

Stockland Turbaries - Historical Context

'Enclosure' is a term used to describe various means of consolidating or extending land-holdings into larger units. This can include the partition of large areas of land communally farmed under the open field system into small fields farmed by individuals, the conversion of arable land to pasture and the occupation of commons by large landowners, excluding other users. Enclosure awards are legal documents recording the ownership and distribution of the lands enclosed.

Throughout England, open or common land was gradually parceled out to owners by the various Enclosure Acts that were passed from the 16th century onwards. By the 19th century, unenclosed commons had become largely restricted to rough pasture in mountainous areas and to relatively small parts of the lowlands.

In the parish of Stockland, following the Enclosures a number of pockets of land that were thought to be unsuitable for arable farming remained as common land and became known as the Stockland Turbaries.

The word 'turbary' is believed to derive from Anglo-French 'turberie' and Low German 'turf', and refers to the ancient right to cut turf or peat for fuel on a particular area of land. The word is also used to describe the particular area of land itself. Turbary rights, or more correctly *common of turbary* are associated with having rights or access to a piece of land.

Today, the turbaries are owned by Stockland Parish Council and the people of the parish have access rights to them, including the gathering of fallen trees and branches for firewood.

Historically, the people living within the parish of Stockland used the turbaries for grazing, the cutting of bracken for animal bedding, and as a source of firewood. They also used controlled burning as a means of management and because of this the turbaries were much more open in appearance than they are today. This change has come about within the last sixty years or so, and they have become covered in scrub and secondary woodland.

The differences in appearance are due to the changing lifestyles of the population living in and around the turbaries. In the past, many more people relied on their own livestock to supply their everyday food, and of course many of them owned horses. These animals were all allowed to graze on the turbaries and helped to keep the vegetation down.

Changes to lifestyle gradually led to the decline of the traditional uses of the turbaries by the local people, and they ceased to be managed in any way, and thus became less open.

Despite these changes, today the Stockland Turbaries have a high wildlife value and support many species of flora and fauna within their wet heath, bog and woodland. The wet boggy communities are very significant in conservation terms, as these types of landscapes are restricted both locally and indeed across Europe.

In order to bring some form of management back to the turbaries, a plan was developed by Devon Wildlife Trust on behalf of Stockland Parish Council, running from 1997 to 2007 and partly funded by EU grants.

Since then, further plans have been put in place to manage several turbaries under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Agreements between Stockland Parish Council and Natural England, running from 2009 to 2019. These separate agreements cover Horner Hill, Quantock Common and Bucehayes Common. A similar HLS Agreement is in place for Shortmoor for the period 2010 to 2020.

The basic purpose of all these agreements is the restoration of the various landscapes and habitats in order to encourage the return of declining species of flora and fauna. Each agreement contains a list of specific targets to be met described as 'indicators of success'. These include the reintroduction of named species of trees, plants, animals and birds.

These documents are available for viewing at the back of the hall, but they cannot be removed as they are formal agreements between Natural England and Stockland Parish Council.