

# Lone Survivor of the Enclosure Movement

**GEOFFREY LEE** studies the Open Fields of Laxton

(With acknowledgements to *Country Life*)



**L**AXTON, in Nottinghamshire, has the unique distinction of being the only village in the whole of England to retain the open-field system. There are fragmentary survivals of open fields in nearby Eakring, at Braunton in Devon, on the Isle of Axholme and in a few other places, but nowhere else is there a village still administered by the rules associated with this ancient method of land tenure. From the evidence available it seems likely that Laxton's open fields have been farmed in strips for at least 1,200 years, and under the protection of the present Lord of the Manor, the Minister of Agriculture, they will possibly continue to be so farmed for many generations to come.

The village lies at the eastern edge of Sherwood Forest, four miles from Sutton-on-Trent. Its isolated position and rich, fertile soil are two of the factors that helped to insulate it from the economic and political pressures that caused the enclosure of the rest of England. However, it is much more than an anachronistic medieval museum piece, and is worth studying as a living example of a way of life that worked well for this country for hundreds of years and had many merits—particularly those appertaining to individual freedom—that were lost in its passing.

Laxton, an Anglian settlement of the sixth or seventh century, was granted by William the Conqueror to a nobleman whose only daughter married another Norman, Robert de Caux, who became Lord of the Manor, and whose descendants held it for 500 years until, in 1618, it was sold to George Villiers, the favourite of James I. It was sold once more before, in 1640, becoming the property of the Peirrepoint family, whose descendants, in order to meet death duties, sold it in 1952 to the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry administers the estate through the Divisional Surveyor, Nottingham, and seeks "to preserve the Open Fields", and to help the "tenants to meet the demands of the future."

Before considering how Laxton's open fields managed to survive the Enclosures, it may be useful to examine briefly the actual workings of the open-fields system, which was probably introduced into Britain from northern Europe. The strip system itself is the logical outcome of the desire for equality. In a community that saw that land was a gift of nature, not to be appropriated by any one individual for his own exclusive benefit, it made sense that each person wishing to use the land should share

fairly the good fields and the poor fields.

A strip of each field for each person solved this problem with the least difficulty. It also made co-operation more effective. In ploughing, for instance, when a team of oxen had completed one field it would ensure that everyone had part of their land ploughed at the same time, rather than having to wait, as they would have done if each held separate fields; and some would, indeed, have run the risk of not getting their fields ploughed at all if the weather broke. The Lord of the Manor carrying out the administration of the community, the soldier protecting it, and the priest attending to its spiritual and educational needs were all supported by the landholders in return for these services.

Perhaps only in some unrecorded golden age did such a system work perfectly, but it did provide a basis for individual independence. The Enclosure Acts, starting with the Statute of Merton in 1236, changed all this. Often freeholders and villains exchanged strips so that they could consolidate them into blocks of land, and, if possible, add portions of the common pasture. The large-scale grazing of sheep demanded more land and fewer men. The sheep, as Sir Thomas More put it: "consume, distroye, and devoure whole fieldes, howses and cities."

The Enclosure movement saw the end of the idea of land being held in common and allowed the rise of the individual entrepreneur. For him, enclosure made sound economic sense. Being one of a group of land monopolists he could pick and choose who was to work for him and what wages he would pay. For the dispossessed farmer there was little choice but to accept a low wage or to starve; and the problem of the vagabonds, tramps and sturdy beggars adrift on the highways was to bedevil governments for many years to come—indeed until the Industrial Revolution mopped them up as cheap labour. The financial and psychological consequences of depriving so many self-reliant Englishmen of the use of land are still with us. Francis Bacon complained that Enclosures "bred a decay of people, and by consequence a decay of towns, churches, tithes, and the like."

But once the Enclosures started it became difficult for the open fields to compete. In a society that was simply seeking a rigorously fair self-sufficiency the open fields had no rival. But in a sophisticated world where farm surpluses could be traded for town-made

goods, more efficient production methods were demanded. Despite protest and active rebellion the Enclosures made their relentless progress. In the end the strips of land cultivated in common gave way to enclosed farms under the control of one man. Between 1700 and 1845 over six million acres were enclosed, generating one of the most extraordinary periods of unsettlement and resettlement in our history.

Parts of Laxton were enclosed in the eighteenth century, but the village had a large number of freeholders mixed with tenants, and consolidation was difficult. A neighbouring hamlet, Moorhouse, was enclosed in 1860. But the Lord of the Manor of Laxton, Earl Manvers, was busy building his great house at Thoresby and showed no interest in making the village follow suit. Between 1904 and 1907 a drastic reorganisation took place. Strips were amalgamated to form larger units, and restrictions that bound the tenants to a rigid rotation were relaxed so that they were free to crop these strips as they liked. Strengthened by these changes the village continued into the middle of the twentieth century, when the Ministry of Agriculture took over as landlord.

The open-field system is still administered by the Court Leet of the Manor, which consists of all occupiers of land and property in Laxton. A bailiff, a steward and a jury of twelve men are the officials and have powers to inspect fields and to fine anyone abusing the system. Half the proceeds of any fine go to the Lord of the Manor and the other half is used for the refreshment of the jury on their return from the annual inspection of the winter cornfield. This involves an examination of the boundaries of the sykes (stretches of meadow grass in the open fields) and the grass roads, and between the common grass and the arable strips. Any encroachments are duly noted along with an appropriate fine. Court procedures provide real democracy—making Laxton a genuine self-governing community that has no historical equal in England.

The open fields are not a particularly practical system for farming in the 1970s, with the farmers having to move implements, stock and manure from one strip to another across fields that are miles apart. But it survives because the rents are realistic and its tenants have a pride in carrying on a tradition of farming that goes back beyond record. New tenants are chosen from the village itself, or if an outsider is taken on he is, as the HMSO guide puts it, "made fully aware of its peculiarities and of the obligation to maintain them."

Given the Ministry of Agriculture's and the village's interest, the future of Laxton would seem assured provided that it can survive the current enthusiasm for over-exploiting our past. Nottinghamshire County Council, which has produced an excellent village "trail" guide, is now talking of setting up an interpretation centre, and of building the vil-

lage a plastic windmill. A senior planning officer has even suggested having actors add a little medieval colour by wandering around the village wearing smocks and carrying pitchforks. This sort of treatment would be disastrous. Laxton is an unpretentious working village. It welcomes serious students, and Ministry officials will willingly show small organised parties round. To turn it into a farming Disneyland would completely destroy its sense of reality.

If the open fields are not eventually to become enclosed car parks, Laxton must be left to those diligent enough to seek it out. Organised as a large-scale educational entertainment it would so alter in character that what the Normans, the Enclosures and 1,200 years of history failed to change could perish overnight.

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