unnamed and unattended grief, looking hopelessly at a world we can’t serve’, leading us back to feelings of eco-anxiety and powerlessness.<sup>952</sup>

Beyond the scientific, and potentially reductive, process of classification and recording of other-than-human species or structured acts of voluntary conservation work, citizen environmental humanities can broaden opportunities for participation. This participation can be a spark that ignites environmental care by offering wide-ranging activities including ‘writing, photography or other art, sound recordings or interviews, and more’ that may not obviously be seen as environmental.<sup>953</sup> Citizen

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<sup>952</sup> Nadia Shaikh, ‘Recommoning’ in *Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You*, ed. by Nick Hayes and Jon Moses (Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 29-43 (p. 40).

<sup>953</sup> Tina Gianquitto and Lauren LaFauci, ‘A Case Study in Citizen Environmental Humanities: Creating a Participatory Plant Story Website’, *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 12 (2022), pp. 327-340 (p. 333).

environmental humanities activities go beyond traditional citizen humanities whose 'primary area of investigation is human culture' to incorporate the more-than-human.<sup>954</sup> Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén suggest that such engagements are a means of effectively involving individuals in a 'transdisciplinary and postdisciplinary vein' that can draw attention to 'the (often invisibilized) differences between bodies in the Anthropocene *as well* as their entangled nature'.<sup>955</sup> Such activities broaden the definition of what knowledge is 'acceptable' by empowering and enabling participation in multifaceted projects, opening the door for other-than-human ontologies and the appreciation of vernacular wisdoms. These activities also encourage a greater number and range of human participants, who may be put off by the scientific rigour demanded of citizen science projects or may not have the time or resources to participate in voluntary active conservation. Participation in citizen environmental humanities activities can 'encourage those outside of university environments to see themselves as environmental thinkers and actors with important contributions to share with the world'.<sup>956</sup> The inherent creativity and wide scope of the environmental humanities enable a broad range of activities that can help to reconnect humans and their other-than-human neighbours. By harnessing a range of creative methods, citizen environmental humanities activities also offer opportunities to encounter the 'other' without a need for physical proximity, thus minimising the hazards of direct encounters and opening opportunities to wider audiences.

My understanding of each of the methods highlighted above has broadened and deepened as a result of my professional and academic practice. Knowledge of each

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<sup>954</sup> Barbara Heinisch and others, 'Citizen Humanities' in *The Science of Citizen Science* ed. by Katrin Vohland and others (Springer, 2021), pp. 97-118 (p. 98).

<sup>955</sup> Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén, p. 70; Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>956</sup> Gianquitto and LaFauci, 'A Case Study in Citizen Environmental Humanities', p. 332.

informed the design and implementation of two programmes of engagement, as I will now go on to explain.

## **7.2: Encountering the Landscapes of the Lark**

### *7.2.1: Encountering the Landscapes of the Lark*

As I stated in Section 2.6, the severity of the current environmental crisis demands we use every means of engagement available to engender care and extend kinship to the other-than-human world. Combining elements of citizen science, active conservation, and citizen humanities into single public programmes may increase their appeal to a wider audience than might be captured by just one of these offerings. In 2023 I was able to gain funding for a programme of public engagement that enabled me to test this hypothesis. My awareness of the need for creative and wide-ranging forms of inter-species encounters, combined with my professional work monitoring skylarks, evolved into the Landscapes of the Lark (LotL) festival. My evolving relationship with the Common, fed by my encounters with others and my research into more-than-human lives, resulted in a determination to centralise the contribution of other species to the physical, ecological, and cultural systems of the Stroud Commons. The festival included a range of activities over a six-month period that shared the wonder of the Commons and helped participants to understand what they could do to support them and their multi-species commoners.

In naming the project the 'Landscapes of the Lark' I aimed to decenter the human whilst avoiding marginalising or projecting human attributes and emotions onto other species. I was also cognisant of the need to limit my complicity in relations of harm. The idea was not, therefore, to increase potentially negative attention on skylarks or their fellow commons-dwellers but to reposition them as central to the life of the

Commons. The ability to do this without a need for humans to necessarily come into direct contact with the other-than-humans who had not consented to such attention was a cornerstone of the project's design. In the interests of foregrounding the eponymous character of the festival and beginning a journey of (virtual) close contact, I begin the story of the festival by introducing the skylark.

Eurasian skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*) are members of the passerine classification of birds belonging to the family *Alaudidae*. There are currently one hundred different recorded species in the *Alaudidae* family, occupying nearly all temperate regions of the Earth. The Eurasian skylark (Fig. 7.2.1.1) is part of the *aladuas* sub-genus that spread their wings across Europe, Asia, and Africa.



Figure 7.2.1.1: The Eurasian skylark (and unidentified prey)  
Source: David Iliff. Reproduced under CC BY-SA 3.0

They have historically been extremely successful in evolving and expanding their domains in line with their human neighbours. They were first recorded

in England by the Anglo-Saxons and so have lived alongside humans here for at least 1500 years.<sup>957</sup> Eurasian skylarks, hereafter known simply as skylarks, are so entwined with the agricultural practices of humans they are, along with others of the *passerine* classification, known in the UK as ‘farmland birds’. Their Latin name, *alauda arvensis* translates literally as ‘field lark’ or ‘lark of arable land’. The contrast between their Latin and common names are appropriate given their occupation of the liminal space between the earth and the sky.

Skylarks nest on the ground, making them vulnerable to predators who might lurk amongst scrub and in trees. The birds therefore like to breed in open fields, with male skylarks delineating their territories and attracting mates with an extraordinary song flight, which can reach up to 300 metres and last for many minutes.<sup>958</sup> As areas of open land increased in number due to human and farmed other-than-human interventions, so in turn did the opportunities for skylarks to thrive.<sup>959</sup> Traditional ways of farming the land suited skylark preferences. The grasses where they nest must be neither too tall, nor too short, ideally between thirty and fifty centimetres in height (Fig. 7.2.1.2). Happily, for the skylark, traditional sowing and harvesting meant at the start of their breeding season, spring-sown crops or winter-rested meadows were just about reaching this ideal height. The wide variety of other-than-human life found in the mixed animal and arable model of farming also meant there were usually enough high-protein invertebrates available to feed hungry chicks. By the time crops and meadows were reaped and harvested in late August, skylark chicks, of which there are ideally two or three broods each season, had flown the nest. As autumn gave way to

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<sup>957</sup> ‘Bird Facts: Skylark’, *British Trust for Ornithology*, n.d <<https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/skylark>> [accessed 2 February 2024]

<sup>958</sup> Andrew Millham, *Singing Like Larks: A Celebration of Birds in Folk Songs* (Saraband, 2023), p. 43.

<sup>959</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

winter, harvesting methods left enough seeds and grains behind, even after human gleaning had taken place, to support birds through the leaner winter months. Traditional farming and skylarks therefore existed in a mutually compatible symbiosis. Skylarks are part of the human-farmed landscape, interacting with other species as predators and prey, co-creators of habitats and cultures. This happy arrangement was not, however, to last, with skylarks falling victim, alongside many other species of other-than-humans, to rapidly changing human farming priorities and practices.



Figure 7.2.1.2: A skylark's nest  
Source: Maurice Flesier. Reproduced under CC BY-SA 3.0

Along with those of many other farmland birds, the number of skylarks has seen devastating declines. As the twentieth century progressed, the agricultural landscape of Britain radically changed. Meadows were destroyed. Hedgerows were ripped up. Most of the remains of the ancient woodlands were finally felled. Crops were sown in autumn instead of spring. Grasses were cut for silage in April or May, not for

hay in August. Pesticides became widely used and contributed to a massive fall in the number of invertebrates.<sup>960</sup> Herbicides sought to eliminate all resource competition for crops, limiting the biodiversity of the land, and leading to huge areas of monoculture farmland that are practically devoid of wildlife. Human life and human needs subjugated the land. In short, the hospitable farmland that had previously welcomed the skylark and supported it for many generations had turned from friend into foe.<sup>961</sup>

Since 1967, skylark numbers in the UK have declined by 67%, and even though declines have slowed in recent years, they remain on the UK's list of most threatened species.<sup>962</sup> The decline in skylark numbers in the decades before 1967 is not recorded and can only be inferred from the skylark's historic prevalence in English literature, language, and music. Skylarks used to be so ubiquitous in the British countryside that their song became legend. Huge flocks were witnessed migrating, so numerous that they blackened the sky.<sup>963</sup> The skylark is the second most poeticized bird in the English language, coming a close second to the nightingale (another species teetering on the brink in the UK).<sup>964</sup> John Clare tells of larks rising 'by dozens from the hay' in his *Summer Ballad*.<sup>965</sup> During the late spring and early summer, their song must have been unbroken from dawn until dusk.<sup>966</sup> In 2020, Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending* was voted by listeners to Classic FM as the UK's favourite piece of

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<sup>960</sup> James Ashworth, 'UK's Flying Insects Have Declined by 60% in 20 Years', *Natural History Museum*, 6 May 2022 <<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2022/may/uks-flying-insects-have-declined-60-in-20-years.html>> [accessed 10 July 2024].

<sup>961</sup> 'Bird Facts: Skylark', *British Trust for Ornithology*.

<sup>962</sup> 'Skylark Conservation Advice for Farmers', *RSPB*, n.d <<https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-we-do/influence-government-and-business/farming/advice-for-farmers-helping-bird-species/skylark-advice-for-farmers>> [accessed 5 March 2024].

<sup>963</sup> John Lewis-Stempel, *The Soaring Life of the Lark* (Penguin, 2021), p. 12.

<sup>964</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>965</sup> John Clare, 'Summer Ballad' in *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. by Kelsey Thornton and Anna Tibble (Carcenet Press, 1990), p. 376.

<sup>966</sup> Jim Crumley, *Skylark: Encounters in the Wild* (Saraband, 2016), p. 26.

classical music for the tenth year in a row.<sup>967</sup> Larks are found in common English phrases, relating to joy, laughter and rising with the dawn. Furthermore, skylark appreciation is not only found in the literature of recent centuries; the lark also held a place in ancient literature, featuring for example as the first mortal creature to come down from the sky to Earth in Aristophanes' play *The Birds*; 'First of all creatures, born before the Earth' (Fig. 7.2.1.3).<sup>968</sup>



Figure 7.2.1.3: Anno Mitchell's lark banner, *Between Sky and Earth* Exhibition, September 2023  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham. Banner image reproduced with permission of Anno Mitchell (annomitchell.com)

Whilst a journey through much of the English countryside may not bring you into regular contact with skylarks anymore, they do continue to breed on commons

<sup>967</sup> 'The UK's Favourite Pieces of Classical Music Revealed in the Classic FM Hall of Fame 2020', Classic FM, 15 April 2020 <<https://www.classicfm.com/radio/hall-of-fame/uk-favourite-pieces-classical-music-revealed/>> [accessed 7 February 2024].

<sup>968</sup> Anno Mitchell, 'Lark Banner', *Between Sky and Earth Exhibition Catalogue*, Landscapes of the Lark Festival, (Stroud Valleys Project, 2023), p. 53.

such as Rodborough. Despite daily disturbance caused by people, and more damagingly, their dogs, breeding pairs of skylarks continue to make the Common their preferred nesting ground, perhaps reflecting the lack of entirely suitable accommodation available elsewhere. Dogs may be many, but thanks to the Common's biodiversity, so are invertebrates, which provide a plentiful food source. The grass is lightly grazed and never mown, meaning flightless chicks do not need to run the gauntlet of blades, just the occasional cloven hoof. The grasslands are open and hedges are far away, meaning predators can be spotted and hopefully distracted by the adults before they can do any damage. The mounds from tree throws and long abandoned ants' nests provide perches from which to observe comings and goings. Whilst paths are widening and pressures are increasing, in the triangles of longer grass between lines of human tread, skylarks survive, even if they don't necessarily thrive. The commons around Stroud are one of the few places now where you can still stand and be surrounded by 360-degree skylark song, although admittedly this is more likely to be your experience on neighbouring Selsley Common than it is on Rodborough. To be so immersed is, for those of us subject to the 'extinction of experience' described by Pyle, a chance to reconnect with the other, to see outside our concerns and perspectives, to look up 'into the expansive sky [...] imagining ourselves thus untethered and airborne'.<sup>969</sup>

Skylarks are, therefore, birds with a particularly strong presence in human culture, are a poster child for the benefits of traditional forms of agriculture as practised on the Common and are relatively easy for the layperson to identify due to their distinctive song flight. Their potential to bridge human and other-than-human divides extends, much like their territories, far beyond the UK. For example, when

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<sup>969</sup> Pyle in Schuttler and others, 'Bridging the Nature Gap', p. 405; Alison Cockroft and Emily Joy, *Between Sky and Earth Exhibition Catalogue*, Landscapes of the Lark Festival (Stroud Valleys Project, 2023), p. 4.

skylarks were named the Swiss ‘Bird of the Year’ in 2022, it was suggested that they could ‘stand for other threatened species in cultivated land and point to a necessary reorientation of agricultural policy’.<sup>970</sup> Skylarks, are, like other species that have evolved to live alongside their human neighbours, ‘boundary-crossing birds [that] invite us to engage in our communities, for the common good [...] noticeable, delightful, vulnerable’.<sup>971</sup> In short, they provided an ideal subject for a programme of public engagement with the Common’s multi-species communities.

### *7.2.2: Territories and Nesting: Laying the Foundations*

The idea for a festival of the lark was first mooted by three skylark surveyors, including myself, who observed and recorded skylarks seen on Rodborough Common throughout the breeding season of 2021. Our survey was the first official one that had been completed, so we could not compare it with previous years to see if a decline was occurring, but our regular visits and close observations did encourage an intimate knowledge of the Common’s skylarks, which suggested to us their ‘islands’ of habitable grassland were becoming fewer and were under greater pressure, in particular from off-lead dogs.<sup>972</sup> Whilst we found it nigh on impossible to find a skylark nest, despite employing the assistance of a thermal imaging scope and an experienced nest finder (Fig. 7.2.2.1), dogs, with their superb sense of smell, have no such issues. Adult birds that are flushed from nests by dogs attract negative attention from predators such as corvids, and, in some cases, dogs will also take chicks from the nest.<sup>973</sup> Birds that are

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<sup>970</sup> ‘Skylark Named Swiss Bird of the Year’, *Swiss Info*, 25 November 2021

<<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/skylark-named-swiss-bird-of-the-year/47141206>> [accessed 10 July 2024].

<sup>971</sup> Nicola Chester, ‘Community’ in *Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You*, ed. by Nick Hayes and Jon Moses (Bloomsbury, 2024) pp. 119-131 (p. 128).

<sup>972</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, Spring 2022.

<sup>973</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, June 2021.

being constantly flushed also have less time to see to the important business of feeding their chicks. In short, breeding success is often negatively impacted by frequent dog disturbance.<sup>974</sup>



Figure 7.2.2.1: Thermal image surveying of skylark nests, Rodborough Common, June 2021  
Source: Deborah Roberts © Deborah Roberts. Image reproduced with permission

One of the recommendations made in our survey report was a programme of education and engagement to widen understanding of the Common's importance for other-than-humans and to give people an opportunity to engage with the Common in different ways.<sup>975</sup> Various discussions between skylark surveyors and SVP's CEO led to an application to the Cotswold National Landscape's Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) fund for a programme of lark-centred engagement. This

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<sup>974</sup> D.A Showler and others, 'What is the Impact of Public Access on the Breeding Success of Ground-Nesting and Cliff-Nesting Birds', *Collaboration for Environmental Evidence Review*, 05-210 (2010), pp. 3 - 75 (p. 5) <<https://www.environmentalevidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/SR16.pdf>> [accessed 12 November 2023], p. 27.

<sup>975</sup> 'Footpath, Botanical and Skylark Surveys', *Stroud Valleys Project*, 2021 </<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607bc3d09f6f9a4d161b5da2/t/616ed0e7817ecd546af5bd42/1634652394061/Stroud+Valleys+Project+Rodborough+Common+Surveys+Report+2021.pdf>> [accessed 5 March 2025], pp. 51-52.

fund supported the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan's goal to 'enhance beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment'.<sup>976</sup> Rodborough Common, as part of the CNL, was eligible, and some of the fund's desired outcomes were compatible with the activities we were proposing, including supporting biodiversity, providing people with opportunities to engage with the outdoors, and promoting or enhancing the quality of the landscape.<sup>977</sup>

### *7.2.3: Brooding: Funding and Planning*

The project, despite aligning with many of the FiPL objectives, was difficult to articulate in the format the bid required. The somewhat subjective and not easily quantifiable goals of engaging people with the outdoors and promoting or enhancing the quality of the landscape were not explicitly catered for in the bid process. I therefore adapted the bid format to accommodate this, converting each aspect of the project into a discrete set of more obviously tangible deliverables with day rates, materials and other costs assigned. Furthermore, in line with many rural funding processes, the bid format was not designed for land that was owned by one entity but farmed by multiple others (i.e., common land). With the support of the commoners' committees and the landowners, it was possible to circumvent these challenges. On the understanding that the project consistently emphasised how it supported the commoners who were 'Farming in [a] Protected Landscape' the reviewing panel approved the bid in February 2023.

The fundamental idea of the project was to engage as broad a spectrum of the public as possible with the Stroud Commons. We hoped to encourage and support

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<sup>976</sup> 'Environmental Improvement Plan', *HM Government*, 2023

<<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a6d9c1c531eb000c64fffa/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf>> [accessed 8 February 2024], p. 243.

<sup>977</sup> 'Get Funding for Farming in Protected Landscapes', *DEFRA*, 17 May 2023

<<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/funding-for-farmers-in-protected-landscapes#what-the-programme-will-pay-for>> [accessed 22 March 2024].

people to learn about other-than-human commoners and the history of inter- and intra-species collaborations that make the Commons distinctive, in the hope this would engender care and deepen connections. As I have already explored, the Commons' farmers face many challenges, some of which the public can help alleviate. The festival was also, therefore, fundamentally concerned with bridging gaps between farmers and recreational users, enhancing understanding of the multi-species shared nature of the Commons, and empowering people to 'do their bit' to help the Commons thrive. By employing a wide range of methods, I hoped to spark care, share information and provide a means of retaining that information. The programme of events was designed to support the co-creation of knowledge and outputs. The bid was based on reaching at least 2000 people in person (i.e., not just via publicity) by the conclusion of the project. To broaden its appeal, the festival included a citizen science element, a citizen humanities element, direct learning opportunities of varying types for all ages, free-of-charge activities, and LotL representation at relevant public events.

#### *7.2.4: Fledging the First Brood: Taking Flight*

To make the most of the impending skylark breeding season when the birds are most audible, the initial priority was to launch the project's citizen science activities. We invited the public to become citizen scientists by taking part in independent skylark spotting in and around the Stroud District. Bearing in mind the possible negative impacts on skylarks of this additional attention, we made it clear that citizen scientists should not seek out nests or get underneath where birds were flying, in case nests became trampled. The quality of data collected on surveys of this particular type (i.e., those where people are asked to incidentally record species whilst engaged in other activities) cannot always yield precise results, so precision was not the primary

objective of the exercise. I was more concerned with providing a chance for people to engage on a deeper level with the Commons and in particular their skylarks.

In addition to establishing a digital method of recording sightings, I included an analogue recording option. This was supported by the design, printing, and distribution of 600 leaflets given out to would-be citizen scientists to record their sightings without needing to access a smartphone (Fig. 7.2.4.1). The aim of including leaflets was to ensure citizen science activities were as inclusive as possible. The leaflets also allowed individuals to locate themselves within the landscape, providing an embodied experience that connected people to place and highlighted human/other-than-human entanglements. Finally, I saw the leaflets as an opportunity to share information about the Commons, including their special conservation status, and how visitors can help to protect and care for them (Fig. 7.2.4.1 and 7.2.4.2). Bearing in mind the need to support actions alongside information, I deliberately chose to tell people what they could actively do to support the Commons, rather than what they should not do.

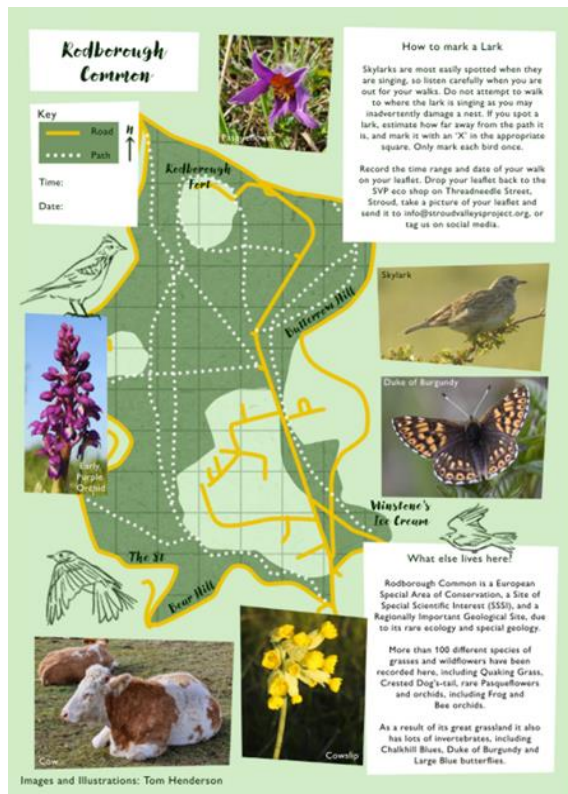


Figure 7.2.4.1: Skylark spotters map, Rodborough Common

Source: Stroud Valleys Project © Stroud Valleys Project and Tom Henderson. Image reproduced with permission



Figure 7.2.4.2: Outer cover of Rodborough skylark spotters leaflet

Source: Stroud Valleys Project © Stroud Valleys Project and Tom Henderson. Image reproduced with permission

The take-up of citizen science elements of the festival was relatively low. This was partly due to difficulties with the time available to set up, test, and launch the activity. Also, despite launching the citizen science element with a guided spot on each Common, the free-flowing aspects of the task (i.e., that you could spot ad hoc when you were out and about) did not seem to encourage participation. Many citizen science projects are more prescriptive, setting parameters around geographic areas or spotting times. These projects may be easier for people, particularly those less experienced in wildlife observation, to follow confidently. Running citizen science activities takes a good deal of dedicated time, especially if participants' commitment is to be maintained over a three to six-month period. As Gianquitto and LaFauci found with their participatory plant stories website, labels matter, and some people can be easily discouraged from taking part in what they perceive to be technical or academic-sounding projects.<sup>978</sup> Therefore, invitations to become a 'citizen scientist' may be immediately off-putting to some. If a project has engagement and reach as its primary objective, careful labelling and ongoing encouragement to sign up and actively participate may be needed. Sadly, time and financial constraints made it impossible to provide the necessary levels of ongoing encouragement to maintain participant momentum or recruit new citizen scientists for the LotL.

Given that broad-ranging engagement was a key objective of the festival, the inclusion of citizen humanities aspects was also central to the project's aims. I was keen, however, not to reinforce disciplinary boundaries by offering only discrete activities which might be considered either 'cultural and creative' or 'ecological and scientific'. To this end, I created hybrid activities incorporating what might be termed

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<sup>978</sup> Gianquitto and LaFauci, 'A Case Study in Citizen Environmental Humanities', p. 337.

‘culture’ into what might traditionally be viewed as ecological or wildlife learning activities, and vice versa. By gently merging elements in this way I hoped to stretch established perceptions about the type of activity with which people were prepared to engage. For example, during our Easter weekend launch, I introduced some creative elements to citizen science sessions and the relaying of skylark ‘facts’. Attendees of all ages were able to make and fly their own skylark ‘kite’ (Fig. 7.2.4.3) and record a creative response to the event on a postcard, and were given time to stop, be still, and engage all their senses, in particular listening to the sound of the skylark’s song (Fig. 7.2.4.4). This caused some initial discomfort for some attendees who may not have expected the event to be participatory. Fine weather and an open invitation did, however, enable participation for those who wanted to experience all aspects of the session.



Figure 7.2.4.3: An SVP event attendee flying their skylark ‘kite’, 7 April 2023  
Source: Author’s Photograph © Sharon Gardham



Figure 7.2.4.4: SVP skylark spotters taking time for stillness and reflection, 7 April 2023  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham

This approach was epitomised by a 'Solstice Skylarks' event I ran on Selsley Common on the 21 June. During this event, as well as learning about skylarks and immersing ourselves in their song, I shared two pieces of work by John Clare: *The Sky Lark* and *Summer Happiness* (Fig. 7.2.4.5), whilst discussing the long tradition of marking midsummer in shared landscapes.<sup>979</sup> Sharing John Clare's joyous celebration of the skylark whilst surrounded by its song provided an enriched experience for participants, as did reading and listening to *Summer Happiness* before settling down to watch the sunset on the solstice atop a neolithic long barrow. This event enabled us to feel grounded in the present, to engage multiple senses and to feel connected to the past, each other, and other species. Attendees were also able to be more passive in this process; listening, and absorbing, rather than feeling pressure to 'create' something, which may have been more comfortable for them than for those who joined the initial skylark spotting events.

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<sup>979</sup> John Clare, 'Summer Ballad' in *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. by Kelsey Thornton and Anna Tibble (Carcenet Press, 1990), p. 244; Ibid. *The Sky Lark*, p. 464.



Figure 7.2.4.5: Sharing John Clare's *The Sky Lark*, Selsley Common, 21 June 2023  
Source: Ruth Powell. © Ruth Powell. Image reproduced with permission

### *7.2.5: Preparing a Second Brood: Events*

As well as introducing people to skylarks, I was keen to tell wider Commons stories. To this end, I organised an extensive programme of events based around wildlife, farming, conservation, and history covering examples of inter- and intra-species cooperation. I was luckily able to draw on the many good working relationships that SVP enjoys with other organisations to arrange events with experts from Butterfly Conservation, Stroud Wildlife Survey Group, the Gloucestershire Bat Group, and the National Trust.

Although we ran a good number of events of this type throughout the festival, their reach was arguably limited, with most attendees being those who were already interested in the Commons in one way or another. Information and participants' overall experience were also mediated by 'experts' who acted as gatekeepers to knowledge. Whilst these events may have acted as an introduction to a subject, which

may invite further engagement, it is unclear how much information was retained by participants, or how long-lasting the impact of the sessions may be. As John and Pontes found in their study of environmental education on a wildlife preserve in the US, traditional wildlife events such as these ‘tended to be *about* the environment more than they were *for* it’, with a narrow focus that did little to increase overall eco-literacy.<sup>980</sup> Introducing creative elements to these interactions was also more difficult than those I ran myself, so the ability to positively engage people in a way that enabled knowledge retention was arguably limited.

In an attempt to counter these constraints, I took LotL to public events, including Stroud’s Festival of Nature (Fig. 7.2.5.1), an event to mark 2023’s Earth Day, and a celebration of the release of cattle onto the Commons (Marking Day). These events engaged with a larger audience, including those who might not otherwise be interested in attending subject-specific themed events. I was also able to use a range of methods to inform and engage, including information sharing and creative activities. These events took place in public spaces, including the Museum in the Park, and public house The Old Lodge, which allowed us to reach people who might not ordinarily attend wildlife-themed activities.

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<sup>980</sup> Rebecca A. Johns and Rachelle Pontes, 'Parks, Rhetoric and Environmental Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Ecoliteracy', *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 22.1 (2019), pp. 1-19 (p. 15); Ibid., p. 2.

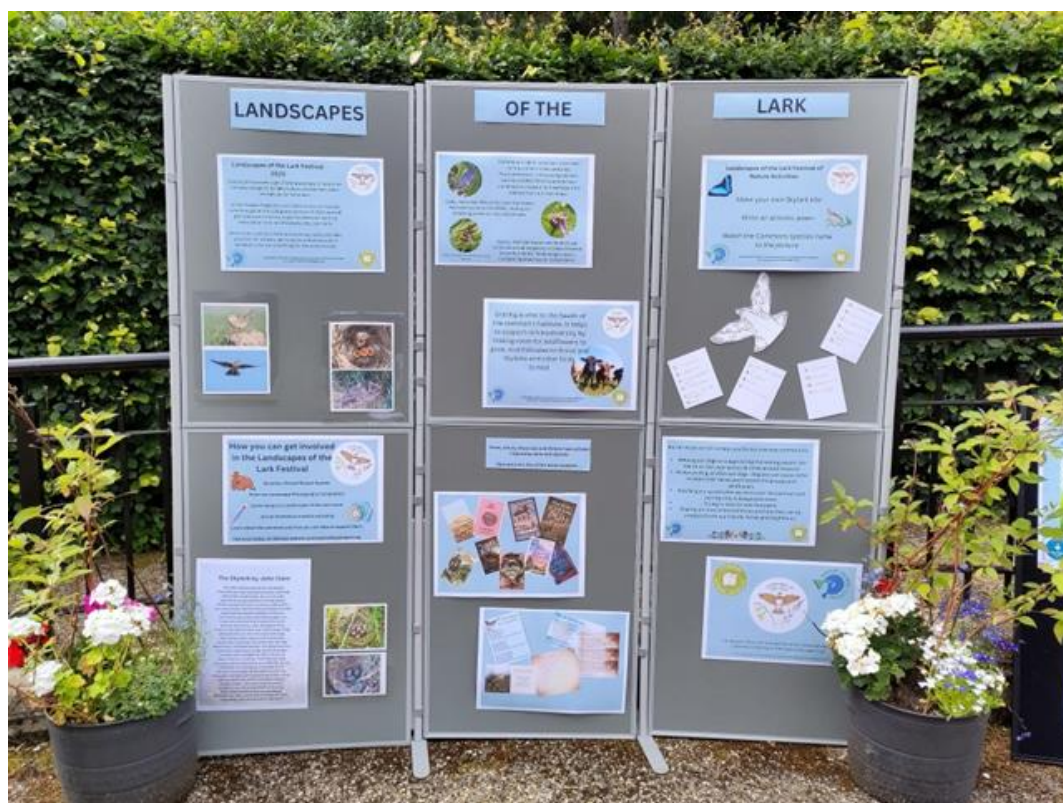


Figure 7.2.5.1: Landscapes of the Lark display boards, Stroud Festival of Nature, July 2023  
Source: Author's Photograph. © Sharon Gardham

### 7.2.6: *Fledging the Second Brood: Education*

As well as events that reached the public generally, I was also keen to offer activities specifically for younger people. As LM4 pointed out when discussing how to communicate with people about the value of the Common:

‘But my only feeling is and again this is just my gut feeling and observations, we need to be deeper in how we deliver that [message about the Common], so it's not preaching to the converted already. So, you're not doing that, you're actually delivering it to a different audience. A new generation audience’.<sup>981</sup>

Barriers to educational institutions engaging in outside activities can be economic, political, practical, or curricular. According to colleagues who have worked with schools over many years, concerns about costs, health and safety, as well as the

<sup>981</sup> LM4, interview with the author, 3 December 2022.

time constraints that school staff experience, can all limit opportunities for young people to engage with the world outside the school or college gates.<sup>982</sup> Chances for schoolchildren to experience ‘nature’ are poor and inequitable, with state schools with a higher proportion of children receiving free school meals able to provide even fewer daily nature-encounter opportunities (18%) than those in more affluent areas (52%).<sup>983</sup> The challenges are not, however, purely logistical; as in wider society, a lack of knowledge is increasingly perpetuated between generations. A study of A-level Biology students, for example, found only 14% could identify more than three species of native British plants, with 41% only able to name one or less.<sup>984</sup> Future teachers, in the shape of PGCE students, were no better off, with 65% of primary and 74% of secondary Biology teaching students only able to name three or fewer flowers.<sup>985</sup> C7, who has worked with schools and young people on educational programmes, explained:

‘We have a generation of schoolteachers who are scared of taking children into the countryside. One because it’s alien to them, two because they don’t know enough about it and feel unqualified to start talking to children about the countryside and nature’.<sup>986</sup>

In some cases, there are also physical barriers between schools and their surroundings. For example, local parent IG1 told me that:

‘Gastrells [school] used to go up there [to the Common] all the time but the change in Ofsted means that they have to have gates. So the back access was just a stile and they don’t have that anymore. They’ve had to put an additional gate in’.<sup>987</sup>

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<sup>982</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, April 2023.

<sup>983</sup> Brendan Montague, ‘Poorer Pupils Suffer ‘Nature Gap’’, *The Ecologist*, 9 September 2024 <<https://theecologist.org/2024/sep/09/poorer-pupils-suffer-nature-gap>> [accessed 27 February 2025].

<sup>984</sup> Anne Bebbington, ‘The Ability of A-Level Students to Name Plants’, *Journal of Biological Education*, 39.2 (2005), pp. 63-67 (p. 64).

<sup>985</sup> Bebbington, ‘The Ability of A-Level Students to Name Plants’, p. 64.

<sup>986</sup> C7, interview with the author, 20 October 2022.

<sup>987</sup> IG1, interview with the author, 29 March 2022.

To include people of all ages in our activities, we needed to overcome some of these barriers by making activities for young people as accessible as possible. We achieved this by providing free-of-charge expertise and tailoring ready-to-deploy activities that could be easily and freely accessed with minimal input from school staff. Whilst some children were regular visitors to the Common, some had rarely or never visited, despite its proximity to their school, and in some cases, their homes. Some of them were alarmed by the long grass and were fearful it might cause them harm, but we reassured them it was nothing to be afraid of. Activities included a 'mini beast' or invertebrate search, producing a soundscape where children drew an 'X' in the centre of the card and recorded sounds in relation to themselves, and using mirrors to give them a 'birds-eye' view of the Commons. These activities introduced the children to the often-invisible others they share the Commons with and allowed them to decenter the human experience by situating their own experiences alongside those of others. Finally, we showed the children how to fold origami butterflies, which they attached to a stick and string and 'flew'. This was a tricky activity as the butterflies were quite complex to fold, but it allowed the children to have a period of concentrated activity, with something tangible to share with family members when they got home (Fig. 7.2.6.1). The same activities were repeated for two other primary schools and a Cubs group.



Figure 7.2.6.1: Children and adults from Minchinhampton Primary School with their origami butterflies  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham

The success of our primary-age activities depended, to an extent, on the approach of the school and the individual teachers involved. Some pupils had been prepared for their visit to the Common with activities in the classroom beforehand. These pupils were easier to engage with than those fresh on the Commons with no prior context provided. For those in the latter category, it was harder to get the children to focus on a learning experience that was overridden by the excitement of being released from the school grounds. Follow-up in the classroom after visits would also help to aid retention. With teachers time-poor and potentially not confident in discussing the other-than-human world there may be many barriers to engaging with outside learning. There are resources available to help teachers overcome these barriers, but the many demands on their time may render these ineffective.<sup>988</sup>

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<sup>988</sup> For example, 'Our Wild Classrooms', *Wild Classrooms*, n.d <<https://www.wildclassrooms.org/>> [accessed 7 March 2025]; 'Resources and Activities for Schools', *Woodland Trust*, n.d <<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/support-us/act/your-school/resources/>> [accessed 7 March

While primary-aged children may have varying levels of guided contact with the other-than-human world, secondary school-aged students are even less likely to have regular encounters with nature.<sup>989</sup> Teenagers are often viewed by nature and conservation practitioners as difficult to reach, and a study by the RSPB and the University of Essex showed that people between the ages of twelve and sixteen were the least nature-connected of any age group.<sup>990</sup> The study's authors speculate that 'social, cultural and life-stage influences' may be the cause of what they term the 'teenage dip' in nature connection.<sup>991</sup> These factors may be exasperated by a lack of guided nature connections in schools or other youth organisations. For example, members of the focus group, who were all ecologically engaged, shared with me that they had few opportunities for outdoor learning or fieldwork, experiences mirrored by Bath Spa University MA Environmental Humanities students whilst they were at school.<sup>992</sup> The majority of available learning resources are focused on younger children, with older pupils seemingly neglected. The planned introduction of a Natural History GCSE which may have the potential to fill this gap, was placed in a 'holding pattern' upon the change of government in 2024.<sup>993</sup> Whilst the GCSE has now been revived, it is not clear when it will be implemented, or what it will entail.<sup>994</sup>

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2025]; 'Education and Inspiring the Next Generation', *RSPB*, n.d <<https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-we-do/education-and-inspiring-the-next-generation>> [accessed 7 March 2025]; 'Free Resources', *The Wildlife Trusts*, n.d <<https://www.naturefriendlyschools.co.uk/free-resources>> [accessed 7 March 2025].

<sup>989</sup> Brendan Montague, 'Poorer Pupils Suffer 'Nature Gap'', para. 10.

<sup>990</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*; Joeline Hughes and others, 'Age and Connection to Nature: When is Engagement Critical', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 5 (2019) <[https://repository.essex.ac.uk/23602/52/Rogerson\\_ms1%20-%20for%20author\\_edited%20-%20with%20copyright%20statement.pdf](https://repository.essex.ac.uk/23602/52/Rogerson_ms1%20-%20for%20author_edited%20-%20with%20copyright%20statement.pdf)> [accessed 27 February 2025], p. 5.

<sup>991</sup> Hughes and others, 'Age and Connection to Nature', p. 6.

<sup>992</sup> Focus Group 1 with the author, 29 March 2023; Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, May 2024.

<sup>993</sup> Samantha Booth, 'Natural History GCSE Stalls After Official Block', *Schools Week*, 13 September 2024 <<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/natural-history-gcse-stalls-after-official-block/>> [accessed 7 March 2025].

<sup>994</sup> Patrick Barkham, 'Department for Education Confirms Launch of Natural History GCSE', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2025 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/21/departement-for-education-confirms-natural-history-gcse>> [accessed 27 March 2025].

Being aware of the lack of provision for pupils of this age, we were keen to include them in our activities. We worked with a tutor at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College (SGS), to take a group of music and sound recording students onto Selsley Common to record skylark song. On arriving at the meeting place, the students (who were aged between sixteen and eighteen) were quiet and withdrawn. I explained about skylarks and their song and spoke briefly about the Common. Once again, some students had not previously visited the Common and those that had seemed to have little or no knowledge of its wildlife. They were each given a hand-held recording device and then 'set free' to roam the paths, listening for and recording sounds they heard. Despite this being quite far into the academic year, it was the students' first experience of outside sound recording; hitherto they had spent their time solely in the studio or classroom. After an hour, the students who returned to the van were far more engaged and talkative, keen to tell me what they had seen and heard.<sup>995</sup>

In addition to the students from SGS, we also ran an activity for the Rodborough Youth Group, which had requested a bat talk and walk. I feared that the evident excitement of the attendees, brought about by walking in the dark with loudly screeching bat detectors, may result in the young people learning and retaining very little about the Common or about bats. I was therefore somewhat amazed to receive an email from the Youth Group leader a couple of days later with some brilliant feedback from parents, who had been regaled after the event with stories of bats and bat habitats.<sup>996</sup>

From these limited contacts, it seemed that people in this age group were inspired and excited by their encounters with the other-than-human world. Despite the

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<sup>995</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, June 2023.

<sup>996</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, September 2023.

social, cultural, and life-stage influences that may limit young peoples' encounters with the other-than-human, they would, it seems, benefit from being empowered, in tandem with teachers and youth leaders, to experience such encounters.

#### *7.2.7: The Final Brood: Immersive Workshops, Photography, and Between Sky and Earth*

The final brood of events were aimed at those who might not be able to, or might not want to, visit the Commons for whatever reason, or those not engaged by traditional SVP offerings of wildlife-themed information and education. These activities were primarily led by creative facilitators *Periscope* who, from our first meeting, had enthusiastically understood the programme's objectives and were convinced of its value. A key driver of this phase was to try to bring the Commons into the town, rather than expecting people to go to the Commons themselves. We planned to offer a variety of experiences, including a series of immersive creative workshops, an online photography competition, drawing workshops, and a week-long art exhibition.

A 2020 poll undertaken for the UK government showed that, whilst just over half of people said they had visited a museum or art gallery in the previous twelve months, these percentages fell markedly according to socio-economic background and ethnicity.<sup>997</sup> For example, those in manual and routine occupations, those living in localities with multiple deprivation indexes, or those from black ethnic groups visited museums far less often than those in administrative and professional occupations, those living in areas with fewer deprivation markers, or those with white or mixed ethnic backgrounds.<sup>998</sup> The most common reason for not visiting galleries and museums was

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<sup>997</sup> 'Museums - Taking Part Survey 2019/20', *National Statistics*, 16th September 2020  
<<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-museums/museums-taking-part-survey-201920>> [accessed 20 March 2024].

<sup>998</sup> *Ibid.*

the person was ‘not interested’, followed closely by ‘not having time’.<sup>999</sup> To counter this, we were keen for the planned creative activities to reach out to communities, capturing audiences that may not be inclined to visit the Commons or a curated artistic space. To support our ambition to bring the experience of the Commons into the town and engage those put off visiting a museum or gallery, we originally planned to procure workshop and exhibition space in an empty retail unit in the town centre. I agreed with C3a’s feeling that ‘maybe educating people about what Rodborough Common is needs to not even happen on Rodborough Common’.<sup>1000</sup>

In common with many others up and down the UK, Stroud town centre has many empty shop premises, with twelve retail spaces vacant in February 2023.<sup>1001</sup> In the past, *Periscope* had been able to use empty shop premises free of charge, so we did not include the cost of venue hire in the bid. Despite past success and multiple empty premises, *Periscope* struggled to find a venue. This left us facing the second half of our programme with no venue for the two main events due to take place. Fortunately, the Museum in the Park stepped in to allow us to use their garden pavilion for our creative workshops, and the Stroud Heritage Trust allowed us to use the disused Chapels of Rest in the town’s cemetery for our exhibition, both free of charge. Whilst these were both great spaces for the aesthetics of the events, and we were very grateful for their use, they did not, unfortunately, help to overcome the objections that some might feel to joining activities at a museum or having to make a special trip out of town to visit an art event (the town’s cemetery being located at the top of a hill outside the town centre). Despite the objections some might feel towards attending events at a

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<sup>999</sup> ‘Museums - Taking Part Survey 2019/20’, *National Statistics*, 2020.

<sup>1000</sup> C3a, interview with the author, 30 March 2023.

<sup>1001</sup> James Felton, ‘All the Empty Shops in Stroud Town Centre’, *Stroud News and Journal*, 3rd February 2023 <<https://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/23297494.empty-shops-stroud-town-centre/>> [accessed 20 March 2024].

museum or making their way out of town, both the creative workshops and the exhibition were well attended. The latter, taking place in the well-known Chapels of Rest (Fig. 7.2.7.1) that are usually not open to the public, proved a particular draw, with casual passersby calling in to see the building and viewing the exhibition whilst they were there. However, the disused state of the building did undoubtedly cause extra work for *Periscope* (Fig. 7.2.7.2)!



Figure 7.2.7.1: The Chapels of Rest, Bisley Road Cemetery, viewed from Rodborough Common  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission



Figure 7.2.7.2: Emily prepares the disused Chapels of Rest for the *Between Sky and Earth* exhibition  
Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham

The free-of-charge immersive creative workshops took place at the end of the skylark breeding season in August. They included: listening to recordings of people talking about their relationship with the Commons as well as a skylark folk tale; adding to a group story about the Commons; painting or drawing using natural inks and materials (Fig. 7.2.7.3); making a cyanotype picture; modelling in clay; viewing grassland plants under a microscope; and completing a questionnaire where attendees envisaged themselves occupying the 'landscapes of the lark' as an animal, vegetable, mineral, elemental, or mythological being. This latter resulted in individuals imagining themselves as crows, cattle, plants, weather, soil, fossilised sea creatures, and a variety

of mythological beings.<sup>1002</sup> Participants were given space and time to engage with the activities on offer in a relaxed and open way (Fig. 7.2.7.4). *Periscope* skillfully set up the room so that participants could both encounter the ‘others’ of the Common and become entangled with them in an embodied way (Fig. 7.2.7.5). Despite not being located in the town centre, around 400 people participated in the workshop activities, and we received very positive feedback from those who took part.



Figure 7.2.7.3: Drawing the Commons  
Source: Periscope © Periscope Reproduced with permission

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<sup>1002</sup> For examples see: ‘Inhabiting the Landscapes of the Lark’, *Stroud Valleys Project*, n.d  
<<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607bc3d09f6f9a4d161b5da2/t/654a3a988a51074b4d09a44e/1699363489390/Inhabiting+the+Landscapes+of+the+Lark+3.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2024].



Figure 7.2.7.4: Relaxing in the Landscapes of the Lark, August 2023  
Source: Periscope © Periscope. Reproduced with permission

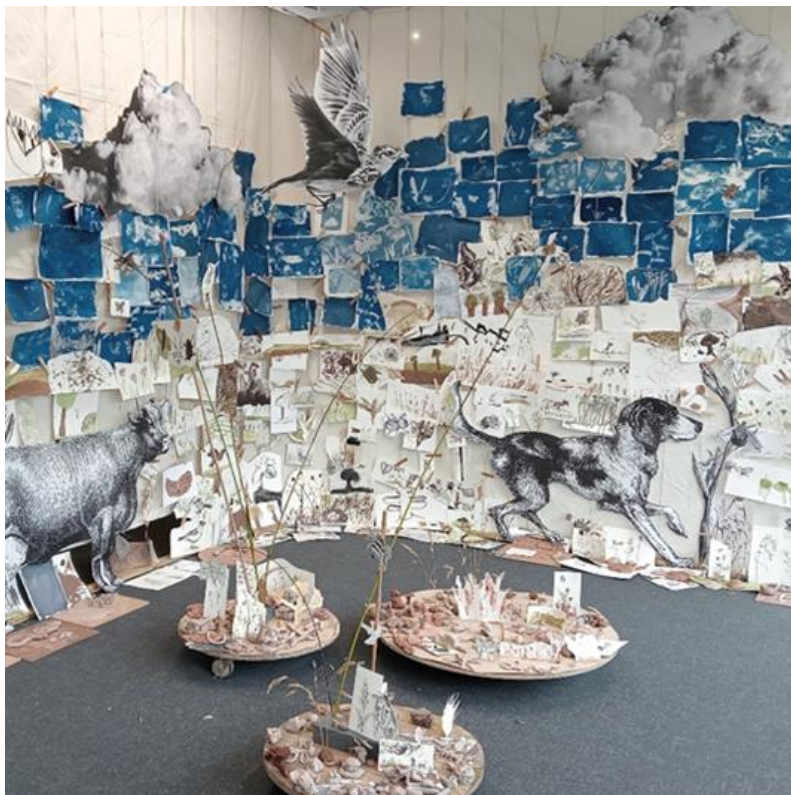


Figure 7.2.7.5: Bringing the Commons into the town. Participants output from creative workshops, August 2023  
Source: Periscope © Periscope. Reproduced with permission

The workshops were attended by a wide range of age groups, with the adults who visited enthusiastically joining in activities alongside younger visitors. Materials were carefully chosen to provide a tactile connection with the Commons. The workshops offered an embodied experience and a way to connect to the Commons and their other-than-human lives without having to visit the physical space. By enabling an imaginative and tangible encounter, we hoped to move beyond knowledge sharing, to co-created world-making. The participatory nature of the workshop allowed us to co-create a microcosm of the Commons' more-than-human lives, illustrating the principle that 'methods don't just describe worlds, but make worlds'.<sup>1003</sup> We were unable to question participants directly on their experiences, but reading through some of the questionnaires on 'inhabiting the landscapes of the lark' suggests people felt able to imagine themselves as another and articulate the connection of this 'other' with the Common.<sup>1004</sup> Those who participated in this activity certainly decentered the human; in fact, humans were conspicuous by their absence from this activity. The range of responses to all activities indicated attendees felt inspired by the imaginative invitations offered, although the absence of humans from this imaginative space may indicate an incomplete appreciation of their role in the landscape or a relishing of the chance to absent humans from the scene.

Alongside preparations for the immersive workshops, *Periscope* invited contributions to an exhibition, which, inspired by Aristophanes' larks, they named '*Between Sky and Earth*'. Artists were asked to consider themes relating to 'shared public space, cultural representations of larks and what they symbolise, commons and common land, negotiations of urban and rural commons, sky and earth, liminal spaces,

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<sup>1003</sup> Bastian, 'Introduction: More-than-human Participatory Research', p. 2.

<sup>1004</sup> 'Inhabiting the Landscapes of the Lark', *Stroud Valleys Project*.

our relationship to place, contested spaces, and grassland ecologies'.<sup>1005</sup> More than 200 artists responded, with works from the local area vying with those from the wider country and beyond for space. Forty-one works in a variety of media were chosen, including films, photographs, sculptures, paintings, textiles, turf, 3D prints, and others which defy easy categorisation (Fig. 7.2.7.6, 7.2.7.7 and 7.2.7.8). All were designed to provoke engagement with multi-species encounters, sharing spaces, stories, myths, and ideas of contestation and commons. Around 500 people visited the exhibition over the week, and it concluded with an evening performance by several of the artists and a local dancer whose work was inspired by the skylark. A copy of the *Between Sky and Earth* exhibition catalogue can be found in Appendix 7 (printed version only).

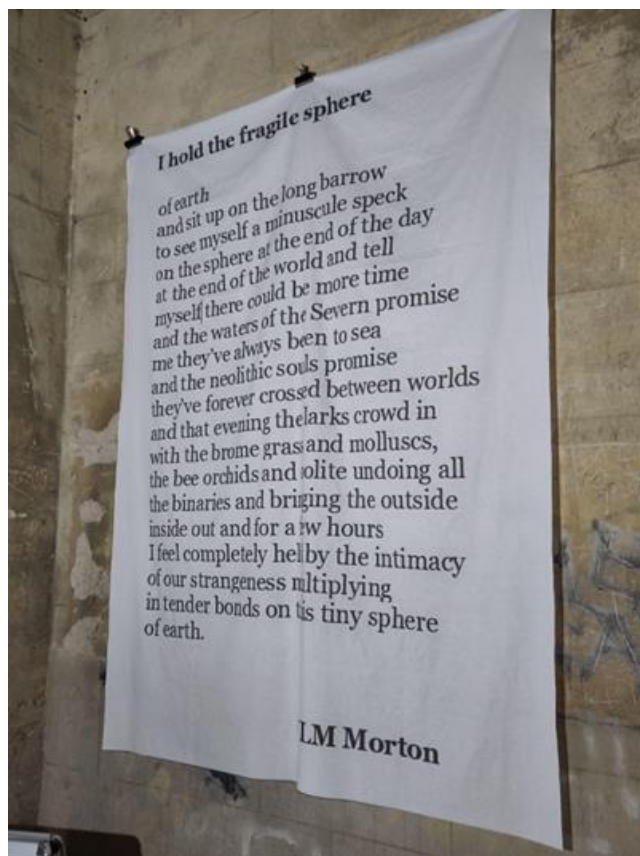


Figure 7.2.7.6: JLM Morton, *I hold the fragile sphere* (2023)

Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham. Image reproduced with permission of JLM Morton

<sup>1005</sup> 'Open Call - Between Sky and Earth Exhibition', *Periscope*, 9 June 2023

<<https://periscopics.wordpress.com/2023/06/09/open-call-between-sky-and-earth-exhibition/>> [accessed 20 March 2024].



Figure 7.2.7.7: Stella Jane Yarrow, *A Place Called England* (2018)  
 Source: Author's Photograph © Sharon Gardham. Image reproduced with permission of Stella Yarrow



Figure 7.2.7.8: Various works at the *Between Sky and Earth* exhibition  
 Source: Author's photograph © Sharon Gardham<sup>1006</sup>

<sup>1006</sup> Including from top left to bottom right: Colin Glen, *White Shadow Pine*; Camilla Stacey, *Edge of the Earth*; Rachel McDonnell, *Rodborough II*; Alanna Gray, *Microcosm*; Delpha Hudson, *As Infinitely Boundless*

I did not systematically gather experiences from attendees. Some of those who completed an entry in the visitors' book shared, however, that they had found it 'magical and real', 'fascinating and thought-provoking', 'very immersive', and 'completely inspirational'.<sup>1007</sup> As with the immersive workshops, we were able to embody the spirit of the Commons in a different environment. As it turned out, the 'unmade' nature of the empty chapel was ideal for this in a way that a clean, bright gallery would not have been. Common land and its more-than-human inhabitants provided fertile ground for imaginative responses that embodied ideas of inter- and intra-species sharing.

#### *7.2.8: Flying the Nest: LotL Lessons*

The range and breadth of activities undertaken during LotL allowed us to engage with people of all ages and interests in exploring connections between humans, places, and other species. As I hoped, an invitation to explore the 'Landscapes of the Lark' was an engaging idea that received an enthusiastic response from colleagues and members of the public. At the project's conclusion, I was easily able to demonstrate direct engagement with over 2000 people, suggesting that programmes with a range of participatory activities are successful in reaching wide audiences. Numerous others were also reached via print and online media, and radio broadcasts.

During the festival, we went beyond sharing information to offer various embodied experiences that encouraged and allowed a decentering of the human. The plight of the skylark and its Commons home was communicated and understood but

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*as the Human Heart*; Freya Gabie, *Difficult Maps*; Stella Jane Yarrow, *A Place Called England*; Rachel Johnston, *Wheatfield Flight 1*; Victoria Rose Richards, *It Will Grow Back Eventually (and it always will)*.

<sup>1007</sup> 'Visitor Comment Book', *Between Sky and Earth Exhibition*, Stroud Valleys Project, September-October 2023.

this did not seem to lead to worry or expressions of eco-anxiety from participants. The positive, participative way the message was shared allowed care and concern to be expressed, without accompanying disengagement or feelings of powerlessness. The fact that we were not able to secure premises in the town centre may have limited our ability to reach audiences who may be put off by museum or gallery settings. As we did not collect demographic information on participants, it is hard to judge the impact of the eventual location. Finally, we did not have the scope to fully engage in evaluating participant experience, in particular the impact of the festival on levels of care, knowledge, and resulting cultural eco-literacy.

In summary, LotL broadly achieved its overall aims to engage a wide audience in a variety of activities that refocused attention from humans to other species, emphasising the shared nature of the Commons. However, time and financial constraints prevented some of these activities from reaching their full potential. The range and breadth of activities also proved to be a constraint in such a time-boxed programme of events, particularly given the relatively small number of resources available. Critically, measures of success, beyond the most basic quantitative ones, were not easy to design or implement in the time available, leaving questions about increases in ecological literacy or long-term alteration to behaviour amongst participants largely unanswered. Future projects of this breadth and scope would benefit from a larger number of people working on them, a longer planning and implementation period, and clearer ways of recording and reporting on participant experiences. Ideally, ideas and activities would be co-created upfront with a wider range of people, allowing them to be focused on areas that were most likely to gain good engagement. Finally, funding application processes that recognise the value of multi-disciplinary modes of engagement on shared lands would allow activities to be more focused on funder

priorities, improving the chances of favourable bid outcomes.

### 7.3: Storying the Commons

Whilst the LotL festival was focused on co-creating and sharing stories of the Commons using a range of methods, human and other-than-human, we did not have an explicit storytelling element. Given the specific power of storytelling to engage the imagination, as detailed in Section 2.5, this was potentially a gap. I was, however, able to take advantage of an opportunity to engage in co-creative storytelling in academic settings. The first of these opportunities came through participation in the Bath Spa University doing together 24 symposium. During the symposium, I ran a collaborative storytelling workshop that transported attendees through the Common's deep-time journey, before inviting them to envision the Common's future. During the workshop, I used key narrative elements to compose a story that would 'generate intimate connections between all involved; listener, teller, and the place of telling'.<sup>1008</sup> My narrative was designed to excite the imagination and to provide 'permission' for any and every response to the questions 'what does the future hold for Rodborough Common?' and 'why is the Common an important place for humans and other species?'. I was also able to examine the impact or lack thereof of my attempts to decenter the human from Rodborough's story (see Appendix 5 for a transcript of the story of Rodborough Common used in the doing together 24 workshop). I took advice from Gersie and others on the maximum number of participants, the workshop structure, and the process for carrying out story-based problem-solving provocations.<sup>1009</sup>

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<sup>1008</sup> Alida Gersie and others, 'Introduction' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp 15-53 (p. 20).

<sup>1009</sup> Gersie and others, 'Introduction', pp. 15-54.

I began the workshop by reading excerpts from Claire North's *Notes from the Burning Age*, a novel that imagines a post-climate apocalypse future where notions of reciprocity are based on fear, rather than love, joy, or inherent feelings of kinship.<sup>1010</sup> I then paused and asked participants how the excerpts made them feel, before introducing a provocation that asked what future relations built on love, joy, and kinship, *without* fear, might feel like. This is in line with Salisbury's advice to 'feed the story', by introducing a 'pause at particular points and invite the listeners to offer up an image or a moment within the narrative which has caught their attention'.<sup>1011</sup> I used sound, visual aids, and room set up to recreate as much as possible, a fireside-type setting where participants could sit in a circle surrounded by the subject of the story (Fig. 7.3.1).

I took the listeners on a journey through Rodborough's environmental history, creating characters from its past and present. I included sounds and stories of the Common's more-than-humans, including wind, land, birds, humans, farmed other-than-humans, companion animals, and trees. I used my voice and performance along with images and audio, allowing 'moments of mirror-neuron empathy and identification' to add 'liveliness, depth and meaning to the story'.<sup>1012</sup> All elements were intended to provoke reflectiveness amongst workshop members. This reflectiveness allowed participants to experiment and be playful with their responses, to have an immersive experience (as much as possible in an indoor academic setting) and to feel involved and engaged in the storytelling process.

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<sup>1010</sup> Claire North, *Notes from the Burning Age* (Orbit Books, 2021).

<sup>1011</sup> Chris Salisbury, 'Feeding the Story' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 168-179 (p. 171).

<sup>1012</sup> Kelvin Hall, 'The Forgotten Tongue' in *Storytelling for Nature Connection*, ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022) pp. 294-303 (p. 298).



Figure 7.3.1: *Storying the Commons* workshop, Bath Spa University, doing together 24 Symposium, 5 April 2024

Source: Jakup Knap. Reproduced courtesy of Bath Spa University

Once I had shared the stories of Rodborough’s past and present, using the perspectives of different Commons beings, participants were asked to split into two groups, come up with their own means of telling the story of Rodborough’s future, and relay this back to the other group at the end of the session. A third of the workshop time was allowed for listeners to devise and share their vision of Rodborough’s future. The active participation of those who attended the workshop helped to improve their listening capacity and encouraged a more personal involvement, which in turn ‘fed’ the stories that we were co-creating.<sup>1013</sup> I did not dictate the form of the group work and the two groups approached the activity differently, with one working as a team, whilst the other came up with individual narratives they combined at the end (Fig. 7.3.2).

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<sup>1013</sup> Salsbury, 'Feeding the Story', pp. 174-175.



Figure 7.3.2: Envisioning the future of Rodborough Common, doing together 24 Symposium, 5 April 2024  
Source: Jakup Knap. Reproduced courtesy of Bath Spa University

The first group's response focused on the large blue butterfly, with the butterfly of today writing a postcard full of hope and good wishes to the butterfly of tomorrow. The second group focused on the changing social, ecological, and political contexts of the Common, creating a future landscape very different from the one we see today, with far more emphasis than the other group on human experiences of these changes. It was interesting that, for one group at least, the post-climate apocalyptic vision relayed in the passages from 'Notes from the Burning Age' proved more engaging than the provocation to be joyful and hopeful in thinking of the future. The reasons for this could be related to the strength of Clare North's storytelling powers, the different approaches taken to the group work, or the individuals involved. Whilst the future stories told were quite different, what was clear from observing the conversations that led to these outcomes was that my narrative of the Common had been understood and absorbed.

Nalau and Cobb found that establishing a connection to place was important in enabling future visioning.<sup>1014</sup> The fact that participants felt able to occupy future realms, extending in some cases into the distant future, suggests I was able to vivify Rodborough in this remote-from-the-Common setting. This is in contrast to the researcher-led interviews I carried out for this project where, when I asked interviewees, who largely had a strong existing connection to Rodborough ‘what does the future hold for the Common?’, they found the question difficult or uncomfortable. The process of sharing a narrative from different entities’ perspectives and granting ‘permission’ for imaginative responses, no matter how seemingly outlandish, yielded better results than asking a straightforward question.

This approach was also the basis for my participation in the Commoning Beyond Growth event at Nottingham Trent University in June 2024. My original intention was to repeat the doing together 24 workshop structure, but the format of the event could not accommodate this. Instead, my offering was compressed into a fifteen-minute presentation (see Appendix 6 for the script), followed by a Q&A session alongside other presenters. The absence of opportunities to allow participants to have an immersive experience augmented by sound, image, and room layout made a tangible difference to the success of the interaction, with the audience much more passive in the process. As a result, responses were noticeably more muted, and confined to traditionally academic discourse, with questions focusing on the process, rather than imaginings of the Common’s future.

Whilst these two interactions cannot claim to be an extensive test of the storytelling approach, with other factors such as audience expectation, composition,

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<sup>1014</sup> Johanna Nalau and Gemma Cobb, ‘The Strengths and Weaknesses of Future Visioning Approaches for Climate Change Adaptation: A Review’, *Global Environmental Change*, 74 (2022), pp. 1-15 (p. 8).

and engagement all playing a part in the differing responses, they do suggest that narrative or place on their own are insufficient triggers when attempting to provoke imaginative future thinking. Simply asking the question ‘what do you think the future holds?’, particularly in the context of a researcher-led interview, is also unlikely to yield the best response. Preparing the ground for such a question by sharing imaginative narratives is more likely to instill the confidence necessary to allow future visioning. Additionally, room setting, employing means of engaging multiple senses, limiting the size of groups, and providing opportunities to participate actively are also key in eliciting imaginative responses. In all settings where future visioning through storytelling is attempted, setting, workshop structure, and approaches to inviting participation are important factors influencing the outcomes.

#### **7.4: Situating Cultural Eco-Literacy**

In Section 2.5, I explored the thoughts of a range of scholars on overcoming human species isolation and engendering greater care and advocacy for our other-than-human neighbours. As described in Section 2.5, the equation leading to this goal’s widespread achievement might be simplified and summarised as (Knowledges + Ability to Process and Retain Knowledges) + Care = Enhanced Cultural Eco-literacy (Fig. 7.4.1). Cultural eco-literacy in this context goes beyond empirical knowledge of environments and ecosystems to encompass recognition of the enmeshed nature of more-than-human coexistence, leading to an emotional attachment to places and other beings.<sup>1015</sup> It allows for biocultural senses of places and other beings that recognise the validity of alternative non-human ontologies and accepts that these, despite being ultimately

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<sup>1015</sup> Monty Hempel, ‘Ecoliteracy: Knowledge is Not Enough’ in *Governing for Sustainability*, ed. by Lisa Mastny (Worldwide Institute, 2014), pp. 41-52 (p. 42).

unknowable, are, nevertheless valid and relevant. Knowledge in this context is polycentric, encompassing vernacular and cultural knowledge that is shared between generations, species, and communities.

Cultural eco-literacy also enables a recognition of the claim of other-than-humans to space in the world, leading to more equitable inter-species relations. Embracing the claim of other-than-humans to their space in the world involves the not-inconsiderable challenge of overcoming notions related to human domination and superiority. However, the accumulation of such knowledges, let alone the ability to make the imaginative leap necessary to recognise other-than-human ways of being, assumes there is an interested and engaged audience waiting to participate in the process. Finding such an interested and engaged audience becomes an increasingly difficult challenge in the face of self-perpetuating holes in knowing and encounter as other-than-human species decline, spaces for unmediated connections are reduced, and ‘extinctions of experience’ become more widespread.<sup>1016</sup>

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<sup>1016</sup> Robert Pyle, ‘The Extinction of Experience’, *Horticulture*, 56 (1978), pp. 64-67 in Stephanie G. Schuttler and others, ‘Bridging the Nature Gap: Can Citizen Science Reverse the Extinction of Experience?’, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 16.7 (2018), pp. 405-411 (p. 405).

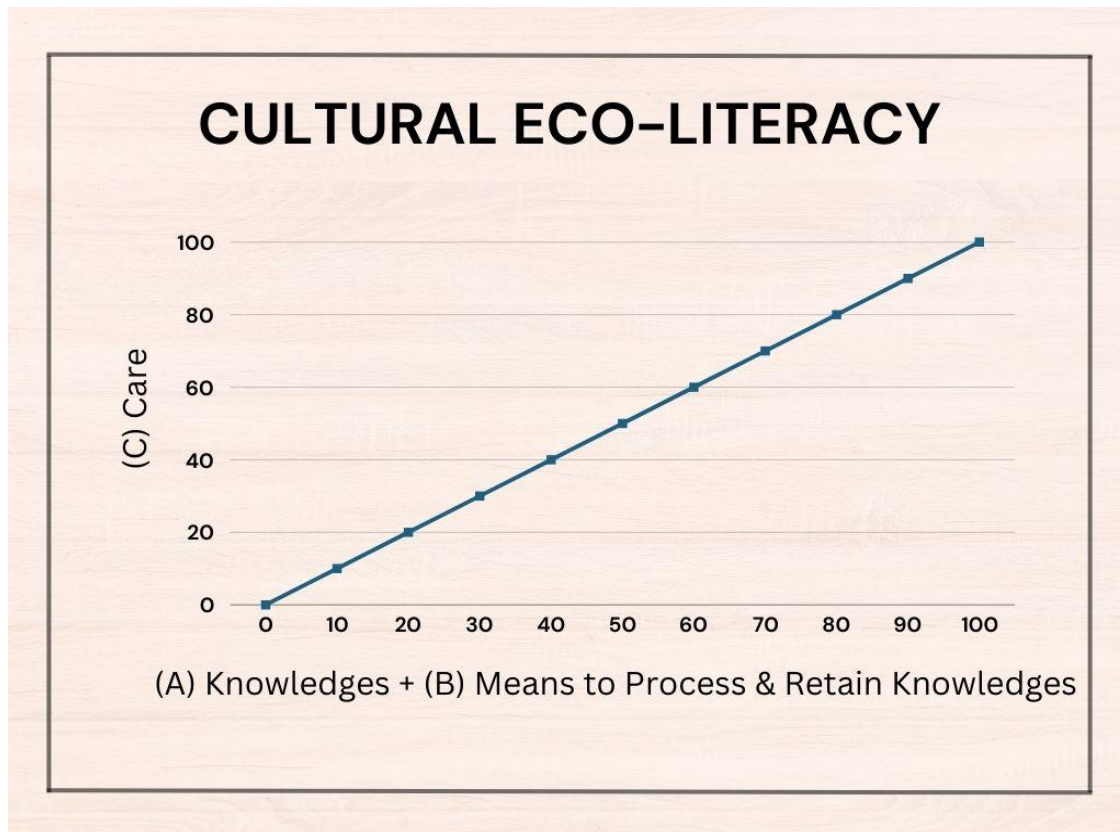


Figure 7.4.1: How to achieve cultural eco-literacy?  
Source: Author © Sharon Gardham

Given this, I analysed interviews and interrogated my encounters with programme participants during LotL and StC for indications of cultural eco-literacy, evaluated the degree to which participants demonstrated it, and sought out its origins. I also examined which engagements might have proven most effective at encouraging or embedding cultural eco-literacy amongst LotL or StC participants. As previous chapters have made clear, many of the individuals who participated in this project showed a great deal of care and concern for the Common and its multi-species lives, but levels of cultural eco-literacy varied. For programme participants the range of cultural eco-literacy was even more diverse and pronounced. Land managers and conservationists were most likely to demonstrate higher levels of cultural eco-literacy, as defined in Fig. 7.4.1. Residents and interest group representatives had varying levels of knowledge about other-than-human commoners and demonstrated varying degrees of care. For

interviewees and LotL participants, the opportunity the Common offered for an embodied learning experience allowed knowledge to be physically rooted in a particular place, giving the Common the potential to evoke emotional as well as intellectual engagement. For some participants, caring, embedded in place-attachment, resulted in a desire for knowledge, which, when combined with an embodied means to retain knowledge, led to cultural eco-literacy. This was not, however, a linear progression, but rather fed itself in a self-fulfilling cycle (Fig. 7.4.2). In short, the more people cared, the more they wanted to know and remember. The more they knew and remembered, the more they cared, and so on. Activities ‘that involve their hands, head, heart, and spirit’, such as those described in Section 7.2.7 seemed to have the most profound impact on festival participants.<sup>1017</sup>



Figure 7.4.2: Cycle of cultural eco-literacy  
Source: Author. © Sharon Gardham

The starting or finishing extent of knowledge and care demonstrated by LotL or StC participants was not, however, systematically recorded, as I explained in Section 7.1 and

<sup>1017</sup> Jon Cree and Alida Gersie, ‘Storytelling in the Woods’ in *Storytelling for Nature Connection* ed. by Alida Gersie and others (Hawthorn Press, 2022), pp. 54-73 (p. 57).

7.2. These programmes did, however, afford me an opportunity to engage with a wide range of individuals, from those with little or no experience or knowledge of the Commons and their multi-species lives, to those who had either extensive prior knowledge, or a strong desire to obtain the same. Irrespective, the variety of activities offered, as well as the choice and range of venues that hosted events afforded an opportunity to broaden the reach and appeal of the Commons and share their wonder more equitably. Informal feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and the number of repeat attendees coming along to multiple events suggested that the programme was engaging and prompted a desire for further knowledge and connection with the Commons and their other-than-human lives. The LotL programme also encouraged new engagements with SVP, some of which have persisted beyond the life of the project.

Given that care could be the primary instigator of a desire to increase knowledge, leading to increased levels of cultural eco-literacy, I was particularly interested in the triggers for care. For many of those interviewed, their care was located in a complex web of individual and shared memories, ethics, values, and life experiences. Care for the Common was demonstrated in most encounters, but this is perhaps not surprising, given the self-selecting nature of participation in the project (i.e., only those with an interest in Rodborough Common volunteered to take part). Levels of care did vary, however, and the reasons for people's levels of care were more complicated. These reasons were situated in personal experiences, family connections, knowledge, and types of interaction, entangled in encounters with others. One of the key determinants of philosophies of care in the interviews I carried out was, therefore, the memories associated with Rodborough Common.

Often the shared nature of memories, whether through direct experience, or awareness of shared cultural histories, was key to the strength of these connections.

These experiences were reliant on an embodied interaction, firmly rooted in a physical place where the challenges of sharing resources and spaces with others, human or otherwise, were tangible. Given the inherent inequality of land access across the UK, to say nothing of the apparent intangibility of some global environmental challenges, it is not always possible to root environmental care in a physical location. When problems and places are distant or detached from the everyday reality of people, they can become occluded.<sup>1018</sup> This occlusion can be even more pronounced when those people and places are located in the future.<sup>1019</sup> To provoke deeply connecting experiences that engender care we therefore need to remove reliance on an embodied experience in a specific physical location. Once care has been initiated, a desire for further knowledges, and the seeking of a means to retain and act on them, can follow. It was this desire and belief in the urgent need to facilitate wider human/other-than-human connection that drove the design and delivery of, in particular, the LotL festival. Again, it was not possible to measure any change in levels of care demonstrated by participants in a quantitative way. However, the many conversations I had with participants who expressed their joy, connection, and wonder during and after events suggest that such imaginative and wide-ranging programmes can be effective triggers of care for the other-than-human world.

Another important component of promoting care is the promotion of spaces where communities can come together in equitable ways to share stories that can then become entangled, thereby highlighting our intrinsic enmeshment. We require sites, physical or virtual, where different peoples can find 'new forms of dialogue, new

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<sup>1018</sup> Hempel, 'Ecoliteracy', p. 46.

<sup>1019</sup> Johanna Nalau and Gemma Cobb, 'The Strengths and Weaknesses of Future Visioning Approaches for Climate Change Adaptation: A Review', *Global Environmental Change*, 74 (2022), pp. 1-15 (p. 9).

varieties of collaborative research, new channels of communication, and new ways of disseminating the results of our [collective] efforts'.<sup>1020</sup> To capture as many imaginations as possible in envisioning an expanded 'good neighbourhood' a range of methods must be employed and opportunities for active engagement need to be made available to humans of all ages, backgrounds, and preferences. As shown in Sections 7.1 and 7.2, such active engagements can be enabled by a variety of practical and intellectual pursuits that highlight our enmeshments in a more-than-human world.<sup>1021</sup> My experiences of running the LotL festival suggest that co-creating a 'Story of the Commons' and including other-than-humans in this co-creation, can promote enduring connections and attitudes of care.

## **7.5: Countering Eco-Anxiety**

When seeking to expand attitudes of care, we must also, however, be aware of the potential to cause harm. As levels of eco-literacy increase, there is a danger that increasing understanding of the parlous state of the world may result in increasing levels of eco-anxiety.<sup>1022</sup> This anxiety can lead to feelings of powerlessness, and ultimately, to disengagement from issues that may seem overwhelming or beyond the ability of individuals to influence or alter.<sup>1023</sup> For example, apocalyptic narratives, whilst likely to increase awareness of environmental problems in the short term, are not necessarily helpful when seeking to bring about longer-term changes in levels of

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<sup>1020</sup> Hannes Bergthaller and others, 'Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities', *Environmental Humanities* 5.1 (2014), pp. 261-76 (p. 273).

<sup>1021</sup> Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior, 'Environmental Aesthetics: A Synthetic Review', *People and Nature*, 2.2 (2019), pp. 254-266 (p. 255).

<sup>1022</sup> Panu Pihkala, 'Eco-Anxiety' in *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, ed. by C. Parker Krieg and Reeta Toivanen (Helsinki University Press, 2021), pp. 119-133 (p. 123).

<sup>1023</sup> Maria Ojala and others, 'Anxiety, Worry, and Grief in a Time of Environmental and Climate Crisis: A Narrative Review', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 46 (2021), pp. 35-58 (p. 44).

care.<sup>1024</sup> As I carried out the analysis of interviews and observed those taking part in the Lotl festival, I was alert to the possibility of participants displaying symptoms of eco-anxiety. I also considered whether there was a correlation between high levels of eco-anxiety and high levels of cultural eco-literacy.

The land managers I interviewed demonstrated a deep-seated attachment to the Common, coupled with a strong sense of personal responsibility for its care; attitudes that were mirrored in interviews with conservationists. Both groups demonstrated high levels of eco-literacy, but there was a key difference between them: whilst the former had an active outlet for their sense of responsibility via their work on the Common, the latter did not. The inability to actively influence or be involved in practical care for the Common appeared to lead to frustration, feelings of loss, and signs of eco-anxiety that were not present in interviews with land managers. Whilst land managers did express concerns about the future of commoning, these were, to an extent, counteracted by their belief in the commitment of the graziers, rooted in centuries of tradition. The conservationists, on the other hand, seemed to feel they were, in some cases, relegated to watching the Common be abused and degraded, without the means to prevent this degradation. Some conservationists had been involved in providing empirical evidence of the pressures experienced by the Common, but could not actively carry out the measures they felt were needed to mitigate these. This, understandably, led to frustration, anxiety, and worry for the future of the Common's other-than-human lives. Residents and interest group representatives also expressed some concerns about the future of the Common, but these were more diverse and tended to be situated in their particular experiences, for example, worries about the

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<sup>1024</sup> Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén, 'Four Problems, Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene', *Ethics and the Environment*, 20.1 (2015), pp. 67-97 (p.77).

continued openness and outlook of the Common, about building development, or about more specific issues such as littering and dog fouling.

My research findings suggest there are different levels of engagement: those who care, have knowledge, and feel empowered to directly influence outcomes; those who care, know about issues, but experience anxiety and frustration due to their inability to address those issues; and others, who may care and have some awareness of issues, but do not find their interactions with the other-than-human world overshadowed by this awareness despite not having the ability to actively address issues themselves. These delineations are not, however, fixed, and individuals can move between tiers, particularly when they become aware of specific problems. For example, one of the residents I interviewed shared in a later social interaction that, as their knowledge grew, on visits to the Common they could only see what was wrong with it, not what was right.<sup>1025</sup> For members of the purely advisory MRCAC, knowledge without the power to significantly influence outcomes can, and has, led to frustration and disengagement.<sup>1026</sup> When planning means and methods of engagement with the wider public, it is important to consider this tiering and its potential to impact subsequent behaviour and actions. Care, followed by education and knowledge, can lead to increased cultural eco-literacy, but this can be coupled with frustration and feelings of loss if there is no outlet for that knowledge and care, which can lead to disengagement. This would suggest that, to be effective, activities designed to increase care and knowledge need to be combined with a degree of self-determination over ways to put the resulting cultural eco-literacy to use. The ability to offer opportunities to put increased cultural eco-literacy to practical use was limited in the LotL and StC

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<sup>1025</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

<sup>1026</sup> Ibid.

programmes. However, future programmes of engagement should consider offering such opportunities for active rectification and mitigation of human-induced harm in order to counter any eco-anxiety that awareness of and caring about environmental challenges may provoke.

## **7.6: A Common Relationship**

My own experiences over the course of this project have been reflective of that evidenced in my study participants, and to a lesser degree, by participants in the LotL and StC programmes. My journey to greater cultural eco-literacy began in earnest with my enrollment in the MA Environmental Humanities course at Bath Spa University in 2019. That I was already environmentally engaged is potentially suggested by my choice of this Masters course over all others on offer. Despite this, my understanding of the hazards facing the Earth and my complicity in inflicting this harm were vastly developed through my learning during that first tumultuous pandemic year. Feeling overwhelmed by the issues I learned about, particularly once in-person contact became so limited, I was fortunate to be able to secure part-time employment with Stroud Valleys Project (SVP). This employment gave me a sense of agency and an ability to counteract my feelings of complicity in relations of harm, albeit in a localised way. As I mentioned in the introduction, my relationship with Rodborough Common began in childhood and developed through adulthood to one of fondness. As I became professionally involved with the Common, however, my perspective shifted.

Since moving to Stroud in 2000, I had enjoyed visiting the Common, to walk, admire a sunset, or meet friends. However, my awareness of the others with whom I shared this space was limited. As I learned and experienced more, in line with my study participants, my understanding deepened, and so did my level of care. The

more I learned, the more I cared and the more I experienced the pain of visiting the Common and seeing it damaged or degraded. I despaired of others, whose lack of knowledge, or care, led to behaviours that disrespect the principles of living in 'good neighbourhood'. As my wider environmental understanding grew, it allowed me to place the Common in its global contexts, which compounded my fears for its future sustainability.

I have sometimes dealt with this by absenting myself from the subject of my focus, not wishing to experience the powerlessness that comes with thoughts of the seemingly overwhelming challenges faced by the Common and the wider world. Bastian and others advise that a focus on the symbiotic relationship between species can allow for a subversion of the divide between researcher and researched.<sup>1027</sup> Allowing for and celebrating this symbiosis then opens the possibility for research to be co-created across species divides. In this way, my entanglements with others fed and consumed my research for this project in a self-perpetuating cycle. Adopting Bastian's approach has allowed my attitudes to evolve via these entanglements, allowing me to become both researcher and researched.<sup>1028</sup>

This approach has meant that the further I travelled through this project, the more at peace with the Common I became. This is not due to disengagement, or blind optimism, but rather, placing the Common in its historic and deep-time contexts allows me to appreciate its dynamic and ever-changing nature. There is no point in the past or present at which the Common's habitat could be considered 'optimal'. If, for example, I had lived 500 years ago, I may have lamented the loss of the common wood,

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<sup>1027</sup> Michelle Bastian and others, 'Introduction: More-than-Human Participatory Research: Contexts, Challenges, Possibilities' in *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds*, ed. by Michelle Bastian and others (Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-16 (p. 6).

<sup>1028</sup> Bastian, 'Introduction: More-than-Human Participatory Research', p. 6.

not only due to the lack of timber now available but also because of the loss of my sylvan neighbours. I may have known nothing of the habitat to come; the grassland that flourishes each spring into a glorious display of multi-species abundance. Here, at this time, I know nothing of the next phase of the Common's long life, or how it will evolve in the centuries that follow.

This inability to predict the future does not, however, mean that I should abandon feelings of care, or that I believe the Common should be left to its own devices, to 'rewild' or turn into a full-on dog park. The former would deny the important role of humans in the Common's development and cultural history; the latter would disrespect the needs of free-living others to have equity of opportunity to thrive. I can, therefore, accept the inevitability of change alongside a wish to support the Common's current multi-species lives via my appreciation for my role as one in a long line of commoners, whose care and commitment have played an intrinsic role in the Common's survival.

An appreciation of the advantages I enjoy due to the efforts and care of past commoners inspires me to 'pay it forward' for the commoners to come. Reconciling the potentially diametric forces of change and conservation allows the principles of revitalising and extending 'good neighbourhood' to steer away from attempts to maintain a status quo nested in a nostalgic vision of a mythologised rural past. Rather, this reconciliation allows for the possibility of agency and care for all current and future commoners, avoiding exploitation of resources by a few in the interests of the equity of the many. Finally, the agency with which I have been endowed, in terms of my employment at SVP, and my ability to undertake this project, have given me an outlet for my grief, and an opportunity to counteract some of the relations of harm in which I am complicit.

Jenkinson reminds us that 'connection is honed through relationship, not

birthright; it is cultivated through non-exclusive practices of care'.<sup>1029</sup> It is in the exercise of non-exclusive practice of care that a twenty-first century common has the advantage over its feudal predecessors. It is no longer birthright or property ownership that makes someone a 'commoner' but rather our relationships with one another and with the few remaining areas of communal land which still exist thanks to our multi-species ancestors caring for and protecting these spaces. If we all recognise ourselves as commoners, we by default become invested in the sustainability of our shared resources.<sup>1030</sup> This widening of the definition of 'commoner' allows attitudes of care to be shared more equitably, with each person invested in reciprocal care with their neighbours. By extending care to multi-species commoners and indeed extending the definition of commoners to all who have a vested interest in encouraging mutual thriving, we open the door to a more equitable attitude of care. My recognition of this has allowed me to move past despair to acceptance and a little hope.

Not everyone, however, will want or have the opportunity to undertake a journey such as mine. To enable acceptance and hope more widely, accessible means of empowering and enabling connections need to be made more readily available. Multi-species shared spaces like commons can play a vital role in providing models of equitable engagement, thus providing such opportunities, directly or indirectly. Once again, however, we see that commons are too few, and too unevenly spaced. The limited opportunities we have to fully engage with the 'other' in an attitude of parity creates risks for those with whom we share these limited spaces. Wider access and creative means of encountering the other, such as those described in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 are,

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<sup>1029</sup> Harry Jenkinson, 'Kinship' in *Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You*, ed. by Nick Hayes and Jon Moses (Bloomsbury, 2024) pp. 81-95 (p. 89).

<sup>1030</sup> Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict and Ecology* (MIT Press, 2014), p. 132.

therefore, urgently needed to foster improved inter- and intra-species relations.

## 7.7: Conclusion

When devising activities for LotL and StC, I was, first and foremost, conscious of the need to respect the ‘etiquette of an interspecies encounter’.<sup>1100</sup> Uncovering what this etiquette is involved paying close attention to the ways other species communicate their wants and needs. In the case of skylarks and the Common’s plant life, my prior involvement with ecological surveying permitted a close study of how different species behave when interacting with humans, or with human companion animals. The knowledge gained from this close study guided me to consciously design activities that were not unduly disruptive to other species even when these took place on the Common. When interactions did take place on the Common, I explained to participants the ‘etiquette of an interspecies encounter’ that was required.<sup>1101</sup> Beyond this, I focused on working with collaborators to co-create interventions that could take place elsewhere, thus not adding to visitor numbers on the Common, or directly interacting with its other-than-human inhabitants.

By foregrounding the skylark as the focus of the LotL festival and beginning my account in Section 7.2 by paying close attention to them, I invited a decentering of the human and an acceptance of alternative plant, animal, and elemental ontologies. This liminal species, with their long enmeshments with human culture, provided an ideal gateway to forging multi-species connections. Understanding such multi-species enmeshments can potentially take us outside our narrow sphere of experience and promote feelings of kinship across the species divide. The success of this

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<sup>1100</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), p. 192.

<sup>1101</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 192.

approach is perhaps evidenced most clearly by the responses to LotL's immersive workshops, where individuals were able to imagine themselves as a wide variety of Commons dwellers, taking them beyond their human experience. Beyond this invitation to embrace alternative perspectives was a desire to follow Cree and Gersie's suggestion to engage participants in activities 'that involve their hands, head, heart, and spirit'.<sup>1102</sup> Many activities were hands-on and all were, to varying degrees, participative. Even activities that might be considered passive, such as visiting the art exhibition, focused on providing an immersive experience. The Common, and its multi-species commoners, became active in this process, collaborating with event attendees to co-create knowledge and connections.

Additionally, interventions and activities for the LotL festival and StC workshops were meant to reach out to people, bringing the Commons to them, rather than expecting them to visit the Commons. The range of activities, and the degree of interaction with them, showed that it is possible to provide an embodied, immersive, participatory experience without physical proximity to a place or other-than-human persons. By using imaginative and wide-ranging experiences, we extended a sense of belonging to the Commons and pushed the boundaries of their 'good neighbourhoods' beyond their geographical borders. Participants in the LotL festival were offered an embodied experience of the Commons, whether they were physically located there or not, giving those who might not want or be able to visit an emotive, yet informed experience. The difference in audience response between the immersive, interactive StC workshop I ran at the doing together 24 symposium and the passive, mono-sensory experience of the Commoning Beyond Growth event, indicates the importance of

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<sup>1102</sup> Cree and Gersie, 'Storytelling in the Woods', (p. 57).

setting, approach, and creativity when seeking effective ways of imagining and co-creating more-than-human stories.

Environmental Humanists and others who design future engagements with the goal of achieving greater multi-species understanding should concentrate, wherever possible, on having a broad, actively participative appeal, without diluting their primary purpose. Considering the barriers to participation I explored in Section 7.1, in order to reach outside the already nature-conscious echo-chamber, programmes of engagement should take events to communities, be creative about the venues in which they are hosted and inclusive in the activities offered. As discussed, as ‘extinctions of experience’ self-perpetuate, engagement programmes that empower educators and other communicators to confidently speak with and of the other-than-human world are of primary importance.<sup>1103</sup> Furthermore, by employing creative and inclusive methods these programmes can make it possible to pay the close attention and listening necessary for acceptance of other-than-human needs and agency, without increasing direct impact on the species concerned, or the places where they live.

My findings suggest that Environmental Humanities activities, when combined with inter-disciplinary offerings such as citizen science, can have the requisite broad appeal. Future programme designers should also consider adding opportunities for participation in designing and carrying out active conservation activities; this would have the double advantage of countering any eco-anxiety triggered by increased care and benefiting other-than-human homes. Practitioners of the Environmental Humanities are well placed to work with others from allied disciplines to create multi-species, inter-disciplinary projects of this kind.

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<sup>1103</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 142.

Unfortunately, judging the overall impact of these activities on enduring levels of cultural eco-literacy or eco-anxiety was not possible within the remit of this project. Proving causal links between participating in activities and changes in attitudes and behaviours is difficult; mid-to-long-term measurement of change even more so. Finding a transferable way to do this consistently and effectively would make it easier for projects to target activities to those most effective in encouraging greater cultural eco-literacy.

Whilst there seems to be a recognition of the need for cultural and creative engagements with the environment and an appetite amongst funders and the public for events and activities that cross species and disciplinary boundaries, the perceived intangibility of the deliverables and their resulting outcomes mean that project benefits can be hard to quantify. In a highly competitive funding environment, a greater understanding of outcomes would give mixed-disciplinary projects such as LotL a greater chance of funding success. Furthermore, considerable time and expense are involved in preparing and submitting project bids, particularly when a degree of creativity is required to fit project formats into funding models that are not designed flexibly. This may make it difficult for small charities or community organisations, who may not have the resources or expertise to compile bids, to successfully gain funding. For future mixed-disciplinary projects with similar aims to the ones described here, the establishment of a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) framework for measuring the impact on individuals' cultural eco-literacy and levels of eco-anxiety brought about by participation in events and other activities would be useful, as would a more nuanced understanding of the demographics and prior ecological knowledge of attendees.

Despite the absence of formal ways of measuring the impacts of the LotL

project, as the 2024 skylark breeding season got underway, I kept an eye open for debate in the local press and social media about the vulnerabilities of skylarks and the actions people can take to protect them. There was lively debate on social media and elsewhere regarding the issue, supported by additional signage on the Common from the Trust (Fig. 7.7.1). My conversations with conservationists involved with the Common, members of the MRCAC, and members of the public indicate these debates have continued into the 2025 breeding season.<sup>1104</sup>



Figure 7.7.1: National Trust signs on Rodborough Common advising visitors to keep dogs on leads  
Source: Paul Gardham © Paul Gardham. Reproduced with permission

Stroud District Council also made the unusual move of featuring skylarks in their annual newsletter for 2024 which is distributed to every household in the district. This was widely shared on social media (Fig. 7.7.2). Whilst it is hard to draw a direct causal link between LotL and this heightened public awareness, there seemed to be a marked increase in spontaneous conversations on the matter, with the majority

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<sup>1104</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*.

soundly (and sometimes vehemently) finding in favour of skylarks over the ‘rights’ of dogs to roam off-lead during the nesting season. This increase was also noted by SVP’s CEO, who firmly attributed the change to LotL.<sup>1105</sup>



Figure 7.7.2: Stroud District Council publicity regarding Selsley Common’s skylarks  
Source: Stroud District Council Facebook Page. Reproduced under Facebook’s Fair Use policy

The examples of engagement projects presented in this chapter suggest a broad range of participants can be engaged when activities are creatively approached, correctly located, and involve a wide range of participatory options. As with many projects of this nature, the lasting impact of these isolated programmes of engagement is hard to judge. Opportunities for individuals to foster longer-term connections

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<sup>1105</sup> Sharon Gardham, *Field Notes*, April 2024.

through participation in designing and implementing active conservation measures may have provided an enduring legacy from LotL, but these were not within its scope. The findings of this chapter suggest that seeking ways to embed long-term connections, along with an effort to bestow an understanding of our agency and situatedness as one in a long line of past, present, and future commoners, would help to engage, repair, and nurture multi-species 'good neighbourhoods'.

## 8. Becoming Good Neighbours

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene  
Nor fence of ownership crept in between  
To hide the prospect of the following eye  
Its only bondage was the circling sky

John Clare, *The Mores*

I began this thesis by asking how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable multi-species relationships. Using Rodborough Common as a still-living example of the ‘unbounded freedom’ Clare describes, I asked how we can find places where the ‘only bondage was the circling sky’ in a modern world where individualism and profit-motivation encourage ongoing enclosures and the degradation of our Earth commons.<sup>1106</sup> Working from the common land principle of ‘good neighbourhood’, which recalls the customary relations between neighbours that ensured equitable and sustainable sharing of resources, I asked whether this idea might be revitalised and extended to all more-than-humans.

My aim in this thesis was to exploit the opportunity offered by my involvement in active conservation on common land, alongside my academic studies, to develop an applied Environmental Humanities project. By making the study wide-ranging, I have been able to bring multiple disciplines into dialogue around a single focus, Rodborough Common. This has allowed me to derive findings that cross academic boundaries, testing them in applied settings. As detailed in Section 7.6, my experiences

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<sup>1106</sup> Excerpt from John Clare, ‘The Mores’, ‘Poems of the Helpston Period’ in *John Clare Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-204, (p. 167).

of using my research findings in applied settings then fed back into my academic viewpoints, and vice versa. This has allowed me to create a situated ‘thick description’ of Rodborough and its multi-species commoners.<sup>1107</sup> The results contribute to the academic disciplines the study touches and provide advice that can be applied by practitioners in the fields of conservation, public engagement, and policy.

This study specifically contributes to the field of the Environmental Humanities in several ways. By providing a detailed, multi-species, relational study of a single common, it adds to the case study literature for common pool resources, highlighting Rodborough’s congruence, or otherwise, with Ostrom’s principles of good CPR management. In particular, it brings together the stories of past and present commoners, of all species, to examine how and why Rodborough survives as a successfully managed common resource, allowing us to draw lessons from these experiences that can be applied more widely. Additionally, it brings different disciplines from across the Humanities and Social Sciences into dialogue to address its research aims, allowing and inviting a decentering of the human and demonstrating the innovative methodological approaches needed in our time of environmental crisis.

The thesis also considers the wide-ranging debates around the need for greater human/other-than-human connection and how these might be enabled, placing these in their historical and current contexts. It goes beyond logistical considerations to examine cultural, individual, and societal constructions of the land. By relating the experiences and constructions of English common land to wider questions around resources and sharing, this thesis also challenges us to see the Earth as the commons it surely is, and for us all to view ourselves as ‘commoners’ with the privileges and

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<sup>1107</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, ‘Thick Description: Methodology’, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 24, 2 (2015), pp 291-293 (p. 291).

obligations this implies.

Finally, it provides examples of applied Environmental Humanities programmes of public engagement that include good practice and lessons learned that can be applied to future endeavours.

In this chapter, I bring its key findings together to address the thesis' overarching question: how the model of English common land can inform and inspire the development of equitable and sustainable multi-species relationships. I conclude by briefly suggesting areas for further study.

### **8.1: Becoming Good Neighbours**

When considering how historic and contemporary stories of the commons might inform our understanding of inter- and intra-species sharing, reciprocity, and kinship, we see Rodborough Common demonstrating a successful and sustainable land use that flies in the face of prevailing attitudes of individualism and profit-motivated growth. Despite the overwhelming imperatives that led to the loss of vast swathes of common land, in particular during the past three centuries, some have, like Rodborough, survived, although their future is still perilous. The continuation of commons as open, multi-species communities, despite centuries of assault on their existence, defies those who claim they are inherently unsustainable; that the overwhelming urge of humans is to over-exploit for selfish gain. As I showed in Chapter 4, commons such as Rodborough are living proof of the efficacy of shared identity, purpose, customs, and autonomy in maintaining successful CPRs.

My findings show that Rodborough Common inspires feelings of kinship, care and sometimes passionate advocacy for the land, its *genius loci*, and its multi-species commons communities. These, combined with a strong tradition of active care,

ensure that it is as well-managed as it can be under current pressures and constraints. As discussed in Chapter 5, its shared nature is often key to attitudes of care, giving each user or visitor the potential to feel inherently invested in its sustainability; a strong sense of personal responsibility rooted in the care of past generations of commoners.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, successful commons such as Rodborough show congruence with some, if not all, of Ostrom's principles (as described in Section 3.2). The idea that shared spaces will become overused and overexploited due to the selfish nature of humans who universally have a base instinct to acquire at the expense of others does not stand up to scrutiny, either in the case of commons like Rodborough, or on land used more generally for recreation. As we face human population pressures, scarcity of resources, and increased demand on land to support greater human need for food and recreation, we may be tempted to further limit, to control, to restrict. What the findings of this thesis suggest, however, is that this attitude is antithetical; that such an approach in fact stimulates increased competition for limited resources, which leads to their overexploitation, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Given the current issues the world is facing, some may argue that reality is already very much with us. What the model of commons suggests, as demonstrated on Rodborough, is that equitable sharing, where many benefit and profit motivations are abandoned, can lead to attitudes of care and concern that go beyond the intellectual or moral to tap into deep rooted senses of responsibility and connection. That such attitudes can exist in spite of the dominant capitalist contexts in which they operate suggests that actually the core of human nature is to share, to come together in communal endeavour, and to live in attitudes of reciprocity.

As increasing pressure on the land manifests, we should plan for more equitable sharing, not less. Land use planning and frameworks would do well to recognise the

potential of sharing, both inter- and intra-species, to foster care, belonging, and responsible use; all of which are urgently needed in an increasingly fragmented world. This equitability must, however, extend to the other-than-humans with whom we share our planet, for reasons moral, ethical, and practical. Making space for connection, encouraging feelings of buy-in and responsibility, and understanding that the root of these lies in highly individualised ways of knowing is key to the success, or otherwise, of such an approach.

With regards to how encouraging greater multi-species contact, based on the model of English common land fosters opportunities for improved multi-species relations, it is important to consider the features of Rodborough, and places like it, that make it particularly supportive of this endeavour. My findings suggest that these include rich biodiversity that offers multiple opportunities to encounter other-than-human neighbours, the working aspect of common land that enables a connection with the labour of farmers and farmed, and long traditions of communal activity and care. These aspects are variously vital in building the layers of identity and place attachment necessary to promote support and advocacy. Rodborough Common is also a site of shared and individual rituals which help to build and cohere communities. Its equitable openness enables all to join this cohesion be they long-term dwellers, newly arrived residents, or fleeting visitors. Working lowland commons like Rodborough can, therefore, act as sites of inter- and intra-species encounters, which can facilitate mutual understanding and may help repair damaged planetary relationships.

This thesis presents and celebrates the relational nature of commons described above, recognizing that they exist within a web of complex contexts: individual, societal, and environmental. This relationality stretches present 'realities' to encompass the past, including deep time, the future, and a myriad of different ways of knowing, both human

and otherwise. Whilst in this thesis I have presented a range of personal, professional, rational, and emotional experiences of the Common, I also recognise that these are viewed through my own, highly relational, lens. Any attempt to grasp these 'realities' and present them as a definitive view is, therefore, futile; they are simply too dynamic, existing in a multitude that changes minute by minute. Despite this, I do attempt to draw commonality of experience between different individuals, contexts, and species and use this to inform conclusions that have academic and practical implications. I have achieved this by blurring disciplinary boundaries, using a wide range of sources to collate and analyse, and being unconstrained in my approach to what is considered a valid source. Doing this, whilst maintaining academic criticality and rigour, encapsulates the critical realism position that I occupy, present and advocate for in this thesis.

In this approach there is an inherent recognition that 'reality' does not need to be constrained to just those things which can be described; that those things which we glance in our peripheral vision, or cannot conceive of at all, have validity, despite their inherent unknowability. This is not, however, a constraint. Rather, it is an enabling force that enriches our view of the Common, and the wider world, keeping us curious, excited, and connected to those others with whom we share this space. To solely occupy the room allowed for by a single ontology skews our perspective, condemning us to a narrow hermeneutic viewpoint that constrains and prevents the imaginative leaps needed to challenge the dominant hierarchies that are proving so damaging to intra-and inter-species relations. Whilst community, connectivity, and coming together encourage moral considerability and equitable sharing, allowing for, celebrating and embracing the myriad ontologies of other beings within that community enriches, rather than denudes. The shared memories that communities can then build are wider, more encompassing, and more enabling of understanding and connection. In this thesis, I

found that such shared memories, and the stories we use to communicate these, are key to care, advocacy and mutual respect.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, the contribution that common land makes to human and other-than-human wellbeing is largely disproportionate to its size and distribution. Ambitions to further lean on commons to widen human participation in rural recreational pursuits and enable human/other-than-human connection puts them at further threat of overuse; of exceeding their recreational carrying capacity. That commons are in many cases exceeding their recreational carrying capacity is not the fault of those who use them. Rather it is a failure of provision, support, and imagination, which are the result of centuries of systematic exclusion. That more space for recreation is needed is reflected in ambitions to improve access to blue and green space for underserved populations. However, these ambitions must be backed by financial and policy frameworks that support landowners to willingly share more of their spaces, assured that this will not bring about the destruction of their businesses, rather than increasing the reliance on already over-subscribed and unevenly distributed common lands.

When discussing access restoration the recreational value of common land, and the crucial difference in terms of the potential it has to enable connections, compared to a carefully managed urban park, or a walk on a constrained footpath, are important considerations. As I showed in Section 5.6, an important aspect of place attachment for Rodborough's human commoners is the feeling of being free and unconstrained which defines the experience of visiting and increases positive senses of ownership and feelings of belonging. Replicating this on other land types where there are centuries-long traditions of exclusion would require a significant cultural shift in attitudes towards private property amongst landowners, policymakers, legislators, and

the wider public.

As considered in Chapter 6, overlooking the key differentiators found on common land, the often very personal feelings that make up place attachment, and the shared cultural memories that instil a sense of identity and belonging to lands like Rodborough Common may mean that any access restoration would fulfil only a fraction of its potential. One place should not be assumed to be automatically interchangeable with another, meaning what makes an 'Alternative Natural Greenspace' 'Suitable' is highly complex.

Many arguments for greater access to the countryside focus on the mutual benefits of increased multi-species contact. Greater 'nature' connection and spending time in blue and green spaces is well recognised as a route to improved human health. When other species are considered in these arguments, there is sometimes, however, an assumption that greater inter-species contact will automatically result in improved human/other-than-human relations that will benefit both. Rodborough's example suggests that this argument has three main flaws. Firstly, as I outlined in Section 4.6, the assumption that all those who come into contact with other-than-human lives in a passive way understand, respect, and wish to care for them, ignores incidences of poor behaviour during multi-species encounters. Secondly, as discussed in Section 7.1, it does not account for the *quality* of the experience, which, to maximise its potential needs ideally to be active engagement that highlights our multi-species enmeshments and promotes extensions of kinship. Finally, as I discussed in Section 5.7, it is based on the troubling assumption that contact with any type of land in any place can encourage kinship and advocacy for the other-than-human world.

This highlights the role ecologies of place found on English common land can play in encouraging wider love, care, and advocacy for multi-species communities.

As with all ecologies of place, the Common's is constantly and dynamically evolving. It is alive with agential co-creation, human and other-than-human; an interactive, creative, multi-species cacophony of materiality, identity, culture, and community. There are, therefore, complex reasons why individuals feel obligated to care for certain places and share them equitably with others. Understanding the nature of shared and individual attachment to place, the processes that form multi-generation place-memory, and the role of *genius loci* in feeding each of these is, therefore, key to understanding the roots of care.

Furthermore, whether place attachment to Rodborough is a force for good or ill is not binary. As discussed in Section 6.6, love and care engendered by place attachment and nostalgia can be a positive force, but this must be rooted in present realities. Attempts to harness and evoke a sense of place and nostalgia more widely must be rooted in a good dose of realism; a John Clare-style appreciation for the wonders of co-creative agency, rather than a passive appreciation of a mythical rural idyll. The analysis presented in this thesis suggests, however, that many people are aware of the dangers of indulging in baseless nostalgia and understand the inherent conflicts and challenges involved in managing shared lands like Rodborough Common. The examination of the historical and current human interactions with Rodborough Common presented throughout this thesis exposes the push, pull, and constant vigilance that is necessary for the Common to continue to function successfully as a communally farmed space. Desires to regain an imagined past, a nostalgic vision of when the land might be considered to have been 'optimal', are, therefore, founded on culturally constructed, and highly individualised, illusions.

Countering these potentially harmful constructions with realities that can still inspire meaningful connection is where multi-disciplinary approaches, informed by

the Environmental Humanities, can be deployed. Carefully constructed, imaginative and wide-ranging programmes can help to enable imaginings and narratives that can extend the English common land model of 'good neighbourhood' more widely. As we strive to reconnect humans with their planetary partners and overcome our crippling species isolation, we must reach out to humans who have lost the tradition of connection.

By enabling inter- and intra-species connection within communities, programmes of engagement, as described in Chapter 7, can work to trigger care for the other-than-human world by highlighting our enmeshments. Shared spaces where acts of embodied care in collaboration with our multi-species 'good neighbours' can take place, can counter any eco-anxiety created by greater awareness of environmental challenges. These should work in cohort with educational programmes, policy, and legislation to recalibrate human and other-than-human connections. The combination of creative engagement and active knowledge-sharing, backed by legal protections that can be accessed and administered locally and dynamically, can help in the ambition to turn human/other-than-human relations from ones of exploitation and consumption to those of kinship and care.

The disproportionate contribution that commons also make to habitat conservation also supports the view that more such spaces are needed. Common land has the potential, if more evenly and equitably distributed, to play a significant role in the landscape-scale recovery needed to halt, and ideally reverse, the decline in free living other-than-human species' abundance and distribution. A patchwork of common lands, traditional and new, could act as 'powerhouses' of nature restoration, providing connectivity between places, people, and other-than-humans. Just as Rodborough Common enables the flourishing of multi-species symbiosis, as described in the story of the large blue butterfly in Section 4.2, more land managed with the same communal

principles, although perhaps not the same medieval legal frameworks, could serve as a model, practical and theoretical, for other nature-rich spaces.

Entangling more spaces in the 'legal thickets' that commons currently operate in does not, however, make good sense.<sup>1108</sup> As Chapter 5 demonstrated, policy and legislation governing commons is often complex and poorly understood, suggesting the need for a new definition of shared communal land resources that is reflective of its modern purposes. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 4.5, common land like Rodborough can experience problems operating effectively in a system of centralised controls and legislation which have their roots in now largely outdated medieval forms of intra-species relations. Greater localised autonomy for commons such as Rodborough and a refreshed legal status that more accurately reflects their current use model may allow better congruence with Ostrom's principles, potentially improving their sustainability in the longer term.

As populations expand and migrate, as cultural memories are diluted, and as actively farming commoners disappear, there is, however, a danger that the memory of Rodborough's centuries of shared care is also lost. With this may go the will and knowledge to help it and places like it to survive and thrive as a biodiverse shared space for future generations. Further losses of actively farming commoners will also have implications both spiritual and practical for the life of the Common. Its continued presence as a vibrant multi-species shared community is, therefore, heavily reliant on increasingly fragile foundations, putting its long-term sustainability at risk.

As shown on Rodborough, farmers and farmed have a vital role to play in the development and care for such spaces. Those farming on common land are, however,

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<sup>1108</sup> Paul Clayden, *Our Common Land: The Law and History of Commons and Village Greens* (The Open Spaces Society 1992), p. 1.

often marginalised and unsupported, continuing to operate solely on the basis of a shared sense of responsibility, encouraged by being one in a chain of commoners who have cared for the land over centuries, rather than due to any professional imperatives.

Whilst this shared identity and sense of purpose is crucial to the successful management of commons, it cannot be relied upon to indefinitely support the future of commoning. The many opportunities commoning offers to connect wider populations with farming, the public with their means of subsistence, the support it offers for the flourishing of free living other-than-humans, and its ability to contribute to the overall mosaic of farming approaches needed in a time of climate crisis, should be supported financially and practically. Schemes to further connect farmers and consumers, to enable a premium 'product' to be produced and recognised, and to give farmers a fair deal that is reflective of the goods that they deliver (physically, culturally, ecologically, and financially) may be crucial for the future of commoning. Failure to offer such support will likely result in the failure of active commoning, with conservation organisations, themselves hard pressed for cash, forced to make a choice between stepping in to fill the gap, or abandoning commons' habitats to their fate.

In summary, common lands can demonstrate workable alternatives to individualism and relations of consumption. These lands can offer space for multi-species communities to come together, coalesce, cooperate, and dynamically form. The often-rich biodiversity and long traditions of cooperation found on common lands, to say nothing of their unbounded nature, make them particularly well-suited to being demonstrable sites of alternative ways of being. Commons, and the more-than-humans they support, are unbounded and free, reminding us of the possibility of the ancient human practice of free-ranging exploration and the care and mutual respect needed to ensure the land's sustainability.

Via commons we can connect with the deep-time origins of our planet and our relative position within its multi-species community, envisaging ourselves as temporary travellers in its dynamic and ever-changing systems. If we extrapolate the experience of commons more widely, by recognising and acknowledging the Earth as a multi-species CPR, we see the fundamental unsustainability of exploiting its resources for the benefit and enrichment of the few. This approach has tumbled the planet into a Hardin-style Tragedy; a self-fulfilling prophecy which is used to justify further resource privatisation. If we instead view ourselves as one in a community of multi-species, multi-generational Earth commoners, we become inherently invested in ensuring its sustainability. By following this route, we can learn to become ‘good neighbours’, living together on a more hopeful, sustainable, shared planet.

## **8.2: Future Projects**

In line with my aim to provide richly contextualised Environmental Humanities scholarship, this project was deliberately and necessarily limited to a deep dive into the history and circumstances of a single, lowland common. Reflecting the need for Environmental Humanities scholars to work across disciplines and seek out creative ways to address environmental challenges, it is deliberately wide ranging, bringing different disciplines, knowledges, and concepts into dialogue around a single focus, in this case, Rodborough Common. Further studies may wish to adopt this approach to carry out case studies of other lowland working commons. This would allow a comparison with the findings from this study. It may, furthermore, be particularly beneficial to carry out this work on ‘failing’ commons (i.e., those that are under immediate threat from a loss of working commoners, biodiversity loss, urban encroachment, or poor management). This comparison would identify the aspects of

Rodborough which specifically ensure its ongoing viability that may be missing from other commons.

Answering the call for a polycentric approach, this study covers a wide range of disciplines, concepts, and ideas. It does not, therefore, undertake a 'deep dive' into any single one of the concepts it covers. More concentrated studies of one or more of the concepts discussed here, focused around a single or small collection of commons, would be beneficial. These could be added and compared to existing studies of upland, coastal, and urban commons, contrasting the different challenges they face and the differing approaches to addressing these.

As communities rally to jointly purchase land under threat of new waves of enclosure, as they have at the Heavens Valley in Stroud, a study to address how such schemes work in respect of fundraising, legalities, stakeholder management, ecological management, and balancing the needs of the same would also be beneficial. Such a study may wish to examine more thoroughly new frameworks of policy, legislation, funding, and management of such new 'commons', created for twenty-first century needs and protected for future generations.

Finally, on a practical note, engagement projects of the kind discussed in Chapter 7 would benefit from a method for recording, analysing, and assessing the impact of participation on event attendees. These methods should cover aspects such as environmental awareness, pro-environmental behaviours, levels of eco-anxiety, and multi-species understanding and advocacy. Covering these aspects and learning from the results would, in turn, help to direct future projects towards the most effective method of engagement, giving them a greater chance of gaining funding and having a lasting impact. A future, discrete project that considers and sets up a data collection, evaluation, and reporting framework that could be used in multi-disciplinary public

engagement projects would, therefore, be beneficial.

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## **Interview Transcripts**

Kate Ashbrook, Open Spaces Society Chair, interviewed with the author, 6 April 2022

C1 interview with the author, 28 April 2022

C2 interview with the author, 31 March 2022

C3a interview with the author, 30 March 2023

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C5, interview with the author, 7 September 2022

C7 interview with the author, 20 October 2022

FG1A - FG1F focus group with the author, 9 June 2023

IG1 interview with the author, 29 March 2023

IG2 interview with the author, 27 April 2022

IG3, interview with the author, 28 April 2022

IG6, interview with the author, 31 March 2023

LM2 interview with the author, 25 May 2023

LM3 interview with the author, 20 October 2022

LM4 interview with the author, 3 December 2022

R4 interview with the author, 28 April 2022

R5 interview with the author, 30 March 2022

R6 interview with the author, 25 August 2022

R7 interview with the author, 4 October 2022

R9 interview with the author, 30 March 2023

R10a interview with the author, 9 March 2023

R10b interview with the author, 9 March 2023

R11 interview with the author, 17 March 2023

R13, interview with the author, 17 April 2023

R14 interview with the author, 10 May 2023

# **Appendix 1: Becoming ‘Good Neighbours’ Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

## **Please tell me about your personal relationship with Rodborough Common.**

What is your personal history/your family’s history with this place?

How do you use the Common? How often do you use it?

How important is the Common to you? Why is it important/not important?

What (if any) are your feelings about the Common?

## **What do you think is the importance (or otherwise) of commons in general?**

What is your understanding of what a ‘common’ is in England and Wales?

What do you think a common is for in the 21st Century?

Are your feelings about commons influenced by your understanding of their historical context?

How important do you think that commons are to local communities?

What (if anything) about commons should be cared for and preserved?

## **What challenges (if any) do you think are currently facing the Common?**

What are these challenges and what might the root cause of them be in your view?

What do you think should or can be done to resolve some of these issues?

How might these things be done?

Who do you think might be responsible for making these changes?

Who or what do you think should be prioritised and why?

What would be an ideal outcome in your opinion? Who or what might stand to benefit?

**How do you feel about the future of spaces such as these?**

What does the future look or feel like for Rodborough Common and places like it?

Do you feel positive or negative about the future of Rodborough Common? Why?

What role do different stakeholders play in the future of commons like Rodborough?

## Appendix 2: Full List of Transcripts and Descriptors

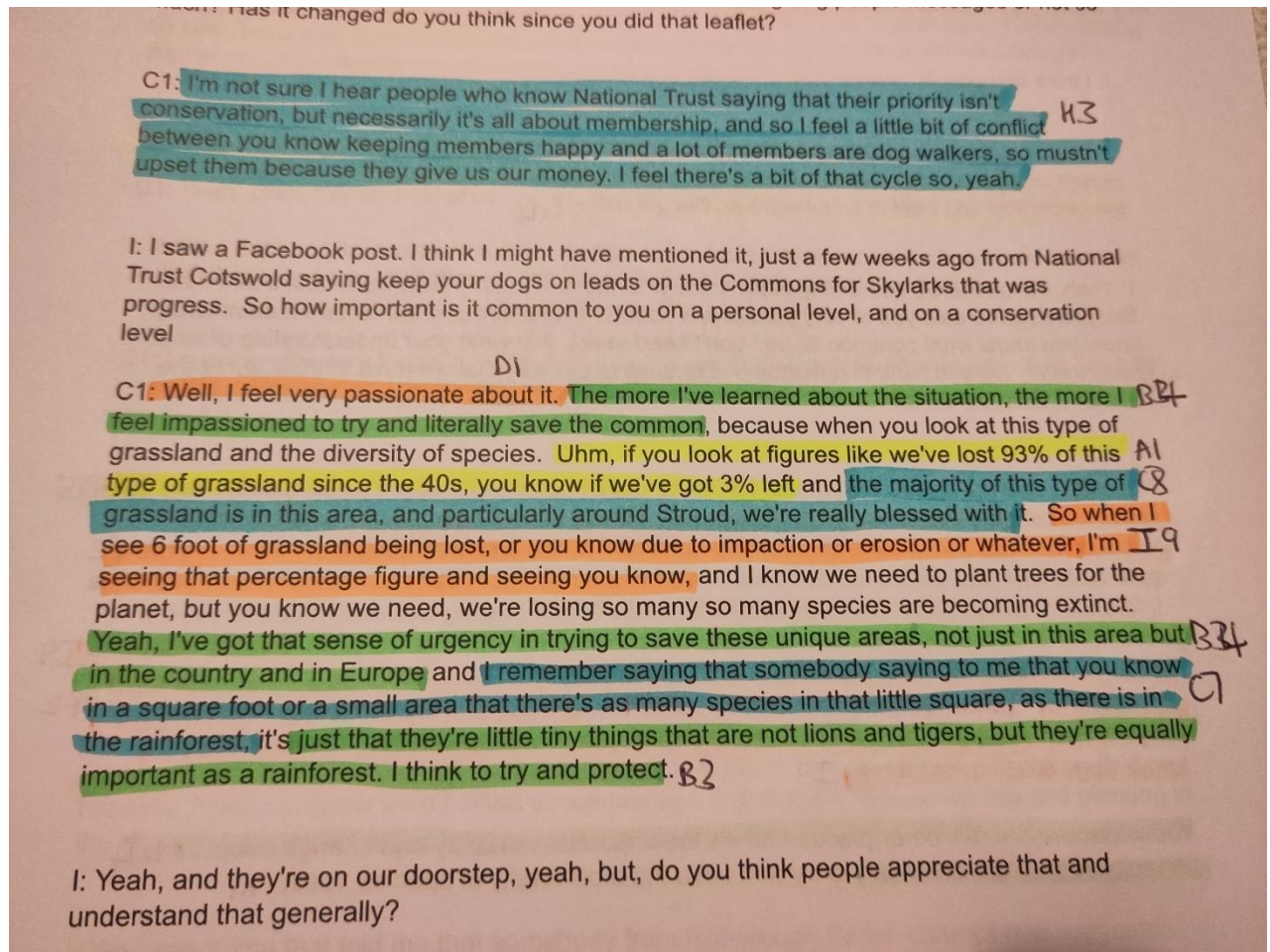
Title	Excerpts	Format of Interaction	Participant Type	Event	Age	Residency Length	Primary Commons Use	Secondary Commons Use
R4 Interview Transcript R4 28.04.2022.docx	52	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	40- 59	>10 years	Commuting	Walking
IG3 Interview Transcript IG3 28.04.2022.docx	86	One to one, in person	Interest Group	Interview	40- 59	Lifetime	Mountain Biking	Spending time with family/friends
LM3 Interview Transcript LM3 20.10.2022.docx	47	One to one, in person	Land Manager	Interview	40- 59	Not resident/visitor	Work	Observation/Surveying
R5 Interview Transcript R5 21.04.2022.docx	102	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	60+	>10 years	Dog Walking	Other
R7 Interview Transcript R7 04.10.2022.docx	113	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	60+	Lifetime	Dog Walking	Spending time with family/friends

C1 Interview Transcript C1 28.04.2022.docx	98	One to one, in person	Conservationist	Interview	40- 59	>10 years	Photography/Art	Observation/Surveying
C5 Interview Transcript C5 07.09.2022.docx	68	One to one, in person	Conservationist	Interview	60+	>10 years	Dog Walking	Work
IG2 Interview Transcript IG2 27.04.2022.docx	46	One to one, in person	Interest Group	Interview	25- 39	Lifetime	Horse Riding	Dog Walking
C2 Interview Transcript 05_05_2022.docx	191	One to one, in person	Conservationist	Interview	40- 59	>10 years	Observation/Surveying	Walking
R6 Interview Transcript R6 25.08.2022.docx	81	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	60+	>10 years	Photography/Art	Exercising
LM4 Interview Transcript LM4 03.12.2022.docx	173	One to one, in person	Land Manager	Interview	40- 59	Not resident/visitor	Work	Spending time with family/friends
C3 Interview	95	Couple, in	Conservationist	Interview	40-	>5 years	Dog Walking	Observation/Surveying

Transcript C3a & C3b 30.03.2023.docx		person			59			
R9 Interview Transcript R9 30.03.2023.docx	39	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	60+	Lifetime	Walking	Spending time with family/friends
IG1 Interview Transcript IG1 29.03.2023.docx	87	One to one, in person	Interest Group	Interview	25- 39	>5 years	Work	Spending time with family/friends
R11 Interview Transcript R11 17.03.2023.docx	78	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	25- 39	Lifetime	Exercising	Spending time with family/friends
C7 Interview Transcript C7 20.10.2022.docx	103	One to one, in person	Conservationist	Interview	60+	>10 years	Observation/Surveying	Walking
R10 Interview Transcript R10a & R10b 09.03.2022.docx	75	Couple, in person	Local Resident	Interview	60+	>10 years	Walking	Observation/Surveying

FG1 Transcript FG1 09.06.2023.docx	48	Focus group, in person	Local Resident	Focus Group	<16	<5 years	Walking	Spending time with family/friends
IG6 Interview Transcript IG6 31.03.23.docx	56	One to one, in person	Interest Group	Interview	60+	>10 years	Walking	Other
R13 Interview Transcript R13 26.04.2023.docx	77	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	25- 39	Lifetime	Walking	Spending time with family/friends
R14 Interview Transcript R14 10.05.2023.docx	34	One to one, in person	Local Resident	Interview	25- 39	>5 years	Walking	Exercising
LM2 Interview Transcript LM2 23.05.2023.docx	101	One to one, in person	Land Manager	Interview	60+	>10 years	Work	Spending time with family/friends
<b>Total Number of Excerpts</b>	<b>1850</b>							

## Appendix 3: Example of Manually Highlighted/Short-Coded Transcript



## Appendix 4: Full List of Themes and Codes

Overarching Concept	Theme Reference	Theme Name	Theme Definition	Underlying Code Reference	Code Subject
Place attachment and nostalgia	A	Big Yellow Taxi	From the Joni Mitchell song of the same name, the theme 'Big Yellow Taxi' relates to feelings and thoughts around losses of biodiversity, connection, community, ways of life, and cultural memory. The name evokes the line from the song 'you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone', and reflects the environmental concerns outlined in Mitchell's lyrics which are still pertinent today.	A1	Loss of or threats to other species
				A2	Loss of or threats to way of life/cultural memory
				A3	Loss of or threats to community and connectivity
				A4	Loss of or threat to the Common due to complacency
				A5	Loss of or threat to the Common's <i>genius loci</i>
				A6	Positive changes
Problems and solutions	B	Your Common Needs YOU!	Adapting the quotation from British WWI recruitment posters featuring Lord Kitchener, this theme covers excerpts relating to the importance of individuals (human and other-than-human) and organisations in caring for the Common.	B1	The role/importance of volunteers
				B2	The role of grazers and graziers
				B3	The role of individuals (incl. feelings of personal responsibility)
				B4	The role of policy and government
				B5	The role of corporations

				B6	The role of the third sector
				B7	The role of the National Trust/landowners
Place attachment and nostalgia	C	Living in 'good neighbourhood'	This theme relates to the role of the common in local identity building, connectivity and community building and how it fosters a sense of belonging. It draws on the traditional notions of communal land management as an exercise in 'good neighbourhood'. At its essence, this theme relates directly to the building blocks of local place attachment	C1	The Common's role in local identity building
				C2	The Common's role in building community and connectivity
				C3	The Common's role in fostering a sense of belonging
				C4	The role of the Common in fostering human wellbeing (physical and/or mental)
				C5	The Common's role in memory-making
				C6	The importance of the Common for other species
				C7	Feelings of luck and privilege due to proximity to the Common
				C8	The common as an attraction/draw
				C9	The Common's heritage and/or historical importance
Behaviour, conflict and 'othering'	D	Oi! Gerroff my Land!	Taken from the 'traditional' cry of those who feel that their land has been encroached upon, or that trespassing is taking place. This theme relates to tales of conflict experienced by subjects, either as instigators or recipients. It also relates to general feelings of pride or ownership, as well as	D1	Feelings of ownership towards the Common

			understandings of what common land ownership is and how it is relevant in today's world.		
				D2	Behaviour regulation - self to others
				D3	Behaviour regulation - others to self
				D4	Feelings of personal pride in the Common
				D5	Correct understanding of common rights
				D6	Incorrect understanding of common rights
				D7	Self-regulating behaviour
Behaviour, conflict and 'othering'	E	England's Green and Pleasant Land?	From Blake's work and the subsequent hymn 'Jerusalem', this theme deliberately seeks to juxtapose romantic notions relating to the countryside with examples of 'othering'. Whilst encompassing codes relating to romantic notions of the rural (e.g. beauty, awe, love) it also contains codes relating to 'othering' and disquiet, between 'locals' and 'incomers', the rural and the urban, and between different generations	E1	'Romantic' descriptions/phrases
				E2	Importance of the Common's outlook (views)
				E3	Rural versus urban
				E4	Incomers versus locals
				E5	Young versus old
				E6	Self versus others
				E7	What's the problem?
				E8	Laying down the law
				E9	Humans versus other species
				E10	Common as a functional space
Place attachment and nostalgia	F	For everyone, for ever	Taken from the National Trust's strapline, this theme relates to the open access status of the	F1	Open access as a negative

			Common; it's importance, the issues it raises, the feelings it invokes. It addresses wider issues of equity; between humans and between humans and other species		
				F2	Open access as a positive
				F3	The importance of open access - to people, to planet
				F4	Space and freedom due to open access
				F5	Threats to open access
Problems and solutions	H	Money Talks	From Rick James' 1982 funk-soul song of the same name, this theme relates to the role of a monetised economy in the past, present and future of the Common. It includes commentary on the challenges of managing a communal, non-monetised land type under the neo-liberal economic model.	H1	Fair trade for Farmers
				H2	Issues created by commodification and capitalism
				H3	Charities as businesses
				H4	Lack of funds/funding
				H5	Inequality and inequity
				H6	Commons as an alternative system
Problems and solutions	I	What's YOUR Problem?	This theme relates to practical issues identified by subjects for example, littering, traffic, parking, etc. The use of 'your' here indicates that what is perceived as a problem is situated according to the individual.	I1	Littering
				I2	Dog walkers/dog fouling
				I3	Mountain bikers/biking
				I4	Traffic - volume/speed
				I5	Parking - inappropriately or volume

			I6	Fires, barbecues, parties
			I7	Volume of visitors
			I8	Path widening/erosion
			I9	Development of built environment
			I10	Trees/scrub incursion
			I11	Grazing animals
			I12	Camping/overnight Parking
			I13	Global environmental concerns
			I14	Horse riders
			I15	Anti-social behaviour

## Appendix 5: doing together 24 Symposium Workshop Transcript

Rodborough Common is a 116 hectare area that sits on top of the Cotswold Escarpment next to the post-industrial town of Stroud in Gloucestershire. It is an area of open access common land that is still communally grazed by local farmers. It is also a popular place for local people to meet, walk, and enjoy being outside.

It is a rare area of unimproved limestone grassland, meaning that it has never been ploughed or artificially fertilised. It supports a range of now rare and declining species including the pasque flower, the large blue butterfly and the skylark. It has multiple conservation designations, including being classed as a Special Area of Conservation, a Regionally Important Geological Site, and a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

It is also a place that is much beloved, with a long history of intra and inter species cooperation, which has supported a mutual thriving over many centuries. However, in our present era of capitalist-driven individualism, increasingly species isolated human populations, and the global environmental crisis, the future of places such as Rodborough Common looks uncertain.

I will begin this session by introducing you to one vision of the future; that imagined by Claire North in her novel, *Notes from the Burning Age*.

I will then introduce you to Rodborough Common more intimately. Reaching back into deep time, we will witness Rodborough's birth, and will travel with it through the ages, meeting some of its inhabitants along the way. After covering more than 200 million years of Rodborough's evolution, we will then work together to imagine Rodborough's future.

In *Notes from the Burning Age*, Claire North imagines a post climate-apocalypse future. In this future, humans live alongside others, paying tribute to the earth and to nature deities called the kakuy who they believe control the earth's fate. Tributes to the kakuy are mediated through the Temple. This is the history of the Burning Age, as taught by Temple scripture. Read page 15-17.

So we see here a somewhat uneasy truce between the forces of humans and the wider forces of nature, sitting in what turns out to be increasingly precarious

harmony. Here a priest from Temple explains why: Read page 54.

So we see here that the traditions by which people live in the future are predicated not on love, wonder, or joy, but instead on fear. This perhaps might be expected from those living with the memory of the reality of the human fall from its supposed position of dominance over all others. From this position of fear, lessons of the fall can easily be erased, making the memory of supposed superiority appealing to some.

In today's session I want you to think about how this might be different if the march of the Burning Age can be averted. Might we be able to live more in gratitude, joy and wonder, instead of in fear? What might this future look like, feel like, and how might places like Rodborough offer us a glimpse of the possibilities?

I am Rodborough Common. I was shaped, formed and gestated in warm, salty waters. Covering my bones was a warm, shallow sea. As time passed the seas became filled with wondrous plants and creatures. The largest predator and the smallest plankton, alongside colourful corals and plants, all lived here nourished by warm waters and sunshine. For generation after generation these creatures played out their daily dramas above my implacable head. Slowly, slowly, their being became one with my own. Father upon fathers, mothers upon mothers, the generations lived, multiplied, died, and added a little of themselves to my whole. Bodies lay on bodies, stem upon stem, slowly becoming one with the earth that had given them nourishment. I was grateful for the gifts of my fellow beings, accepting the offer of their mortal remains to add to my immortal own. Little by little my bare rock was covered and changed until I became as one with those that had once lived above my surface. Time moves inexorably forwards, and as time passed, deeper earth forces became restive. What was sea became land. What had been south was now north. My sea dwellers and I were heaved from the warm waters, and were born as land. As we moved northwards, my newly exposed skin was chilled by sheets of ice that came and covered me with a layer of frozen waters. The ice was far greater and stronger than I. When it melted, its rushing forged valleys around me. As they refroze, the ice came once again, shifting my sea-dwellers skin higher and higher into a spine of rock. Our icy skin gone, we were once again exposed to shiver at the mercy of the wind and the weather.

I am the wind that blows from the west. I bring a warm, gentle caress, or a howling battering gale. I push rain, sleet, and snow before me. I pass the clouds before

the sun. I also bring life. Spores and seeds travel in my tumult, deposited where I leave them. In amongst the crevices and wrinkles of the sea-dweller skin they find shelter and room to grow. Drinking in the rain that I bring, and basking in the warmth brought by the northern sun, they begin to grow. Just as this place was once formed from the creatures and plants of the deep, now it is land-dwellers who add a skin of soil to the bleached and chilled surface. But I am the wind and I am powerful and strong. Rodborough stands tall and turns its face to me in defiance of my might. And so I take the infant soil and scatter it, never allowing it to become too deep. But the mosses, lichens, and liverworts continue to grow in spite of me, showing their tiny tenacity against my awesome will. Each generation leaves a little of itself behind, creating room for more and more, ever larger cousins who slowly march northwards. Gradually their cycles of living and dying, of summer and winter, cover the bare skin. I take them down when I can, but still they grow....

I am tree of the wildwood. My forebears came and colonised this land, bridging the path north before the sea reclaimed it, leaving us on an island. When the bridge still stood, other beings also travelled north with my plant kin. We worked with our insect kin in a symbiotic dance of production and reproduction. Whilst our pollen nourished them, the fruit, nuts and berries we produced together nourished others. Birds and mammals lived alongside us, giving life, taking life, in a self-sustaining cycle. The wind might shake our leaves, but it also spreads our pollen and seeds. It might take some of us down, but this only allows new brothers and sisters to strive for the light that the fallen have left behind. On Rodborough the high wind keeps our leaves from making deep, hummus-rich soils, so our roots, nestling amongst the sea-dwellers of old, are shallow. Together we stand. Divided we fall. The thin soil with its chalky tang gives life to many though. Grasses, herbs and flowers make the most of the spaces where no tree will flourish.

I am auroch of the grove. As trees fall, so grasses grow. Sweet on my tongue, lushous in my nostrils, the rich heady scent of a summer meal nourishes my body. I need plenty of their nourishment, as I have a newborn calf to feed. In amongst these fine grasses, these sun-drenched gifts, she will grow strong and healthy; if she is given the chance. For dangers are many for the grazers of the woodland groves. I am large and so can fight many foes, but she is small, slow and vulnerable. The gifts of the trees may hide her from harm, but they also hide danger. Wolves, humans and bears all lurk in their

depths, ready with tooth, spear and claw to take my little one away. Many I have lost this way. Before long, there will be no more aurochs of the grove. The trees will grow to fill the shadows where we once grazed.

I am human. My ancestors followed the great aurochs northwards. Hunting aurochs and others gave life, food and clothing. But this was a hard, nomadic life, and as time passed, aurochs became fewer, but the land became more friendly. My forebears may have wandered from place to place, but not me. I like it here. Seeds from wild plants can be planted and tamed to feed us. We make spaces in the trees with our axes to give us more room to grow. All of my kin work together to feed the village. Little by little, as the generations pass, knowledge is passed from mother to son, from father to daughter about how to work with the wild plants and animals so that they can be settled here with us. The grazers we once pursued have been tamed into calmer creatures who live alongside us. The boar we once hunted have also become our neighbours. The descendents of the wolf have become our companions. As the generations passed, this land became our land. We buried our dead in great mounds that tell all comers that we belong here. I am here. My ancestors were here. This is my land now. And it is a good land, even when the cold winds blow. Others come and try to take the land for their own, but I, human, will survive. The contract between me and my leader will pass through the generations, until our traditions of good neighbourhood will have been in place since time immemorial.

I am skylark. As human clears the land, plants their crops and harvests their meadows and grains, so I learn to work with their seasons and habits. As the weather warms and the days lengthen each spring, I take to the sky. Wind may blow, rain may fall, but still I fly, singing from daybreak to dusk. Soaring above the earth, I see my own patch of ground and I sing to its joy. My mate can hear me and see how well I am as the air fills my lungs and I sing strong. She knows that our chicks will be as strong as I. I will feed them. I will protect them. Other males also hear me and know to stay away. Once the job is done, and my chicks are raised, and the humans have harvested their crops, I will glean the grains they left behind. I will survive the cold winter months, and I will wait. Wait for my return to the skies next spring, when I can shout my joy to the heavens once again.

I am sheep. My fleece is fine, warm and plentiful. I live alongside human. Human and his dogs protect me from harm. Human clips my fleece when it grows too

long. I have lambs each year after the ram has visited. Some stay and join the flock. I show my daughters where the choicest grass, shoots and saplings are to be found. Our flock is strong and we remember which parts of the land are ours. When my grandmother was here there were many more trees, but there are fewer now. I wonder why? Where can they have gone? Every year I grow a new fleece for human to clip. They are taken from my high hill down into the valleys to be spun, dyed and woven. My fleece is then mingled with a beetle from far, far away until it turns red. Imagine that! After that it is placed on the backs of men, who march it across the earth with musket, bayonet and sword, conquering all in their path and forcing their will onto distant others. Here in the high hills I am a generally a mild-mannered, peace-loving creature, but my fleece becomes a lethal killer once it is put onto man's back.

I am dog! I am very excited! My human companion brings me here to this wide, open place. It is full of sights and sounds and scents which make my nose twitch and my tail wag. Here I can run, run, run, play and be free with my pack; my canine friends, my humans and me. I like to chase the birds sometimes too - what larks! There are no more sheep here now - too bad - I like sheep! I don't like cars though - they drive so fast and frighten me with their noise and they are so many now, they never stop, roar, roar, roar. There are sometimes cattle here though! I like cattle! Cattle are big! They do have little ones sometimes and they are fun to chase! The big cattle don't seem to like this very much, but I don't care. I am dog and what am I for after all except to run and herd and nip? My humans shouts at me sometimes when I chase the birds, the cattle or go near the cars. Sometimes other humans shout at them. There are a lot of humans and a lot of dogs here after all. But what do I care? I am dog, and I love it here, and my joy overrides all!

I am Rodborough Common. Many suns and many moons have passed since I was born as land. I have been cold, naked and alone. I have been richly blanketed in plants and creatures. Some have come and some have gone. Some think that I am theirs. They talk of land deeds, rules, laws and common rights held since 'time immemorial'. Time immemorial? What do such things mean to me, ancient being that I am? Time shifts inexorably forwards, and change is always happening. But changes seem to arrive more quickly now. I wonder what the future will hold for me, for my fellow beings. As time stretches unknowable into the moons, suns and seasons yet to come, who can tell what will become of me. What will be my fate I wonder? Can you guess?

We are going to split into 2 groups and I will ask each of you to think about Rodborough's future. What might it look like? Sound like? Smell like? Who will be present? What voices will be heard? Who will have fallen silent?

Before we get started, have a wander around the room, look at the pictures, through the slide viewers etc and reflect on Rodborough Common's story. Then join your group and talk through the possibilities for Rodborough's future stories.

We will join back together at 11 o'clock to share our stories with one another, before discussing their similarities and points of difference.

## Appendix 6: Commoning Beyond Growth Presentation Transcript

Hello and good afternoon. My name is Sharon Gardham and I am in my final year of PhD research at Bath Spa University. My project 'On Care of our Commons Home: Revitalising and Extending the Notion of Good Neighbourhood for the Modern Cotswold Commons' is based in the disciplines of the Environmental Humanities. It uses historical research, discourse analysis of semi structured interviews, and auto ethnography to examine human and other than human relationships. I have carried out a case-study of a lowland working common in the West of England. I am particularly interested in the power of imagination and storytelling in helping us to imagine different relationships with other-than-humans, and to free us from the constricts of dominant discourses. I am also interested in the potential of working common land to challenge embedded ideas regarding land ownership, use, and sharing. Alongside my studies, I work for a local environmental charity, where I work on active conservation programmes and public engagement projects.

We are living in a time of perma crisis. Visible signs of climate breakdown are all around us. We are entering The Burning Age. Claire North's novel *Notes from the Burning Age* imagines a far-distant future where the balance of life on Earth has changed. Climate breakdown has reduced and scattered the human population. Those who remain regroup and reform, living under a new system where tributes are paid to the gods of nature and the earth, the *kakuy*, to pacify them lest they grow restive and return all of humankind to the Burning Age. They are taught:

Let not your hands fell the tree but that another is planted.

Let not your ears hear the rain and think it falls for you.

Let not your tongue speak of conquering the mountain, for it will not shiver when winter comes.

And if your eyes should see the *kakuy* slumbering in their sacred caves, gentle in rest, remember to bow in prayer, for should they wake again, no tears shall douse the flames.

The people of the novel live communal lives in unquiet harmony with other-than-human nature. Humans have been realigned to sit alongside others, their supposed position at the top of the Chain of Being toppled. But their tributes to the *kakuy* are predicated on fear, not love. The relationship is one of cowed and reluctant reverence rather than one of shared and mutual joy. There are those that seek to return humans to the top of the hierarchical tree. Fading fears are not enough incentive to stop those hungry for power in using any means to take it. The bad old days return...

As we face our current crisis, and as we think about our responsibility to future generations, we have a choice to make. Do we approach the future with fear, or with hope? Do we see the rest of nature as something to be mollified and overcome, or as something we can share a brighter future with. When we are surrounded by fear and anxiety, how can we hope to reframe and repair our relationship with the other-than-human world? How can we change from relationships of exploitation to ones predicated on respect and reciprocity? What ways of being can we look to for inspiration? In our divided world, where can we find spaces to encounter the 'other' that are safe for both us and for them? What alternative stories might we tell?

When we seek such spaces, we might look back into the past, seek to understand the roots of the present, and open our minds to imagining the future in unbounded and unrestricted ways. Working lowland common land in England is on the knife edge of this choice between exploitation and cooperation. Localised management, a deep sense of history, overriding love and care for these places, and the support of concerned citizens has allowed them to weather the ongoing storms of enclosure, privatisation, techno-industrial agriculture, and a changing climate. So far at least. But as these processes continue, commons come under increasing pressure. From people, seeking to reconnect with other-than-human nature. From farmers, who are ill-supported in their attempts to maintain a commoning way of life in a neo-liberal economy. From cars. From climate change. From funding cuts... The list goes on. But they do persist, and people are passionate in their defence of them. The traditional commons notion of operating in 'good neighbourhood' persists. It morphs and flexes, but fundamentally it persists.

Jean Jacques Rousseau links the ills of humankind to the drive to 'own' land, to enclose it, to possess it. In this quotation, he talks of wars, crimes, murder, and misery and lays these at the door of the human urge to own land. He only reflects however on

the ills caused to the human race. In our modern understanding, we might add to this the untold horrors caused to the other-than-human world as a result of this urge to possess and to exploit. Common land in England is of course 'owned'. Perhaps more than any other land type however, there is a sense that this ownership is shared. People are more aware of their rights on this land than they are on others. Inherited senses of the injustices wrought by enclosure are alive and well and are often directed at those who try to visibly 'manage' the land. Conservation efforts that seek to balance the need of humans, with the often-rare other species that live on commons, can meet with resistance and hostility. We are too much squeezed into the same spaces. The notion of good neighbourhood concerns humans alone, and goodness knows, humans have enough trouble managing their own conflicting priorities. The understanding that rights to share in the gifts of the land came with obligations has become diluted. Sometimes, the idea of extending this principle to other-than-humans seems an impossible task. Some deeper recognition of others as kin, when that word did not just mean to those whom you were directly related, is needed. We need to undertake our hierarchical realignment from choice, not from fear.

Places such as Rodborough Common offer sites of sharing, models of a different way of being with the land, and with each other, and provide a springboard for the kind of imaginative storytelling that can help us to reframe human and other-than-human relations. They can provide contact zones, places to encounter the 'other', particularly when they occupy the margins between the urban and rural. I'm now going to take you on a whistle stop tour of Rodborough Common. We will start in deep time, and come right up to the present day. I hope that my story will help you to picture this place, and to situate its human protagonists alongside those who were party to its co-creation.

Rodborough Common forms part of the escarpment of Jurassic limestone known in modern times as the Cotswolds. It lies in western England above the market town of Stroud, and commands fine views over the River Severn into Wales. It is currently 'owned' by the National Trust and is still actively commoned. Just about. Out of the more than 200 properties with common rights registered, only 2 are actively still farming here.

This land has its origins in deep time. It once sat under the waves of a warm, shallow, sea that supported a multitude of life. Its countless creatures and plants lived and died; their bodies becoming part of the land itself. Through the pushes and pulls of

the ice ages, it was heaved apart from the land of the Severn Vale to form a spiny backbone that runs along England's western border with Wales. When you walk on Rodborough Common, you walk on the graves of countless millions. If you look carefully you can still see them, close to the surface, within arms reach.

When the ice retreated, trees colonised the land, and large herbivores came in their wake. The soils of Rodborough are shallow and thin. Trees grow but do not always thrive here. As humans began to settle, some trees were cleared. Wood pasture habitat likely developed.

A documented tradition of commoning goes back at least 700 years here, but it is likely that communal farming was practised long before that. Rodborough's commoners used the Celtic system of a series of sub-fee manors, a system that we would find more familiar than the Anglo-Saxon method of farming communally in strips, that is better known under the mediaeval system.

For the common, trees were present in large numbers until the 17th century. The area of grassland that is now so valuable for its biological rarity was once the custom wood. Wardens of the Wood were appointed across the generations. The axe bearer as he was known, marked the trees for harvest, not felling, and ensured that no one took more than their share. At one time, the woodland supported more than 3000 swine. The swineherd was an important position with special benefits. Alongside, farmed and free-living animals evolved and co-operated in conjunction with human endeavours.

As geo-political Britain expanded and reached beyond its shores, Rodborough's use evolved. Neighbouring Stroud was heavily employed in producing woollen cloth and dying it scarlet for the use of Britain's colonising armies. Sheep came to Rodborough. The trees retreated. The chalk grassland for which it is now so valued, was born. Cattle, goats, horses, all grazed on the common. Humans settled here, some temporarily, others permanently. Some areas were enclosed, but encroachments were quickly and decisively dealt with. Good neighbourhood survived the onslaught of greedy landowners, indifferent, absent, landlords and increased quarrying of its much prized stone. These defences were often made on the basis of rights that were understood to have been in place since 'time immemorial'.

As human society changed, and as leisure became more accessible, Rodborough's purpose evolved too. It was an important place to meet, to convene, to encounter your neighbours, human and otherwise, for high days and holidays. May Day processions,

beating the bounds, and Midsummer Eve were all important dates in the local calendar. The commons around Stroud were also used for religious meetings of the non-conformist church, for political meetings of the Chartists. In short, they provided a vital space for the community to gather unhindered.

These uses are still important today. During the pandemic the commons became vital places for people to meet within the restrictions placed on them. Wakes were held here, wedding celebrations, birthday parties and family reunions. As the world reopened, we remembered what was important to us; family, friends, air, space. But the others who share the common with us did not benefit from this remembering. As more people come, paths widen. Cattle are bothered by dogs. Traffic speeds. Skylarks are flushed from their nests. In our isolation, we forgot how to share.

If Rodborough Common had a human voice, what might it say of the present day? One might imagine that it would scoff at claims of rights and ownership of mere hundreds of years standing. That 'time immemorial' would have a very different definition to it than it does to us. It might also tell us that change is inevitable and that time never stands still. It has borne witness to exploitation and plunder; of its rock, its grassland, its trees. But it has also seen humans and other than humans living in balance and harmony. It has seen how effectively that balance can be maintained. It is living, breathing, evolving proof, that sharing is possible, that mutual thriving can be achieved.

So I invite you to imagine the future of places like Rodborough Common. But to do this from a starting point of hope, joy, and wonder. Not one of fear. Of understanding that enduring models of sharing and reciprocity are both possible and desirable. To imagine a future where the principles of good neighbourhood can be revived, refreshed, and renewed. And most importantly extended to our other-than-human kin.

## **Appendix 7: Between Sky and Earth Exhibition Catalogue (Printed Version Only)**