

FRIENDS OF FARTHING DOWNS

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

*Held on Wednesday 9th November, 2016 at 7.30 p.m. at
The Centre for the Retired, Old Coulsdon*

GUEST SPEAKER: DOMINIC NORTH, RANGER, HAPPY VALLEY

The Chairman introduced guest speaker Dominic North, Ranger, Happy Valley. He reminded those present that in recent years AGM Speakers had covered a broad range of issues. Last year our guest speaker had been Christine Howard Chairman of the Surrey Hills Society who spoke about the challenges that lay ahead and in 2014 Sue Ireland Director of the City of London Open Spaces spoke to us about future management plans. The Chairman said that this year Dominic will take us on an illustrated tour of Happy Valley highlighting the unique characteristics of the site where he has been the Ranger for the past eighteen years.

Dominic began with a brief outline of the history and geology of the 250 acre site bought in 1937 by the then Coulsdon & Purley UDC under the auspices of the Green Belt Act. The area included Devil's Den Wood, Glebelands (given by Caterham & Warlingham UDC) and (later) the Parson Pightle Estate. The area forms a link between Farthing Downs to the north, bought by the City of London in the 1880s, and to the east by Coulsdon Common, also owned by the City. Foxley Wood, Kingswood and Coulsdon Court where among other areas bought by the UDC at the time. The name 'Happy Valley' was given in 1970. Dominic explained that the steep sided dry valley was formed during the last Ice Age and is mainly chalk with a band of clay and flint soil on the western slope.

Most of Happy Valley, along with Farthing Downs, is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and as such is an important area for wildlife. It is also a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature (SMNI). The rarefied neutral chalk soil is habitat to both rare and scarce chalk-land plants. Within a square metre of meadow there can be growing anywhere between thirty to fifty different species. Dominic reminded us that this abundance of plants is good for wildlife – insects feed upon plants, birds feed upon the insects and so-on up the food chain. However, following WWII up to 80% of the chalk grassland had been lost in-part due to mismanagement, lack of grazing, myxomatosis, which reduced the rabbit population, and the fact that the land had been leased to a farmer for haymaking which was not carried out. All resulted in the chalk meadows becoming invaded with scrub. Dominic was pleased to say that when the management of Happy Valley returned to Croydon Council in 1966 they took advice from the Surrey Wildlife Trust and a scrub clearance and grazing project carried out on the Southern slopes in 1968/69 brought improvements.

Dominic showed us photographs of some of the most rare and beautiful plant species now flourishing in Happy Valley beginning with the Bee Orchid which evolved bee-like flowers to attract male bees to facilitate pollination. However, the species growing in this country is self-pollinating. It flowers from June to July. The Pyramidal Orchid is another mid-summer flowering orchid which can be found on chalk grassland and a variety of other low nutrient sites. It can be identified by its bright pink pyramidal flowers. The Fly Orchid, which has small

fly shaped flowers, is very vulnerable and is on the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN) Red List. Generally ten to twenty are found each year. Finally, the Man Orchid which gets its name from the small humanoid shapes of its flowers is endangered and needs a specific management regime. It can grow to about a foot high. Among other rare plants Dominic showed us the Round Headed Rampion which is nationally scarce, the Woolly Thistle which is now rare in London and the Greater Knapweed which is particularly attractive to butterflies. Finally the Greater Yellow Rattle which is nationally rare inhabiting only six sites in Britain. Dominic assured those present that the Greater Yellow Rattle is now very abundant both on Happy Valley and Farthing Downs where its seeds continue to be spread by hay-making.

Dominic brought us up-to-date with current management plans which he put in place when he first took over. He started with a survey of the site which was divided into sections and given specific management programs. Due to this a wide variety of wildlife has flourished. There are now a good range of insects numbering around eight-hundred species which have benefited from the increase in wildflowers. Butterfly numbers are another success story. In response to careful management around thirty species have been recorded during annual transits while new species like the Silver Washed Fritillary have moved in. The day flying Burnett Moth is frequently seen. Chalk grassland can provide a rich habitat for butterflies and trends recorded are used to monitor results of management plans. The Roman Snail, a Schedule 5 protected species, is also found both on Happy Valley and Farthing Downs.

Turning to grassland management, which needs either grazing or cutting. Dominic explained that until the 1970s rabbits helped to control scrub but another outbreak of myxomatosis led to a decline in numbers and further invasive growth. Many hundreds of years of grazing by wild and domesticated animals created the grassland meadows which became populated by chalk-land flowers. Grazing was again re-introduced to Happy Valley in 2002 and is more effective than cutting by tractor – it encourages more wildlife diversity and protects ant hills. Several varieties of sheep are used for grazing and they do a good job; The Hardwicks, the breed saved by Beatrix Potter, will eat the thorny scrub; Jacobs Sheep, a hardy breed, eat rough scrub, they also protect the flock by chasing off dogs; The Speckled Face Beulah's are a hardy Welsh mountain sheep. Dominic is helped by volunteer shepherds who regularly check the flocks for fly strike and other problems. Volunteers also help with ragwort pulling which is always burnt on site. As a general rule 120 sheep weeks are needed per hectare per year but much depends on growing conditions, public use requirements and rights of way. The valley fields are cut by a local farmer who keeps the hay.

Dominic then spoke about the ancient semi-natural woodland of Devil's Den Wood which straddles both the chalk and flint and clay and flint soils of the site. The woodland dates back many hundreds of years and is populated by many different species of trees. Where the soil is a mix of both chalk and clay, Pedunculate Oak, Ash and Hazel can be found along with small clusters of Beech. Here there is an abundance of Dog's Mercury growing on the woodland floor. Wild Cherry and Hawthorne grow on the chalk and flint soil with wildflowers including Bluebells, Sweet Woodruff and Bird's Nest Orchid – all indicative of ancient woodland. Coppicing, a practice dating back to Neolithic times, is carried out on a fifteen year rotational basis. Dominic explained that trees are coppiced by cutting back branches to a low level, new shoots can then grow back from the stool. Dominic went on to explain that by varying the height of coppices a variety of wildlife can be supported particularly the Dormouse, a protected species, which inhabits the Woodland. Coppicing creating a mosaic of different but interconnected conditions with areas of woodland left undisturbed benefits the population.

Dominic checks the fifty dormouse boxes annually and data collected is forwarded to the National Dormouse Monitoring Program.

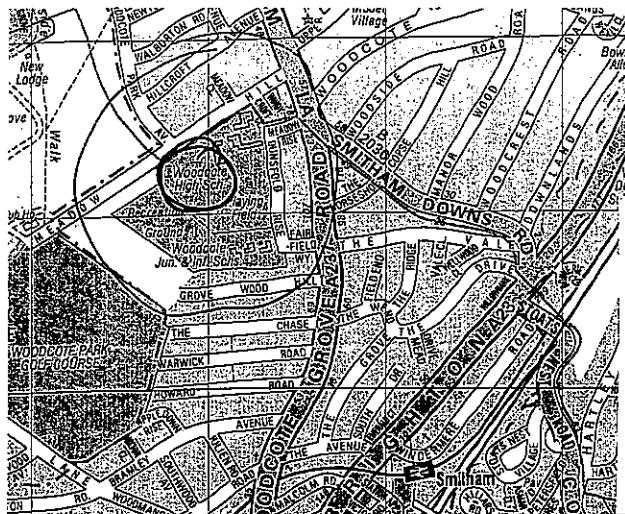
Tree management requires felling and replanting. Hundreds have been planted and to protect the new trees from being eaten by deer they are planted in protective tubes and surrounded by a five foot fence which is left in place for three years. Open inlets are left on the woodland edge creating areas which are both sunlit and warm. Cut wood is put to good use: hedges are laid (an ancient art) which are good for wildlife; log pits have encouraged a wide variety of fungi and charcoal made by using a steel kiln is sold locally, at the BTCV Office and at countryside shows. The wide variety of trees in Devilsden Wood provide a good support for birds including Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, Kestrels and Skylarks and provide habitat for Roe Deer, foxes and badgers.

Dominic gave a brief summary of other aspects of his conservation work on Happy Valley. Help comes from both British Conservation Volunteers (BCTV) and Corporate Volunteers who replace posts and carry out maintenance work on steps, paths, gates and fencing. Fly tipping and car dumping continues to be a problem but removal is now expedited by GPS marking. Office work includes grant applications (Higher Level Stewardship Scheme Grant from Natural England) and organising guided walks. He also works with local schools on literary projects and display work on Happy Valley. Referring to the Happy Valley & Farthing Downs Nature Trail, Dominic said that the revival of the Trail had begun with the updating of the three 1970s booklets which he reproduced as one fifty page A5 booklet. Printing costs were sponsored by the Friends. Posts and signage for the Trail were renewed and QR code discs were added – the Friends website hosted the link to the Trail pages. Dominic went on to say that this year he had worked with the Friends on a new information board which will be on an additional lectern located at the visitor gathering area on Farthing Downs.

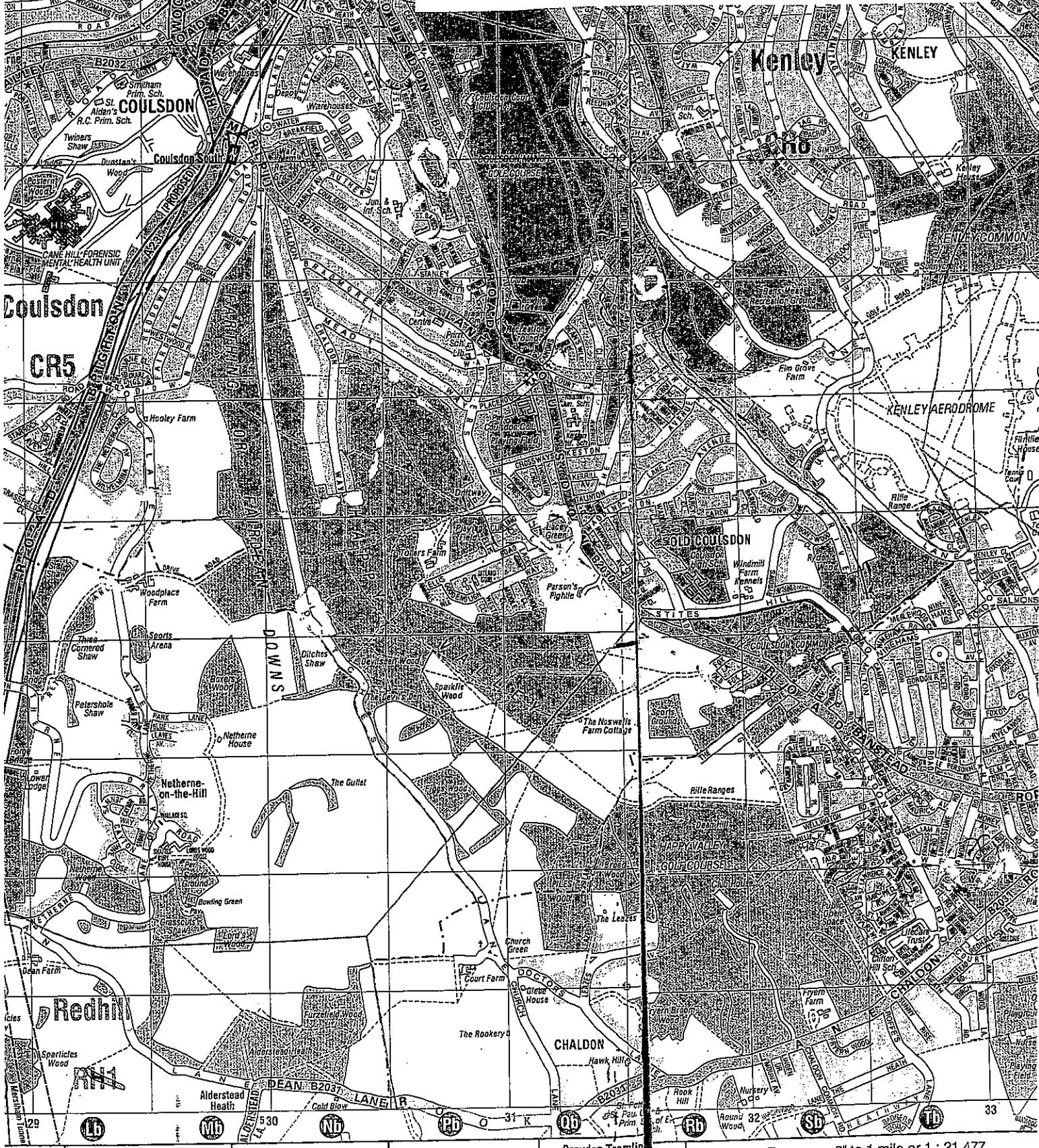
Dominic finished by saying that, as well as being a pretty place to walk, there is much conservation work being carried out on Happy Valley to protect and encourage wildlife. He believes he has one of the best jobs in Croydon Council.

The Chairman thanked Dominic on behalf of Friends members and guests for his excellent and detailed talk and for his excellent work on Happy Valley.

The meeting closed at 9.00 p.m.



**Fig. 1 Section of the local A-Z map
(shaded areas are accessible open space
though no legal status is implied by this
particular map)**



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**Fig.2 Portion of an OS map
(showing contours, major pathways and three
types of woodland)**



Fig.3 First OS map of the area, 1867

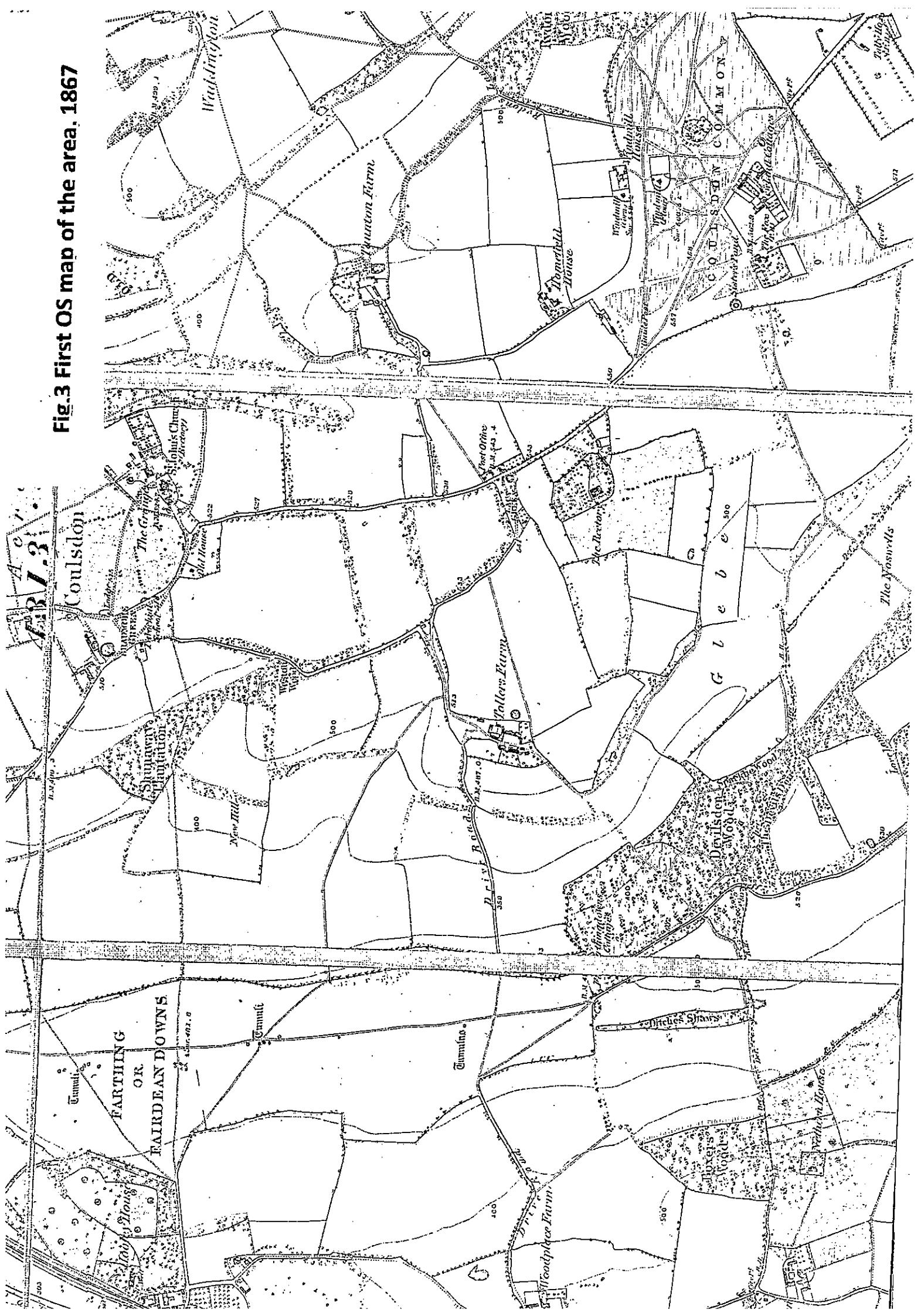


Fig.4 Revised OS map dated 1914

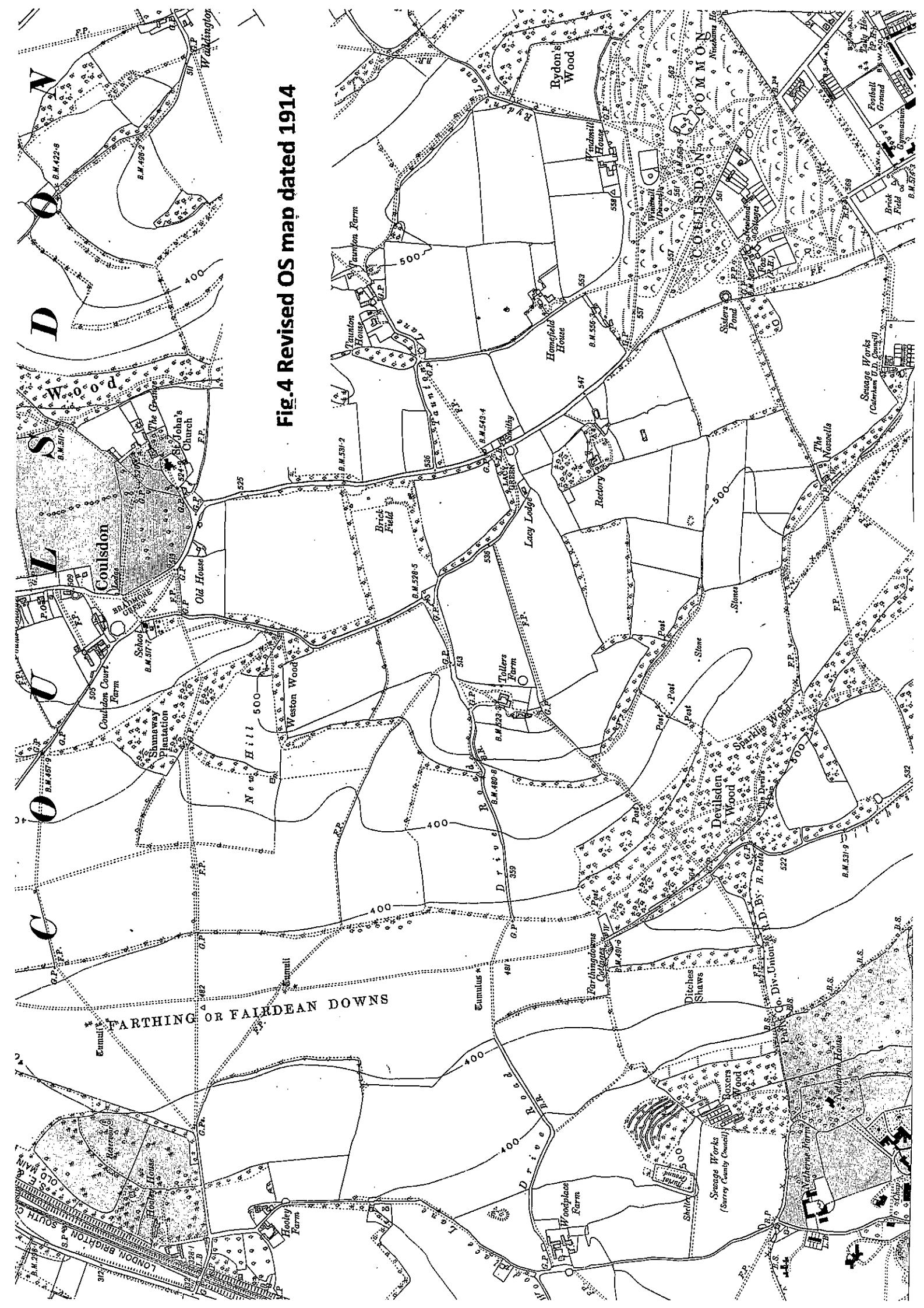
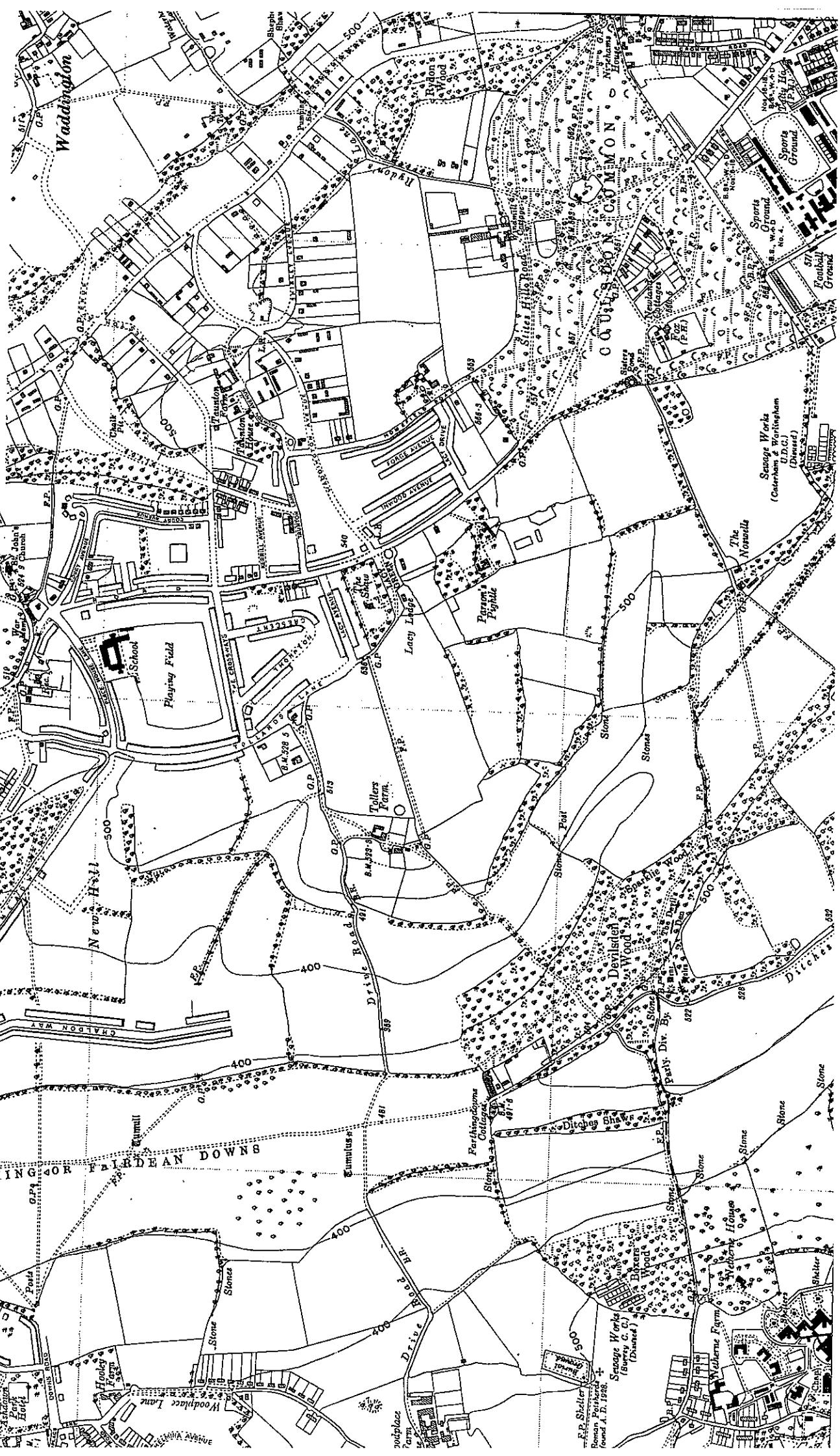


Fig. 5 Map dated 1938 showing encroaching suburban developments at Chaldon Way and in Coulsdon



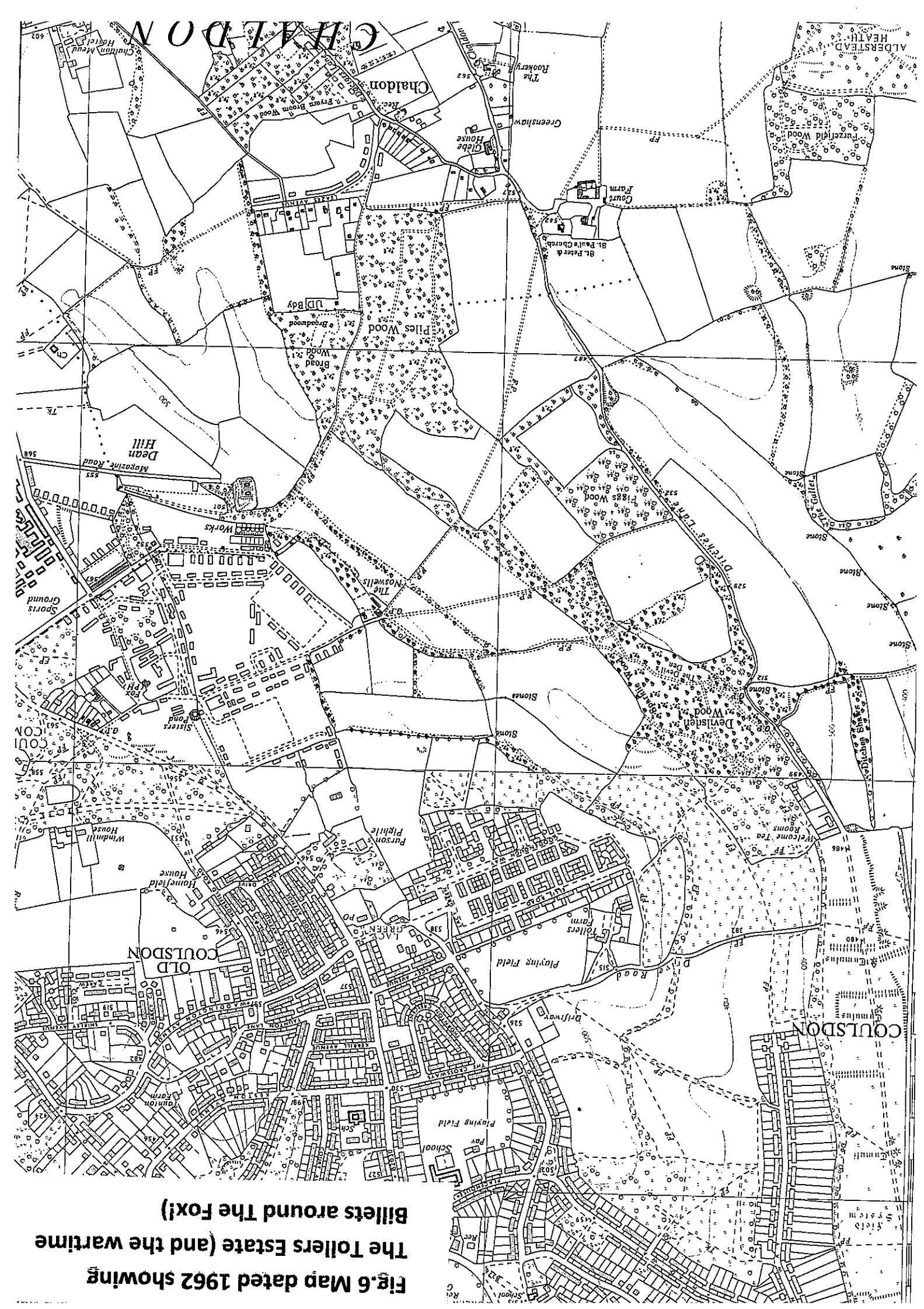
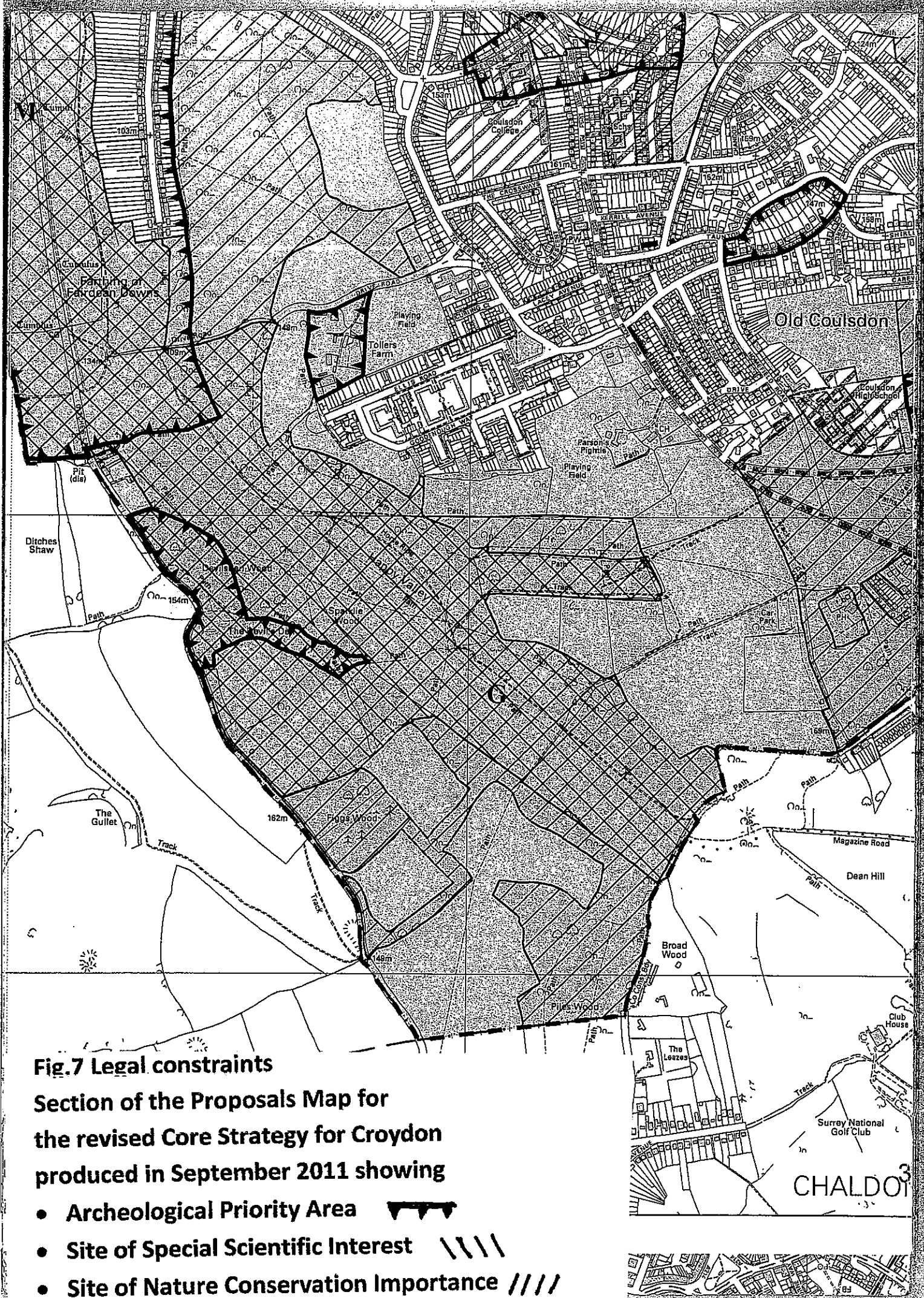


Fig.6 Map dated 1962 showing
The Tollers Estate (and the wartime
billetts around The Fox!)



Farthing Downs & New Hill



Skylark

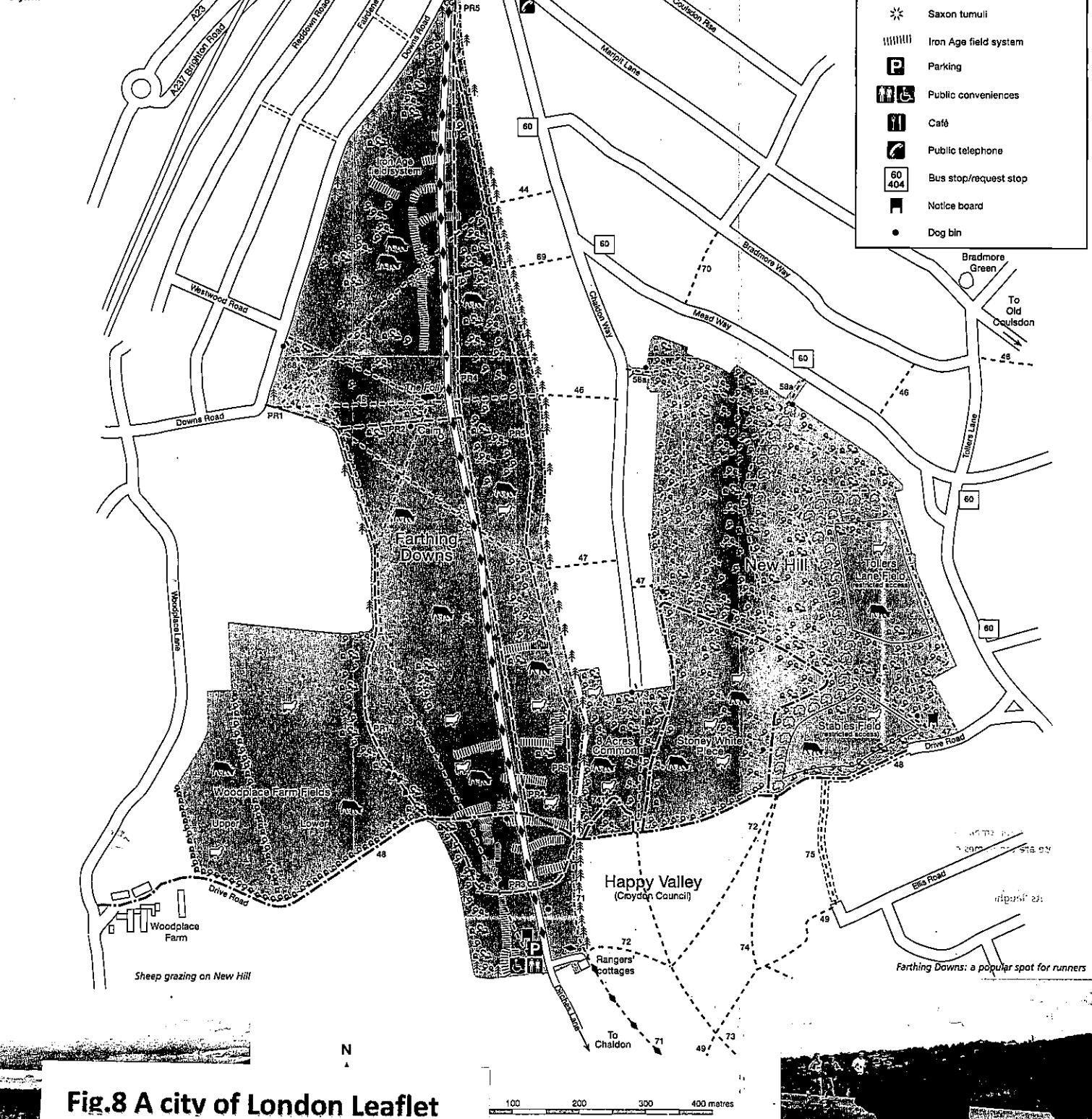


Fig.8 A city of London Leaflet

Valuing Your Local Environment - Dangers to the Downs

(Continued from overleaf)

The Health Boards 130 years ago were building isolation hospitals and asylums way out along the pollution-free North Downs – Queen Elizabeth (Banstead), St. Lawrence (Caterham), Netherne and Cane Hill. All now given over to housing, or soon to be.

"Last weekend we drove to Farthing Downs, a rolling chalk escarpment in Coulsdon with breathtaking views. Along with New Hill, Devil'sden Wood, Eight Acres Common, and the aptly named Happy Valley, it's a real rural idyll, and on a fine autumn day it's impossible to believe that you're in Greater London at all!" *

[* Melissa Harrison Nature Notebook, The Times 10 October 2015]

The article goes on to say this rural idyll, hidden away in the urban jungle, "is just as much a part of London nowadays as the Shard". On a fine day you can actually see the Shard! But being embedded now in London's suburban sprawl inevitably brings a host of pressures. This display of images is to get you thinking about how we can best sustain this precious local environment for future generations.

Farthing Downs is the highest stretch of land in the whole of Greater London – topped only by the airfield at Biggin Hill – and all part of the chalk North Downs which stretch from beyond Guildford in the west, to the white cliffs of Dover in the east. Purchased by the City of London Corporation, through a special Act of Parliament 130 years ago, the newly protected Farthing Downs was intended to give quality open space to people trapped in murky London – then way to the North. Coulsdon was a tiny village of 2300 people. Today it's a town of 85000 and still growing; because the London conurbation seems set to house three million more people by 2036.

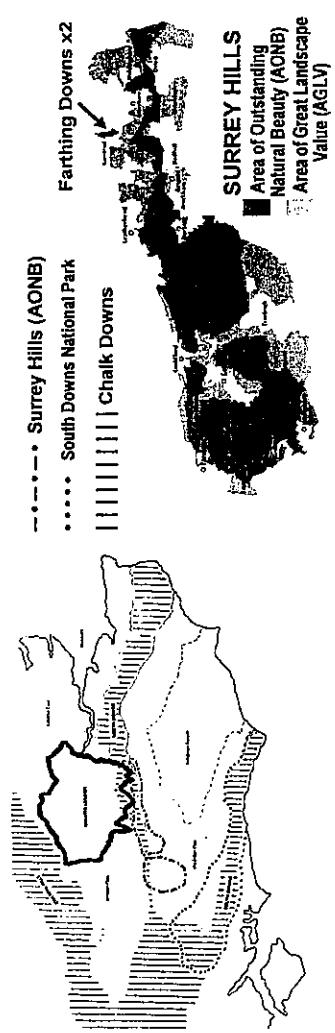


Photo Display at Coulsdon South

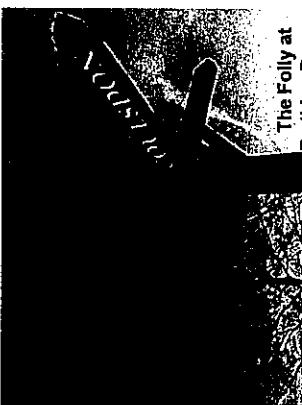
The purpose of this display of images about our precious landscape is to encourage your interest in its continual care and conservation.

The Friends of Farthing Downs are grateful to Rod Swain (rodsworld@hotmail.co.uk) who lives close to the Downs and provided images from his considerable collection. Thanks also to Jayn Harding for two images taken at 'The Folly'. Gary Beckett at Advanced Print in Coulsdon undertook the printing. The Friends are also grateful to Stephen Norris, Manager Southern Rail for permission to display these photographs.

Both Farthing Downs, and Happy Valley (the latter owned and managed by Croydon Council) are green belt in local plans, with each having added protection as sites of nature conservation importance, and special scientific interest. Farthing Downs is also a scheduled ancient monument (early historical burial place). And as the maps show, much of the North Downs along London's boundary has further protection either as Outstanding Natural Beauty or Great Landscape Value. The Surrey Hills has a Management Board, and a Society to encourage corporate and individual involvement. The Friends of Farthing Downs support the City's rangers, and encourages interest in the Downs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ADVICE

- www.friendsoffarthindowns.co.uk
- www.cityofcroydon.gov.uk/citycommons
- www.downlandsproject.org.uk
- www.accs-croydon.co.uk
- www.old surreydowns.org.uk
- www.surreyhillsociety.org
- www.naturaltrail.co.uk/northdowns



The Folly at Farthing Down