



Wadsley and Loxley Commoners

A Munificent Gift

The 2nd November 2013 will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the gift of the Common to the City of Sheffield. The documents were presented to the Lord Mayor, Ald. Samuel Osborn by 3 sisters, Miss Fanny Phillips, Miss Mary Payne Phillips and Miss Henrietta Harrison.

Wadsley and Loxley Common is a small part of the former extensive mediaeval common lands that existed around the villages of Wadsley and Loxley. A parliamentary enclosure act in 1784 placed the land in private ownership.

After the enclosure, the Reverend Thomas Halliday acquired an estate which included the common, and built the first Loxley House. After just a few years John Payne of Wath bought the house with 190 acres of land. John Payne completely rebuilt Loxley House in 1826. The Payne family were to own the Common and the Loxley House estate for more than a hundred years.

The Paynes were a family of successful South Yorkshire businessmen and farmers. They were Quakers, and some readers may remember Quaker Lane, which led to Loxley House and was closed off when the Aldene estate was built.

As well as agriculture, the Payne family exploited the minerals of the common. They leased mining rights to ganister miners and quarry rights to several firms. During the Payne's ownership large quantities of building stone were removed from the Common; and most of the Common was undermined. The last member of the Payne family to live at Loxley House was the eccentric Doctor Henry Payne, taking up residence in the 1860's.

So, who were the 3 donors? They had inherited the properties of Dr. Henry Payne, who had died on 26th April 1895, described in his will as Surgeon and Farmer. They were the daughters of Dr. Payne's sister Sarah. In 1895, the date of probate of Dr. Payne's will, and in the 1901 census, they were living at The Elm in Ecclesfield, another of Dr. Payne's properties.

The title deed to the common (referred to as Loxley Chase) was handed over at a presentation ceremony, in which the Lord Mayor described the gift as an "act of munificence", and said that Sheffield rejoiced in the addition of a most valuable tract of wild moor land and that "Loxley Chase would be an untold delight", and that "he could assure the donors of the land that they could not have placed their gift in better hands."

Ald. Senior, chairman of the Parks Committee, said that the gift contained an area of about 75 acres. The stipulation was that it should retain its rural character and be preserved as an open space. The land was situated to the

west of Rural Lane, Wadsley, nearly a mile in length and was wholly outside the city boundary.

Mr F E Machen, the donors' solicitor said the donors hoped that the land would be used as a health resort where people could ramble at leisure. The children would find plenty of amusement among the shrubs and plants which they could not damage much and some of which were productive of brambleberries and bilberries. It was a very rugged place and the children would have to take care.

Miss Mary Payne Phillips said, "The owners had felt for some time that it was a great pity that such a beautiful place as Loxley Chase should be kept apart from the public, particularly as they themselves had not been able to use it. Such a charming spot should be available for the uplifting of the people especially those in poor districts"

The three donors were then presented with illuminated copies of the Corporation's resolution of thanks.

There were photographs in the press reports of the gift. These are difficult to reproduce, but the captions describe them:

"A pretty wooded path down the hillside." (Bower Plantation);

"A sandy path across the heather-grown Wadsley Common",

"Craggs crown the ridge for a good distance and give wilderness to the scene", (Loxley Edge), and

"Entrance to Loxley Common, just behind Loxley House".

On the weekends following the presentation, it was said that thousands of people visited the common.

According to the Council Minute Book, the Finance Committee granted a sum of £300 for the erection of fencing and for costs connected with the transfer of land, and in January 1914 tenders were accepted for the fencing for a sum of £159.

However, later in 1914 a sub-committee of the Council proceeded to Loxley Chase and met Miss Phillips and Mr. Harrison respecting "complaints of wilful damage to the Chase by persons resorting thereto". Instructions were given for notices to be posted at various points cautioning persons against wilful damage, and it was resolved that David Wragg, tenant of the cottage at Loxley Chase (i.e. Cave House) be appointed part-time keeper of the Chase, at a weekly wage of 6 shillings, with a uniform cap and coat.

The sisters gradually sold off the remainder of the Loxley House estate and in 1924 sold off the sports fields. Although some of the fields are still in private ownership, some are now managed along with the common.

The common is now owned and held in trust by Sheffield City Council and remains a public open space, used as an area of recreation and exercise by the general public, just as the Payne family intended. Excluding the sports field, the common covers approximately 100 acres (0.40 square km). It is an area of heather, oak, silver birch, bracken and grassland, which was declared a local nature reserve in 1999.

The common is designated as access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

<http://www.wadsley-loxley.org>