

Brislington Community Museum News

2024 January

(Issue 7)
ISSN 2753-7773

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This issue

Following on from our previous newsletter, which looked at some post-medieval activity on the southern slopes of Broomhill, this issue explores some of the more recent features of the Brislington Meadows site - up to and including the Enclosure of Brislington Common by Act of parliament in 1778.

Ken Taylor, chair



Contact us

Email us - secretary@brislington.org - to enquire about any of our community museum's exhibits, or to suggest ideas to add to or improve them. Please use the same email address to contribute feedback or items for inclusion in this publication.

We aim to produce this quarterly, but our schedule is flexible so we can react quickly to inform our members of changes or important events. It also means during quiet times we can focus our attention on other matters such as out-reach activities and sourcing and researching new exhibits.

Brislington Meadows - lynchets

The hedgerows that edge the fields of the hillside that Homes England has dubbed Brislington Meadows are fabulous habitats for wildlife because they've been left to sprawl, but that welcome overgrowth conceals an important clue to their history. There's also a tell-tale indicator literally under our feet where the public footpath from School Road emerges into the field - the short steep climb that's so memorably slippery when muddy.

The five fields that until recently were used as pasture for cattle, all share an usual feature hidden in their hedges - not only the hedges that run along the contours, but also (although to a lesser extent) those that run straight up and down the hillside.

The traditional footpaths established by local people over many decades cut through these

hedges and reveal their unusual cross section - a change in ground level. On the uphill side of the hedges on the contours, the ground is at least half a metre higher (sometimes twice that, or even more).

It would take an enormous amount of time and effort to build that sort of field boundary, but that's not how these structures came into being. This sort of linear feature is created by ploughing on a hillside.

The plough lifts the soil and, as it tumbles back down to the ground, gravity makes the earth fall slightly downhill (erosion by rain also plays a part in this downward migration). Little by little, year after year, these inexorable processes take soil away from the top of the field, spread it across the slope, and gradually allow it to accumulate at the bottom of the field.



Looking southeast from the kissing gate - the original right of way continues straight ahead, the modern route turns up the lynchet riser to the left (photograph taken 19 November 2022).

The 1840s tithe survey informs us the higher fields were indeed ploughed arable land, while the lower fields were pasture - this difference is still reflected in the different plant species that are found in them. The physical evidence of the field boundaries themselves though, tell us the lower fields were also ploughed for many years.

The steep part of the lynchet is called a riser - a word denoting the vertical distance on a set of steps - because on a steep hillside the rows of lynchets can be narrow and look like a giant flight of stairs.

Incidentally, the riser at the entrance to the fields from School Road doesn't coincide with the actual field boundary - the hedge of ancient

hazels, hawthorns and oak trees is a short distance downhill - at the level of the public footpath from School Road. The gap between the riser and the boundary appears to be the route of the original ancient footpath that ran along the full length of this old hedgerow.

These unusual field terraces - known to archaeologists as lynchets - are difficult to date as lynchets are still being formed by modern agriculture, and similar features in the landscape have been created by ploughing since before this country was invaded by the Roman Empire. The local structures have been dated through desk-based research as forming in the post-medieval period (see "Notes on a set of 'Acre' fields" in issue 6 of this publication).

Heap of stones

Following a small fire in one of the lynchet hedges, a chance visit on 7 January 2023 provided an opportunity to observe a loose pile of stone between the fields known as Five Acres and Three Acres (ST62727104). Approximately 1 metre in diameter and 0.3m tall, the accumulation lay immediately on top of the lynchet riser (some members had tumbled down the slope).

The pile was composed of some 200 pieces, mostly grey Pennant stone but also a broken brick with a 'frog' (an intentional hollow that is absent from early bricks) and several lumps of hematite (iron ore). Some were as small as 50mm at maximum diameter, but most were in the range of 100mm to 150mm (including the hematite).

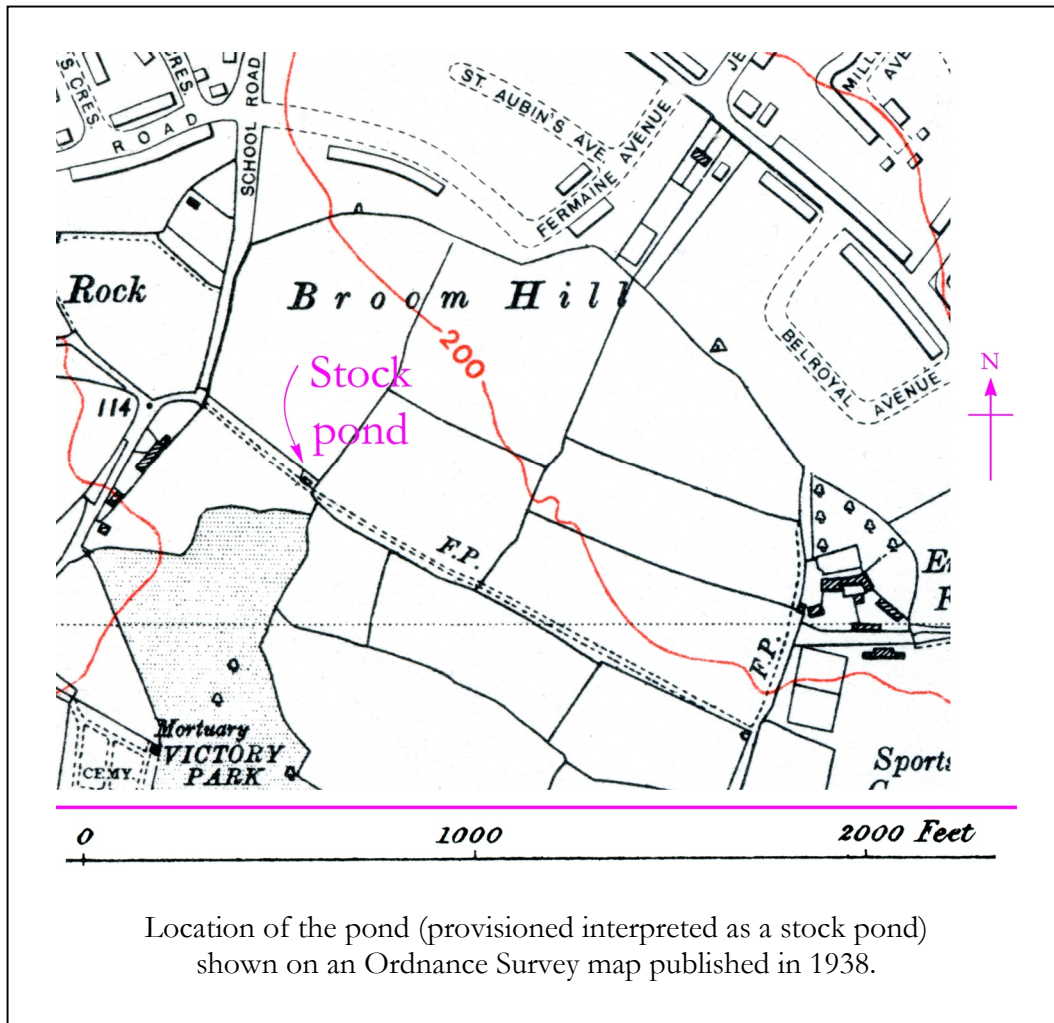
Veteran hawthorns

In expert evidence to the Brislington Meadows appeal (January 2023), Julian Forbes-Laird noted that many of the hedges have hawthorn trees that date to the 18th century. These hedges were set on the top of the lynchet risers.

The photographs of such hedges on page 1 of this issue and below (also taken on 27 May 2023), show the hawthorns' white blossom. The picture below looks east in the field known as Four Acres.



A pond at Brislington Meadows



Beside the public footpath leading from School Road to Brislington Meadows are the remains of a rectangular water feature marked on old Ordnance Survey (OS) maps (modern grid reference: ST6245671107). Its remaining stone walls have a regular plan that shows it to be artificially enclosed, which allows us to classify it as a pond. The word 'pond' is related to the geographical 'pound' and their etymological root signifies an enclosure.

The site has good access and lies immediately beside a public footpath that runs roughly southeast from School Road (nearly opposite the junction with the road to The Rock) - to Bonville Road. The pond lies near the eastern end of the section of path from School Road to

the modern metal 'kissing gate' at the entrance to the open fields of Brislington Meadows.

The site was visited and some measurements taken by local residents in September 2022 (following one of the driest summers on record). The surface enclosed by the walls was a little below the level of the public footpath, it was largely free from living vegetation and was dry but not compacted, suggesting the soil just a little way below the surface was saturated with water (permanently waterlogged conditions may preserve organic materials that can be recovered by archaeological excavation). The water table here is high enough to let the pond fill naturally, without intervention (like a well).



Above, masonry in the northeast wall.

Below, masonry in the southeast wall, and a large, squared stone in the foreground that has been moved from its original position (photographs taken on 19 September 2022).



Description of the pond

Masonry survives intact in the northeast wall, and south corner. Both areas are of grey Pennant sandstone, which is the local bedrock, and of rubble construction (which is simply to say the stones haven't been shaped into neat blocks of regular size and shape). The individual stones are bonded with a hard white mortar that contains many granules of angular black material (occasionally up to ten millimetres across) resembling cinders.

The northeast wall is set into an earth bank that would have been created in digging the pond into the field's natural slope (or, perhaps a lynchet riser). This bank rises some 1.2m above the modern ground level, and the surviving stonework rises to around half that height and extends to at least 2.83m across. This wall leans back into the back at an angle from vertical of around 30 degrees, which may have been deemed sufficient to face the slope with stone and retain the soil.

The masonry of the south corner extends at least 1.33m along the southeast wall, where courses achieve some 0.5m in height; and at least 0.48m along the southwest wall, where courses are some 0.3m high. The thickness of the southwest wall was found (judging by its uppermost stone) to be 0.4m (16 inches).

The enclosed area contained some loose stones, as would be expected from its collapsing walls, but one stone was exceptional. It's partially buried but the exposed piece measured 0.62m long by 0.41m wide and 0.15m deep. The only complete measurement was the width which, in Imperial units is 16 inches. This stone was apparently painstakingly shaped to be a roughly rectangular block, with right angles in three dimensions at its corners, and straight parallel edges. Its purpose is open to conjecture. Its width, being identical with the measured width of one of the walls, permits interpretation as a coping stone. Such professionalism represents a significant investment of money in the design and building of this structure.

The distance between the inner surfaces of the southwest wall and the northeast wall was estimated at 4m (vegetation hampered

measurement) and, when the width of its walls are added, the structure would total around 4.8m (nearly 16 feet) across its short side. No fourth wall to the pond was visible above ground but the six-inch to the mile OS map published in 1884 (Somerset Sheet VI.NE, surveyed 1882 to 1883) shows the long side would measure roughly 9m (30 feet). These figures suggest the pond may have been built to be twice as long as it is wide.

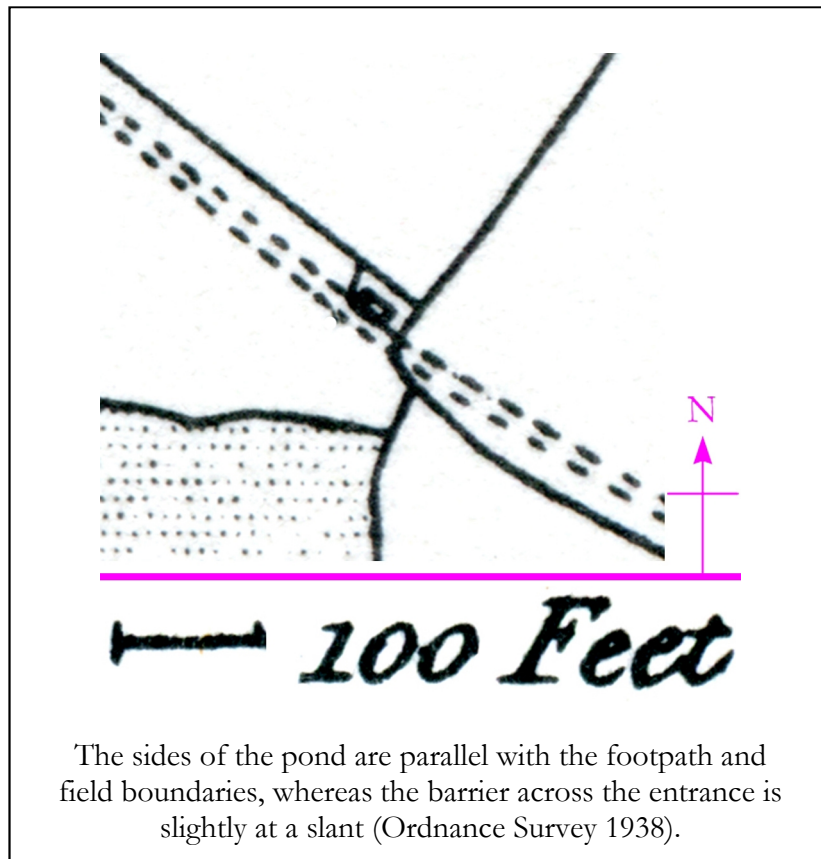
The missing fourth wall of this pond can be accepted as a feature of a stock pond. These were often constructed with three walled sides and a ramp at the open side - giving livestock a gentle slope to access the water. Such stock ponds were regularly lined with a floor of cobbles or stone slabs. The author has been informed that in a separate probing exercise the build-up of soil is around 0.6m deep above a stone base.

A suggestion has been made that this is actually a cart or wagon pond, a stone structure containing water that was used to prevent the wooden components of cartwheels from drying out sufficiently to shrink away from the wheel's iron rim (causing the rim to come loose and detach).

This hypothesis was initially attractive due to the pond being located near one end of what appears to be a medieval route between the hamlet of Rock (and a medieval house at nearby Wick) and the market town (and local religious and administrative hub) of Keynsham.

Wagon ponds, though, are usually drive-through structures with a separate entrance and exit. Although the present-day structure has only a single opening, this may have been a later modification that changed its function from wagon pond to stock pond.

Wagon ponds are significantly less common than stock pond so, if this is indeed an example, it would represent a significant feature of local heritage. Further investigation is required to settle this point.



Dating evidence

The pond isn't shown on the tithe map of 1846, but the field is described in the tithe apportionment as a pasture called Middle Broomhill, owned by John Hurlle (BTM&A 1846). A comparison of the tithe and 1884 OS map shows the pond would have been at the southern corner of the field, which the tithe map shows had a boundary following the line of the modern footpath to School Road.

Middle Broomhill was used for pasturing livestock, its boundary prevented the animals from accessing a nearby watercourse (a tributary of Brislington Brook) in the field to the south owned by John Jones. Middle Broomhill lacked a natural pool (the tithe map did show pools, but there wasn't one here), so the animals would require a pond.

Putting a date of construction on the pond isn't easy. We may presume it was there in 1846, and the creation of this waterless field almost certainly pre-dated the 1778 Act that enclosed Brislington Common (Middle Broomhill lay in

an area loosely designated as 'Brislington Old Enclosures'). But, beyond that, all we can really say is that it's post-medieval.

The question 'when did this stock pond fall into disuse?' is easier to answer because the 1884 OS map shows the southwest boundary of Middle Broomhill has been removed, which would give livestock access to the natural watercourse just to the south.

The 1938 OS map shows a barrier (presumably a fence) has been installed immediately to the west of the pond, blocking the entrance. This map also shows a new field boundary has been created to the north of the footpath, once again preventing stock in the field to the north from accessing either the natural watercourse to the south of the footpath or the pond. Further research is required to determine whether this is due to the field being put to a different use and no longer pasturing animals, or an alternative water supply was installed for their continued use. An aerial photograph (published on Know

Your Place) dating to 1946 shows the field to the north being filled with allotments, which are still there to this day.

When the pond no longer served a valued purpose, it would have begun its journey into

disrepair and, after a century and a half of dilapidation the fact that anything remains above ground at all, is a tribute to the old philosophy of 'building things to last.

Bibliography

Two excellent, free map resources (used in this research) are Know Your Place, Bristol City Council (<https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp>), and Map Finder, National Library of Scotland (<https://maps.nls.uk/geo>).

BTM&A 1846, *Brislington Tithe Map and Apportionment*, Bristol Record Office, EP/A/32/9.

Ordnance Survey 1938, *Provisional Edition*, Somerset Sheet VI NE, (resized from 1:10560, 6 inches to the mile).

1778 - Enclosure of the Common

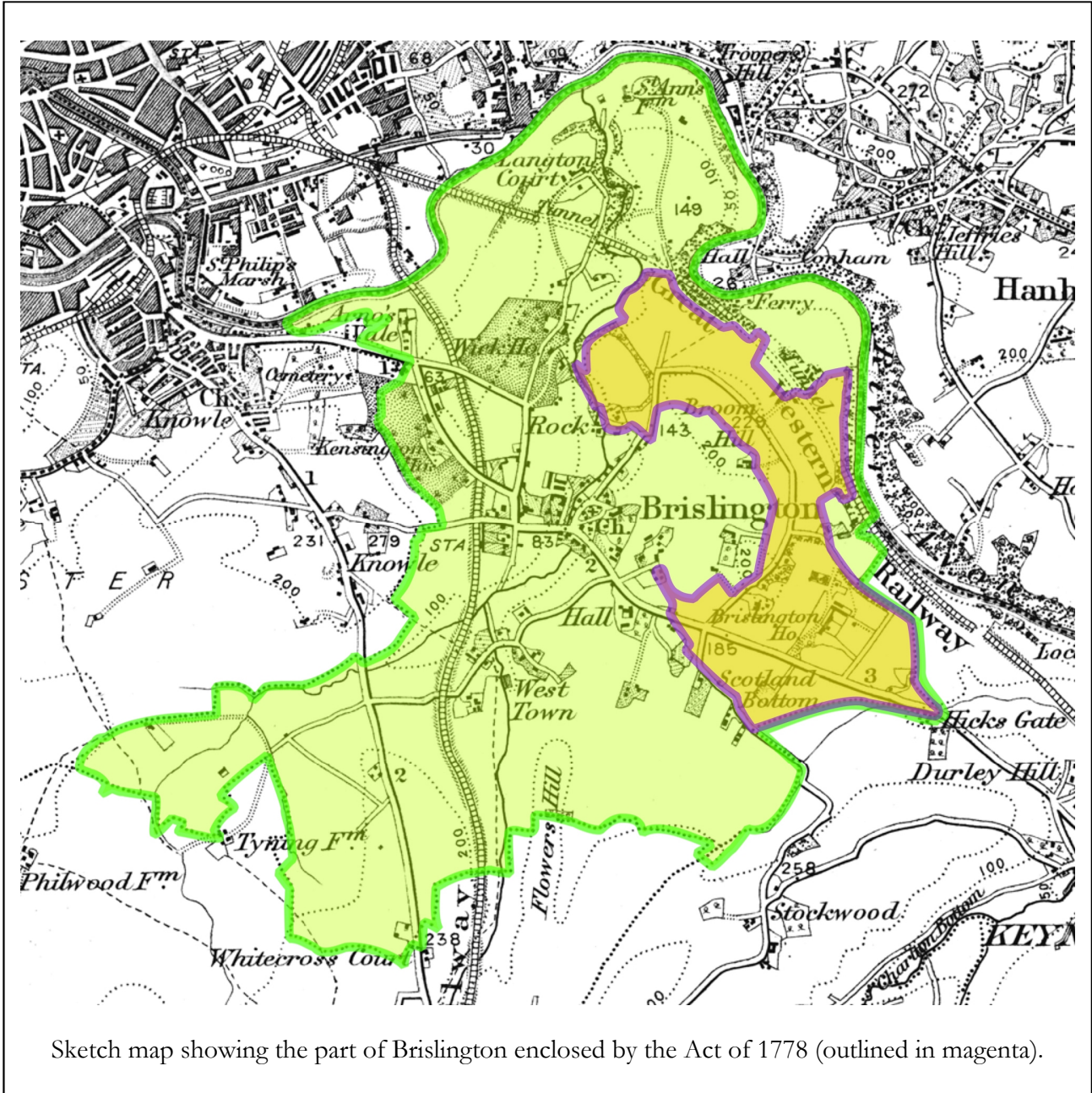
The Act of 1778 that forced the enclosure of Brislington Common, was our local example of a national phenomenon. The sketch map gives an idea of the scale of the change - the Common being enclosed (shown in yellow) takes a large bite out of the parish (shown in green). Five more patches of Brislington were also enclosed at the same time, but - to the best of the author's knowledge - the location of them all isn't yet known.

The parish boundary shown here is based on the 1846 Tithe map. The area enclosed is from a map in the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton (reference Q/RDE/130) because it dates to the time when this parish was still in Somerset). Underlying the sketch is an Ordnance Survey map (1 inch to the mile) from the earlier part of the 1890s.

The bitterness of the sense of social injustice occasioned by the enclosures is frequently cited with reference to an anonymous rhyme known as The Goose and the Common that exists now in many traditional forms:

The law locks up the man or woman
who steals the goose from off the common,
but leaves the greater villain loose
who steals the common from the goose!

Other variants and several more verses may be found in print and online (a version quoted by Professor James Boyle has the benefit of his notes on its history).

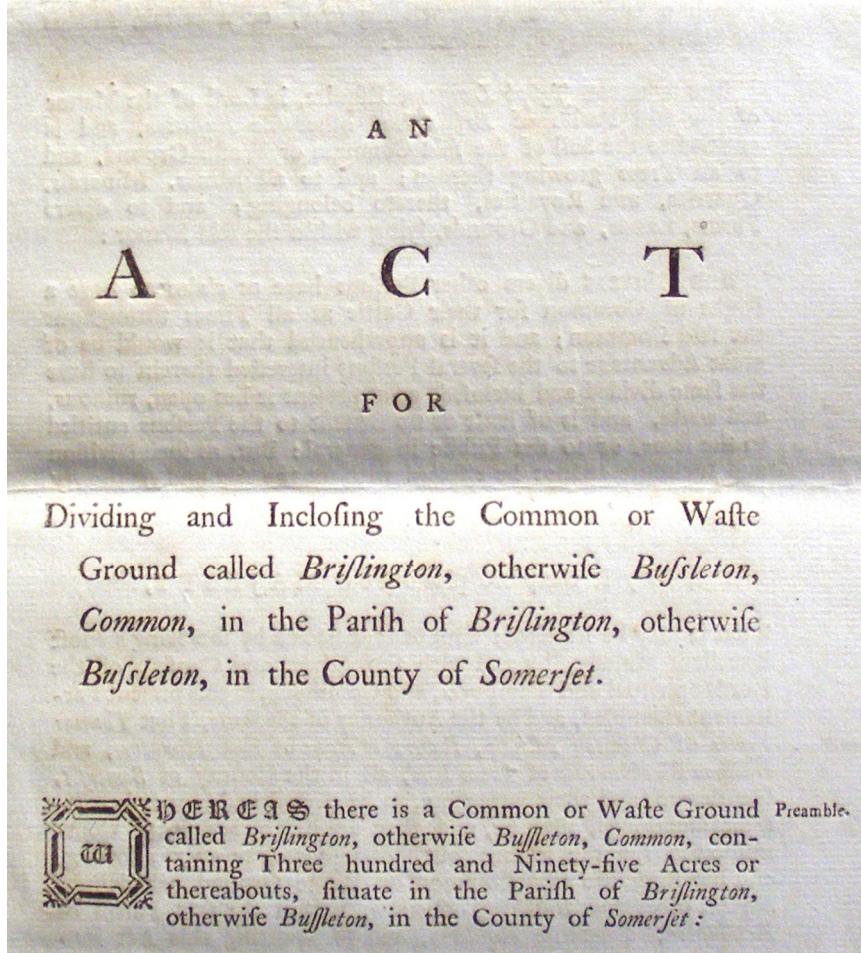


Part of the Brislington Meadows that Homes England has plans to develop for housing was first enclosed by the 1778 Act. Some hedgerows - the living heritage of that controversial enclosure Act of parliament - are not only in the proposed access route to Broomhill Road but also elsewhere on the upper slopes of Broom Hill.

A facsimile of the 1778 Act is in the library wing of Brislington Community Museum (brislington.org).

Bibliography

Boyle, James 2003, The Second Enclosure Movement and the Construction of the Public Domain, *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol 66:33, pp 33-4, Duke University, USA, <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1273&context=lcp> (accessed 19 June 2022).



Title and part of the preamble from the first page of the 1778 Act of Enclosure.

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