

## THE PAST IN THE PRESENT – REMNANT OPEN FIELD PATTERNS IN ENGLAND

Della HOOKE

Institute of Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, UK  
91 Oakfield Road, Selly Park, Birmingham B29 7HL, UK, e-mail: d.hooke.1@bham.ac.uk

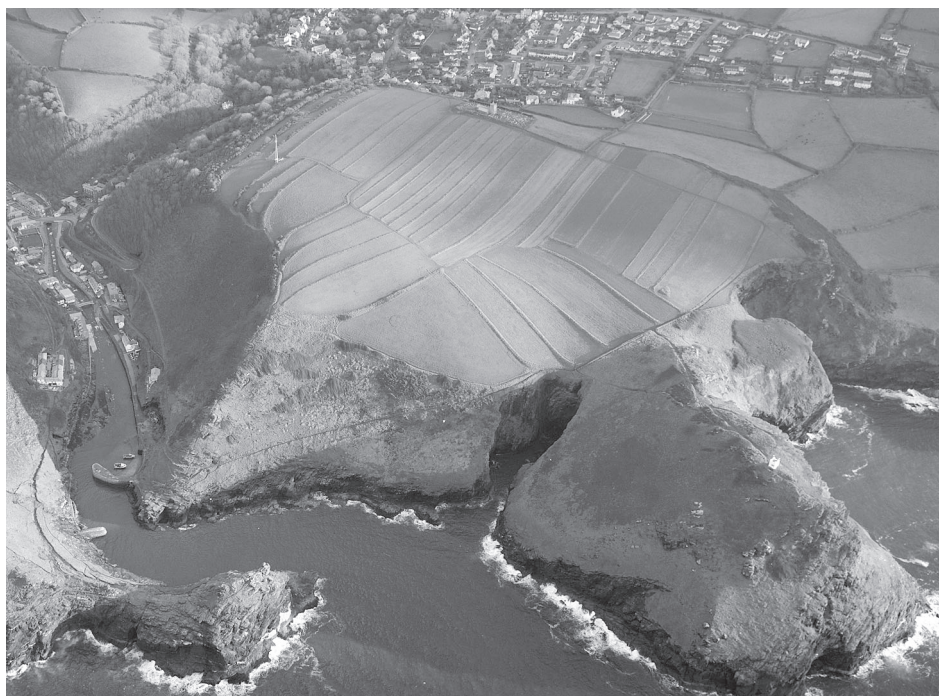
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**Summary:** The agricultural landscape forms an important part of Britain's cultural heritage. Relict field systems cast light upon landscape evolution, often showing the special connections between landscape and people over time. Medieval open field systems represent a method of farming that endured for many hundreds of years, produced through, and dependent upon, community involvement. Most of these landscapes were lost in the period of enclosure in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as individually held farms replaced such systems; later, the large estates themselves were also frequently broken up. The few survivals of open fields in England are discussed here and the cultural changes associated with landscape change, culminating today in conservation measures to protect such features. Thus the rural landscape reveals the depth of its evolutionary history, contributing towards the rich diversity of England's regional landscapes and the maintenance of a sound ecological balance, thereby contributing towards the preservation of cultural identity and heritage.

### Survivals of medieval open-field agriculture

As one example of 'The Past in the Present' one might look at survivals of medieval open-field agriculture. This was a method that dominated English farming for nearly 1,000 years from the early medieval period until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was clearly being actively extended as a way of organising agriculture in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and in the most intensively cultivated regions open fields had probably reached their maximum extent on the eve of the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Essentially, open field farming was characterised by the cultivation of crops in unenclosed strips within huge open fields – one holder would have his strips scattered through 3 or 4 such fields and by medieval times one of these would usually have been left fallow. The village stock was grazed upon this fallow and on any remaining areas of common waste, and, after the hay crop had been gathered in, on the common meadows.

Very few relict field systems of this type survive in England. At Forrabury, on a coastal headland above Boscastle in Cornwall (Figure 1), there are over 20 hectares of strips, here referred to as 'stitches', of which some 42 survive of the 50 recorded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. They are not all ploughed in the same year – there is a 4-year cycle with crops such as barley and wheat being grown for three years, followed by a year of pasture, and they are grazed by sheep from November to March (they are cropped from Lady Day on March 25<sup>th</sup> until Michaelmas Day on Sept 29<sup>th</sup>) (CHAPMAN 2007). Only the easternmost stitches have been invaded by scrub. The area under cultivation in medieval times in this way was once more extensive here and enclosed strips can still be seen on surrounding land.



*Figure 1.* Forrabury Stitches, Boscastle, north Cornwall, the remnants of an open field system  
(Photograph: Steve Hartgroves, Historic Environment, Cornwall Council)

*1. ábra* Forrabury Stitches, Boscastle, Észak Cornwall, egy nyílt terület maradványai  
(Fotó: Steve Hartgroves, Historic Environment, Cornwall Council)

A second open field survives in the south-west of England. At Branton in Devon, to the north of the Taw-Torridge estuary, 360 acres below the village are divided into 200 strips which vary in size from  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 6 acres, but in 1840 there were some 600 strips then in the hands of some 60 cultivators so much consolidation has taken place. The strips were separated by grass baulks – not a feature of every region of open field. There is documentary evidence that in 1324 one particular holding of  $26\frac{1}{2}$  acres was divided into 25 separate parcels or strips, approximately one acre per parcel (GRIFFITH 1988). Once again, the open field was once more extensive (Figure 2) and by 1994 there were only 20 owners, so that much agglomeration of holdings had taken place (MIDDLETON 2002).

Third, perhaps the best known survival is Laxton in Nottinghamshire where 3 of the 4 original open fields survive, still managed by working farms. The village was, and remains, strongly nucleated and may have achieved a planned layout at some stage (the castle with its motte and two baileys, was probably built by the de Caux family in the 12<sup>th</sup> century) (STOCKER 2006). Once again, there has been much consolidation of holdings and in 1909 a wholesale exchange of strips took place so that each farmer might work a more compact holding. Visually, this means the field inevitably makes less of an impact – farmers, who formerly had 40 or 50 scattered strips of an average size of half an acre, by the 1920s had only half a dozen each of about 4 or 5 acres in size (BERESFORD, ST JOSEPH 1979, CHAMBERS 1928).



*Figure 2.* Brauton Great Field, a further open field survival in south-west England.  
(Photograph: NMR 23598/06 SS 4635/7 taken 23 July 2004 ©English Heritage)  
2. ábra Brauton Great Field, egy újabb megőrzött nyílt terület DNy Angliában.  
(Fotó: NMR 23598/06 SS 4635/7, készült 2004 július 23-án ©English Heritage)

These are precious survivals of what, in this country, is a lost practice and it is to be expected that modern changes in farming in other European countries will not totally eradicate these open-field landscapes. They help to show, firstly, how our man-made landscape has evolved, and, secondly, they contribute towards the preservation of regional countryside character.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century relict fields of strip systems were common in Cornwall – around many villages and farmsteads the tithe maps captured patches of enclosed strips, the relics of these earlier field systems (Figure 3). They are slightly different here to those of midland and southern England (HERRING 2006). They may have begun their lives in this region as patches of ‘in-field’, an area kept under constant cultivation by the application of manure; beyond, the ‘out-field’ could be taken in and cultivated intermittently when circumstances demanded. Field patterns such as these have survived most easily in less intensively farmed areas – as on the edge of Goss Moor in Cornwall (HOOKE 1998). In the Welsh Borderland, too, occasional patches of former strip fields, long enclosed, have also survived (Figure 4) (HOOKE 2006). In more intensively cultivated regions such patterns have been almost totally eradicated.

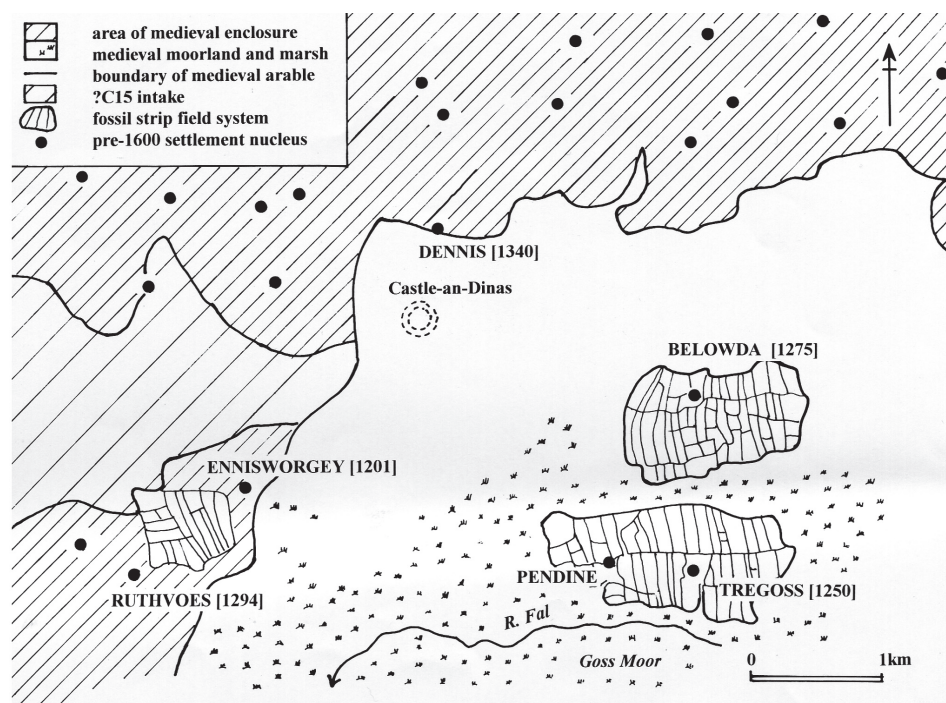


Figure 3. Field patterns on Goss Moor, Cornwall, probably reflecting an early 'in-field'  
(Map produced by D. Hooke)

3. ábra Goss Moor táblamintázata, Cornwall, valószínűleg egy korai 'in-field' példája  
(A térképet készítette: D. Hooke)

Associated with the common arable was the common meadow, usually divided annually by the drawing of lots for the purpose of cutting the hay. Once this had been gathered in, stock could be allowed to seek pasture there. Again, very few extensive areas of common meadow survive. Water meadows in river valleys have all too often been seen as suitable locations for modern roads etc. Common waste had been in very short supply in the intensively farmed areas by the time of the Black Death and patches of common, too, survived best in more marginal zones, as in the Welsh Borderland or the Warwickshire Arden.

The open-field system was generally one organised within the township community, its procedures organised and supervised by the manorial court which was the central institution, after the church, of medieval village life. Tenants of the community met every three weeks and the court records illuminate almost every aspect of life and work on the manor, the tenants' rights and duties etc. Perhaps surprisingly, the dates agreed for such major events as sowing, ploughing and harvesting are rarely recorded in such documents – even the arrangements for sharing the plough oxen – but in a village community these were well known to everyone and the courts usually list minor transgressions – such as the gleaning of spilt corn by those considered able-bodied enough to work for a living. Obviously the medieval village offered a very 'communal' way of life with limited scope for individual initiative.



*Figure 4. Surviving strip fields at Madley, Herefordshire, in the Welsh Borderland  
(NMR 23718/10 SO 4238/12 taken 24 September 2004 ©English Heritage)*

*4. ábra Megőrzött nadrágszjij parcellák Madley-ben, Herefordshire, a wales-i határ környékén  
(NMR 23718/10 SO 4238/12, készült 2004 szeptember 24-én ©English Heritage)*

### **Enclosure**

Extensive areas of open field did not necessarily last much beyond the Middle Ages in marginal areas, where the land was better suited to stock rearing and manorial organisation was less rigidly upheld. But open field farming held sway in more productive regions into the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. By then the Agricultural Revolution was well under way and landowners in the richer, more fertile regions wanted greater independence and greater control over their individual holdings. The old manorial system had been less adaptable to the newly emerging market forces or the promotion of scope for entrepreneurial initiative. New crops were being introduced (such as clover) and it was not easy to introduce these into the manorial system, neither could selective breeding of stock take place within a

common village herd. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, enclosure progressed rapidly and by the middle of the century open field had been drastically reduced in most counties. At first a cumbersome business, the General Enclosure Act of 1836 greatly facilitated the change and the landscape of the open field regions gave way almost everywhere to one of straight-sided large geometric fields, often bounded by quickset hedgerows. These still dominate the present-day field pattern of much of lowland England (Figure 5). New farms were established beyond the village centres to farm the new fields. A system of ploughing normally carried out in the open fields was the use of ridge and furrow, particularly because it facilitated drainage in the days before land drains became available. Even after former arable land had been enclosed, relict ridge and furrow often survived if the land was later left under grass.



Figure 5. Enclosure fields in the Vale of Evesham, Worcestershire (Photograph: D. Hooke)

5. ábra Körbezárt terület Vale of Evesham-ben, Worcestershire (Fotó: D. Hooke)

The pockets of waste were the last remnants of common land in many areas but these too were often subdivided in the last stages of 19<sup>th</sup>-century enclosure; the inhabitants of the cottages that had grown up around them were often driven to the newly developing towns of the Industrial Revolution. Even the great open sheepwalks of the Welsh Borderland were enclosed – thousands of acres at a time on uplands like the Long Mynd or the Clun Forest – over 20,000 acres of mostly sheepwalk taken in between 1845 and 1891 in the latter area (Figure 6) (HOOKE 2006).



Figure 6. Clun sheepwalks, Shropshire, upland sheepwalks enclosed in the final stages of 19<sup>th</sup>-century enclosure (Photograph: D. Hooke)

6. ábra Clun birkajárás, Shropshire, lekerített felföldi birkajárások a 19. századi privatizáció végső stádiumában (Fotó: D. Hooke)

Culturally, the change was enormous: individually managed holdings replaced community organisation. The landowners of big estates, recognised as leaders in agricultural improvement, had often organised enclosure and reaped its benefits, but even their estates were often being broken up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tenant farms were often amalgamated and the smaller ones forced out of business. In 1911 only 13% of holdings in England and Wales were in owner occupation and in Shropshire this proportion was only around 10%, covering some 8% of the land. By 1979 over half of the farms, covering nearly half of the county acreage, were wholly owned by their occupiers and a further 13% mainly thus owned. The smaller owner occupier became the crux of 20<sup>th</sup>-century farming.

### Cultural implications

Paradoxically, as local control diminished in favour of independence there was a gradual move towards more central organisation and guidance. Farming had hit a new low at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and government intervention was increasingly required. Although farming cooperatives became better organised it was government policy that revived farming – the 1947 Agriculture Act, for instance, guaranteed prices for produce. By 1973 further payments and subsidies were available through the European Community and now the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) within the EC is influential in guaranteeing minimum prices etc.

The moves advocated were not always beneficial for landscape conservation – former downlands and traditional pastures were broken up for intensive grain production as England tried to become more self-sufficient, continuous cultivation maintained only by the addition of vast amounts of chemical fertilizer; hundreds of miles of ancient hedgerows were destroyed to make way for bigger farm machinery (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Ancient hedgerows in the Monnow Valley, Herefordshire (Photograph: D. Hooke)  
7. ábra Ősi sövény a Monnow-völgyben, Herefordshire (Fotó: D. Hooke)*

### **Conclusions: present-day conservation**

Today it is government initiative that also encourages conservation. Such schemes as Countryside Stewardship and its successor, the Farm Environment Scheme, helps – and pays – farmers to care for their land in a way that not only ensures efficient farming but caters for the protection of wildlife habitats, archaeological features and, particularly, traditional landscapes. Recognition of just what constitutes the latter has been facilitated by a series of studies carried out by the government funded Countryside Agency and English Heritage, now being completed for every English county.

Forrabury Stitches are now owned by a private body, the National Trust, and the area is also protected by a Boscastle Conservation Area appraisal endorsed by North of Cornwall District County Council in 2007. A tenancy agreement of 1942 has made it difficult to bring in meaningful conservation but, nevertheless, the baulks between the strips provide a reservoir for biennial plants and the landscape offers one of the best examples of this old system of farming. The plants, now rare in areas of modern agriculture, include corn marigolds, lesser snapdragon, fumitory, sun spurge and bugloss (CHAPMAN 2007).

Braunton Great Field lies in an area designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural

Beauty and has special protection within this under the North Devon Local Plan of 2006, designated an Area of Strategic Landscape and Development Control. Laxton is protected by a Parliamentary undertaking given by the Crown Estate Commissioners when they purchased the estate in 1981. Under the new Farm Environment Scheme it has been a target for what is termed Higher Level Stewardship in order to ensure the conservation of the historic landscape and its biodiversity.

Within CAP, too, there has been a move towards stewardship, encouraged by the European Landscape Convention: traditional landscapes, in particular, are much valued. Above all, they see the land as not just a resource to be exploited but as part of a wider environment that bears witness to each country's individual cultural heritage.

### Acknowledgments

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### MÚLT A JELENBEN – MARADVÁNY NYÍLT TERÜLET MINTÁZATOK ANGLIÁBAN

D. HOOKE

Institute of Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, UK  
91 Oakfield Road, Selly Park, Birmingham B29 7HL, UK, e-mail: d.hooke.1@bham.ac.uk

**Kulcsszavak:** nyílt terület, Anglia, tájfejlődés, vidéki karakter

A mezőgazdasági tájak Anglia kulturális örökségének fontos részét képezik. Az egykori mezőrendszerek maradványai rávilágítanak a táj fejlődésére, gyakran jól mutatják a táj és az ember kapcsolatát az időben. A középkori nyílt területrendszer egy gazdálkodási módszert képvisel, amely évszázadokon át fennmaradt, a lakóközösség részvételével készült és így tőle is függött. A 18–19. században ezek a területek a privatizáció során elvesztek, amint az egyedi farmok helyettesítették a korábbi rendszert. Később a nagyobb birtokok is felosztódtak. Jelenleg a néhány túlélő angliai nyílt terület vizsgálatáról, valamint a tájváltozással egybefüggő kulturális változásokról olvashatunk, amely változások védelmi beavatkozásokat sürgettek az ilyen típusú képződmények védelmére. A vidéki táj így feltárja a fejlődéstani történet mélységeit, segíti megőrizni Anglia vidéki tájainak sokféleségét és a megfelelő ökológiai egyensúly fenntartását, ezzel elősegítve kulturális identitás és örökség megőrzését.

