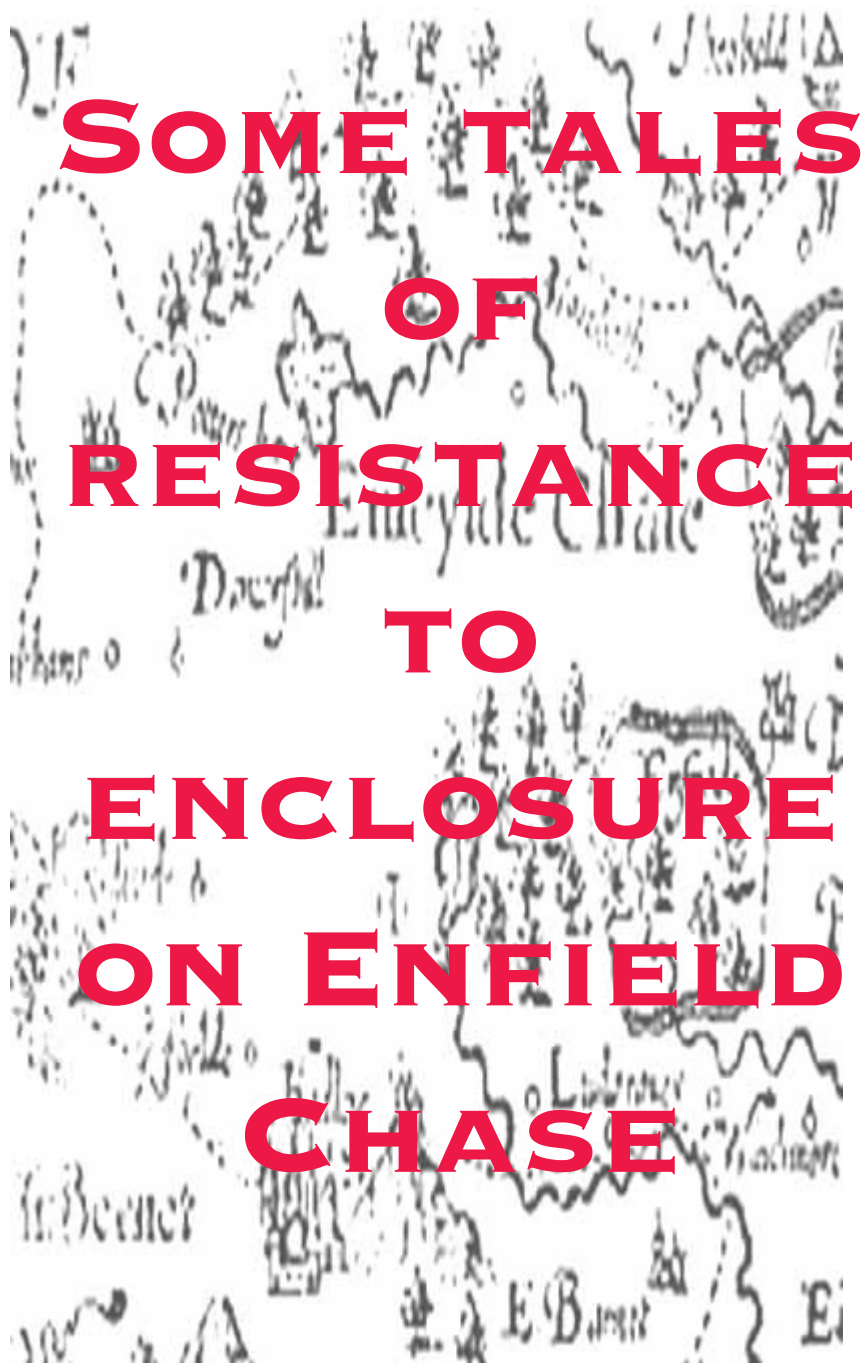




**SOME TALES
OF
RESISTANCE
TO
ENCLOSURE
ON ENFIELD
CHASE**

Enfield Chase was an ancient royal hunting ground some nine miles outside London to the north. Its many acres comprised arable and grazing land as well as a deer park and over the years legal agreements with tenants of the royal estate had granted rights of common such as grazing and wood collecting, which were of great importance to the local economy in an area with a very high rate of poverty, not that such rights benefited the very poor, who were unlikely to be commoners paying rents and taxes.

The chase was surrounded by villages and hamlets; Edmonton and Tottenham were close by and the largest was Enfield. There were also estates, manors and farms as well as large mansions and lodges. Small rural communities existed at South Mimms, Hadley, Potters Bar and along the road from Southgate to Cockfosters. Barnet provided the nearest significant town although London was only a day away. By 1154 what had been known as the Park of Enfield or Enfield Wood had been converted into a hunting ground, or chase. It appears it was not known as Enfield Chase until the early 14th century. The royal land comprised the majority of the forest, though aristocratic families owned some areas and maintained hunting lodges on the Chase. Royal forests were the creation of successive Norman kings, whose obsession with hunting trumped virtually all other imperatives where land use was concerned. Vast areas were declared royal forest, meaning wholly different laws applied and usual rights and uses were banned. Land owned by others, not just the king, could be designated thus.

As with many rural areas, from the 16th century, landowners began to enclose land, fencing off woods and fields, and excluding local residents from using its resources.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, much of the open land, commons or woods in England and Wales was enclosed for development, usually by rich landowners or sold off for house building. In many of the

commons, local people had traditionally benefitted from customary rights of use, mostly grazing of animals & wood for fuel, but also often sowing of small plots on the fringes of commons for market gardens or feeding themselves.

But despite its name, common land was rarely if ever, land held ‘in common’: it was almost always land owned by the Lord of the Manor, on which over time other local people had come to exercise some rights. But these rights often had no legal weight, they were part of an unwritten social contract, of custom and tradition, allowances granted by landowners, often in the face of earlier individual or collective struggles.

As time went on the ‘commoners’, those with acknowledged customary rights, could become wealthy individuals themselves. Thus later struggles sometimes developed into struggles between different local rich persons. Gradually, as capitalism developed, slowly replacing a society of complex vertical social obligations & custom with one based entirely on profit, the impetus was on for landowners to replace traditional land use with intensive agriculture. This demanded the clearing of woodland & the exclusion of the poor from the commons. Those deprived not only lost traditional ways of making a living, or in many cases ways of topping up incomes as labourers or craftspeople; they were experiencing the change in class relations at first hand, losing everything bar the ability to sell their labour... “In an increasingly legalistic age, an unwritten agreement counted for little in the face of the new law ...”

But on Enfield Chase, as elsewhere, this process was not simply imposed on a docile population. Poor labouring people fought for centuries to resist enclosure, both legally through petitioning and court cases, and by direct action.

Enclosure quarrels in Enfield provoked a petition in 1575 and riots in 1589, 1603, 1649 and 1659.

1589 In 1589 forty women, wives of local farm workers, were named on a charge of riotously throwing to the ground the fence round the close of a certain Alice Hayes at ‘Joan Potters’ in the south of the parish. The Enfield women were particularly lively in defending their rights, possibly because the district was much affected by enclosures for the royal Chase.

1603 A mob of women assembled again in 1603, at White Webbs, near the Chase, to maintain their right to gather fire-wood there. According to Vincent Skinner, a Middlesex justice, the women thought that wood should either be burnt in the King’s House or given to the poor, but not carried out of Enfield Town. As in other areas in the Stuart and Tudor period, authorities were not always unsympathetic to anti-enclosure protests, and local magistrates made an agreement to hear the women’s cause and to some extent supported their cause in subsequent petitions.

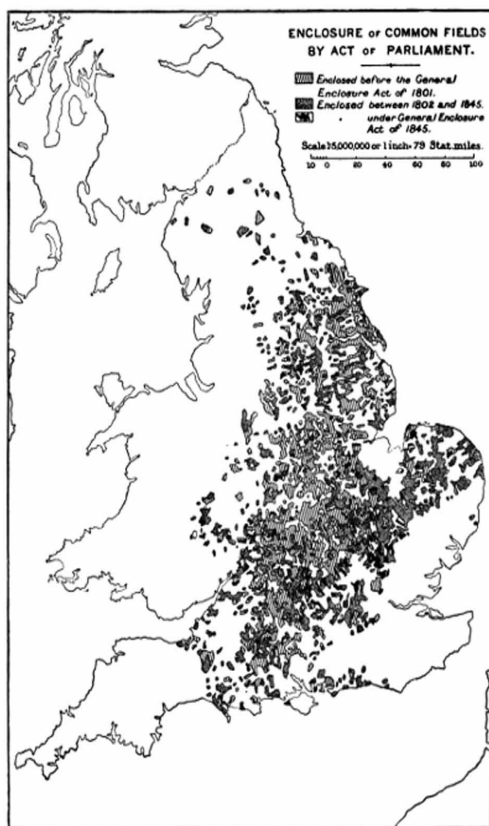
Such expressions of local feeling were not infrequent. In 1611 when enclosing a further one hundred and twenty acres the King gave an assurance to the Commoners that he would not enclose any more land. Enclosures of manorial waste, either to extend property or for building, were common.

The upheaval that accompanied the English Revolution had a huge impact on land ownership and pressures for changes in land use. Increased demand for productivity for food production at a time of disruption and hardship due to the civil war led to more enclosures. And the seizure of land owned by defeated and exiled supporters of the royalist side opened up opportunities for those victorious opponents – as during the reformation and dissolution of the monasteries, political and religious change helped make some smart operators rich. While radicals like the levelers and diggers may have objected to enclosure from the point of view of the poor who it dispossessed, others of the parliamentary party were enthusiastic ‘modernisers’, where the Stuart regime had on the whole been more conservative and tried to keep a lid on large-scale enclosure.

This was reflected in events on Enfield Chase. In 1649, there were anti-enclosure riots on the Chase.

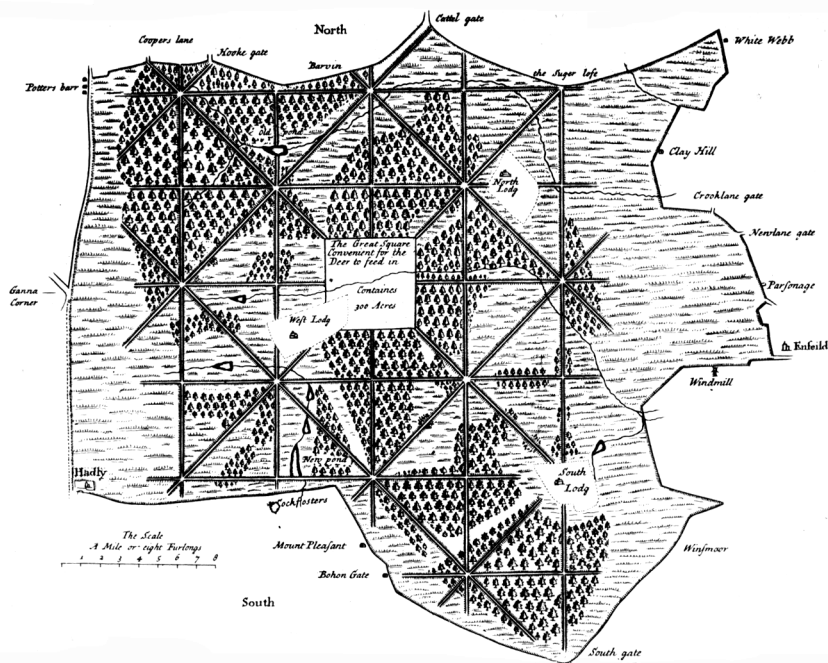
1650 By 1650, the Diggers were said to have a Colony here. Digger groups apparently were active in both Barnet and Enfield. The Diggers were a wing of the Levellers, communistic in outlook and loose in membership, who had formed around the political activist Gerrard Winstanley. Small groups began digging up common land for squatter communes. Their first venture was St George's Hill, Weybridge but other colonies also appeared elsewhere, to the consternation of locals. Such communities, although very small, were strange and disruptive. They were also made up from the very poor and thus represented a threat to social order and local tradition, as many Diggers were apparently from squatting families who had come to the

Chase during the war and just after. They may even had had a blind eye turned to them by Parliament, hoping to disrupt traditionalist opponents of the new regime. Either way, rioting certainly occurred during the Digger occupancy although we do not know if Diggers were involved with the disturbances. Accused of killing deer and of assault, fifteen men, including a furrier, cordwainer, weaver, butcher and group of labourers, were indicted for the disturbances. These men were almost certainly recently discharged soldiers as all had access to firearms; they also represented the poorest of the area.



1659 In 1659, a significant anti enclosure riot took place. Commoners tore down barns, burned fences on land that had been sold to speculators, and led their cattle into corn. This led to pitched battle with militia.

The immediate cause of the struggle in 1659 was a scheme drawn up by Parliamentary commissioners as a result of surveys of the Chase conducted in the 1650, ordered by Parliament to decide who legally held rights of proprietorship and rights of common. The results were used to allot ownership and codify customary rights, but deprived local inhabitants of many of their "*privileges and advantages.*" An outcry of protests from the Inhabitants erupted, who claimed that large areas of the Chase were being quietly taken over by 'Intruders', without payment, who had stopped and turned rights of way, had laid out impassable new ones, and were digging and despoiling even the small part of the waste which was allotted to the Inhabitants, who had recently suffered much destruction from a huge fire on the Chase.



Many of the ‘intruders’ were great officers in the Army: they included Adjutant General John Nelthrope, Colonel Joyce, and Colonel Webbe, who was himself the Surveyor General. They had purchased poor soldiers’ debentures - land granted in lieu of arrears of wages - at prices varying from one shilling and sixpence to two shillings and sixpence in the pound, but they expected allowances and interest for the whole face value of the debentures.

In May, 1659, several of the Inhabitants destroyed some of the new enclosures and drove in cattle upon the standing grain, “to the great loss and damage of the purchasers.” In their view the trespass was lawful, “the pretended purchasers having no title.” The Intruders complained to the Council of State, who ordered local justices to protect the Intruders and to make use of two troops of horse which were sent to aid them if needed.

According to the Inhabitants, when the troops arrived in Enfield, they were given strong beer and money by the Intruders. The soldiers then fell upon some of the Inhabitants, slashed several of them and their servants, and even attacked poor labouring men who passed that way. Naturally the victims fought back. The Intruders then made legal complaints about the injuries suffered by their side. At first the Inhabitants refused to give evidence against their neighbours; threats forced them to give some evidence, but they refused to maintain it on oath. As a result of the declarations of the Intruders, several of the Inhabitants were bound over. When the jury could not find a bill because of insufficient evidence, justice Hobert, one of the Trustees of the Chase, forced them back. They found an indictment against some men who had nothing to do with the riot but who had previously said that they would put their sheep and cattle into the new enclosures to test their title. The other accused persons were acquitted.

The Inhabitants’ triumph was short; for “*there was a design by some of the said justices, who were purchasers and trustees and men concerned therein and judges in the cause upon the Bench, to find a bill against those persons to take off the courage of the proprietors and commoners from their claims to the common, that they might the better force the proprietors’ common from them in the said Chase!*” To aid this design,

the Intruders protested to Whitehall that the slow proceedings against the first offenders were encouraging others to imitate their misdeeds. Accordingly the Council of State urged the Justices to take speedier action.

Meanwhile the Inhabitants laid countercharges against the Intruders and their agents, and an indictment was found against several of them. A warrant was issued to apprehend three of the enclosers, but justice Hobert, who was "*a great agent and stickler against the said proprietors and a great offender in the destruction of wood in the said Chase, called to see the warrant and had and did then tear the same in pieces.*" The Inhabitants were thus left without legal remedies; they could not even look for their cattle in the Chase because of threatened violence.

The threat became actual. Soldiers hired by the Intruders shot several sheep and ate them, killed valuable cattle and challenged the commoners to fight. On July 10, some drunken soldiers shot at Inhabitants who were walking on the common. On the next day, a number of the Inhabitants, according to their own account of the fray, armed themselves with cudgels, mattocks and forks, and challenged the authority of the soldiers. Seventeen soldiers and their commander marched against them, fired, killed one man and wounded others. The Inhabitants then turned upon the soldiers, captured nine or ten, and took them before justice Rich. After examining their confessions and the testimony of witnesses, he sent them to Newgate prison. They admitted that they were hired for sixpence a day more than their ordinary pay and that they had no authority from their chief commanders.

A brief account, written from the Intruders' point of view, appeared in the government organ, *Mercurius Politicus*. Clearly the Intruders were too well entrenched and too influential in the Law Courts, Parliament, Council of State, and Army, for humble yeomen, tenant farmers and other commoners to be able to resist them by "legal" means. The resistance of the Inhabitants was suppressed. On July 16, the House of Commons issued orders concerning the riot. These were read in the churches on the following day. Now assured of their predominance, the Intruders trampled upon the rights of the small proprietors and

commoners. They or their hirelings wounded some of the inhabitants of Edmonton and killed a mare in the Chase, "*at the insolency of which soldiers and purchasers of Enfield Chase without title, the country stands amazed.*" But amazement was all; some troops of horse, sent by Parliament, restored order.

There were no further disturbances. In August, 1659, the much enduring Inhabitants suffered twenty-three deaths in a severe outbreak of the plague. With the Restoration, the Chase was given to the Duke of Albemarle, but the enclosures remained. Subsequently, almost the entire Chase was converted to tillage.

The small yeomen, tenant farmers and others who had traditional rights over the Chase probably had the better legal and moral case. The unscrupulous behaviour of the Intruders seems to prove this. Nevertheless, the Inhabitants were undoubtedly 'unprogressive': their small property rights stood in the way of the efficient development of the productive resources of the Chase. The encroaching moneyed interests were better fitted to exploit and develop it. Continuance in the late feudal organization would have meant that

although many would have rights of woodcutting and pasturage on the Chase, none would have the power, resources or inspiration to take full advantage of its productivity. Capitalistic development would mean greater production and possibly employment for more men. It would result in greater wealth for the exploiters and the reduction of



independent or semi-independent commoners to the status of labourers. The resistance of the Inhabitants was necessarily in vain: not only were economic, political and ecclesiastical powers largely in control of the new interests, but also the forces of historical progress. If the Chase was to be efficiently exploited to produce for the adjacent London market, a more advanced method of farming had to replace the traditional, late feudal system which was better suited for subsistence farming in a landed economy than for production for markets and profits in a moneyed economy.

A peculiar feature of the enclosure troubles at Enfield was that while the Inhabitants protested loudly against the Intruders, they seem to have made no effort to eject some poor families who settled upon the Chase. Possibly the squatters' encroachment was abetted by the Intruders in their desire to weaken the claims of their opponents. Certainly the toleration extended to this group differs from the eagerness with which persons with rights of common joined local lords of manors to eject the Diggers from common land which they had occupied in 1649. Perhaps the Inhabitants of Enfield were too much exhausted by the agrarian conflict, the fire and the plague to take any effective action.

Shortly after the Restoration, the residents of Enfield, including tenant farmers, prepared a petition complaining that two or three hundred families had settled on the Chase during the late unhappy times; they were destroying the timber and, if not restrained, would become chargeable to the parish. Therefore the petitioners asked leave to bring in a bill to Parliament to enclose their common fields and to establish a fund for employing the poor. The economic transition from the common fields to private ownership was thus to be greatly furthered; but details about what, if anything, was done at this time are lacking. The scheme for employing the poor was possibly inspired by William Covell, a preacher and landowner at Enfield. He was the author of a compromise solution for the agrarian troubles there: workers' co-operatives were to be established and financed by wealthy benefactors in order to use the resources of the Chase not primarily for profits, but to satisfy the needs of the community and to raise its general standard of living. Though his plans were never carried out, they are significant

in the history of radical social thought; they have interesting parallels in some of the ideas of the Diggers; and they exemplify an aspect of Puritan utopianism.

(Patrick)

1660 With the restoration of Charles II in 1660 common rights were restored, although violence was still present on the Chase during the 1660s. In November 1660 the farms which had been set up during the English republic were subjected to a campaign of hedge breaking; several of those ‘Intruders’ targeted by the 1659 rioters complained their new properties were attacked.

The commoners themselves were looking to re-establish a flexible ‘customary’ use of the chase as can be seen in several examples. In the early 1660s Robert White beat a gamekeeper who was attempting to impound his sheep. No doubt White felt aggrieved at such actions now that the chase had been spared systematic enclosure. Presumably White felt that the chase was now there for the benefit of himself and other locals. Also during the 1660s commoners continued to use the Chase as a fuel reserve. William Fairweather and his son were caught chipping trees and had their tools confiscated. It was of course to no avail and it was reported that they were soon back at work. John Clerke, an Edmonton smith, was caught cutting trees. When told to stop by the woodward he disregarded the order and simply continued. In 1669 Richard Garret, Nicholas Thompson and Robert James were all warned by the underkeeper to stop lopping trees on the Chase. They struck the underkeeper and continued with their work.

No sooner had the common rights at Enfield Chase been restored by Charles II than the fate of the common fields were immediately put in doubt. Lord Rainton and other large local landowners in the parish petitioned for enclosure of the Enfield common fields in 1660. Although unsuccessful in this attempt Rainton was influential as a local large landowner as well as being the MP for Middlesex between 1681-85. His local authority allowed him to make several enclosures on the Chase sometime after the restoration to the annoyance of the commoners. In 1672 commoners drove their sheep in Rainton’s

enclosures destroying ten acres of wheat and oats, and a further ten acres of grass. One of the commoners, a Mr Joseph Collet, threatened to open all Rainton's enclosures notwithstanding 'all Mr Raintons injunctions and all his perjured witnesses' The following year Rainton found himself involved in legal action against some of his more powerful neighbours, including the Duke of Albemarle who had taken offence at Rainton's enclosing activities.

Aside: around 1666: There were rumours of a Fifth Monarchist conspiracy here and in Epping Forest. The fifth monarchists were veteran republicans, ardent puritans who had emerged from the parliamentary army to become disillusioned by Cromwell's regime, who formed the core of an underground resistance to the restored monarchy. They were alleged to be plotting in the woods with other outlaws and rebels...

Writing to his friend Francis Manley, in 1666, Henry Eyton could mention his fears regarding the

"... restless enemy amongst us ... I mean the whole fanatic party, the head of which serpent lies in and near London especially upon the confines of Essex and Hertfordshire ... taking either side of the Ware river from Edmonton down to Ware and particularly those retired places of Epping Forest and Enfield Chase ... About the road near Theobalds there is a crew of them lie concealed ... that should there be the least commotion in London we should find to our cost that they would be too ready to second it." Outlaws and rebels often hid out in woods where they could easily conceal themselves from the authorities; it is also worth noting that radical doctrines also often flourished in areas where social and economic change (like enclosure) had harshly affected local livelihoods.

Over the following decades, between 1660 and 1700, about 100 squatter cottages were reported on Enfield Chase: the increasing dispossessed and disenfranchised poor, being driven out by enclosure, who had nowhere else to go, making a living from marginal land.

1676 In 1676 John Hale, the clerk of Enfield manor court, complained to Charles II that people from South Mimms, Enfield, Edmonton and Hadley were “*an abundance of loose, idle and disorderly persons ... and make great havock and wast of your majesty’s best timber and underwood on Enfield Chase.*”

Enclosure continued to occupy the minds of local people here. In 1689 the Enfield vestry resolved that ‘*We, whose names are hereby subscribed inhabitants of the parish of Enfield, do hereby promise and agree to stand by each other, in the behalf of ourselves and the rest of the parishioners, in endeavouring to restore our rights and privileges on Enfield Chase. And that the charge that we, or any of us, shall be at about the recovery and setting of the same, shall be defrayed out of the parish stocks*’.

There were 21 signatures attached to the resolution. This was perhaps the way in which many instances of enclosure resistance were initiated.

1691 In 1691 the Enfield vestry agreed to Sir John Battle enclosing his common field land upon payment of £60 to the parish funds. Local people strongly disagreed with the acquiescence of the vestry who had not represented the wider community in agreeing to such a deal. The commoners would now lose winter grazing rights due to the deal struck by the vestry. This was unacceptable and the commoners had destroyed the enclosures by 1703, thus re-opening the land to common usage and prompting Battle to appeal to the vestry to enforce their earlier agreement.

1703 In November 1703 the commoners of Monken Hadley opened a voluntary subscription to the threat of losing their common rights on Enfield Chase with each attaching their name. Petitions of course consciously brought commoners together to fight as a group. This involved setting out demands and targeting their

Once organised commoners could exert pressure on their more powerful neighbours which could include influential landlords; thus

in 1718 landlords petitioned against Major General Pepper, who had leased the Chase, and had enclosed 30 acres of waste to the detriment of their tenants who had right of common there. Pepper became a hated figure of landlords, farmers and commoners alike in north-east Middlesex, due to his enclosing and oppressive tendencies. When Pepper asked for a commission of local gentlemen to help him to stop wood being stolen from the Chase not one person would come forward.

1720 Like previous owners, the lords Cottington, Rainton and Palmer, Pepper found himself struggling to enclose, and keep enclosed, land previously used by generations of Middlesex commoners.

In the 1720s General Pepper was shot at in what seems to have been an assassination attempt or at least a heavy warning; he had been engaged in a long often fruitless war with poachers and ‘woodstealers’ who were generally supported by a large section of the local population, and had had a number arrested and jailed – some were eventually hanged.

In 1783, only a small common, a rough lot and a small wood remained unenclosed; even these disappeared when an enclosure act was passed in 1801. At first, efforts to improve the gravelly clay soil of the Chase had little success, for much capital had to be expended to clear, drain

and marl it. Obviously the Inhabitants could not have afforded to develop it properly for themselves.

Despite the centuries of resistance, between 1777 and 1801, what remained of Enfield Chase was finally enclosed.



Enclosure didn't mark the end of struggles here however...

Charles Lamb witnessed the firing of several barns and haystacks at Enfield in December 1830, in the wake of the Captain Swing riots and commented that *'it was never good times in England since the poor began to speculate upon their condition. Formerly they jogged on with as little reflection as horses. The whistling ploughman went check by jowl with his brother that neighed. Now the biped carries a box of phosphorus in his leather breeches, and in the dead of night the half-illuminated beast steals his magic potion into a cleft in the barn, and half the country is grinning with new fires'*.

After Swing there were further threatening letters at Enfield into 1831

It's worth noting that when the crop failed in 1830 Irish migrant labourers rioted at nearby Barnet,

produced by past tense
for the anarchist
walking group 2017