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Source: *Geografiska Annaler*, Vol. 43, No. 1/2, Morphogenesis of the Agrarian Cultural Landscape: Papers of the Vadstena Symposium at the XIXth International Geographical Congress (1961), pp. 75-79

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography](#)

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Accessed: 30/04/2015 23:32

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RECENT PROGRESS IN ENGLISH AGRARIAN HISTORY

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Between the appearance of the pioneer *History of Agriculture and Prices* by Thorold Rogers (1866–87) and that of the monograph on *English Field Systems* by the American scholar H. L. Gray (1915) lay half a century of fruitful work on English agrarian history. Between the wars a fresh advance was made, chiefly in the direction of regional studies. The foundation of local archive repositories in many counties made vast quantities of documentary material available for the first time to the geographer and the historian. Moreover, these two groups of scholars were beginning to understand each other; or perhaps it would be truer to say that some scholars in each group were beginning to understand that history cannot be written solely from documents or solely from observation in the field: it demands a combination of the two. They now turned away from the writing of works on a national scale and concentrated instead on detailed local studies, most of which were published by local historical societies. In effect they underlined the diversity of farming practice and social structure between the various regions. They also proved that such diversity was not based on ethnological distinctions, so that although our archaeologists continue to speak of ‘Celtic’ fields, it is now well understood that the term is a misnomer. Of general works, perhaps the two most notable were the fourteen studies edited by H. C. Darby in 1936 under the collective title *An Historical Geography of England before 1800*, and the treatise on *The Open Fields* published by the Orwins in 1938. The last-named work, though intended to be of general application, was based on a single instance of surviving open field, and suffered from that fact. On the whole, the harvest of new writing between 1915 and 1945 was meagre enough to justify me in limiting the brief survey which follows to the last fifteen years.

The beginning of this period saw a continuation of work on the local scale. One general conclusion which emerged was that open-field agriculture had formerly been much more widely practised than the text-books had led us to believe. Perhaps I may mention here the evidence collected by Michael Nightingale in an unpublished thesis on Kentish agriculture (1952), and my own demonstration that the system was very common in medieval Devon. Kent and Devon were two of the counties in which, according to the text-books, it had never taken root.¹ Another theme of general interest was broached by Dr W. G. Hoskins, whose *Essays in Leicestershire History*, published in 1950, drew attention to the shrunken or wholly deserted village-sites that abound in many parts of England.

Scholars were now at work on agrarian history in sufficient numbers to encourage the foundation of a new society and a new periodical. The British Agricultural History Society held its inaugural meeting in April 1953. Since then, its membership has grown continually, and its journal, the *Agricultural History Review*, which now appears twice yearly, has provided a medium for the publication of important original work.

Meanwhile a Department of English Local History had been set up in 1948 at what was then the University College, now the University, of Leicester. This is still the only department of its kind in any English university. A further step in its development was taken in 1951, with the foundation of a senior research fellowship in Agrarian History, which has been held from the beginning by Dr Joan Thirsk.

It now began to appear that enough new knowledge had accumulated to justify some attempt at a provisional synthesis. In 1955 Dr Hoskins published a book entitled *The Making of the English Landscape*. Written with learn-

ing and felicity, this book is likely to become a classic; it will certainly long remain the best short introduction to our subject. It was intended to pave the way for a series of monographs on the history of the landscape in particular counties. Four of these have appeared: W. G. V. Balchin's *Cornwall* (1954), R. Millward's *Lancashire* (1955), my *Gloucestershire* (1955), and Hoskins's *Leicestershire* (1957). They were published at too low a price, and with illustrations badly reproduced; consequently they have not made the impact which they might have done had they been more attractively presented; but it is much to be hoped that the series will be continued, for nothing of the kind has been attempted in any other quarter, and so far it is only in these books that the history of the English landscape has been set forth in detail.

Encouraged by the success of the British Agricultural History Society, some of us began to dream of something on a more ambitious scale. At a meeting held in London on the 14th of January 1956 under the presidency of the *doyen* of our agrarian historians, Professor R. H. Tawney, the foundations were laid of a new Agrarian History of England, planned to consist of seven or eight volumes of some 350,000 words apiece. It is obvious that a History conceived in these terms can only be undertaken as an effort of co-operative scholarship, spread over many years. The theme will be pursued from the beginnings of systematic agriculture in the Neolithic period down to whatever date in the twentieth century may be deemed a convenient terminal point. There will be work here for many hands, especially as the History is not intended to be merely a synthesis of existing knowledge; it will embody a great deal of new research undertaken *ad hoc*. To finance this research, the Nuffield Foundation has made a generous grant of funds to the University of Leicester. Leicester is the headquarters of the project, but scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, London, Manchester, Leeds, Chicago, and several other universities, are actively engaged, and more will be enlisted as time goes on. For a number of reasons, the fourth volume, dealing with the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century, was the first to be put in hand. Work on it is now so well advanced that we hope to see it published within the next two

years. Meanwhile, preparations are being made for a beginning of work on Volumes I, III, and VI.

Thus the general picture is one of activity over a wide front. In order to make its outlines more precise and definite, I propose now to mention briefly some of the principal phases in the making of our agrarian landscape, and the more important recent discussions of the historical problems associated with those phases.

For the prehistoric era we are still heavily indebted to the pioneer work of Scandinavian archaeologists and palaeobotanists. The technique of pollen analysis, a Swedish contribution, has been employed in England by H. Godwin and others, with results which are summed up in a comprehensive *History of the British Flora*, published by Godwin in 1957. His section on cereals, based on the work of Jessen and Helbaek, presents the best available account of the development of wheat, oats, barley, and rye since Neolithic times. For a general survey of Neolithic husbandry—and it must be remembered that in some parts of our island husbandry did not rise above the Neolithic level until the Roman period or even later—the most important new work is Stuart Piggott's *Neolithic Communities of the British Isles* (1954).

Archaeological findings of recent years have shown that the roots of the Romano-British rural system lay in the British Early Iron Age. The square, so-called 'Celtic' fields are known to have been cultivated continuously under Roman rule, and traces of pre-Roman farmsteads have been uncovered beneath a number of Roman villas. In the last century or so before the Roman invasion, settlement began to invade the medium loam soils and the valleys, and the heavy plough with broad blade is found working in rather longer and larger fields. As might be expected, Roman enterprise and capital pushed these and other developments much further, and produced a highly organized agrarian economy. This has been studied at full length by S. Applebaum in an Oxford thesis which remains unpublished, but a valuable summary was printed two years ago in the *Agricultural History Review*.²

The fall of Roman rule in the fifth century was followed by a period of obscure catastrophe, and the question: what then happened

to the rural economy of Britain? remains one of the fundamental and most difficult problems of our history. It was warmly debated three-quarters of a century ago by Seebohm, Maitland, and Vinogradoff. Subsequent writers, who perhaps did not notice how far Vinogradoff shifted his ground in his later work, *The Growth of the Manor* (1905), have taken the line that the Anglo-Saxon conquest involved a complete break with the agricultural past. This is authoritatively expressed in the first volume of the Oxford History of England, where J. N. L. Myres says that "the whole structure of rural society was shattered and reformed" by the English conquest, and that "the towns and manors of late Saxon England can claim no demonstrable connexion with the Roman past." Hence the prevalent assumption that every feature in our agrarian landscape for which a higher antiquity cannot be proved must be of Anglo-Saxon or later origin.

I venture to prophesy that this assumption will not hold the field much longer. In 1952 Michael Nightingale found clear traces, at Cliffe in Kent, of Roman allotments in square *centuriae*, subdivided into strips of some five *jugera*.³ Applebaum has shown that the open-field system which survived until 1821 at Great Wymondley in Hertfordshire, surrounding the site of a Roman villa, and with its base on a Roman road, rested upon a Roman grid-division into 200-*jugera* squares. In the Middle Ages the fields of Great Wymondley were cultivated on the two-field system, and it has been found that a number of the strips were subdivisions of the Roman *centuriae*, averaging some 750 by 230 ft. Five years ago I published a detailed study of Withington, a Gloucestershire parish which includes the site of a large Roman villa, and for which there are documentary records from the seventh century onwards. After examining at some length its topography, geology, archaeological record, boundaries, land-use, and manorial custom, I found no evidence for a complete break between Roman and Saxon Withington. On the contrary, there seemed every reason to believe that the Roman villa-estate, a land-unit devoted mainly to wool production, and in a lesser degree to corn-growing, came through the post-Roman and into the Saxon period with its pattern of fields and trackways and its ancient boundaries intact. Its popula-

tion of servile and half-servile husbandmen, its religion, and its rural economy all reappear in the same light at the end of the dark interval as before it; only the ownership has changed, and, of course, the language, but this only after an interval which may have lasted for several generations.⁴

Of the various forms of open-field cultivation which have been practised in England at different times we are still very far from possessing anything like a complete history. In 1948 Maurice Beresford suggested that one method of enlarging our knowledge of the subject would be to plot on maps the high-backed ridges which in many English counties still appear as wave-like undulations on the surface of the fields. These ridges are seen most clearly in pastures which the plough has not touched for centuries, but their presence, or former presence, is also revealed in ploughland by bands of different colouring in the soil or crop. Beresford identified them with the strips or selions of the medieval open fields. In support of this identification he reproduced a number of maps drawn up before the open fields were enclosed and converted to pasture, and showed that the strips delineated on those maps coincided, both in number and direction, with the ridges still to be seen on the ground.⁵ His argument was presently challenged by Eric Kerridge. With a wealth of quotation from agricultural textbooks Kerridge proved that farmers continued to plough in ridges after enclosure, and also on land which was ploughed up for the first time during the Napoleonic war. Rather overstating his case, he concluded that most of the ridge and furrow to be seen in England today was the result of nineteenth-century rather than medieval ploughing. To this, Beresford has since replied with further arguments and more reproductions of old maps and recent air-photographs.⁶

A minor, but entertaining, controversy was provoked by the Orwins' resolute denial that arable holdings in the open fields were ever separated by grass balks, or strips of unploughed turf. Against this denial Kerridge quoted a mass of documentary evidence, which was subsequently challenged in detail by Miss H. A. Beecham.⁷ It remains true, however, that except at Laxton, the village on which the Orwins founded their case, grass balks can be

seen wherever the vestiges of open-field cultivation survive in England today, and there are at least two cases where medieval evidence can be quoted for this method of dividing one man's arable holding from his neighbour's.⁸

A perhaps more important discussion has been initiated by Miss H. M. Clark. It is well known that the arable selions in the open fields often showed abrupt variations in width. The Orwins attributed these variations to differences in the character of the soil. Miss Clark has tested this theory by field-work in a number of midland parishes for which old strip-maps and detailed modern soil surveys are available; and she finds that the selions vary in width even where there is no slope and no change in the permeability of the soil. If her argument remains unchallenged, some other explanation will have to be found of this feature of the open-field landscape.⁹

The transformation of the old, communally tilled, open fields into enclosed farms held in severalty is the most revolutionary change which has come over our agrarian landscape in modern times. It is now known to have extended over half a millennium or more, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, with two particularly notable bursts of activity in the Tudor and Georgian periods. In each of these periods the motive was the same: it was a movement to improve the use and yield of land at a time of agricultural prosperity. Dr Thirsk has pointed out that the particular purpose of enclosures, and the use to which the land was put after enclosure, differed very much from place to place according to the type of husbandry practised in the region. Hence enclosure caused social distress in some places, where it involved evictions or loss of employment, while elsewhere, as for instance in the pastoral districts of Lancashire, it proceeded uneventfully. Further, since enclosure was prompted mainly by the hope of getting more out of the land, it had great attractions in some regions and little virtue in others. There was no incentive to enclose the fells and high moorlands which in the existing state of knowledge could not be greatly improved (nor indeed can they now, except at great expense). Hence the main impetus to sixteenth-century enclosure was felt in areas devoted to arable and mixed husbandry, not in those where pastoral farming prevailed.¹⁰

Historians of the eighteenth-century enclosure movement have in the past been much concerned with its social consequences, particularly its effects on the small landowner. But in the last few years their researches seem to have changed direction and to be more concerned with showing why the movement was rapid in some districts and slow in others. Once again, therefore, they are examining its agricultural and technical setting. They have also been showing more interest in the effect of enclosure on the landscape. Alan Harris has shown that the depopulation of the Yorkshire wolds in the sixteenth century and the making of large sheepwalks did not greatly alter the landscape, because at that time the land could not be turned to more productive use; the revolution in the appearance of the wolds did not come until the use of turnips became general in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Dr Hoskins has discussed the effect of enclosure on the changing face of the countryside in his book, already cited, *The Making of the English Landscape*, and its social effects in his detailed study of a Leicestershire village, Wigston Magna, entitled *The Midland Peasant* (1957).

I have mentioned depopulation as one result of enclosure. Ever since Tawney reproduced the village map of Whatborough, drawn in 1586, a map showing a blank space where the village had formerly stood, historians have been interested in this aspect of our rural past. Latterly they have come to realize that the decay of villages is a phenomenon not confined to any one period and not the product of any single cause. Dr K. J. Allison has calculated that 69 of the 726 Norfolk village-names recorded in Domesday Book, that is, in 1086, had disappeared or dwindled into insignificance by 1316, when a new list was compiled, but that 70 new names had come into existence.¹² Other writers, including Dr Hoskins, have investigated the subject in their own parts of the country; and in 1954 Maurice Beresford published a book, *The Lost Villages of England*, which brought together a good deal of scattered information. Since then a number of historians, geographers, and archaeologists have combined to form a body called The Deserted Villages Group with the object of promoting further research into the subject. Though much hampered by lack of funds, the

Group has carried out a number of instructive excavations, particularly one at Wharram Percy in the East Riding of Yorkshire, directed by Beresford and J. G. Hurst, and has also compiled a list of nearly 1,700 deserted village-sites. It is hoped that in due course the Ordnance Survey will find it possible to issue a comprehensive map of these sites over the whole of England. This map, when it appears, will strikingly illustrate the advance and retreat of cultivation, especially on marginal lands. Meanwhile a new Society for Medieval Archaeology was founded in 1957, with terms of reference which cover this particular field of research, and may be expected to bring it much valuable support.

Excavation of deserted medieval villages is one way of adding to our knowledge of medieval houses and cottages. To quote Mr L. F. Salzman: "The present time has sometimes been called 'the era of the Little Man'; architecturally it might be termed the era of the discovery of the Little House . . . This generation has discovered the interest and importance of the houses of the farmers and yeomen." The great landmark in this new study was the

publication by Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan, between 1951 and 1954, of an elaborate study of nearly 500 houses and farm buildings in the lowlands of Monmouthshire, ranging in date from about 1450 to 1714, and in style from the simplest timber construction to solid stone buildings. This publication has set a standard for all later work on the subject.¹³ The only criticism that can be made against it is that it lacks the support of documentary evidence. A class of document from which much information on peasant building can be drawn is the inventories made for the purpose of proving a man's will. These inventories, in large numbers from every part of England, form the basis of a comprehensive work on Vernacular Building which Maurice Barley has in preparation.

In this necessarily brief survey I am conscious of many omissions, and of consequent injustice to many scholars and amateurs whose labours fully deserve a mention. Even so, I hope enough has been said to show how intensive and multifarious are the researches now being conducted into "the morphogenesis of the agrarian cultural landscape" in England.

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