

## WITHYCOMBE

Withycombe parish lies largely hidden in the hills south of Carhampton whose ancient parish formerly surrounded it on the north, west and south.<sup>1</sup> The village lies in the steep-sided valley known as the Combe from which it takes its name. It is completely surrounded by hills except to the north-east where the valley opens out, crossed by the Williton to Minehead road, affording a view of the Welsh mountains across the sea. Although less affected by tourism than its neighbours it has seen a steady trickle of visitors for at least a hundred years. The artist John William North sought solace here in 1904 after the death of his wife and stayed for ten years.<sup>2</sup> Although there is no hotel there are holiday homes and the Macmillan Way long distance footpath passes through the centre of the village.

The parish formerly reached into Carhampton village and had small detached fields just over the eastern boundary in Old Cleeve and at Blue Anchor between Carhampton and Old Cleeve at the mouth of the Pill river. In the 1330s the land was called ‘splotte by sea’ and used for grazing and harvesting reed.<sup>3</sup> It was later known as Pill Mead and in 1839 was three meadows covering c. 10 a.<sup>4</sup> A fishweir at the Pill mouth belonged to Withycombe in 1525<sup>5</sup> and the bridge carrying the Carhampton to Watchet road also lay in the parish.<sup>6</sup> In 1839 the parish covered 1,813 a. but after the loss of the detached areas and the acquisition of Rodhuish from Carhampton in 1884 it measured 1,431 ha (3,536 a.).<sup>7</sup>

The ancient parish had few natural boundaries although the Long Combe stream marked most of the western boundary dividing Black Hill from Croydon Hill.

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<sup>1</sup> SHC, tithe awards Carhampton and Withycombe. This article was completed in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> New DNB.

<sup>3</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/3/2, P37/4/1—2.

<sup>4</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/53/9; *ibid.* tithe ward.

<sup>5</sup> SHC, DD/L P2/8/1.

<sup>6</sup> Above, Carhampton, intro.

<sup>7</sup> SHC, tithe award; *ibid.* D/P/car 22/3; D/PC/wyco 7/5; Census.

At its source was probably the Withemere recorded in the late 13th century, later a marshy area called Mere Ponds and now afforested.<sup>8</sup> Black and Withycombe hills, probably cleared of wood by the Middle Ages apart from rough stands of oak or beech, were used mainly for rough grazing. In the late 18th century they abounded with wild berries and game birds.<sup>9</sup> Extensive afforestation took place in the first half of the 20th century but the tops of both hills remain open heathland. Older woodland includes Court or Withycombe wood near Court Place farm and Shere or Share Wood, east of Combe farm.

Most of the parish lies on Devonian Avill slates, siltstones and sandstones but the high moorland of the commons to the west is formed of Hangman Grits. Withycombe Hill stretches from the village (c. 60 m. (197 ft) west to Bat's Castle and Gallox Hill in Dunster. From its long narrow summit (222 m. (728 ft) it drops steeply north towards Carhampton village (40 m. (131 ft)) but only slightly south. The south-west of the parish is occupied by the bulk of Black Hill, part of the great watershed dividing the coast lands from Exmoor and the Brendon Hills. Black Hill rises from 200 m. (656 ft) at Gupworthy farm to (381 m. (1250 ft)) and is divided from Rodhuish Common to the east by Red Girts combe and from Croydon Hill on the west by Long Combe. The western slopes of Black Hill are under rough woodland known as Withycombe Scruffets and the flatter southern hilltop forms Withycombe Common. The east of the parish falls more gently from c. 120 m. (394 ft) on the Rodhuish boundary to c. 30 m. (98 ft) on the Old Cleeve boundary in the north-east, although a partly-wooded spur divides the village from Sandhill. Bands of Rodhuish limestone running through this part of the parish were quarried and burnt in the 19th century.

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<sup>8</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/1/46; OS Map 1:10560, LXVII. NW (1887 edn); OS Map 1:25000, sheet OL9 (2006 edn).

<sup>9</sup> SHC, A/AQP 8.

There are pebble beds near Sandhill and the village with fields to the north lies on valley gravels flanked by marls.<sup>10</sup>

The Combe stream rises at Red Girts collecting several tributaries before it runs north-east through Withycombe village by Lower Street to join the Pill river near Marshwood in Carhampton.<sup>11</sup> It was dammed at Bretheren Cross before 1500 by John Hadley and Peter Courtenay and the former had turned it into his lands depriving Marshwood park of water. Tenants of Williton Hadley manor rented the diversion from the 16th century and it remained in existence in 1839<sup>12</sup> but the water has since been restored to its original route. Another tributary of the Pill river runs through Sandhill farm where it was dammed into a series of ponds.<sup>13</sup>

## COMMUNICATIONS

The Williton to Minehead road, slightly altered in the 1960s,<sup>14</sup> crosses the north-east of the parish and from it three roads lead to Withycombe. In the east Sandhill Lane passes Sandhill to enter the village through Rattle Row over the ford opposite the former mill. A second road from Withycombe Cross, formerly Bretheren Cross recorded c.1500,<sup>15</sup> passes Court Place and becomes Lower Street to the church where it meets West Street. The third route called Hill Lane runs from Carhampton village over Withycombe Hill to Black Hill but from it Withycombe Lane runs east into West Street. An orchard was taken to widen Withycombe Lane before 1820.<sup>16</sup> From the church the village street continues south to Higher Rodhuish but the parallel

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<sup>10</sup> Geol. Surv. Map, 1:50000 sheet 294 solid and drift (1974 edn); OS Map 1:10560, LXVII. NE (1887 edn); OS Map 1:25000, sheet OL9 (2006 edn).

<sup>11</sup> SHC, DD/L 291/3; *ibid.* tithe map.

<sup>12</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/19/1, P32/30/2; *ibid.* tithe map.

<sup>13</sup> SHC, tithe map; OS Map 1:25000, sheet OL9 (2006 edn).

<sup>14</sup> SHC, C/GP HF/67.

<sup>15</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/19/1, P32/30/2.

<sup>16</sup> SHC, DD/L 2M/23/130.

Sandrocks Lane on the east leads from Sandhill Lane to Lower Rodhuish. Culver Lane, now a path, lead from the village over Withycombe Hill to Dunster and Combe Lane originally led to Combe, Dumbledeer and Gupworthy farmsteads. In the south a trackway, which forms the southern boundary of Withycombe Common, was the Port Way in the 13th century, probably from Old Cleeve to Dunster.<sup>17</sup> Before the 19th century the roads probably crossed streams by fords as Rattle Row still does.

## SETTLEMENT AND BUILDINGS

A prehistoric field system on the east side of Withycombe Hill above Dumbledeer is the only one of its kind in the Exmoor area and Neolithic scrapers have been found nearby. There are damaged round barrow mounds on Withycombe Common. There are traces of iron-age stone farmsteads there and on Black Hill and of several prehistoric and modern cairns.<sup>18</sup>

By the 11th century the parish probably consisted of scattered farmsteads, as it does today, although some would have been hamlets rather than single dwellings. The village may have grown up around Alnoth's hall.<sup>19</sup> Later a church and clergy house, a mill and small farmsteads clustered in the valley to create a village settlement although before 20th-century infilling dwellings were dispersed along the streets.

### Village

Withycombe village consists of the main north—south street called Lower Street and the side street by the church, which is known as West Street and leads into Withycombe Lane. Opposite the former mill Rattle Row, recorded in 1698,<sup>20</sup> crosses

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<sup>17</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/1/46.

<sup>18</sup> H. Riley and R. Wilson-North, *Archaeology of Exmoor*, 62, 81. 83; Som. C.C., HER.

<sup>19</sup> Below, landownership

<sup>20</sup> SHC, DD/L 1/6/19/3.

the ford and becomes Sandhill Lane. The central section of the village called The Causeway and Mill Street have raised cobbled pavements probably because the stream originally ran down the street. Stony Hall was recorded in 1326 and 1423 perhaps implying other houses were made of cob.<sup>21</sup> In the 1780s the village houses were rough stone or cob of one of two storeys under thatch<sup>22</sup> as most older dwellings still are, although the walls are usually rendered and colourwashed and slate and asbestos have often replaced thatch. Laurel Cottage had its thatch replaced by tile as late as 1994.<sup>23</sup>

In Lower St the oldest house is Court Place farmhouse, which probably dates from the late Middle Ages and was the manor house of Withycombe Hadley.<sup>24</sup> Its 19th-century farmyard lies across the street. In West Street the oldest house dates from c.1600 and is incorporated into the Old Post Office, a largely modern house. Further down the street is the early 17th-century two-room cross-passage house with attics known as Tudor Cottage.<sup>25</sup> Most houses in the village like the Causeway cottages, including the former poorhouse, and heavily restored Christopher's Cottage, formerly Mrs Cox's, probably date from the 17th or 18th centuries but Withycombe Farm, which sits behind the church with its extensive farmyard, may preserve some of the original 16th century house.<sup>26</sup> Cedar Ford, the former rectory, has a 17th-century core although virtually rebuilt in the 19th century.<sup>27</sup> As at Carhampton, there were many new houses built in the early 17th-century on new sites or abutting existing

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<sup>21</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/1/18, P32/13/1.

<sup>22</sup> SHC, A/AQP 8.

<sup>23</sup> SHC, A/BQD 1; *ibid.* D/PC/wyco 7/5

<sup>24</sup> Below, landownership.

<sup>25</sup> SHC, DD/V/WIr 29.3; Som. CC, HER.

<sup>26</sup> Below, landownership.

<sup>27</sup> Below, *rel. hist.*

houses. Nine such houses were recorded on Withycombe Hadley manor, in one case a terrace of three, and two tenants had to be restrained from further building.<sup>28</sup>

Slightly later is Hobbes's farmhouse on Lower Street, now two houses called Squirrels, and neighbouring and Laurel Cottage, formerly Hiles farmhouse. There were said to be 44 houses in 1821 but 62 by 1831, probably because houses had been subdivided. John Fownes Luttrell was taxed on the rents of 25 cottages in 1853.<sup>29</sup>

West of Lower Street Vexford was built in 1910 and around the corner next to the Old Post Office is Foxwarren a large early 20th-century house with applied timbering to its multiple gables and large tiled hoods to bay and other windows. It was built as Halswell on the site of the King's Arms, which was said to have been burnt down after it closed in 1910.<sup>30</sup>

Seven local authority houses were built on Lower Street in 1927 and known as Meadow Cottages, more built in West Street c.1950 were called Culver Cottages and bungalows were built in the late 1950s and 1970s. Many are now privately owned.<sup>31</sup> When the former Dunster Castle estate passed to the Crown some new houses were built including Crown Cottages in Lower Street in 1957.<sup>32</sup> Later development has been infilling on gardens and orchards although houses have extended along the east side of the road to Rodhuish.

### Hamlets and Farmsteads

Just south of the village is Hill, recorded in 1225<sup>33</sup> and until after 1839 a hamlet of three farms. One was dilapidated in 1770 with earthen floors, no plaster or ceilings

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<sup>28</sup> SHC, DD/L P3/12.

<sup>29</sup> Census; SHC, DD/L 2/23/132.

<sup>30</sup> SHC, D/PC/wyco 7/5; below, econ. hist.

<sup>31</sup> SHC, D/PC/wyco 1/2/1.

<sup>32</sup> SHC, D/PC/wyco 7/5.

<sup>33</sup> Somerset Pleas, (Som. Rec. Soc. 11), p. 51.

but with three lower and three upper rooms.<sup>34</sup> In 1851 Lower Hill farm was two cottages, Higher Hill farm was occupied by labourers and only Middle Hill was still a farmhouse but it too was a cottage by 1871 and Higher Hill was uninhabited. Thereafter there were just two cottages, presumably the divided Lower farmhouse and the others had been demolished.<sup>35</sup> The survivor, now a single dwelling again, probably dates from the 16th century with an early 17th-century wing. It suffered a fire in the late 20th-century although fragments of crucks remained. It was probably built as a three-room cross passage house but the end beyond the cross passage has been demolished.<sup>36</sup>

To the east of the village lies Sandhill recorded in 1196 and probably a hamlet of several houses. In 1315 Robert le Elyman was robbed and killed in his house there.<sup>37</sup> Chilkey had gone before the 18th century, Little Sandhill was an old ruinous house in 1780 and thereafter only Sandhill survived, a large house dating from the 15th and 16th centuries.<sup>38</sup> To the west of Withycombe village lies Combe where early 17th-century Combe farmhouse survives but a second called Shereplace in 1695 had gone by the 19th century.<sup>39</sup> Further west near the prehistoric settlement is Dumbledeer, said to mean black hill river,<sup>40</sup> but no early records of the name have been found. Of the two small farmsteads, Lower Dumbledeer was divided into two in 1790<sup>41</sup> and only Higher Dumbledeer survives, its 19th-century cottage extended into a barn to create a larger house sold by the Crown estate in 1999.<sup>42</sup> South-west of

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<sup>34</sup> SHC, DD/L 2/23/129.

<sup>35</sup> SHC, tithe award TNA, HO 107/1920; *ibid.* RG 10/2350; RG 13/2262.

<sup>36</sup> SHC, DD/V/WIr 29.2.

<sup>37</sup> *SDNQ*, XXXI, 458, citing coroner's roll.

<sup>38</sup> *Below*, landownership; SHC, DD/L 1/23/130.

<sup>39</sup> *Below*, landownership; SHC, DD/L 1/7/26; *ibid.*, tithe award.

<sup>40</sup> E. Ekwall, *Oxf. Dict. Eng. Pl-Names*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> SHC, D/P/wyco 4/1/2; *ibid.*, tithe award.

<sup>42</sup> SHC, D/PC/wyco 7/5.

Dumbledeer are Bowden, recorded as ruinous in 1348<sup>43</sup> but a house survives, and Gupworthy, which may have formerly been Elsworthy but either name suggests an early enclosed farmstead. Gupworthy farmhouse dates from the late 19th century. Between Combe and Bowden was Gilcott straddling the boundary with Rodhuish. No buildings survive but in 1086 there were the demesne holding and three tenements.<sup>44</sup>

## POPULATION

In 1641 92 males signed the protestation suggesting a population of c. 270, a high figure for a small hill parish and probably accounting for the new houses.<sup>45</sup> In 1801 and 1811 the population was 283 rising gradually to 332 in 1831 and after a slight fall reaching a peak of 349 in 1861. The population fell steadily from 337 in 1871 to 223 in 1901, excluding Rodhuish. The population changed little in the early 20th century but later fell until 1981 when there were only 258 residents in Withycombe and Rodhuish combined. Since then housing development has caused a steady rise to 299 in 2001.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> SHC, DD/L P32/4/3

<sup>44</sup> VCH Som. I, 490; below, landownership.

<sup>45</sup> A. J. Howard and T. L. Stoate (ed.), Somerset Protestation Returns (1975), 34; above, this section.

<sup>46</sup> Census.