

OPEN FIELDS IN DERBYSHIRE: SOME RESERVATIONS ABOUT RECENT ARGUMENTS¹

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SINCE H. L. Gray's account in 1915 of English field systems, further studies have extended the limits within which the midland common field husbandry is known to have been practised.² In 1959, Dr Joan Thirsk was able to say: "There are no counties in England in which some traces of open field cultivation have not been found."³ Derbyshire lay on the margins of the area in which, according to Gray, the midland system of open field cultivation was most fully developed,⁴ but two recent papers in this *Journal* have attempted to show that the system was widespread throughout the county.⁵ At the end of his paper on open field agriculture in the Peak District, W. E. Wightman concluded: "Derbyshire must at last take its place firmly amongst the counties where in the Middle Ages one of the main features of agriculture was the great open arable field outside the nucleated village"⁶; and J. C. Jackson has accounted for distributional variations in the open fields in Derbyshire in terms of environmental factors.⁷ Their cumulative evidence undoubtedly demonstrates the former widespread existence of an open field system or systems in Derbyshire, but some of the evidence they use is flimsy, and some of the assumptions they make are questionable.

At the outset of his paper, Jackson lists five principal characteristics of the midland open field system, extending the list compiled by C. S. and C. S. Orwin.⁸ These five characteristics are:

1. Large open fields — often several hundred acres in extent.
2. Holdings scattered in small strips or parcels throughout the arable fields.

¹ My own research has been concerned with the field systems of Kent, but the reservations in this paper are of a methodological rather than a factual nature.

² H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*, 1915.

³ J. Thirsk, *Tudor Enclosures* (Historical Association, 1959), 4.

⁴ Gray, 63, and frontispiece.

⁵ W. E. Wightman, "Open Field Agriculture in the Peak District", *D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), 111-25; J. C. Jackson, "Open Field Cultivation in Derbyshire", *D.A.J.*, LXXXII (1962), 54-72.

⁶ Wightman, 125.

⁷ Jackson, 71, "The importance of certain geographical factors in limiting the extent and causing variations in the open field system in Derbyshire has become increasingly obvious."

⁸ Jackson, 56; C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 2nd ed., 1954, 64. The Orwins list the "main features of open-field farming" as 1. large arable fields which often run into hundreds of acres; 2. holdings scattered in small strips through the fields; 3. fields lying in fallow every second or third year; 4. grazing rights exercised in common in the arable fields.

3. Grazing rights exercised in common in the arable fields when fallow and on the stubble after harvest.
4. The existence of virgates and bovates, each responsible for a fixed quota of rents and services.
5. The division of meadow into strips.

Three of these characteristics, numbers 1, 2 and 5, relate only to the arrangement of fields and holdings, not to the way in which the fields were cultivated and grazed. Yet Jackson states, "Where a Derbyshire settlement is known to have had *some or all* of the characteristics of the midland field system . . . , it is *presumed* to have once cultivated its lands in this way."⁹ Thus if one settlement was identified as having some of its arable and meadow divided into strips and parcels, Jackson has presumed that it was cultivated along the lines of the midland system. Such a presumption is questionable: a particular form of economic organization is inferred from the field pattern alone. An open field pattern is assumed to reflect a midland field system. The fact that open fields had different origins and were cultivated and grazed in a variety of ways is ignored. Claims for the existence of midland field husbandry based solely, or even principally, on field patterns must be regarded with scepticism. Such claims seem to stem from a misleading remark made by C. S. Orwin: "I suggest that wherever you find evidence of open field farming and at whatever date, it is sufficient to assume that you have got the three-field system at one stage or another. I cannot see the necessity for supposing the great variety of field systems which, for example, Gray describes."¹⁰ Yet the open fields of, for example, East Anglia, of Cumberland and of Kent had important differences from those of the midlands.¹¹ In some places, open fields were not commonable,¹² but common grazing on the fallow arable was an integral feature of the midland system: Gray found it to be "so bound up with the nature of the two- and three-field system that it would not be altogether incorrect to call it the determining idea of that system".¹³ Jackson is only able to say, however, that common grazing on the fallow arable was "probably" found in the open field villages of lowland Derbyshire, and that whether it was usual in the uplands is uncertain, although it was practised in one village. He suggests that in the uplands grazing was often so plentiful that this special arrangement was not necessary.¹⁴ In this important respect, many open fields in Derbyshire differed from those of the midlands.

⁹ Jackson, 56. The italics are mine.

¹⁰ C. S. Orwin, "Observations on the Open Fields", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 8 (1937-8), 127.

¹¹ K. J. Allison, "The Sheep-Corn Husbandry of Norfolk in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 5 (1957), 12-31, and A. Simpson, "The East Anglian Foldcourse: Some Queries", *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 6 (1958), 87-96; G. G. Elliott, "The system of cultivation and evidence of enclosure in the Cumberland open fields in the sixteenth century", *Géographie et Histoire Agraires* (1950), 118-30; A. R. H. Baker, "The Field Systems of Kent", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1963.

¹² For example in parts of Wiltshire and Sussex. E. Kerridge, "Agriculture, c. 1500—c. 1793", *V.C.H. Wilts.*, IV, 1950, 46; J. C. K. Cornwall, "The Agrarian History of Sussex, 1560-1640", unpublished M.A. thesis, Univ. of London, 1953, 64, 100.

¹³ Gray, 47-8.

¹⁴ Jackson, 56.

If a basic assumption made by Jackson is questionable, so too is the reliance he places on field-name evidence. Certain field-names were often associated with common field husbandry,¹⁵ and sometimes the observance of these names has been used to establish the existence of that husbandry.¹⁶ For two reasons however, field-name evidence *alone* is unreliable: first, the original form of a field-name and not its later variants is the most meaningful, as well as the most difficult to trace and to date¹⁷; secondly, it is likely that many field-names were part of a ploughing terminology, and could therefore be associated with a variety of field systems, not exclusively with the midland system.¹⁸ Field-name evidence at best is only suggestive, not conclusive, secondary rather than primary evidence of the two- or three-field system. Gray recognized this,¹⁹ but Jackson places far more reliance upon field-names, for he claims that they can provide evidence of open arable "where the documents are silent".²⁰ He further states that some field-names indicating former open arable include the element *field* and in one instance cites "Upper Field" as a name indicating open field arable.²¹ Here the evidence is stretched beyond its limits.

So too is the evidence of ridge-and-furrow. Jackson has himself pointed out elsewhere the differing forms of ridge-and-furrow and their differing origins.²² He interprets ridge-and-furrow in Derbyshire cautiously, merely suggesting that "possibly much ridge-and-furrow in Derbyshire, outside the areas known to be formerly open arable, represents outfield".²³ Wightman is less cautious, equating all ridge-and-furrow with the former existence of medieval strip cultivation and apparently being unaware of the "ridge-and-furrow controversy" so well summarized by Jackson.²⁴ Whereas Wightman clearly demonstrates the widespread occurrence of ridge-and-furrow in the Peak District, his principal conclusion, that he has thereby demonstrated the widespread practice of open field husbandry, must remain a *non sequitur* until the ridge-and-furrow is examined more analytically and in conjunction with many more documentary sources.

A more serious reservation about Jackson's argument relates to his map of "Open field villages in Derbyshire", on which he depicts the location of six categories of settlement: 1. villages with more than three fields; 2. three-

¹⁵ Field-names such as "Eastfield" and "Westfield", and names with the suffix "gore", "shot" or "furlong".

¹⁶ For example, H. P. R. Finberg, "The Open Field in Devonshire", *Antiquity*, 23 (1949), 183, 186; S. R. Eyre, "The Curving Plough-Strip and its Historical Implications", *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 3 (1955), 84. Both use field-names as supplementary evidence for common field husbandry.

¹⁷ F. W. Munslow, "Field-Names", *Amateur Historian*, 2 (1956), 353-6.

¹⁸ Some of the Kentish furlongs and shots and of the Sussex furlongs and laynes were not associated with common fields. Baker, 232; J. L. M. Gulley, "The Wealden Landscape in the early Seventeenth Century and its Antecedents", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1960, 87.

¹⁹ Gray, 42-4.

²⁰ Jackson, 56. In accepting the evidence of field-names in the absence of other documentary sources, Jackson departs from his own advice: "The 'fossilized' field-names provide valuable supplementary evidence in a study of open field cultivation". *Amateur Historian*, 4 (1958-9), 74.

²¹ Jackson (1962), 56, 68.

²² Jackson, "The Ridge-and-Furrow Controversy", *Amateur Historian*, 5 (1961-2), 23-7.

²³ Jackson (1962), 64.

²⁴ Wightman, 112; Jackson (1961-2), 27: "The present distribution of ridge-and-furrow must, therefore, be used with discretion . . ."

field villages; 3. two-field villages; 4. one-field villages; 5. hamlets known to have had open arable; 6. villages known to have had open arable, but number of fields unknown.²⁵ The map portrays the location of more than 200 settlements, but, in view of the reservations presented here, it may be that some of them have but scanty evidence of open arable fields. Throughout his paper, Jackson attempts to explain the relative distributions of different settlement categories portrayed on this map, but he fails to mention a serious limitation upon his conclusions. The map is based on evidence ranging in date from the 13th to the 19th century²⁶: the evidence is not contemporaneous and the map does not, as might be thought, portray open field villages in Derbyshire at one moment in time, nor even in one century. A one-field village noted in the 13th century may appear on the map next to a three-field village of the 17th century. Yet the three-field village may have been a one-field village 400 years earlier, and the one-field village may have become a three-field village 400 years later. The map gives a very false picture of distributions, and to discuss the distribution of different categories of open field village without taking into consideration changes inherent in six centuries of history is to ignore a fundamental fact of English agrarian evolution: the number of fields within a single township varied with changing economic and social conditions. A similar criticism may be made of Jackson's diagram entitled "Siting of open field villages in relation to altitude".²⁷ As the evidence on which it is based spans six centuries, it is unwise to calculate, as Jackson does, the proportions of one-, two- and three-field villages above and below 500 ft. and 1,000 ft. It may have been that a one-field village noted in the 13th century at 1,000 ft. had become a three-field village four centuries later; and a three-field village noted in the 17th century at 500 ft. may have been a one-field village four centuries earlier. The comparisons made by Jackson ignore such changes entirely.

What Jackson has demonstrated is that Gray was right in recognizing that variations in open field cultivation can in places be attributed to varied physical conditions.²⁸ He has also demonstrated the former widespread occurrence of open field cultivation in Derbyshire. Now that the former existence of an open field system of some sort in Derbyshire has been well established, its origins and its workings remain the central problems to be solved. In what ways did it resemble, and in what ways did it differ from the open field husbandry of, say, Leicestershire, or of Cumberland? Dr. Finberg has recently noted that "of the various forms of open field cultivation which have been practised in England at different times we are still very far from possessing anything like a complete picture".²⁹ He might have inserted: "and in different places, too". Progress in the study of English agrarian history depends on recognizing varieties of open field agriculture, not in attempting to

²⁵ Jackson (1962), 55.

²⁶ The exact sources from which this map is compiled are not stated, but the text of the paper discusses evidence ranging in date from the 13th to the 19th century.

²⁷ Jackson (1962), 70.

²⁸ Gray, 73.

²⁹ H. P. R. Finberg, "Recent Progress in English Agrarian History", *Geografiska Annaler*, 43 (1961), 77.

sweep all English counties under the midland carpet. Dr. Thirsk has commented upon "the futility of discussing the open fields of England as though they were all organized on the same system".³⁰ A more cautious, analytical approach than that of the authors of these two recent papers on the open fields of Derbyshire will have to be adopted before the agricultural history of the county can be more perfectly understood.

³⁰ J. Thirsk, *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 10 (1962), 57.