



THE MUSEUM  
OF ENGLISH  
RURAL LIFE



University of  
Reading



# Why does the countryside look the way it does?

## The transformation of farmland

Your class has the opportunity to develop their understanding of why our countryside looks the way it does and how that has been important for farming and the people living there. Our countryside was transformed from the 1600s when the Enclosure Acts of Parliament divided up land into enclosures. Today we see these enclosures as fields bordered by hedgerows, fences and ditches. While our countryside is changing all the time through intensive farming, new developments and changing land use, the countryside's general shape and patterns have been here for hundreds of years.

UPPER PRIMARY | LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY

# Learning outcomes

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After using this document students will:

- have a better understanding of how land ownership has changed over time and how it has shaped what our countryside looks like today
- be more aware of how land ownership has affected different people in different ways over time
- be able to use historical evidence to examine land enclosure
- be better informed to discuss and debate reasons for and against land enclosure.

## Before your visit

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Using the PDF document *Land Enclosure in England* on the webpage, explore the story of why our countryside looks like it does today. The document is a resource to dip in and out of. The higher resolution images of artefacts that are shown throughout the document can be found as downloadable files on the web page for this resource.

In the document there are questions or tasks that help with looking closer at the scanned artefacts. These are repeated below for information:

- Explain how illustrations such as these might help historians learn about medieval farming and the ways in which early field systems worked.
- Using the map as a piece of evidence discuss how successful enclosure has been in this example.
- List the major landholders shown on the map and discuss how they might have influenced the further enclosing of the land shown.
- In groups debate the reasons for and against enclosure of an imaginary parish and its commons taking the viewpoints of a major landholder and a commoner who relies on the freedom of the common.

### THEMES AND TOPICS

- Changing landscapes and environments
- Physical features in a landscape
- A study of British history after 1066

### LINKS WITH OTHER ACTIVITIES

This document can be used before your museum visit with the 'Why does the countryside look like it does?' resource. It can also be used with the 'Where have all our songbirds gone?' resource.



# Hedgerows as farm boundaries

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Hedgerows, stone walls, turf banks and watercourses such as rhynes and dykes are important ways in which we have enclosed and divided our farmland across the UK.

Hedgerows are lines of trees and/or shrubs that border field margins. In some parts of the UK hedgerows have disappeared to make way for larger, more intensive farming. Where they exist they are important places for wildlife.

## Useful websites for hedgerows

[Plantlife.org.uk](http://Plantlife.org.uk)

[Hedgelink.co.uk](http://Hedgelink.co.uk)

**Book:** *Farmer Duck* Martin Haddell (ISBN 13: 9781564029645, Publisher: Candlewick Press (MA), 1996) (KS1/KS2)

Here are some things to research:

- What trees do you find in hedgerows?
- Why are hedgerows important for wildlife?
- What makes an ancient hedgerow in the UK?
- Why did landowners dig up hedgerows in the past?
- What effect does intensive farming having on hedgerows and their wildlife?
- How have different parts of the country divided their farmland?
- Find out other names for ditches across the UK. For example, rhyne.



# Visiting the Museum of English Rural Life

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A visit to the Museum of English Rural Life reveals objects and artefacts that help tell personal stories to engage your students. Your visit could revolve around the questions, 'Why does the countryside look as it does?'. With this as a challenge students are able to explore the galleries looking at the machinery, tools and images that reveal how the countryside was shaped.

The following galleries and objects may help in answering this question.

## Our Country Lives gallery

The large wall hanging at the back of the museum depicts an English county. It reveals regional character through landscape, buildings, animals, crops and produce.

Which county does it depict? What types of crops are being grown or animals are being farmed? How is the farmland divided?

## Wagon Walk gallery

Wagons became more common when enclosure of common land meant farming was carried out on a bigger scale and not just in small strips. Wagons were needed to carry bigger loads of crops. Here at the museum we have many different wagons, each made to do a particular job.

Why did wagons become so important and develop in the way they did?

What was each of the wagons used for and how was it made differently to do this job?

## Digging Deeper gallery

This gallery reveals a variety of horse-drawn ploughs and, like the wagons, each one has a different character and shape depending on where it came from, the soil it was ploughing through and the job it had to do.

How do all these ploughs differ? Why did they need to be different? How is farmland ploughed today? How has modern farming influenced the size of fields and how they are separated from each other?

## A Year on the Farm gallery

Many of the objects and artefacts on display reveal more about how farming has shaped the land. In the winter section there are objects related to hedge-laying, an important job to maintain field boundaries. Hedge-laying is still done today by a small number of people and the public can join hedge-laying courses.

## Making Rural England gallery

In the 'Harsh Reality' part of this gallery, showing two contrasting rural homes, students can discover more about how the enclosure of common land resulted in the criminalisation of the gathering of firewood from common land.

What did this mean for poor people?

Nearby, 'On the Hunt' shows some lethal man traps used by landowners to stop people trespassing after common land became enclosed.

What were poor people trying to get by trespassing? What damage would these traps have done to a trespasser?

## Town and Country

In the 'Grow Your Own' display, students can find out more about gardening and the advent of allotments that grew in popularity after enclosure of common land.

## Machinery changing how the countryside is farmed

Throughout the museum we have significant machinery that tracks the change in how farmers were able to harvest their crop more efficiently. For example:

- A reaper used to cut the crop. The crop still has to be gathered and threshed (removing the seeds from its husks and stalks). A horse-drawn reaper is in the summer section of the A Year on the Farm gallery.
- A reaper-binder was then invented which cut and bound the crop. However, it still needed to be threshed. This was an important step towards the combine harvester. A red, blue and yellow reaper-binder can be seen up close in the Our Country Lives gallery.
- A thresher was invented which mechanically removed the seeds from its husks and stalks. Our threshing machine can be found in the Forces for Change gallery
- The combine harvester now does all this and without the need for binding.



# What next?

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- Source and study aerial photos of your school now and then. Your school may have old aerial photos or your local museum or your local record office might have some. Photographs of your local school environment are also useful for seeing how things have changed.
- Source maps of your local area today and from the past (through your local record office, local studies library or via [www.britainfromabove.org.uk](http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk)) and compare how the countryside has changed, even in recent time. If you can source maps from far enough back you might be able to compare before some of the countryside was enclosed. The Museum of English Rural Life has maps in its collections and might be able to help with sourcing material.
- Walk the local neighbourhood and see if you can find signs of old boundaries such as ancient hedgerows and stone walls. What does this tell you about your local area? How has it changed?
- Reflect on the PDF document *Land Enclosure in England* that was used in the pre-visit activities and put some of the statements and facts into more context now you have visited.



MERL galleries

