



THE MUSEUM  
OF ENGLISH  
RURAL LIFE



University of  
Reading



# Why does the countryside look the way it does? Land enclosure in England

Illustrated through archive material from the collections  
held at The Museum of English Rural Life



The landscape of Britain has been shaped by human hands since prehistory. Two hundred years ago, the enclosure of open-fields and commons across the country was one of the most significant movements that changed how the rural landscape looks in modern times. Its impact can still be seen today both in the shape of fields and the scale of farmsteads, as well as the surviving common land we use for recreational purposes.

## The medieval landscape

During medieval times each manor or village had two or three large fields which were divided into many narrow strips of land. This was known as the open-field system and you still see examples of it today in parts of eastern Europe such as Poland. These fields had little or no boundaries and were cultivated by individuals or families.

One field would be growing arable crops such as wheat, one field would be grown as a meadow to store hay for farm animals in the winter and the third was used as grazing by sheep and cattle. Everyone grew the same crops at the same time and harvested them together.

## Book of Hours

Early illustrations of medieval farming practice can often be found in what are known as Books of Hours. Such books were often highly decorative and contained miniature illustrations showing the work of peasants and farmers. It is from these small images that we see the farming methods used in medieval times as well as the clothing worn and tools used in the processes of farming.

The page shown (right) is from an early fifteenth century Book of Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary and shows a peasant farmer sowing seeds on his strips of land in what we call today a ridge and furrow pattern.

**TASK** Explain how illustrations such as these might help historians learn about medieval farming and the ways in which early field systems worked.



A decorative page from an early fifteenth century Book of Hours

## The movement towards an organised landscape

In addition to the open-fields there would often be woodland and commons (open, common land) as well as land belonging to the lord of the manor and the church. In medieval times little land was owned outright. The king gave the lord of the manor certain rights. And local people rented land from the lord of the manor, although this came with many restrictions.

In John Worlidge's book *Systema Agriculturae* published in 1697 (3514 WOR), he had much to say about the bad points of the open-fields and commons such as:

*"There are several grand inconveniences that attend the common Field, and Open Land, that Enclosures are not subject unto. As that such fields are Sown with Corn, are subject to be spoiled by Cattle that stray out of the Commons and High-ways that are contiguous to such lands. And that the Owners or Tenants of several parts or portions therein, are bound to keep time as well as in Sowing as Reaping, or to let his part lie waste, lest his corn be spoilt."*

Worlidge also had much to say in favour of enclosure including:

*"Enclosure with a good tall Hedge-row, preserves the Land warm, and defends and shelters it from the violent and nipping Winds, that generally nip and destroy much of the Corn, Pulse, or whatever grows on the Open Field."*

## The movement towards enclosure

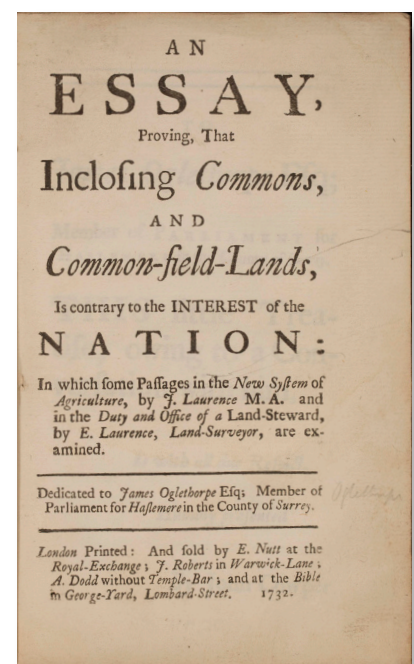
During the medieval and early modern periods, the piecemeal enclosure of strips had already taken place. Adjacent strips of land were fenced off from common land using hawthorn or similar hedging. This was done sometimes by small landowners to consolidate their land and more often by large landowners and lords of the manor.

Not everyone agreed with wholesale enclosure without consideration of the human and social costs it brought with it. John Cowper, writing in an essay against enclosure in 1732, showed his great concern for the loss of rights to the honest labourer brought about through enclosure and for the social upheaval caused by turning people off the land and out of their homes. This is an extract from Cowper's essay about the inequalities of enclosure:

*"In those Parishes that have commons belonging to them, the Poor and Rich have a right of Commonage one with another. But where these Commons come to be inclosed and converted into Pasture, the Ruin of the Poor is a natural Consequence, they being bought*



The cover for John Worlidge's book *Systema Agriculturae*, published in 1697



John Cowper's essay against enclosure in 1732



*out by the Lord of the Manor, or some other person of substance. For when a Common, that has been the main Support of perhaps forty or fifty poor Families, and some of them large ones too, is thus taken from them, they will certainly be thereby rendered incapable of maintaining themselves as usual in that Parish. This will put them under a Necessity of forsaking their old Habitations and wandering about till they can find some other Place."*

Cowper was clearly concerned about an increase in mobility amongst the labouring classes due to the lack of employment and subsistence following enclosure, as well as the fall in demand for craftspeople and their products including carpenters, millwrights, smiths, shoemakers and other trades.

The maps seen here show part of the manor of Winsley and parsonage of Haugh from 1727 and provide good examples of where a partial enclosure has taken place, leaving sections of the old strip system like islands in the middle of enclosed fields (D93/8).

**TASK** Using the map as a piece of evidence discuss how successful enclosure has been in this example.

Four scans of a map showing parts of the Winsley and parsonage of Haugh, in Wiltshire, from 1727



## Parliamentary enclosure

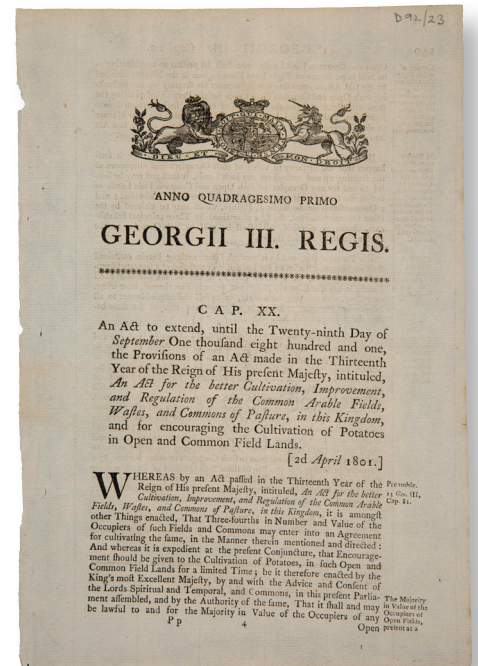
Although a lot of farming land was enclosed by either formal or informal agreement, or by the owners of large estates, most parishes required an Act of Parliament in order to formally enclose lands within them.

## The Potato Act

One Act of Parliament encouraged the cultivation of potatoes in 1801 (D92/23). The Potato Act included many clauses, including the need to give eight days notice before shutting off the commons and planting. Compensation was also to be agreed for the loss of pasture for grazing if land was enclosed.

Following enclosure there were inevitably winners and losers. The winners often included the major land-owners, the Church and small farmers. The losers were those without land, relying on the commons to supplement already low incomes and to support their families with free seasonal food and fuel.

**TASK** In groups debate the reasons for and against enclosure of an imaginary parish and its commons taking the viewpoints of a major land-holder and a commoner who relies on the freedom of the common.



The Act of Parliament encouraging the cultivation of potatoes in 1801