

# The Landscape of Combe St. Nicholas

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## Introduction

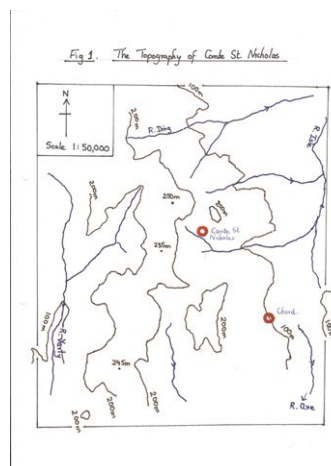
Combe St. Nicholas is an ordinary Somerset parish with an area of about 4000 acres and a population of around 1000. It lies close to Devon and is thus close to the borders of several historical and geographical regions including that between the Durotriges and Dumnonii of the Iron Age and Roman periods and that of Wessex and the West Welsh of the 6th and 7th centuries. It is also close to the boundary of Oliver Racham's 'Ancient' and 'Planned' countrysides.

As far as I can discover, unlike for some of the surrounding parishes, no modern parish history has been published and the relevant volume of the Victoria County History has not been prepared. There are however references to the parish in documents not specifically describing the parish and using these and an examination of today's countryside this assignment will attempt to uncover the development of the landscape of the parish and relate it to the wider context.

Since the suffix 'St. Nicholas' is a late comer, being presumably added when the church was rebuilt ( and rededicated?) in the 13th century, I will follow local practice and call the village just 'Combe' and use the full title only when referring to the parish.

## The Topography of Combe St. Nicholas

The village of Combe lies about 6km WSW of Ilminster , 3km NNW of Chard and lies on the eastern edge of the Blackdown Hills. The general topography is shown on Fig.1. To the east the land falls away to the River Isle and beyond to the Somerset Levels. The ridge of the Blackdown Hills runs roughly N-S to the west of the village and beyond that is the valley of the River Yarty. To the south is the Chard Gap, the watershed between rivers which run north to the Bristol Channel and south to the English Channel. Combe itself lies in a valley below the Blackdown ridge at the head of a stream which runs east to join the River Isle.

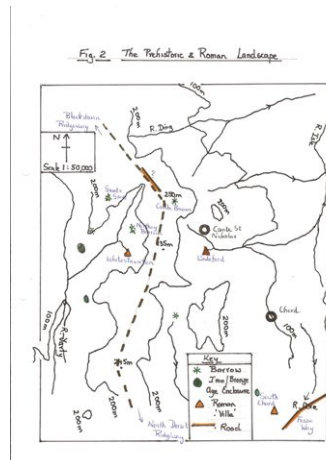


for cattle and sheep.

The soil of this part of the Blackdown Hills is largely clay-with flints which is not very attractive for arable agriculture. Today nearly all the area is used as pasture

## The Prehistoric Landscape

The pre-Saxon visible traces on the landscape of the Combe St. Nicholas area are summarised on Fig.2.



The 'natural' state of the area, i.e. after the last glacial and before the Neolithic, was presumably woodland. Todd (1987,64) suggests that tree cover was continuous for regions below about 600m while Rackham (2000, Fig.5.2) shows west Somerset on the boundary between lime-dominated woodland to the east and that of oak-hazel to the west. Although doubtless Mesolithic hunter-gatherers made a living in this environment they have probably left no impact on today's landscape.

The introduction of farming from about 4000BC saw major changes in the appearance of much of England with largescale deforestation being reflected in the pollen record. Rackham (2000,72) suggests that over the next 2000 years more than half of the original woodland had been cleared. Signs of other Neolithic activity on the landscape of western Somerset and eastern Devon are sparse. The nearest possible causewayed enclosures to Combe St. Nicholas are on Ham hill near Ilchester (Cunliffe 1993,56) and Hembury Hill near Honiton (Todd 1987,78), while the nearest definite long barrows are on Mendip (Cunliffe 1993,24) and in the Exe valley near Tiverton. A possible ploughed out long barrow within Combe St. Nicholas is suggested by the lane called Giants Grave Road running along the spur between the River Yarty and a tributary, (SMR ref.55161), but there is no visible evidence.

The Bronze Age has left at least one definite monument in the landscape of Combe St. Nicholas; a bell barrow on Beacon hill, the highest point of the Blackdown ridge about 1km NW of the village of Combe. This barrow has commanding views over all the surrounding region and particularly to the east where the Somerset Levels and Mendip are easily visible. The barrow was excavated in 1935 and a funerary urn filled with ashes was found (Grey 1935,100-107). This barrow is one of a group of about 20 on the Blackdown Hills. Two others of these can be found at Northay about 2km west of Combe and a further series of 7 barrows are spaced along about 2km of the ridge running approximately N-S to the west of the River Yarty.

It is possible that the ridges of the Blackdown hills were used as communication routes throughout the prehistoric period. Such a ridgeway track has been postulated to run north from the North Dorset Ridgeway, west of where Chard now stands, past the barrow on Beacon Hill to Neroche and then west along the Blackdown Ridgeway.

No Iron Age sites are listed in the SMR for Combe St. Nicholas but the surrounding area contains several which might be of this period. For example two enclosures are located south of Howley 4km west of Combe (SMR refs 53259 and 53266). Combe St. Nicholas is just outside the area of great hill forts which cover the territory of the Durotriges to the east. The nearest of these, clearly visible from many points in Combe St. Nicholas, is on Ham Hill near Ilchester. Closer at hand however is the smaller hill fort at Neroche on the site of the later Norman castle.

Based upon the evidence of the distribution of coins it is suggested that Combe St. Nicholas lay close to the boundary between the territory of the Durotriges to the east and the Dumnonii to the west (the former used coins while the latter seen not to have). This boundary was probably maintained by the Romans when establishing their 'civitates', (Leach 2001). To the east of Combe St. Nicholas is a region with many highly Romanised buildings with a cluster of villas around Ilchester and a string of them at approximately 1km intervals along the Fosse Way from Ilchester to Dinnington a few kilometres east of Combe St. Nicholas. (From here, according to the 4th Edition of the O.S. map of Great Britain, 1994, the Fosse Way loses its sense of direction and curves southwards to the coast at Seaton.)

West of Dinnington are the Romanised sites at Wadeford (in Combe St. Nicholas parish), South Chard and Whitestaunton. There are no visible signs at the first two sites but at the latter, which is close to the later church and manor house, walls survive to a height of 0.5m (SMR ref. 53262). Adjacent to the 'villa' is St. Agnes's Well (SMR ref.53261) which has traces of a Roman shrine around it . St. Agnes was a 4th century martyr and thus the site may be a Christianised pagan one. These are amongst the most westerly Romanised sites in England . Once again the Dumnonii to their east do not seem to have accepted 'modern' innovations.

There are no confirmed Roman roads in or near Combe St Nicholas (except for the Fosse Way which runs to the south of Chard), however Todd (1987,217) is convinced that a road ran west from Dinnington to the Chard area and then roughly followed today's A30 to Exeter. There are no obvious visible signs of such a road but it would run much closer to the Wadeford and Whitestaunton sites than the Fosse Way as marked on the O.S. map, would extend the series of sites along its route referred to above and shorten the march from Ilchester to Exeter by several kilometres compared with the alternative route via Axminster. The SMR also suggests that part of the ridgeway close to Combe Beacon was Romanised (SMR ref. 53194), with a possible 'agger' visible running parallel to the modern road.

It may be no coincidence that the Roman sites at Wadeford, Whitestaunton and South Chard are situated in the separate parishes. The primary source of wealth throughout the prehistoric period must have been agriculture and thus the hillforts of the Iron Age and the roads and villas of the Roman period and their lifestyles must have been built and maintained from agricultural surpluses; implying an intensively managed and developed countryside with a landscape which had been closely shaped by human activity. By these periods at the latest it is probable that the countryside was largely under management whether for arable, pasture, grazing, timber or firewood, under someones control and hence divided into territories or estates.

When the Roman field army was withdrawn and pay for the rest ceased the Roman economy collapsed but presumably the local landowners and population continued to live off the land. In Dumnonia which had never really been Romanised the differences may not have been significant except that taxes ended up with a local leader rather than going to a central coffer. There may have been some population reduction and some areas, such as the Somerset Levels fell out of production due to flooding or failure of the drainage systems but in general agricultural life would have continued.

Somerset and further west was largely sheltered from early Saxon raiding. The Saxon takeover was delayed until over 250 years after the Roman departure and when it did occur was gradual. The area around Bath is claimed by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to have been conquered in AD577, the River Parrett to be reached 80 years later in AD658 and Eastern Devon only in AD682, (Todd 1987,272). This process is unlikely to have been accompanied by a major change in land organisation and is more likely to have been achieved largely by a change of lordship similar to that of the Normans 400 years later. There is thus every possibility that estate boundaries of the Saxon periods had their origins in the Roman period or earlier. .

## The Parish and its Boundaries

The boundaries of parishes presumably took shape in the mid to late Saxon period and in some way reflected the contemporary pattern of land ownership. As shown on

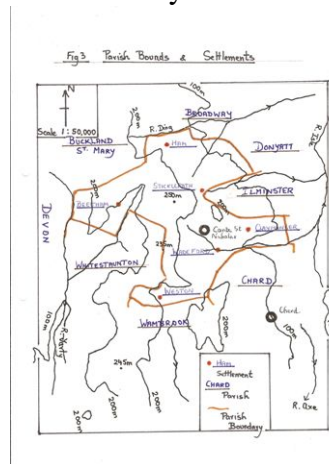


Fig.3 the boundaries of the pre-1982 parish of Combe St. Nicholas form a rather irregular cross shape. The present village of Combe lies near the centre of the cross, and contains the parish church, while other settlements occupy the arms with Ham to the north, Clayhanger to the east, Beetham to the west and Weston to the south. Collinson (MDCCXCL, Vol.2,475) describes Combe St. Nicholas as “a large parish with four tithings, Ham, Clayhanger, Wadeford and Beetham plus the depopulated village of Walton, (sic)”. The estates associated with these settlements were presumably brought together when the ecclesiastical parish was being formed to comprise a ‘composite’ parish. (Aston 1988,76). In addition to these

settlements Sticklepath, Scrapton, Nimmer, Pudleigh and Wilhayne are hamlets within the parish boundary. This pattern of settlement with many dispersed hamlets or farms rather than one central village (perhaps Combe itself was originally a hamlet) is typical of Rackham’s ‘Ancient Countryside. (Rackham 2000,3) whose boundary with the ‘Planned Countryside’ runs through western Somerset.

The ‘bite’ into the parish boundary on the east is part of the parish of Ilminster Ilminster Without, which possibly reflects the fact that the estate on which Chilworthy House, which lies in the middle of this ‘bite’, now stands was associated with Ilminster and not Combe.

The settlement names of Combe St. Nicholas are mainly topographical and are a mixture of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon. Combe itself is Celtic and presumably describes the valley in which the settlement lies. Wadeford is a Celtic/Anglo Saxon tautology with both ‘Wade’ and ‘Ford’ describing the crossing of the stream which flows through the village. Ham describes “a meadow, a close, flat land in a bend of a river or stream”, (Ekwall,1960 ), which presumably relates to its position by the River Ding, even though it is hardly in a flat area. Clayhanger describes the clayey slope on which the hamlet lies, while the name Sticklepath, meaning ‘steep slope’, has presumably at some time been transferred from the steep path leading up to it from Ilminster to the hamlet itself. The name Weston is potentially misleading and does not refer to a ‘West Ton’. An earlier spelling from about 1490 is ‘Waterleston’ (Aldridge 1927,13) which may describe a waterless settlement, since at a minimum altitude of

170m it lies above the local spring level.

The first documentary source relating, even if indirectly, to Combe St. Nicholas is a charter recording the grant, around AD700 of 20 hides at Ilminster by Ynys, king of the West Saxons, to the monastery of Muchelney. M. Costen ( 1988,33) believes that the charter is genuinely of 8th century date and thus it describes a situation within a few decades of the Saxon takeover. The estate defined coincides with the modern (pre 1980s) parish of Ilminster and thus also includes the 'bite' into the east side of Combe St. Nicholas where the two parishes meet. The relevant section, traced by Grundy (1927,138) reads,

“ From Watercress Ford (Carsford) to Whiteway (Wite Wey) then by the Hillfoot (Wyr crume) to the Steep Uphill Path (Sticklepathe) then to Stone..... (Stoneberninge). From Stone..... to Donyatt (Dunnegete)”

The southern section of the 'bite' is still followed by a lane called Whiteway on the 1:25000 O.S. map of 1997 and the tip of the 'bite' is at the hamlet of Sticklepath. The northern section of the 'bite' then follows the steep path downhill towards the village of Donyatt. This evidence shows that by the 8thC at the latest many of the boundaries and names of features in today's landscape were already established.

Also probably in existence were other tracks which linked Combe St. Nicholas to its neighbours. Names that suggest an early origin are Crockstreet (Potters Street) leading to Donyatt and referring to the potteries there, the Stantway which runs from Combe to Whitestaunton and the Greenway which leaves the Whiteway east of Combe to climb directly to Bombe Beacon with its barrow. Combe Beacon thus seems to have been a major intersection of routes with the ridgeway running north-south, the Sticklepath running east, the Greenway coming up from the south-east and presumably another unnamed way leading SSE down to Combe ,the ford which gave Wadeford its name and continuing to Chard.

### **The Domesday Landscape**

By the time of the Domesday survey large areas of Somerset were ecclesiastical estates. In the SW of the county the bishop of Wells held much of the land including Chard and Combe St. Nicholas while Muchelney Abbey held Ilminster. Other local areas were subject to the Count of Mortain. These included Whitestaunton and Broadway.(Thorn and Thorn 1980)

The area of the Blackdown Hills was not rich. Its poor soil put it in the same category as the Quantocks and Mendip with an average population being recorded of less than 5 persons per square mile (Derby & Finn 1967,216).

The Domesday Book says of Combe St. Nicholas ;

“The same Bishop (Gizo, Bishop of Wells) holds Combe. Azar, son of Torold held it in the time of King Edward and paid geld for 20 hides. There is land for 16 ploughs. Of this there are in demesne 8 hides where are 3 ploughs and 12 serfs and (there are) 15 villeins and 13 bordars with 12 ploughs and 12 hides. There are 12 beasts and 18 swine and 315 sheep and 1 riding horse. There are 12 acres of meadow and half a league of pasture in both length and breadth and one league of woodland in both length and breadth. It was worth 10 pounds . Now 18 pounds” (Thorn and Thorn 1980,6.2)

Interpreting these figures into modern terms is not straightforward. The recorded population is 40 people. If this is multiplied by about 5 to account for omissions and dependents the total population would be about 200, almost all of whom would be involved in agriculture. This can be compared with Greenwood's data for 1822, i.e. before major mechanisation, which stated that Combe St. Nicholas had 92 families in agriculture out of a total of 211 families. Making a simple proportion this would suggest that about 400 people, including dependents, were then employed in agriculture. This doubling in 900 years is not outrageous and gives some confidence that the population estimate based upon Domesday is "in the right ballpark".

Harinden (1981,101) estimates that one team of oxen could plough between 100 and 120 acres per year. Therefore the 16 teams in Combe St. Nicholas could plough around 1760 acres, which is about 45% of the total area of the parish. In addition the parish included the 12 acres of meadow, 1/2 a league by 1/2 a league of pasture and 1 league by 1 league of woodland. Assuming a league is about 1.5 miles (Thorn and Thorn 1980, Appendix) then there were about 350 acres of pasture and 1450 acres of woodland. Altogether Domesday thus describes;

Arable 1760 acres

Pasture 358 acres

Woodland 1440 acres

Meadow 12 acres

Total 3570 acres

This is in very good agreement with the present area of the parish of about 4000 acres and shows that the landscape was intensively managed with little waste.

The woodland and pasture were presumably used for feeding the cattle, pigs and the significant flock of sheep as well as providing timber and firewood. The woodland was probably concentrated in the north of the parish which was in the Forest of Neroche and where the surviving woodland of the parish is still located.

It is surprising that Domesday does not record a mill in Combe St. Nicholas considering the later use made of the stream running from Wadeford to the east. However mills are recorded in the adjoining parishes of Whitestaunton, Donyatt and Ilminster, which has three. Donyatt also had a (deer) park, one of the few recorded in Domesday. Ilminster was also significant in having a market which presumably made it the focal point of the locality in the times before the foundation of Chard borough.

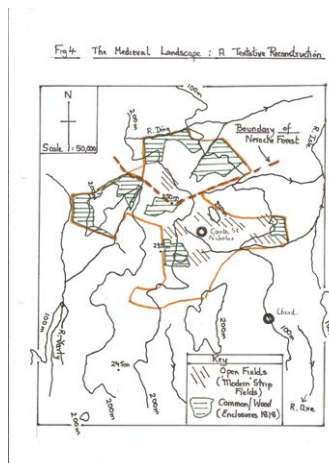
### **The Landscape of the Later Middle Ages**

The first reference to the Royal Forest of Neroche is in 1221 but it is likely that it was actually founded in the 12thC (Victoria County History Vol2,561). The Forest is not explicitly mentioned in Domesday since its area was largely attached to estates to the east leading to what Rackham calls 'the Neroche Anomaly' whereby too much land use is recorded in the area to the east of Neroche and too little in the area itself (Rackham 2000,80). The Forest boundary cut through Combe St Nicholas thus presumably giving the inhabitants access to firewood and grazing. In 1298 and 1300 perambulations of the boundary were made to identify the legal extent of the Forest.

The section through Combe St. Nicholas reads;

“Sic Processerunt incipiendo ad poelerumde Dungate procedendo per regiam viam que dicitur Crockerstrate usque Stickelpath etsic per eandem viam usque castrum de Nerucchuch” (Turner 1899,266).

The forest boundary thus followed the parish boundary with Ilminster from Crockstreet up to Sticklepath, continued to Combe Beacon and then followed the ridge northwards to Castle Neroche. (Fig 4). An area within this part of the parish was still called The Forest at the time of the 1818 Enclosure Act. Much of the Forest was probably never woodland or open country but was normal arable land over which Forest Law was applicable; however the part of Combe St. Nicholas within the Forest was exceptional in being largely the former, although in some areas to the north of Sticklepath and Combe Beacon intakes were made into the physical forest.(Rackham 1988, Fig 1.9).



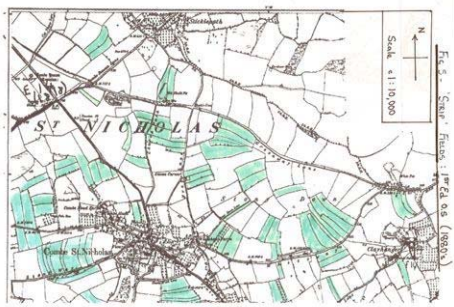
The earliest medieval buildings of which traces remain in the neighbourhood of Combe St. Nicholas include, as usual, the churches; that of Combe itself was rebuilt and rededicated in 1239 (Aldridge 1927,15). A chapel at Weston, long ago incorporated into a house, was probably built in the early 13thC in association with the nearby manor house (SMR Ref 53185).

Outside the parish can be seen the remains of the castle at Neroche. This strategic site overlooking the Vale of Taunton to the north guards the junction of the ridgeway coming north from Combe Beacon and the major east-west successor to the Blackdowns Ridgeway coming up from the significantly named settlement of Broadway, past Hare Farm, along Hare Lane ( both presumably named after the 'Harepath' ,the Army Path, and continuing along the northern edge of the Blackdown Hills. The castle was only occupied for four short periods. The first, when a bank and ditch was built across the promontory, is undated but believed to be pre-Norman. The second, a smaller enclosure, was dated by pottery to within a few years of the Conquest, and was probably part of campaigns in the late 1060's to suppress disturbances in the West Country. Shortly afterwards a motte was raised and the earlier enclosure converted into a bailey. This phase, possibly to be attributed to Robert of Mortain, was also shortlived and by the early 12thC the site was abandoned. A final brief occupation is believed to be dated to the period of anarchy during the wars between Stephen and Matilda. (Davison 1972).

The moated site at Donyatt, one of the few in Somerset, was probably a lodge for the park there.( Aston & Brown 1982,133).

There seems to be no written evidence relating to the field system of Combe St. Nicholas. Once again the parish was in a border region between the areas of open fields to the north and east and that of small enclosed fields to the west (Rackham 2000,175) A more detailed examination of Somerset, but not explicitly including Combe St. Nicholas indicates that open field agriculture was practiced over much of the county except for the marches with Devon.(Aston 1988,90). Despite this there is compelling evidence from the surviving field pattern for an open field system within

the parish. Over significant areas the modern fields are long and very narrow with the long side exhibiting the typical curve associated with ox ploughing. In addition on the 1st Edition O.S. maps it can be seen that several fields which today are approximately square were also originally divided into strips. Examples of these 'strip fields' can be



be seen on Fig 5 and the overall area of 'strip fields' is summarised on Fig 4. These 'strip fields' are presumably the strips of the open fields now fossilized in the landscape. They seem to be associated with the settlements of Combe, Wadeford, Clayhanger and Ham and indicates that each settlement had its own field system. Perhaps it is significant that there are no traces of 'strip fields' around the earlier settlements of Beetham and Weston which are

today reduced to isolated farmhouses.

Weston (or Waterleston) shows clear evidence of being a shrunken settlement site with a series of earthworks being visible on the ground and on aerial photographs (SMR Ref 53186). The notes to the SMR state that open fields around Weston are indicated by the large size of the modern fields. Aston (1982,130) suggests that the settlement of Weston was removed for sheep pasture. Possibly 'strip fields' were formed where the open fields were divided between the original owners of the strips and enclosed, while the large fields of Weston were formed when the whole open field was taken over by a single person.

Sheep rearing had probably been important in the region from before the Norman Conquest, The large flock of Domesday has already been referred to and Ilminster was a principal woollen manufacturing centre throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, (Morland 1938,134). Together with other factors the Little Ice Age of the 14thC and the reduced population following the Black Death probably led to reduced arable farming on the higher land and an increased concentration on wool production leading to the largely pasture landscape we see today.

Even when arable open-field agriculture was at its height there were large open areas in the parish being used for grazing and as a source of timber and firewood. At the time of the Enclosure Act of 1818 about a quarter of the area of the parish was still unenclosed It would thus seem quite possible that the areas of 'strip fields' and of 1818 enclosure as summarised on Fig.4 give the plan of the regions of arable and pasture/woodland respectively described in Domesday and continuing throughout the medieval period.

There seem to be no traces in the landscape of several of the other activities which are often found on medieval estates. It seems probable, if only on circumstantial evidence, that there was a mill on the stream running east from Wadeford that was so intensively used in later periods as described below. Edward III is known to have given rights of free warren to the parish (Aldridge 1927,14) but there are no clues in field names or earthworks as to the site of the warren. (The adjacent parish of Whitestaunton has fields known in the past as Conygar and Warren, (SMR Ref. 53267). Fish was important to the medieval diet and ponds could easily have been constructed in the fields above Wadeford where today ponds exist which were presumably reservoirs for

the watermills downstream. There is however no positive evidence of fish ponds. (Again Whitestaunton has such evidence in a series of earthworks, (SMR Ref. 53276).

A important industry throughout the medieval period and extending up to the 19thC was pottery manufacture. Although this pottery is associated with the name of the village of Donyatt the sites of the kilns were centred on the present hamlet of Crockstreet and some of the kilns were inside the Combe St. Nicholas parish bounds. (Coleman-Smith 2002,120). Crockstreet has clearly taken its name from the 'Crockerstrate' of the Neroche perambulation of AD1300 while a nearby farm today called Pottery Farm was identified as Crock Street Pottery on the 1st Edition O.S. map.

### **The Post-Medieval Landscape**

The date of the enclosure of the open fields into the 'strip-fields' is not known but was probably completed in the 16thC as suggested for Whitestaunton, (Carter 1981,6). In the early 1630's Charles 1, trying to rule without parliament, needed money. Consequently he planned to surrender his rights in Neroche Forest and to agree to enclosure. He proposed that he should be allotted one third of the Forest which he presumably intended to sell, while the adjacent landowners would be granted one third and those with common rights would receive the other third. There was however a backlash by the commoners to this arrangement during the Civil War in which the enclosures were removed and it was not until 1658 following legal proceedings that enclosure of the king's portion was confirmed while the other 2/3 remained open, (Harinden1981,174).

A further part of the area which had been Neroche Forest was the subject of the Combe St. Nicholas Enclosure Act of 1818. By this time the arable land had been long enclosed and the act addressed about 1050 acres of "moors, commons and waste land ..... with divers other pieces". The larger of these areas are shown on Fig.4 and in general comprise the peripheries of the parish and the highest land around Combe Beacon. The adjoining parishes were in similar situations in the early 19thC in that their enclosure acts also addressed only non-arable land, (Tate1948).

The enclosed areas were divided into the regular rectangular fields characteristic of the Parliamentary enclosures. Today nearly all of these enclosed areas are improved grassland used for grazing livestock. In some cases new roads were made through the enclosures either to provide access or to allow those who had used the commons as through routes for their livestock to continue to do so. These latter are generally dead straight. Within the parish examples are to be found in Belcombe Drove running across the ex-common around Combe Beacon towards Belcombe Farm and Hollands Wash Drove running north across the newly enclosed area parallel to the old ridgeway. Presumably it was necessary to build a new road here because the ridgeway had been turnpiked in the late 18thC and anyone using it for livestock would be subject to tolls. A more impressive drove road, today called The Drift is to be found in Chard parish running dead straight for more than 3km across Chard common which was enclosed in 1815.

In the second half of the 18thC Chard became the centre of a network of turnpike roads. The first turnpike road to run through Combe St. Nicholas was built in 1778 linking Taunton and Chard. This ran along the ancient ridgeway from Neroche to Combe Beacon and then down the probably existing road through Combe and Wadeford to Chard. In around 1810 a threat to the economic viability of the roads through Chard appeared in the form of the 'New Road' from London to the west which was built across the north of the parish and eventually became today's A303. To fight back the Chard Turnpike Trust improved its road network, turnpiking the road which is today the A30 and reducing the gradient on the road from Combe Beacon to Chard by continuing it along the ridgeway to meet the future A30 west of Chard thus by-passing Combe and Wadeford (Chard History Group 2001). These changes brought the road network of Combe St. Nicholas to virtually its modern configuration.

In the 18th and 19th centuries and probably much earlier the steam running from Wadeford to the River Isle was used to power mills. There are currently the remains of five mills along this short stretch of stream. The first two were in Wadeford itself; both were corn mills driven by overshot wheels, (SMR Refs. 53191 & 53190).

Downstream was Pudleigh Mill which was a cloth mill and then Nimmer mill. This latter is shown on the 1st. Edition O.S. map as making toothbrushes but earlier it had been used for corn milling and 'silk', (SMR Ref. 5363). Lastly on this stretch of stream is Hornsbury Mill, just outside Combe St. Nicholas in Chard parish. This was another corn mill whose wheel still rotates as a feature in the restaurant which now occupies its buildings.

All along the valley of this stream are traces of these mills; not only of the buildings but of a complicated series of sluices, wiers, ponds and leets, the unravelling of which would be a project by itself! The cloth making process can also be detected in the field names along the valley with three fields marked on the tithe map called Rack Close and one called Rack Mead, all referring to cloth drying frames.

Combe St. Nicholas has been pock-marked over the centuries by quarries, some of which can be detected in the modern fields and many more of which are marked on the 1st. Edition O.S. map. No less than 28 fields have names indicating 'pits' or 'quarries' on the tithe map. The names of some of these fields show that the pit was for extracting marl for improving the fields. Other produced limestone (for example the 'White Pits' at the Clayhanger end of the Whiteway), which would be converted into lime either for mortar or for liming the fields. (Two limekilns are shown on the 1st Edition O.S. map). Many pits must also have been dug to provide stone for adjacent houses ; the pre-20thC buildings in the parish are nearly all built of a rubble of sandstone and flints.

### **The Modern Landscape**

Remarkably little has changed in the physical landscape of Combe St. Nicholas in the last 100 years. Some roads have been surfaced and the houses modernised but while some new development has occurred in Combe this is largely infilling and the actual size of the village is not changed dramatically. The census returns show that the population of the parish has hardly changed since 1801, remaining around 1000; the

reduction in household size has presumably been balanced by the new housing . The most significant difference between the landscape shown on the 1st Edition O.S. map and that of today is the disappearance of the orchards, presumably for cider making, which were shown filling every open space in the villages and hamlets. Not visible on the map but noticeable to anyone viewing the landscape of 1801 and that of today would of course be the dramatic reduction in the number of people in it, as farming has become mechanised.

In the same way that little has changed in the landscape in the last one or two hundred years neither probably have the people changed much perhaps reflected in the wonderfully politically incorrect views of the Rev.G. de Y. Aldridge, Vicar of Combe St. Nicholas (1927,11), “ We have in Combe today a people .....tending to a dim half forgotten memory of their wrongs. A ‘peculiar’ people holding themselves aloof from their neighbours .....intensely suspicious of strangers who until recently carried on a perennial feud with the lowlanders, especially the men of Chard. For generations they have inter5  
6married .....(and) there is a great fixed gulf between a Combe man and a foreigner.”

## Abbreviations

SANHS; Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society  
SMR; Somerset Sites and Monuments Record

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