

Sir Robert Hunter (1844 – 1913)

Sir Robert Hunter can in many ways be considered the mastermind behind the founding of the National Trust in 1895. It was he who came up with the idea for an organisation to own land on behalf of the public, who set up its legal framework and who first coined the name, National Trust. He was also the National Trust's first Chairman.

Hunter lived at Meadfield, Three Gates Lane, Haslemere, from 1882 until his death in 1913, so it was while living here that he was instrumental in establishing the National Trust.

Born into a middle-class, London-based family, he was educated at the local grammar school in Denmark Hill. The family moved several times as urbanisation swallowed up so many of the villages around the capital, eventually settling in Surbiton, then a rural village. Hunter's intellect was quickly recognised; he matriculated from University College, London aged 17 and attained his degree in 1865 with firsts in moral philosophy and logic. While at college he joined his college rowing club and, oddly, the Artists' Rifles Corps. ^{Note 1}

Coupled with his academic achievements, Hunter, a warm hearted, sociable man, had a strong sense of public duty, a firm belief in the rule of law and a liberal attitude to politics. He was also a loyal member of the Church of England.

Embarking on a legal career, Hunter became articled to solicitors' firm, Eyre and Lawson, but the work bored him. In 1866 he entered a competition for essays on the preservation of commons. At the time many commons were threatened with enclosure which was a first step on the part of the owner to developing the land and was a particular problem in areas near big cities. The competition was set by Henry Peek, a Wimbledon Commoner, defending Wimbledon Common against enclosure by 'The Lord of the Manor', Earl Spencer. Hunter's theme was *'The Preservation of Commons in the Metropolis'*.

Hunter's essay did not win the competition but it was recognised by the judges as being of exceptional quality. The following year it was published by Peek in an edition of six of the best essays from the competition.

Emboldened by this success, Hunter approached Philip Lawrence, solicitor to The Commons Preservation Society, asking to be taken into the partnership. Lawrence invited him to dinner but only offered him the chance to be one of 20 article clerks in his office. Disappointing though this was, Hunter, by now determined to work directly on cases defending commons from unlawful enclosure, accepted. In August 1867 he started working for Lawrence at his offices at 6 Lincoln Inn Fields, initially working on the Wimbledon case as an article clerk.

At Wimbledon, Earl Spencer had proposed that a third of the Common should be enclosed and developed, while the remainder should be a public park for local people. Writing in the Clapham Gazette, Hunter remarked:

‘It was a little startling to some of the inhabitants of Wimbledon to be told suddenly that, as a great favour, they might be allowed to enjoy, under strict regulations, about two thirds of the Common which they had always supposed was theirs.’

Hunter won the Wimbledon case by using an early 1600s land transaction to prove that commoners’ rights extended across the whole common. This became the model for other commons including Wandsworth (in 1870) and Hampstead (in 1868).

It was also in 1868 that Hunter had a stroke of luck: Lawrence was appointed as Solicitor to the Office of Works and sold his business to Hunter and two senior partners, Percy Horne and Tom Fawcett, the son of the MP and reformer, Henry Fawcett (1833 – 1884). The firm became Fawcett Horne & Hunter and they were appointed solicitors to the Commons Preservation Society.

On the domestic front, the following year, aged 25, Hunter married Emily Browning. Sadly, the marriage ended in tragedy as Emily died in childbirth in 1872. Hunter remarried five years later to Ellen Cann, with whom he had his three daughters.

Henry Fawcett must have been impressed with his son’s partner, as in 1882, he appointed Hunter to be Solicitor to the General Post Office. Although this meant relinquishing his legal role in defending urban commons, it was not the end of his involvement in preserving open spaces.

Whilst neither the exact date Hunter moved to Haslemere, nor his reason for doing so is known, the family came here in 1882, renting Meadfield in Three Gates Lane from James Stewart Hodgson (1826 – 1899), owner of the Lythe Hill Estate, Haslemere, and a fellow member of the Artists’ Rifles Club in the 1860s.^{Note 2} Hunter’s daughter, Margaret would have been a baby while Dorothy and Winifred were born here. Meadfield remained his home for the rest of his life.

By 1883, Hunter had been drawn into local concerns about enclosures. William Allingham (1824 – 1889) poet and husband of the artist, Helen Allingham (1848 – 1926), had written a letter to Lord Derby, signed by several local dignitaries including Hodgson, asking him not to enclose some of the roadsides within his new property (South Park, between Haslemere and Brook). In a January 1884 letter to Allingham, Hunter wrote that he found Derby’s response ‘satisfactory’, adding:

“I am sure all who value the beauty of the neighbourhood are much indebted to your action..... Pray let me know at any time if I can be the slightest assistance in any similar case.”

By December 1884, concerns had reached such a point that Hunter suggested setting up a Haslemere Commons Preservation Society. The meeting convened to do so was chaired by Hodgson and Hunter was asked to be its chairman.

At a national level, and at about the same time, 1884, there was a growing movement of influential people, including Octavia Hill (1838 – 1912) and Henry Fawcett, concerned at the loss of both countryside and open spaces with public access as a result not only of enclosures but also of the Industrial Revolution and the huge increase in population.

It was that year that Hunter first outlined his ideas to remedy the situation. It was to establish an organisation, independent of government, which owned land for the benefit of the people. Speaking at the annual congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, Hunter said:

“The central idea is that of a Land Company formed.....with a view to the protection of the public interests in the open spaces of the country.”

The following year, 1885, Octavia Hill suggested that the name of any such company should include the word ‘Trust’. Her suggestion was the ‘Commons and Gardens Trust’. In a pencilled note at the top of her letter Hunter wrote ‘National Trust’, so it was almost certainly he who coined its name.

The Commons Preservation Society would have been the obvious vehicle for such an organisation but it was unwilling to consider owning land. Thus the idea languished for seven years, until Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley’s (1851 – 1920) concerns about threats to the Lake District injected new enthusiasm into Hunter’s idea. Finally, the National Trust was established in 1895, with its legal mastermind, Hunter, as its first Chairman.

The Trust got off to a slow start, however, and its early acquisitions were very modest and remote: Dinas Oleu, Wales (1895), Alfriston Clergy House (1896), Barras Head, Cornwall (1897), a small area of Wicken Fenn, Norfolk (1899).

On the domestic front, in 1894 Hunter was knighted and appointed chairman of Haslemere’s first parish council. An article in the Surrey Times in 1896 was full of praise for its efforts, especially those of its chairman:

“No parish council in the county has done better work than the Haslemere council. Sanitation, allotments, charities, lighting, roads, footpaths and wastelands have been thoroughly but prudently looked after..... A better combination of efficiency with economy could not be wished for or hoped for. The result is due to the spirit in which the members of a thoroughly representative council have worked together and, above all, to the invaluable help accorded by Sir Robert Hunter as Chairman.”

There continued, however, to be concerns amongst Haslemere and Hindhead residents about over-development of their picturesque locality due to the continuing influx of newcomers as the railway service improved.

Lord Derby sold his South Park estate to the mining magnate, Whitaker Wright, who also owned the adjacent estate, Lea Park. Wright had made his fortune in mining, raising the necessary finance by issuing bonds in his companies. He was a flamboyant man for whom it was important to show off his successes. He set about transforming his new estates, now known as Witley Park, to impress society guests and potential investors,

adding extravagant new wings to the main house and landscaping the gardens. In January 1904 the Daily Telegraph noted that:

“For a time everything he touched turned – or seemed to turn – to gold. The name Whitaker Wright became a synonym for success and magnificence.”

Due to a downturn in his mining interests, however, Wright started to mis-use investors’ funds to meet interest payments on his £90,000 mortgage and eventually defaulted. In 1902 he was accused of fraud and an arrest warrant was issued but he fled to New York. Eventually he was extradited and faced trial at the Old Bailey in late 1903. He was found guilty on 26th January 1904 but, unable to face the shame of serving a jail sentence, he took a cyanide capsule in rooms below the court and died.

Wright’s estate was put up for auction in 1905. One lot was of 750 acres of common land, Hindhead Common and the Devil’s Punch Bowl, the most outstandingly beautiful commons in the area. It had to be saved. Hunter, as chairman of the Haslemere Commons Preservation Society managed to raise sufficient funds locally for the Society to be the successful bidder, at £3,625 (£394,000 at 2026 prices). In March 1906, the Society gave Hindhead Common and the Devil’s Punch Bowl to the National Trust.

The National Trust had no rangers or central means to manage this vast site so Hunter set up a local committee to do so, the Hindhead Commons Management Committee, with him as chairman and Arthur Conan Doyle as the fire officer. This committee managed these commons until 1993.

With incredible foresight, Hunter realised that this acquisition, far larger and far nearer a metropolis than any other National Trust landholding at the time, was vulnerable to pressure from developers forcing a sale. In 1907, therefore, he wrote a special act of Parliament, the National Trust Act, and guided it through its parliamentary stages. The Act gave the National Trust its unique power to hold its land inalienably, or in perpetuity. To this day, once National Trust property is declared inalienable, it is prevented from disposing of it without the explicit consent of Parliament.

This Act was undoubtedly Hunter’s crowning achievement as first Chairman of the National Trust.

The effect locally of Hunter’s standing, the success at Hindhead and the 1907 Act was to quickly bring a whole series of gifts and acquisitions of land, including Ludshott Common (by subscription) and Bramshott Chase and Nutcombe Down (gifts from Marian James (1830 – 1910)) in 1908 and the acquisition (by subscription) of about 90 acres of Marley Common in 1911 from the Leconfield Estate. ^{Note 3}

Hunter retired from the Post office in July 1913. Sadly, his was not to be a long retirement as he died of septicaemia in November that year, aged just 69. He was buried, at his direction, in an unmarked grave at St Bartholomew’s Church Haslemere, where there is a memorial plaque to him. The Hindhead Commons Management Committee also erected a memorial to him at Waggoners Wells.

The Trio of Hunter, Octavia Hill and Hardwicke Rawnsley are considered the co-founders of the National Trust but some early accounts give most credit to the more colourful characters, Hill and Rawnsley. Today, however, Hunter's part is recognised as being pivotal: he gave the National Trust its name, its legal framework and, as first Chairman, he steered the fledgling organisation through its early struggles and wrote the Act of Parliament which protects its property, land and buildings, to this day.

We have a lot to thank him for.

Notes:

1. The Artists' Rifles: The 38th Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps (Artists) was raised in May 1860 as part of the volunteer movement which arose over concerns about a possible French invasion. It was composed mainly of painters, musicians, architects and actors with the artists predominating so the Corps soon became known as the *Artists Rifles*. Some of the better-known early members included William Morris, John Everett Millais, Frederic Leighton and George Frederic Watts.
Hodgson, who was an honorary member, was an extremely wealthy man, a serious collector of contemporary art and patron of Leighton's, but Hunter, who had joined in 1862, had no known connections to make his membership an obvious choice. It is not known whether Hodgson and Hunter met as fellow members of the Artists' Rifles Corps.
2. Hodgson's Lythe Hill Estate extended to 3,000 acres around Haslemere. He is remembered here as one of the town's most generous benefactors, paying for a water supply to the town, two extensions to St Bartholomew's Church and the Working Men's Club. Most of his wealth was derived from his partnership of Barings Bank, then the premier lending house of the City. In 1890 Barings was unable to meet its liabilities and, in return for a bank of England loan, partners' estates, London homes and art collections became the property of the Bank of England. Hodgson moved to The Manor House in Three Gates Lane, Haslemere where he lived for the rest of his life.
3. Marian James, an author, was living in Hampstead in 1868 when Hunter was the lawyer who did most to save Hampstead Heath from enclosure. She may have met him then, but she certainly would have known all about his successes saving open spaces for the public by the time he saved the Hindhead Commons in 1905. By this time she had been living at West Down, Hindhead for about 15 years.