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## HOW THE ENGLISH PEOPLE BECAME LANDLESS

In *The Land: The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee*, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1913, Dr Gilbert Slater contributed a special section entitled "A Historical Outline of Land Ownership in England." We give our readers the following condensation, in which we have supplied the sub-headings.

[IN THE sixteenth century] the price of grain was relatively low compared with that of wool, so that a great commercial advantage could be secured by turning the arable land into sheep farms. The results were portentous. In many places, as described in the famous passage in *Utopia*, or by numerous other contemporary authors, or in the preambles of many Acts of Parliament, evictions took place on a wholesale scale, and where there had been thriving villages and a sturdy population of hard working peasantry, nothing was left but waste and ruined cottages, and rough grass nibbled by flocks, running we are told, in some cases to as many as 24,000 sheep, tended by a few shepherds and their dogs. The dispossessed peasantry having disposed of their small possessions by forced sale, wandered aimlessly away with scant chance of finding employment either in town or country. The stream of broken men and unhappy women and children could not be stayed by all the vagrancy laws the Government could devise, though such laws rose at times to a horrible pitch of cruelty. This was the great Enclosure movement of the sixteenth century. Enclosure meant then, not the turning of waste lands into cultivated fields, but the conversion of the "fair fields full of folk," of Langland's phrase, into desolate sheep walks.

### The Monasteries

Just when this movement was at its height there occurred the dissolution of the monasteries. Much as King Henry VIII would have liked to keep their vast estates in his own hands, he was unable to do so. To the powerful and unscrupulous there was offered such an opportunity of getting rich quickly as had never been offered since the Conqueror parcelled out the manors of England among his Norman followers, if then. A mighty scramble took place. Nearly all the monastic lands fell into the hands of private owners, men of the type least likely to allow humanitarian scruples to hinder them in the pursuit of wealth.

Whatever the Tudor agrarian code did for the rural labourer and the peasant it did not alter the main result of the agrarian revolution. That revolution enormously increased the wealth of the landed aristocracy. It altered the distribution of the wealth won from the soil in such a way that the cultivator received a relatively much smaller share, and the rent-receiver a much larger share; while the personal services rendered by the latter to the State disappeared, and the taxation paid by him became relatively trifling.

During the Civil War the nobler Puritans and Cavaliers largely fell in battle or were exiled or suffered confiscation of their estates; while meaner men saved their skins and enlarged their possessions.

### The Growth of Landlord Power

With the restoration in 1660 a new and most important chapter in the history of the English Land System was opened. From that time forwards, and even more decisively after the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, the power which, in the Middle Ages, had been divided between King, Barons and Church, was monopolised by the large landowners. As Peers, they sat in the House of Lords; the defects of the representative system gave them complete control of the House of Commons; through the power of patronage they controlled the Church; as Justices of the Peace they held in their hands the administration of justice, and responsibility for local government; literature and scholarship, the Universities and the printing press, were their handmaids.

Immediately after the Restoration the effect of the passing of political power into the hands of the landowners was shown in legislation. Certain incidents of feudal tenures, such as "wardship" and "marriage," which had been appropriate when military service by the feudal lord was a reality, had become merely burdensome to the landowner and of little profit to the Crown.

Various attempts had been made before the Restoration to substitute a definite charge on land held under military tenure for these old rights of the Crown. The Restoration Parliament hit upon another device.

It decreed that the compensation to the Crown for the extinction of feudal incidents should take the form, not of a tax on land, but of an excise duty on the drinks, like beer and cyder, consumed by the poorest classes of the population.

Game laws were enacted; the savage provision was added to the Poor Law Code that a labouring man who took up residence in a new parish could be driven back to the place from which he came, on the mere ground that he might possibly at some future time become chargeable to the poor rates.

### Seven Million Acres Enclosed

Early in the eighteenth century there begins the great series of private acts of enclosure, of which 4,000 in all, covering some 7,000,000 acres were passed before the General Enclosure Act of 1845. During the same period it is probable that about the same area was enclosed without application to Parliament.

Right through the period we have now under consideration, viz., from 1660 to 1845, a three-fold policy with regard to land was being steadily pressed forward by the landowning class. One aspect of this policy was the improvement of estates and the advancement of agriculture.

Closely connected with this part of the triple policy pursued was the movement of enclosure, and this again was equally closely

connected with the war of extermination waged against the owner of small portions of land or common rights and even against the small tenant. A typical progressive landlord of the day desired to make his estate a model of good farming. He wanted his lands to be let to enterprising tenants, each occupying a compact farm surrounding its own farm-house, and each free, without any shackling by ancient village customs, to develop the most profitable agricultural methods.

### High Rents and Dependent Workers

He also wanted an increase of rent. His favourite author, Arthur Young, told him it was his duty to demand high rents, as low rents were only an encouragement to slovenly farming. Moreover, the current political theory held that the prosperity of the State was best judged by the rental of land, because this represented the net profit over and above that required for the subsistence of the cultivators, and this net profit was the ultimate taxable fund on which armies and navies could be maintained. Lastly, the typical landlord desired authority. He wanted no small independent freeholders with bits of land in the midst of his estate, or in possession of cottages or cultivated patches won out of the waste, entitled to keep cows on the open commons, and to go here and there to exercise their right of taking fuel, with a chance, perhaps, of taking a hare or a pheasant as well.

### Powers Usurped by Lords of the Manor

In the eighteenth century the lord of the manor, or the principal owner of land, was almost invariably the mover for enclosure, and the person who chiefly profited by it. In a proportion of cases which was probably large, but how large it is impossible to say, the principal landowner effected enclosure by first of all making himself the sole proprietor. The well-known agricultural writer, William Marshall, records an instance in which this was done, in his opinion, by an equitable bargain, but he describes this as a notable exception to the general rule that enclosure was effected by oppression or underhand dealing. A device frequently used was that of inducing copyholders to allow their copyholds to be converted into leaseholds. When the leases ran out the lord of the manor could deal with the land as he chose.

### Enrichment and Bankruptcy

Where the minor owners were too numerous, or too stubborn, or too firmly established, to be got rid of by purchase, resort was made to private acts of enclosure. This had the effect of getting rid of a certain number of the small owners and of disentangling the properties of the remainder from those of the lord of the manor.

The effect of enclosure varied from village to village and from district to district. But we can make a general statement as to the way in which the fortunes of different classes of people were affected. The chief landowners, as I have said above, were the biggest gainers, but even with them the gain was uncertain. In some cases seven-fold rents were obtained. The Board of Agriculture's reporter for Somerset tells us that the enclosers of Sedgmoor made a net profit of £365,373 15s. 4d. There were cases where the increase of rental scarcely sufficed, for a considerable period afterwards, to pay interest on the money expended in satisfying the rapacious parliamentary agents, paying the Commissioners, and erecting the new hedges. Enclosure was a gamble, but a most satisfactory gamble, offering brilliant prizes to landlords. The title owners generally gained in a similar proportion to the large landlord.

There was a general tendency for lands which had previously been arable to be turned into pasture on enclosure, because, up to nearly the end of the century, pasture was more profitable. On the other hand, land which had previously been common pasture had to be ploughed for some years in succession, in order to effect such an improvement in it as would enable it to yield a higher rental. The farmer in either case had to revolutionise his methods. He might fail either through inadequate capital or inadequate knowledge. If he went bankrupt there were plenty more tenants dispossessed by the process of enclosure in neighbouring villages eager to take his place. *The majority of the small tenant farmers had to choose between migrating elsewhere, or becoming landless labourers.*

#### How the Cottagers Fared

But the mere fact that enclosure was carried out by an Act was an indication that there was a body of freeholders or copyholders possessed of land or cottages, or rights of common. How did these fare? On this point we have adequate and authoritative evidence from contemporary advocates of enclosure. Arthur Young, for example, who spent a great part of his life in advocating enclosure and in endeavouring to get general Enclosure Acts of as effective and comprehensive a type as possible passed, declared "That by nineteen Enclosure Acts out of twenty the poor are injured."

In the first place, many of the poor cottagers who kept a cow or a few geese on the common, and who obtained their whole supply of fuel from it, were only tenants of the cottages which entitled them to these privileges. When enclosure took place the owner of such cottages obtained an allotment of land in compensation for the extinction of those common rights. The tenant got nothing. Nor does it appear that the rent of the cottages was reduced in consequence. On the other hand, it was admitted on all sides that the loss, particularly of the provision of fuel, caused very great hardship, and there were even some cases in which provision was made in Enclosure Acts for a few acres of moor to be reserved to poor cottagers to supply them with fuel.

But supposing the cottager was the owner of his cottage, he then had to produce documentary evidence that he was legally entitled to the exercise of rights of common. The Board of Agriculture, in its general report on enclosures, has handed down the name of one Commissioner who was accustomed to give compensation where cottagers proved

that they had been in the actual possession of common rights, without requiring documentary evidence of their title. But the report clearly gives it to be understood that he was an exception—perhaps the only exception—to the general rule. *Except in very rare instances, without documentary evidence the small common-right owner lost his rights without compensation.* Such cases must have been very numerous.

#### "Give us Back our Commons"

Yet again we must notice the change that had taken place in consequence of enclosure in the whole social structure in the village. With all its disadvantages, the distribution of holdings in scattered strips in the open fields had this one merit: it gave a certain elasticity to the size of the holding. It was easy for a labourer to rent two or three acre or half-acre strips, and gradually increase the size of his holding as his family grew in numbers. The labourer who was entirely landless was comparatively a rarity, and between him and the farmer there was a gradation of men who divided their time in varying proportions between work for hire and work for themselves. But after enclosure, with the whole of the land divided out into large compact and defined farms, *there was nothing left for the small holder. He had to become a labourer pure and simple;* and henceforward there was a gulf between the labourer and the farmer, very difficult for the former to cross, and very painful for the latter.

Out of the 4,000 Enclosure Acts, almost exactly two-thirds were Acts of the character just described. The remaining third were Acts for the enclosure of commons situated in districts where the cultivated land had been previously enclosed. With respect to the effect of enclosure upon the fortunes of the cottagers who had utilised such commons the above statement applies without modification. The whole process of enclosure was deeply resented by the poor rural population. In the nineteenth century, when the labourers were reproached with pauperisation, their reply was: "Give us back our commons and you can keep your poor relief."

#### What was not Necessary

It is often asserted that enclosure was an economic necessity. It is perfectly true that *there was an economic necessity that the traditional methods of common field cultivation should be altered, and that the easiest, and, so far as the foremost agriculturists of the day could see, the most effective method of improving agriculture was by superseding collective ownership by individual ownership, and replacing methods of cultivation which demanded co-operation by individual enterprise.* But *it was in no sense an economic necessity that this change should be carried through in such a way as to impoverish the poor while enriching the wealthy, or to convert the peasant into a despairing, crushed, and dependent labourer.*

#### Progressive Impoverishment

Simultaneously with the rapid increase of enclosure by Act of Parliament during the second half of the eighteenth century, there came a progressive impoverishment of the rural labourer, of which enclosure was not the only cause. Soon after 1760 the celebrated series of inventions in spinning revolutionised the domestic economy of the labourer's cottage. Before the inventions of Crompton, Hargreaves and Arkwright made spinning a machine industry, it was an important sub-

sidary occupation carried on in innumerable cottage homes by the wives and children of the rural labourers.

Even as late as 1793 the Rutlandshire magistrates passed a resolution directing that no outdoor relief should be given to a labourer with a family, unless his children attained certain standards of competence in spinning in accordance with their ages. *The revolution in spinning deprived agricultural labourers of this part of their subsistence at the very time when enclosure was making them more dependent on wages and diminishing the demand for agricultural labour.* Bad harvests also were more numerous in the latter half of the eighteenth century, while finally the great war with the French Republic and Napoleon covered the whole period from 1796 to 1815, driving food prices to famine levels.

#### The Speenhamland Policy

Mr and Mrs Hammond have vividly portrayed the situation of the rural labourer and the choice of policies which faced the English Government at the outbreak of the war. In those few spots where they had sufficient spirit left to make their wants known the labourers demanded that wages should rise in proportion to the rise in the cost of the bare necessities of life. There was not the remotest chance of this demand being conceded.

Efforts were made to induce the labourer to subsist upon some cheaper fare than the wheaten bread and occasional glass of small beer or thin cyder to which he had become accustomed, and to a considerable extent potatoes began to take the place of bread, particularly in the dietary of children. But in the end reliance was placed upon the Speenhamland policy, the policy of laying down the minimum of subsistence for the agricultural labourer, determined by the price of bread and the numbers of his family, and bringing up his wage to its minimum level by grants from the poor rates. *Some way had to be found of avoiding at once widespread famine and bloody revolution. From these perils the Speenhamland policy saved the country, but at a terrible cost.*

#### Wages Subsidised from Local Taxation

The Speenhamland policy was a direct temptation to farmers to reduce wages arbitrarily, in order to throw the cost of working their farms in part upon those ratepayers, including the surviving small holders, who did not employ hired labour. It took away the incentive to exertion and undermined industrial discipline, since the labourer was as well off when he was unemployed as when he was working.

In combination with the bastardy laws, it stimulated illegitimate births to such an extent that, according to reports of the Poor Law Commission, great numbers of young women of the agricultural labour class could only hope to become wives by first becoming mothers.

It must, however, be remembered that what made the Speenhamland policy of giving a bare subsistence to the unemployed labourer and his dependents so disastrous, was the fact that the land policy pursued by the governing class during the preceding century, and the other causes explained above, had reduced the wages of the man in work to even less than a bare subsistence for a family.

The reform of the Poor Law in 1834,

which destroyed the autonomy of the parishes in the matter of poor relief, grouped them together in unions, and brought every Board of Guardians and every Poor Law official under the control of a Board of three Commissioners, had for its main object the reversal of the Speenhamland policy. The Commissioners and the theorists endeavoured to cure pauperism by penalising the applicant for poor relief.

#### Making Docile Labourers

It was afterwards claimed that this policy of repression was a brilliant success; that labourers ceased to riot and became docile, eager to get and to keep their jobs, and that pauperism steadily diminished from decade to decade. But the immediate effect was to aggravate the under-feeding of the working population, and had it not been for a series of remarkable industrial developments, the 1834 policy could scarcely have been persisted in. It would have had to be abandoned amid general execration.

The position of the agricultural labourer in the twentieth century remains that of a man possessed of varied and most valuable forms of skill, who yet is ranked among the unskilled labourers, and receives a remuneration even lower than that of the generality of them. Of all workers he has least chance of a satisfactory career in his own country and his own craft. He is the man most essential to the well-being of the community, yet he shares in the most niggardly fashion in that well-being; he is the man to whom a manly independence of thought, speech and action is made by society most difficult and most dangerous.

#### When the Landowners were Counted

The great enquiry of 1874-5 (the "New Doomsday") into land-ownership shows that the land of England and Wales, exclusive of London, of roads, Crown woods, wastes, commons, etc., and house and garden properties of less than 1 acre, amounted to 32,862,343 acres, and was owned by 269,547 persons.\* If properties of less than 10 acres are omitted, there remain 32,383,664 acres, owned by only 147,564 persons. Slightly more than 2,000 persons owned half the agricultural land of the country.

Since then the agricultural labourer has been enfranchised. His economic emancipation must, sooner or later, follow his political emancipation. But, as yet, little has been done to efface the deep impress made alike upon the land system and the workers on the land by two hundred years of rule by the British landed aristocracy.

\*This is a reference to the Return of Owners of Land ordered to be made by the House of Lords, reported in the Official Debates of 19th February, 1872. As the enquiry was tabulated county by county, many landowners with estates in several counties were duplicated. Moreover, leaseholders with leases of over 99 years were treated as owners. Accordingly, the number of landowners given—269,547—is much in excess of the true figure. There is a detailed examination of this Return and further information about the Enclosures in Mr Graham Peace's book *The Great Robbery. Dr Gilbert Slater is well known as the author of The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields.*

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## RAMBLING IN THE COUNTRY

THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION has issued a Report on "Proposed Country and Town Planning with Particular Reference to Access, National Parks and Footpaths." What it says about the present difficulties is worth recording and certainly give a text for the advocates of Land Value Taxation with which we would be glad to see the Ramblers associated.

"The beauty that belongs to us all should not be exploited further for private or sectional ends, or monopolized by selfish use."

"We have always held strong and clearly defined views on . . . the protection and extension of rights of way and the desirability of much greater general access for the public to the countryside of Britain and in particular to the mountains, moors and sea coast."

"Very drastic improvement of existing laws and the enactment of new laws relating to planning, to access for the public to the countryside, to national parks and to rights of way will be imperative."

"Our proposals call for putting an end to those past mistakes in National policy which have had such unhappy effects on the appearance of our country and for the rigorous enforcement of laws which already exist but which, by reason of their optional nature, are insufficiently used."

"It is not to be expected that people from overseas will visit Britain if our countryside and our country towns and villages are to lose their ancient beauty and if large areas of our countryside are to remain forbidden land."

"Would-be estate developers, promoters of industrial enterprises, etc., should not be permitted to dig themselves in during the war by buying land, drawing up plans for building and obtaining the necessary Government or local permission for their schemes."

"The right of the public to have access to uncultivated hills, moors, downs and the sea coast should be a matter of course and the responsibility of the State. The existing Access Act should be superseded by something much less complicated, less restrictive, and not involving financial onus on voluntary organizations."

"There should be no uncouth fringe to cities consisting of miles of roadside villas, obscuring the view of the country behind them, together with an unsightly mess nearer the city of petrol stations, advertisement hoardings, wooden shack cafés, and so on."

"We advocate right of public access to all lands at present occupied as grouse moors or deer forests. We dismiss as specious the economic arguments of sporting interests. . . ." "The North-West Highlands, where deer forests are most prevalent, were before the war distressed areas."

"We consider it most desirable that British citizens should be able to walk along their own coast and on their own shores. We urge . . . the removal of the legal anomalies which allow individuals to shut off portions of the seashore above high-water mark for their own private use."

"The present law relating to rights of way is too cumbersome and complex,

scattered as it is through many statutes and court decisions . . . It is too heavily loaded in favour of the person who wishes to deny the existence of rights of way on his land, even if they exist, obstruct them or otherwise interfere with their use. Heavy penalties should be imposed on anyone who wilfully acts thus."

The trouble is that the law is "too heavily loaded" in favour of the land monopoly everywhere, for the law permits the private appropriation of the rent of land instead of making that the public revenue, which the Taxation of Land Values would effect.

The Ramblers' Association are only giving particular examples of the general ill which makes access to land for all purposes whether restful or active, trading, industrial or residential, subject to the "price of access" which one citizen has to pay another for the right to use the common inheritance. For example what are those ugly spots on the fringes of cities, the "advertisement hoardings and the wooden shack cafés" but the sites of much value which are temporarily so used while the owners are waiting for the further rise in value that the expansion of the city will bring about? Let the present rateable assessment of such premises be compared with the true market value of the land, and the protection and endowment the present law gives to the sectional, and selfish interests will be fully understood. That gets down to the root of things and if the remedy is applied—to tax and rate the true value of land and untax all buildings and improvements—most if not all the problems with which the Ramblers' Association are rightly concerned will be the easier of solution.

Beauty Spots? Here is but one example of many: Pentire Head in Cornwall was purchased in 1936 from the owner at a cost of £7,500 raised by public subscription. It lies on the estuary of the Camel River opposite to Padstow and Trevone. The extent was 256 acres and previous to purchase the net annual rateable assessment of the whole property was £53. Access to Seafrosts? In 1935 the Sandown and Shanklin U.D.C. had been holding 1½ mile of the foreshore on lease at a nominal rent of £2. The lease was to expire in April, 1938, when the owner announced that he would be putting up the sands to auction. Negotiations with the Urban District Council ended with the public having to pay a price of £31,000, members realizing they were in a dilemma and "had to make the best of a bad bargain." Emphatically something much more far-reaching than "the rigorous enforcement of laws which already exist" will have to be done to make our country "ours" on which to work as well as to play and to live the full life which is the equal right of every one of us.

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