

# The Georgist Journal

Number 51

Spring 1986

## Comment

### THE COMMON LAND SYSTEM

A friend, Eric Price, asks, Would it be possible to have the common land system today? He was referring to the system of working lands, particularly agricultural, without reducing them to private ownership. This "open field" system prevailed in England for many centuries - also in many parts of Europe (e.g., the mir in Russia).

This is a related, but somewhat different matter to Henry George's injunction, We must make land common property. George meant that we must establish equal rights in land for all persons. Recognizing that in modern times production mostly takes place on privately held land, he proposed that the rent of land be taken in lieu of taxes. Thus the equal rights of all would be respected although the land would be in private possession.

The common land system, on the other hand, allowed common use of farm land, grazing land and woodland, centered around a village. The villagers, however, reaped the fruits of their own toil.

The common lands were eventually encroached upon by the nobles; the process of enclosure was accelerated under Henry VIII and continued through the 18th century. Defenders of the enclosures speak of "the tragedy of the commons", maintaining that the soil was depleted by over-use, over-grazing - and over-population! - and better care and greater productivity resulted from private ownership. This is simply not the case. The open field system withstood centuries of use and the villagers developed well-balanced methods of production and conservation. Crops were rotated; different fields were used and were periodically allowed to lie fallow. Shakespeare knew the system, and in the masque in The Tempest, Ceres speaks of "rich leas of wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats and peas." This was the order in which open field crops were planted.

So immersed were villagers in this system that even in the 18th century, Adam Smith noted that farmers persisted in turning their cattle loose onto grazing lands after the ploughing season, even though these lands were now enclosed and they were punished for doing so (for their "inefficiency"?).

The real "tragedy of the commons" was their enclosure. The open field system was gradually pushed to poorer and poorer lands - of course they had difficulty keeping up the fertility! Nor were the better lands consecrated to better agriculture when they were enclosed, but were rather converted to profitable sheep farms or simply turned into hunting preserves.

The common land system did work. The question, can this be revived in modern times, is an interesting one, and deserves some exploration.

R.C.