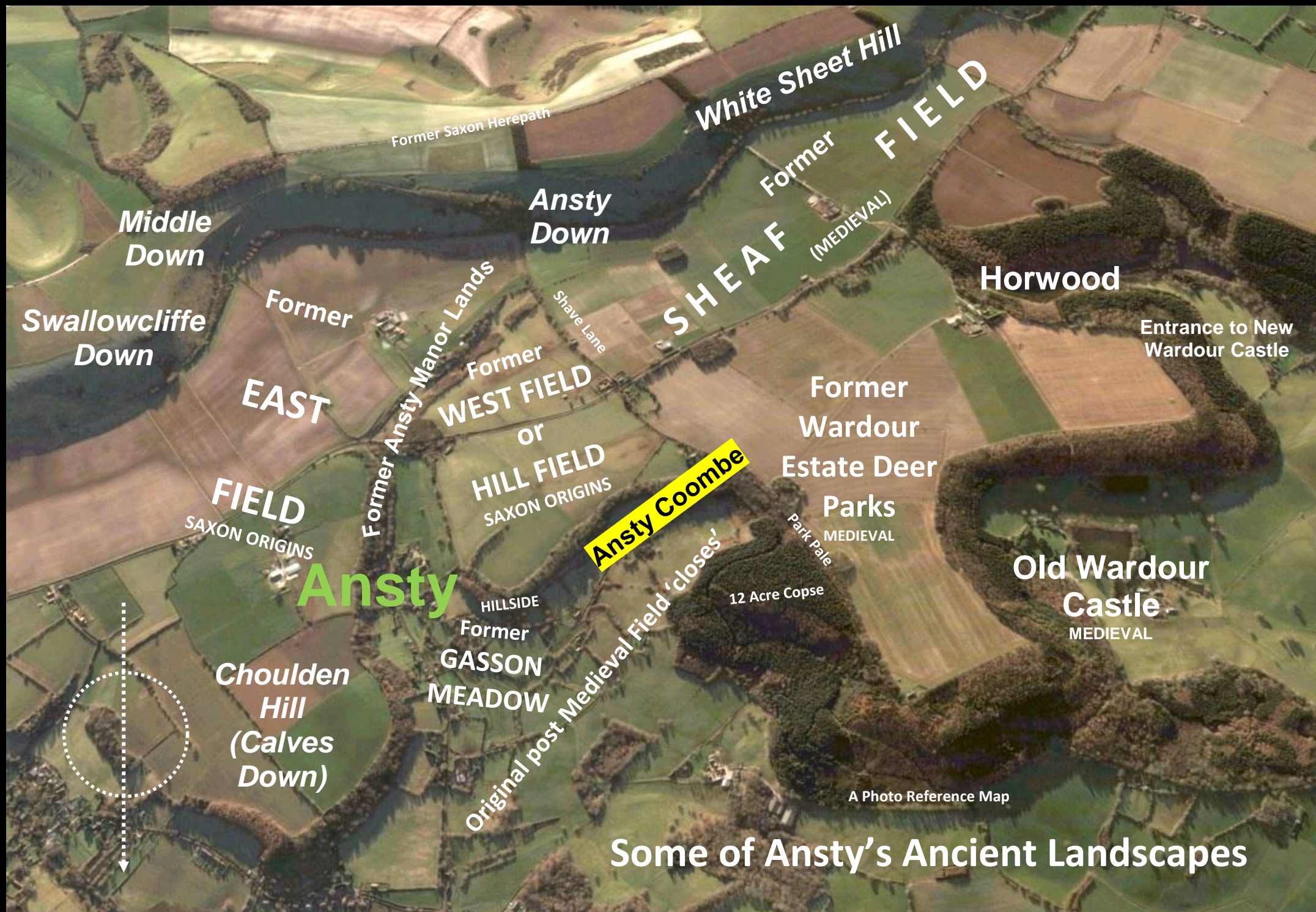


Discover Ansty's Ancient Landscapes 3

In this series of photo-information we choose well-known areas of the Ansty Parish and investigate the history and geography of the surrounding landscape. This set looks at Ansty Coombe and its surroundings.



Former Saxon Herepath

White Sheet Hill

Former SHEAF FIELD (MEDIEVAL)

Horwood

Entrance to New Wardour Castle

Former Wardour Estate Deer Parks MEDIEVAL

Old Wardour Castle MEDIEVAL

12 Acre Copse

A Photo Reference Map

Some of Ansty's Ancient Landscapes

Middle Down

Swallowcliffe Down

Former EAST FIELD

SAXON ORIGINS

Ansty

Former Ansty Manor Lands

Former WEST FIELD or HILL FIELD Saxon ORIGINS

Ansty Coombe

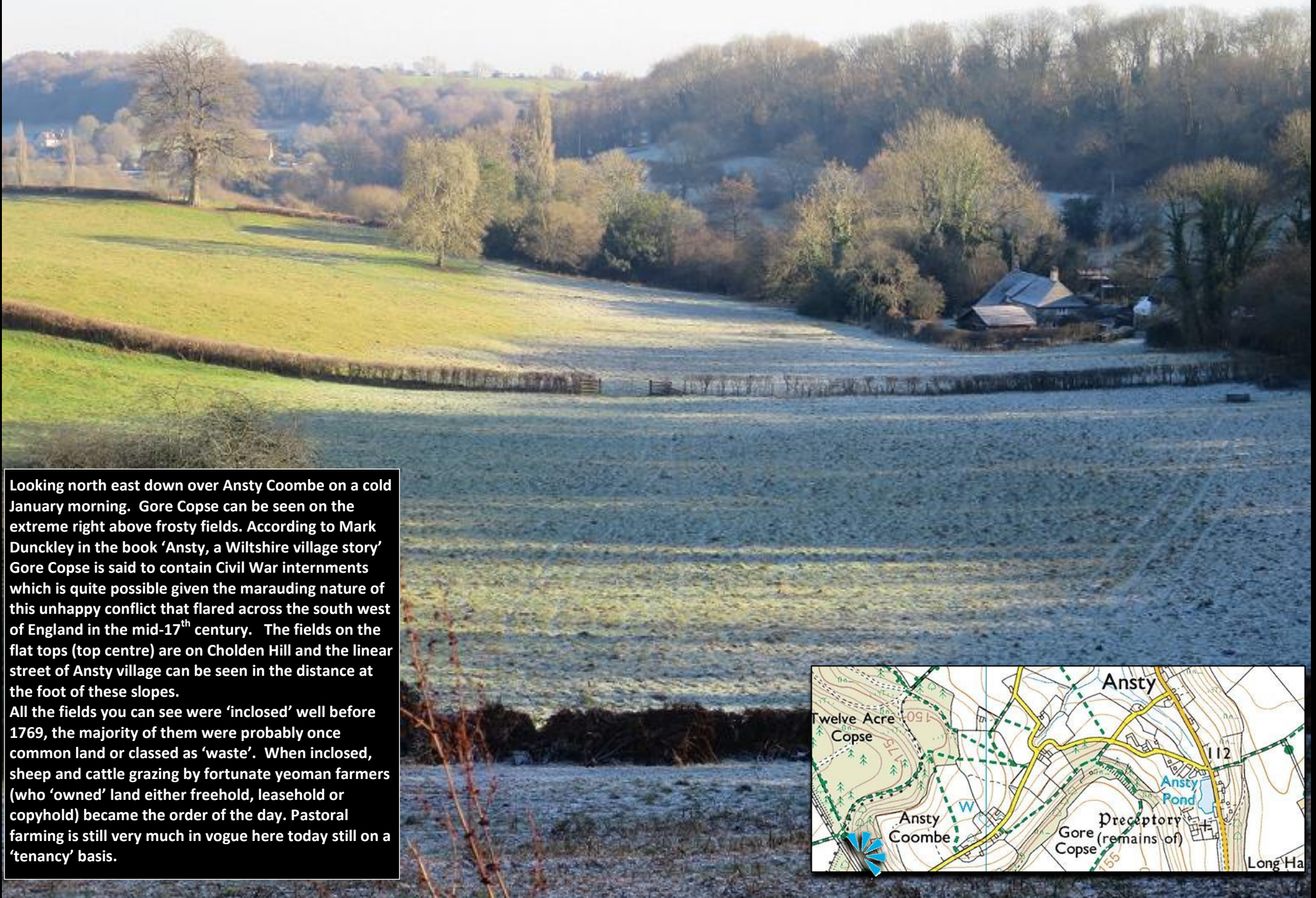
HILLSIDE

Former GASSON MEADOW

Original post Medieval Field 'closes'

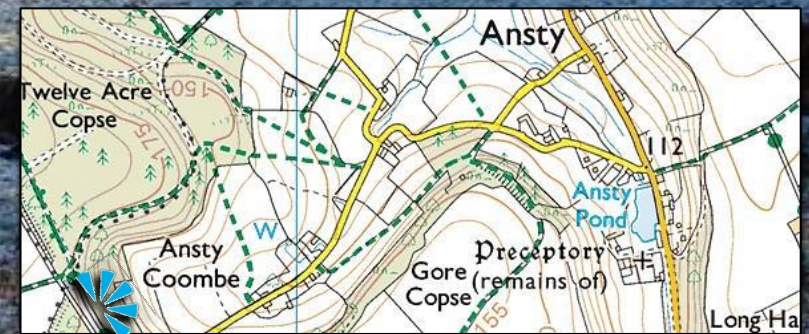
Choulden Hill (Calves Down)

Ansty Coombe



Looking north east down over Ansty Coombe on a cold January morning. Gore Copse can be seen on the extreme right above frosty fields. According to Mark Dunkley in the book 'Ansty, a Wiltshire village story' Gore Copse is said to contain Civil War internments which is quite possible given the marauding nature of this unhappy conflict that flared across the south west of England in the mid-17th century. The fields on the flat tops (top centre) are on Cholden Hill and the linear street of Ansty village can be seen in the distance at the foot of these slopes.

All the fields you can see were 'inclosed' well before 1769, the majority of them were probably once common land or classed as 'waste'. When inclosed, sheep and cattle grazing by fortunate yeoman farmers (who 'owned' land either freehold, leasehold or copyhold) became the order of the day. Pastoral farming is still very much in vogue here today still on a 'tenancy' basis.



Coombe Crate

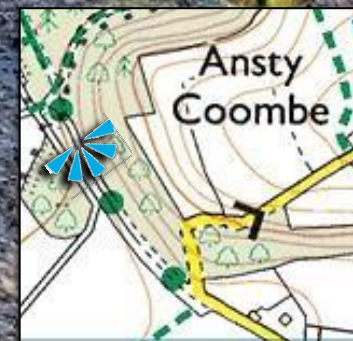
On the south western slopes immediately above Ansty Coombe are swathes of forest and evidence of former coppicing, once known as Coombe Crate. Why isn't coppicing reintroduced?

Managed for centuries by the Arundell family and their Wardour Estate, which included the entire manor of Ansty and the Coombe. The whole of Ansty was sold off in 1946 including large parcels of farm land being split up along with several smallholdings and scores of dwellings when the Barony of Wardour tragically became extinct.

An agricultural way of life (with much local employment and all of the skills and knowledge built up over centuries) was about to disappear forever.

This landscape since WW2 has undergone a kind of slow, creeping, permanent decay and it seems very little can be done about it.

This track is one of many that wend their way around the locality on the former Estate.

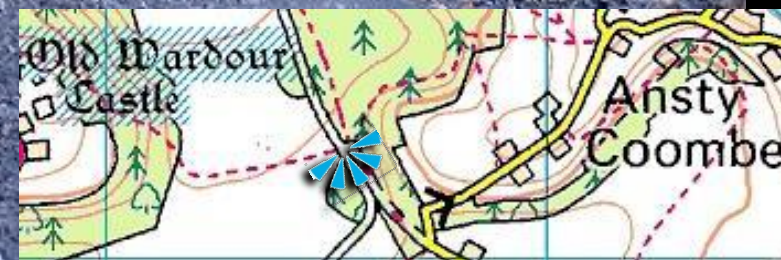


Park Pale

Close to Ansty Coombe is the Park Pale bank (with a ditch behind) which formed the boundary of a once prominent medieval (or post medieval) deer parks that once graced the precincts of the Wardour Estate. This photo was taken above Coombe Crate copse and is just inside the Ansty parish boundary. The bank was probably once topped with a wooden palisade fence. This allowed deer to get into the park but they did not find it so easy to get out because of the ditch behind the bank. Plenty of hunting and meat therefore, for the Lord's table!

According to one source the wooden stakes and fencing were probably looted during the Civil War skirmishes.

[Reading the Landscape](#)



Park Gate

This is 'Park Gate' some 250 metres on the restricted by-way track up from Ansty Coombe Lane (top). This gate was the entrance to the deer parks set within the vicinity of Old Wardour Castle which can be reached through the gap in the centre of the photograph. According to [Hardinge's](#) revised map of Cranborne Chase in 1677 there were two deer parks – one for fallow deer and the other for red deer.

This once important track is now classed as a footpath but it affords wonderful views of the Old Wardour castle ruins as well as the chalk downs to the south. Park Gate is a fraction outside of the Ansty parish boundary.

[Old Wardour Castle and its Park and Gardens](#)



Ansty Coombe

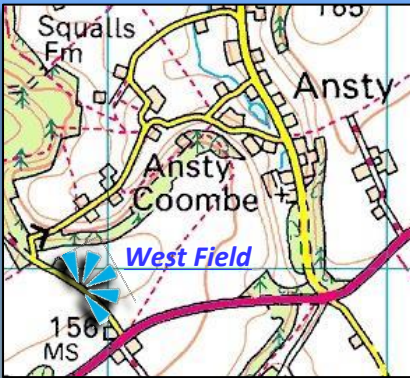
Coombe Lane drops down steeply into its narrow valley that was originally eroded by fast running springs and streams at the end of the last ice age melting.

The local rock is Greensand and the sunken lane is classic because Greensand rock can be relatively soft and in wet weather can 'weep' undermining the steep banks and causing minor landslips. Further down, the road continues to descend on to Lower Greensand rock which is underlain by Gault Clay. Wet meadows (with small streams issuing where the clay is close to the surface) and woodland is typical of this area whilst above the valley bottom there are small and irregular fields surrounded by forest stands (often conifers today).

All the fields and meadows were once carefully ditched to allow the water to drain off during wet times – a practice long forgotten despite today's modern machinery. Hence the lower meadows are slowly turning into bog meadows – not helped by a recent run of wet winters.



Medieval West Open Field



This wide, open expanse of grassland (located on the tops to the south of Ansty Coombe) was once an open medieval field, known as West Field (see map inset) and later referred to as Hill Field, perhaps with roots as far back as Saxon times.

It was one of three large fields (held by Ansty manor and the church) that became established around the village and they were divided into many narrow strips of land. Above the wet valleys the soil was drier and easier to cultivate.

These strips or selions were farmed by individuals or peasant families from the village, often referred to as serfs or tenants. Surrounding these fields were woodland copses and pasture areas for common usage (grazing animals and collecting firewood for example) which were also held by the manor and church.

This Germanic based system lasted for several centuries but from the 15th century onwards a process known as 'inclosure' gradually 'privatised' the land, making farming much more efficient – but the many 'small farmers' lost out. This medieval open field was still intact with its many strips as late as 1806. By 1809 it was gone.

This open field, once toiled over by dozens of peasants eking out a frugal living growing crops in scattered strips is currently used for equine grazing.



The Lower 'Herepath'

The modern A30 (just beyond the wooden fence) was classified as such in the 1920s when the internal combustion engine encouraged the rapid growth of motor vehicles. This important route way has been in use for hundreds of years as the main horse and coaching route from London to Exeter. Indeed the long history of this road can be traced back to the Saxon period when it was referred to as a 'Herepath' referring to an Anglo-Saxon military track built in the 9th century. These army roads were needed at a time of unrest between the Saxons and Viking raiders from Denmark in this part of the world.

However the section that passes by Ansty and indeed other similar villages nearby, dips through valleys and 'cumbs' that were prone to winter flooding, making access difficult, if not impossible. The Herepath was often referred to as the Summerway because it was really only passable in the summer. It can still get very wet in times of inclement weather even today! Our part of this route way was much improved when it became a 'turnpike road' in 1788.

Turnpike trusts were bodies set up by individual acts of Parliament, with powers to collect road tolls for maintaining the principal roads in Britain from the 17th but especially during the 18th and 19th centuries.

An alternative Herepath was also constructed in the 9th century along the Downs from White Sheet Hill about a mile or two to the south to Wilton – probably following an ancient track of even older vintage. This 'Winter Herepath' did not flood so readily but tackling the steep slopes must have made the coaching journeys arduous. This section was improved as a 'turnpike' road in the 1760s but it lapsed and the old Summer Herepath became the better road.



New Barn Milestone



These pictures show both sides of an ancient milestone on the north west side of the A30 just a stone's throw from the entrance to the Ansty Pick Your Own Smallholding and shop. It depicts the distance from on one side of the stone to Sarum (Salisbury) as 14 miles and 6 miles to Shaston (Shaftesbury) on the other.

It is a listed structure and is supposed to be looked after by Wiltshire Council. Badly scarred by wear and tear, particularly over the last few years by council verge cutters the stone was resurrected by local farmer Peter Dalton in 2016 who raised the forlorn stone to its original height and locals now volunteer to keep the vegetation from overgrowing the structure so that the verge cutters now see it and hopefully avoid smashing into the stone with their blades.

There are no council funds to repair the damage so unless the stone is somehow 'adopted' by interested villagers who might also be willing to pay for repairs it will remain in its battered state.

According to the Mogg Survey of High Roads in 1816 there was a milestone almost opposite this location on the other side of the carriageway indicating that it was XCVI miles (96 miles) to London on the then newly turnpiked 'lower herepath' – which is the A 30 today.



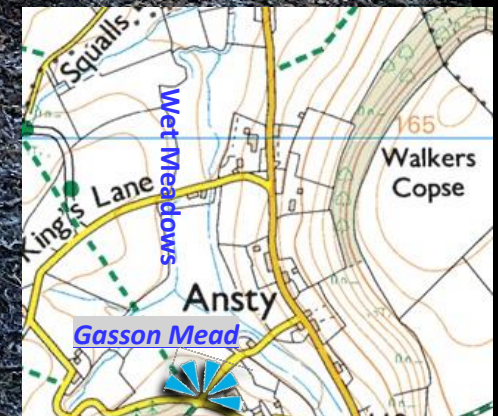
Medieval Gasson or Gaston Mead



This is a view looking north by north west across the tree lined wet meadows of the Ansty valley with the impressive 'Walkers Copse' forming a barrier between Ansty and Swallowcliffe on Choulden (Cholden) Hill to the right.

These meadows were once part of a large area of medieval common land going way back to perhaps Saxon times. Certainly the original common meadow was referred to as Gasson or Gaston meadow on old maps and charts. The name Gasson or Gaston is of Germanic (Anglo Saxon) origin – probably Norman French pre 10th Century. The word 'Mead' is an ancient word describing floodplain meadowland which of course is what this area is at the foot of a valley.

Today sheep are running in this field (extreme right) emphasising one of the reasons why such common land was inclosed (that is, privatised) quite early on, in this case to make way for more efficient specialised farming such as keeping sheep or cattle herds but invariably depriving former peasant landholders of their livelihood and their right to turn out their single animals to graze the common and even the right to forage and collect wood for fuel etc. from the 'wastes' on the edges of the common land.



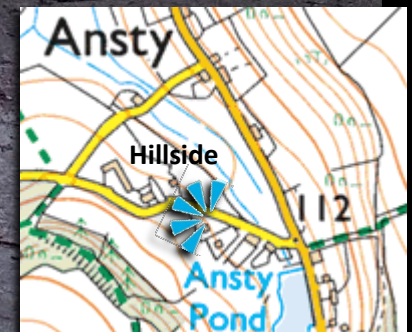
Hillside Farm

01/2018

Hillside Farm (now a private house) is a beautiful detached house (dated 1744 on a keystone over the door) with a separate stable block. Hillside Farm and its Stables has played a small but important part in the agricultural history of Ansty right up to the present day.

After common husbandry had ended in 1811 by private agreement the land (including nearby Gasson Mead) was divided and allotted into more 'compact' farmsteads.

According to 'A History of the County of Wiltshire Vol 13 ' BHO, Hillside Farm worked lands on the western side of Choulden Hill in the 19th century – probably sheep and cattle. The current owners still pay homage to this practice using local fields to graze sheep and cattle albeit on a smaller scale!



Blind Lane

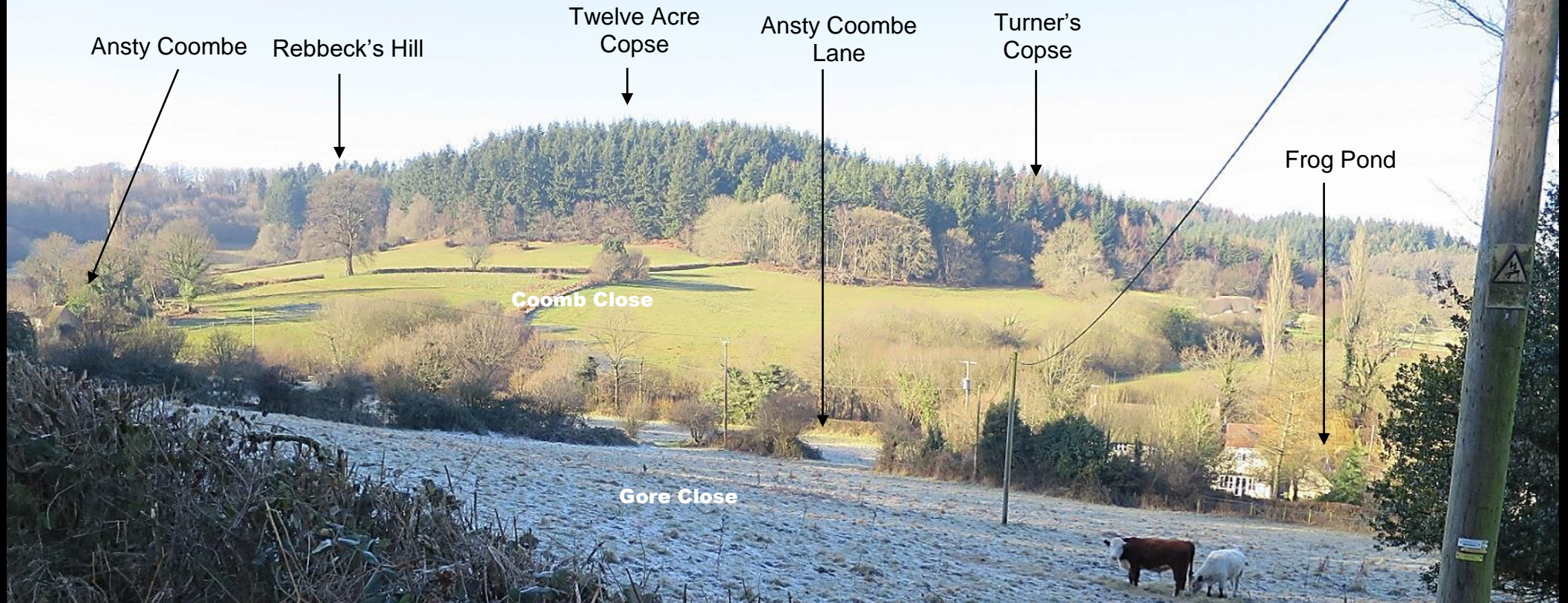
Blind Lane, Ansty. This short, very ancient sunken lane drops steeply down past 'Macey's' cottage across a bridge like culvert through which the Ansty stream issues (from a pond) quite noisily at times. The lane then rapidly ascends up the other valley side to join Ansty Street (High Street) which has exploited a natural ledge before the valley side continues to rear quite steeply (behind cottages lining the street) up towards Cholden Hill or Calves Down.

This road is of considerable historic importance and partly encompassed the whole of 'Hillside' and the original nucleated settlement of Ansty, including the early manor, the church and the preceptory as well as representing a hub that connected the early East and West open fields and common land via a series of footpaths. Most of the lane today falls under Ansty's 'conservation zone' which came into force in 1985.

According to a Jean Morrison who wrote a book about Wiltshire folk life there was a healing well (or spring) and the foot of this lane where mothers would use the water to treat the sore eyes of babies. Another source recalls that the spring waters there had a bluish tinge – possibly copper sulphate which might have done the trick!



Lower Ansty Coombe



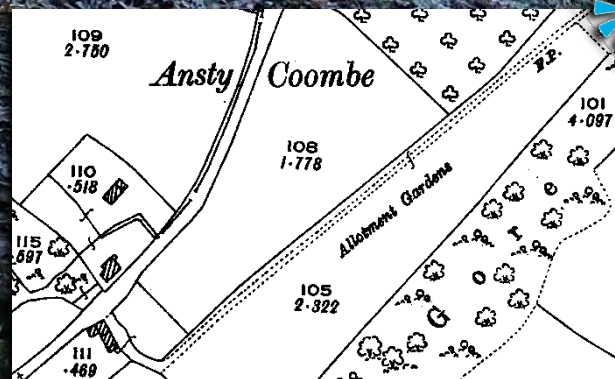
Looking NW across Lower Ansty Coombe from Gore Copse. The field patterns here and the land utilisation has barely changed in hundreds of years. The major differences back then is that there would have been a few more 'small holdings', allotments and 'fruited areas' especially on the sunny south facing slopes. Many villagers would be visibly tending the land.

These fields had been inclosed by the nearby Wardour Estate some time before the peak privatisation of the late 1700s to the mid-1820s. The word 'close' means enclosed (inclosed) land.

Between 1604 and 1914, over 5,200 individual Inclosure Acts were put into place, inclosing a vast 6.8 million acres (2,800,000 ha; 28,000 km²). There is no doubt this improved farming efficiency but some argue it was socially inefficient. On the other hand most 'common folk' were landless anyway: the argument being that these Acts would lead to better farming methods that would put food on their table.



Ansty Coombe (former) Allotments



View looking south west up Ansty Coombe, above Frog Pond. This long rectangular field (well above Ansty Coombe Lane) and flanked by Gore Copse to the left was one of two field areas let as allotments in the 1920s.

Common land husbandry ended in Ansty in 1811 - and a good deal earlier in many parts of the parish - especially this area. This allowed private farms to flourish, all in the name of efficiency and productivity. For a while a few tenants from Ansty worked this strip of land which were marked on the 25 inch to 1 mile OS map published in 1925.

Gore Copse.



View looking north east along the former Ansty Coombe allotment gardens towards Ansty. Flanking the field from the top of the Coombe to just above the slopes down to Ansty Manor is the narrow and lengthy Gore Copse.

This copse seems to have a long history: according to Mark Dunckley in the chapter 'Ansty: Archaeological History' in the book 'Ansty – a Wiltshire Village story' he suggests Gore Copse was said to contain Civil War internments.

A copse is usually defined as a small wood and this one consists mostly of ash, sycamore, with some beech, oak, hazel and holly. There is evidence that some coppicing took place in the distant past.

Sadly, part of Gore Copse today appears to be quite neglected – with little sign of traditional and sustainable forest management. When wood for fuel and timber was locally sourced our local woods were well managed. Now trees just rot and fall down. It seems such a waste!

