



## The Fate of the Common Lands

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THERE is still a haunting memory of the once extensive common lands of England. What was lost, it has been suspected, is greater than what was gained by enclosure. The sturdy and attractive life of the medieval village communities which flourished under the open field and common land system has appealed to scholars, historians, poets.

Yet, though the system itself has been well recorded, the process by which it was undermined has not been adequately researched. A substantial effort in this direction has been made in a book\* which relates, so far as available evidence permits, how the commons "disappeared." The author spent many years on the subject and made first-hand inspection of localities and old documents.

The medieval agricultural village centred around the rotation of crops on open fields, the use of common pasture and woodlands, and availability of wasteland as needed. There were early attempts at enclosure but the movement began in earnest in the time of Henry VIII. Large areas of the commons were enclosed by landlords mostly for the profitable business of sheep raising. But there were revolts by peasants, and men of considerable influence spoke out against the practice—among them, Thomas More, Latimer, Wolsey, *et al.* During this period, some care was taken and laws passed to protect the rights of villagers. Enclosure began almost timidly, then waxed bolder and finally passed into ruthlessness.

Enclosure continued in the 17th century, which also saw the rise of two interesting anti-enclosure movements during the Commonwealth—the Levellers and the Diggers. The name "leveller" has been used as a term of reproach, indicating "communism" and a desire to reduce all men to a dead level. But the original meaning had to do with the action of anti-enclosure people in tearing down the hedges and filling the ditches by which landlords marked off their enclosures—thereby "levelling" the land which they regarded as common by right. The Diggers were a small and pious group of people who had the idea that God gave the earth to all men and that each man had a right to work, on it and keep the fruit of his labour; moreover, they practised what they preached by tilling abandoned land. This action so shocked organised society that Mr. Tate speculates that it closed the ranks of landlords great and small against land reform of any kind.

\**The Enclosure Movement* by W. E. Tate, Walker and Co., New York, 1967.

At any rate, the landlords rode to victory with the Restoration and especially with the "Glorious Revolution." The 18th century witnessed the wholesale enclosure of common lands—and this time with very little regard for the rights of the landless and the poor. Arguments for enclosure were that the old system was inefficient, modern agricultural methods demanded enclosed farms. Mr. Tate wants to be objective and fair to all sides and he concedes that there was something to this argument. Yet the price of "efficiency" was that thousands of evicted villagers were turned loose on highways and towns, reduced to poverty, beggary, thievery. One rather cloven-hoofed argument was that the independent labourer on the common was an "idler" and that enclosure made him more "industrious" by compelling him to work for others.

The argument of efficiency has not gone unchallenged. The Hammonds in their monumental work, *The Village Labourer*, claim better results under the commons system; Mr. Tate cites them as well as modern authorities.

What was indisputable is that rents went up, and economists tended to measure the wealth of a nation by its high rents (regardless of who got the rents!). They paid little heed to the depopulation of villages and the swelling of the rolls of the unemployed poor in the cities as an index of national prosperity. Landlords did not wait for the argument to be settled but went on with their enclosing until by the end of the 18th century millions of acres had been enclosed, breaking the commons system.

Some correctives were introduced in the reform-minded 19th century, but they were more procedural than substantive. For instance, steps were taken to prevent enclosure commissions from being appointed entirely by landlords with their hand-picked men and a more balanced representation was sought. However, the commissions felt that their job was still to enclose, and in the first half of the 19th century, another half-million acres were enclosed!

After this further shrinkage of the commons, more reforms were introduced to safeguard what was left, and various acts from 1845 to 1893 made it progressively more difficult to enclose.

In 1965 was enacted the Commons Registrations Act; its purpose, according to Mr. Tate is that "from 1972 the (rather more than a million acres of) commons in England shall be precisely recorded, and their status as common be most carefully safeguarded throughout the foreseeable future." Although the barn door has been locked after most of the horses have been stolen, we find that there is after all a horse left.

Mr. Tate closes his book with a nostalgic reference to Laxton in Nottinghamshire as the one example left of an agricultural village retaining its medieval constitution. "It is a proud village," he says, "a happy one, and a prosperous one." He regrets that it is only a "museum piece" instead of a typical English village.