

Chapter 1

OPEN FIELDS AND THEIR RECORDS

Open fields have attracted the attention of historians since the first studies of Seebohm, Vinogradoff and Maitland a century ago (see the Bibliography for a list of their works). Before enclosure the significance of fields as major sources of historical information, covering a wide range of economic, topographic and manorial themes, was unappreciated. Much comment had been made about the political and social effects of enclosures made in the late fifteenth century and subsequently, but little was said about the open fields themselves. Bridges, the county historian, collecting data and visiting every village in Northamptonshire during the years 1718 to 1722, makes little reference to fields, although more than half of the county was then still unenclosed.

Since 1948 there has been considerable interest in open fields, about their physical nature and extent, their origins, and many other aspects. How did such an extraordinary system develop and how did a largely illiterate population operate it? These recent studies will be examined later along with the earlier work. The purpose of this volume is to look in some detail at the evidence from Northamptonshire, and see what significance there is in the data and what conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the fields.

At the outset it is important to be clear about the meanings of the terms *vill*, township, manor and parish. Since at many places in the county a village consisted of one settlement, one field system, one manor, and one parish with a church located in the village, the four terms are now often used loosely to mean the same thing. The term *vill* will be used for a settlement that was in existence in the Middle Ages, irrespective of its status as a village or hamlet. A *township* was a field system that formed a complete, self-contained farming regime. The term is no longer used locally, although common in the north of England; it was used in this sense in Northamptonshire before enclosure. The *manor* was a political and administrative unit that had rights over tenants and the fields; there could be one or more per *vill*. A *parish* was, and is, the territory presided over by a church, originally being the area from which the church received a proportion of the produce in kind, the tithes. Most commonly a parish was a block of land coterminous with one or more townships, but not always so (see Chapter 8).

Description of open fields

Some old pasture fields of Northamptonshire have a 'corrugated' appearance, with the ground lying in regular patterns of parallel ridge-and-furrow (Plates 1 and 2). Such fields are now less common than they used to be in the east of the county, where they have been destroyed by modern agricultural practice, but there is still an abundance of them in the west. Good examples can be seen at Brockhall, Fawsley, Winwick, and in the parkland of many of the county's great houses. The ridges correspond closely to the

strips that were used before agriculture was based on a 'modern' system of farms with hedged fields.¹

In the Middle Ages a farm, called a *yardland*, consisted of about 25 acres of land (the amount varied greatly from village to village), lying not in a block, but scattered in strips throughout the township, no two strips lying together. The long narrow strips were called *lands* by those who worked them. They were probably once set out as a quarter or half an acre, but later they often had average dimensions of about 8 yards by 200 yards, which is near to a third of an acre. Groups of lands lying parallel to each other were called *furlongs*, and were identified by names. Early in the Middle Ages most of the available ground in a parish was ploughed in a complex array of furlongs; only river meadows liable to flooding, wet areas along the side of brooks where springs emerged, and areas with steep and rough ground, were left unploughed.

Across the county variations are apparent in furlong patterns. On the gravel terraces of the Welland Valley lands are wider than those described, being up to 22 yards in width and making, therefore, one-acre strips. The pattern of furlongs in that region is of mainly rectangular blocks. On the gentle slopes of the central Nene Valley, such as Irthlingborough or Raunds, furlongs can be over a mile long, made up of hundreds of lands lying side by side. In contrast, the high undulating ground of the west of the county can have very complex patterns of small furlongs, with lands lying in many directions. In all cases the objective of the ploughman was the same, — to cultivate as much ground as possible, given the constraints that the land must drain naturally, that is, the furrows had to be aligned down hill, across the contours. Where gradients change rapidly furlongs varied and changed correspondingly.

Lands became ridged up by ploughing. Medieval ploughs had just one share that made a single furrow and turned soil towards the right as the ploughteam moved forward. Lands were ploughed clockwise, beginning in the middle and going round and round until the outside was reached. The centre would have two cuts piled against each other, and the two final outer cuts would leave furrows, so in section the action of the plough was to make the soil move towards the centre as if on a conveyor belt.² Repeated ploughing resulted in the formation of the familiar corrugated lands.

For the purposes of cropping, furlongs were grouped together in large open areas called *fields*. Typically there would be two or three fields in a township, and one or two of them would be cropped leaving the other one fallow; each became fallow in turn in succeeding years, so forming an arrangement known as the two-, or three-field system. It is for this reason that a single holding had to be scattered uniformly throughout the arable lands; if it were not then all or most of the land might lie in the fallow field in one year and there would be no produce for the farmer to live on. The fallow field, although producing no crop, was valuable as rough grazing for the village animals. It was essential to have a large block of land to keep the common herd together and prevent it wandering over the cultivated area.

Records relating to open fields

Until recently land was the chief form of wealth, and so records relating to it are numerous and date over many centuries. The earliest records are late Anglo-Saxon

1 Proof of this statement will be given at the beginning of Chapter 3.

2 For a diagram see D. Hall, 'Modern Surveys' 1972, Fig. 2.

charters, of which there are 20 for Northamptonshire. They are concerned with the grants of townships or groups of townships and information about individual fields and furlongs is slight and incidental. Charters usually refer to the amount of land granted, assessed as *hides*, and several of them describe the boundaries of the estate being granted. The topography of the boundary descriptions has been described in detail.³ There are no charters earlier than the tenth century for Northamptonshire. De Gray Birch published all known Saxon charters in 1885–93,⁴ and they have been reconsidered more recently by Sawyer⁵ and Hart.⁶

Charters granting churches, manors, tenements, yardlands or individual lands, survive in small numbers from the twelfth century being more abundant in the thirteenth century. By the sixteenth century such documents are generally called 'deeds' and occur in very large numbers for most parishes.

Often charters and deeds give no detail about the property involved, however, between 5 and 10 percent list the names of furlongs in which the lands lie and often give topographical information and name the owners of neighbouring strips. Some deeds have separate schedules, called *terriers*, that describe open-field holdings. Terriers of church lands, the glebe, made during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are a fruitful source of late open-field data. Examples of terriers are given below.

A charter dated between 1154 and 1169⁷ granted 4 acres in the fields of Cranford (St John) lying as follows:

- 3.5 roods in *Wudeforddale*
- 1.5 roods in *Bricsisti*
- 1 rood in *Sortebrokilhil*
- 3 roods in *Langfurlonge*
- 1 rood next to the headland of Gilbert son of Brikeston
- 2 roods in *Hepehil* next to the land that Hosse held
- 1 rood in *Caldewell*, in the eastern part
- 1 rood in *Sortlundale*
- 1 rood in *Barlifurlong*
- 1 rood in *Nonishil* next to Gilbert son of Brikeston

The items in italic can be identified as furlongs on a map made in 1748.⁸

At Hemington, a charter dated 1257⁹ describes:

- 0.5 acre on *Abbewelle* between the land of Wymark, widow of Robert-at-the-church, on the east, and Simon-at-the-church on the west
- 0.5 acre on *Midelfurlong* between the land of Robert Wymark, formerly belonging to Robert-at-the-church, north, and the land of Roger Sparwe once vicar of Hemington, south
- 0.5 acre on *Blakethorn* between the land of Robert son of Lettice, north, and the land of Beringer le Moine, south

3 Gover et al. in the *PNV*, and for more recent work see A. E. Brown, T. R. Key and C. Orr, 'Some Anglo-Saxon estates' *Northants. Archaeol.* 12, 1977, 155–176; A.E. Brown, Margaret Gelling and C. Orr., 'The details of the Anglo-Saxon Landscape: Badby revisited', *NPP* viii (1990–1) no. 2 pp. 95–103.

4 W. de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonium* 3 vols. (1885–93).

5 Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* 1968.

6 Hart, 1970, pp. 31–7.

7 Stenton 1930, NRS 4, p. 94.

8 NRO Map 2648.

9 NRO Buccleuch 25–1, A34, in Box X8676.

Later terriers can be very detailed. A survey of Duchy of Lancaster lands at Chelveston and Caldecott in 1789¹⁰ gives topographical detail for the situation of each furlong and the number of the lands that belonged to the Duchy, for example:

Round head furlong Butts [on] old leys east, little hill furlong west: begin at the balk north, end at wateris furlong south; [the Duchy has the] 2nd to 8th lands

Grants of land made to religious houses, sometimes collected together in cartularies, contain charters that have open-field information. There may be other important related material such as agreements and disputes about field regulation, or terriers of the property. Monastic records have the advantage of being earlier than most secular estate records.

The cartulary of Pipewell abbey describes the structure of Cold Ashby township and its land there in several ways. First it gives the total number of yardlands, relating them to each of the twelfth-century fees to which they belonged. It goes on to explain the composition of the abbey holding, which consisted of grants from several of the fees, and then it describes the actual grants and confirmations made by various donors.¹¹

Manorial and estate records also provide field information. At the death of important or wealthy people a survey or schedule of their estate, called an **extent**, was made. Although primarily concerned with the demesne (the manorial home farm), rents and services, extents often state how many yardlands belonged to the manor, and sometimes refer to what proportion of the demesne was fallow. Such records exist for the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries.

A 1327 extent of Stowe Nine Churches lists the items as given below, showing that there was a manor house in a park with a large demesne of 400 acres and various pieces of pasture (Table 1). The work-service once used to farm the demesne and its value as rent are given. In all there were 3,381 days of work due annually, of which 840 days were spent ploughing the demesne. Or, expressed as work per villein (per yardland), there were 40 days of ploughing and 121 days doing other unspecified work, 161 days in all. The third item on the list makes it clear that a two-field system operated, only half of the demesne being cultivated in one year.

Estate records frequently have terriers and detailed rentals that name meadows and pasture and state the size and number of yardlands. There may also be specific open-field agreements, or other documents relating to the administration of the fields. Court rolls contain regulations (by-laws) made to help run the fields efficiently; the courts also dealt with offenders who broke regulations. Property transactions recorded in the rolls sometimes give furlong names and a brief note about the buildings, but field details usually cease by about 1600.

The most complete and important records of the open fields are **field books** or parish terriers. These list every strip in a parish or township, grouped by fields and give details of furlongs and lands, one by one. Usually the quantity of land and name of the owner are stated; sometimes there is more information such as the type of tenure, the name of the tenant, and less frequently, the precise measurement of the lands. Some

10 NRO Map 1140.

11 NRO FH 145 ff.125-8 from BL Cott. Calig. A xii.

Table 1 Extent of Stowe IX Churches, 1327

Item	Annual value		
	£	s	d
A chief messuage with herbage worth		6	8
A mill worth		4	0
Demesne 400 acres of which 200 could be sown and 200 were fallow and in common with the tenants; 8d per acre	[11]	13	4
100 acres pasture, 2s per acre	10	0	0
Diverse pieces of pasture	1	1	0
Pasture called haliwellebrok	1	3	0
A park inclosed with an adjacent wood, underwood and herbage	1	6	8
A separate fishery		6	8
Prior of Okeburn, assize rent at All Saints [for rent of meadow let to Weedon Bec]		12	0
2 free tenants paying at Easter 1/6d, Michaelmas 2s		3	6
3 free tenants paying at Christmas, 3lb pepper		3	0
21 villeins paying for 21 yardlands, assize rent at Easter and Christmas, 16d each from Michaelmas to 26th May work on Mondays and Tuesdays except at the festivals of Easter and Christmas, per work 0.5d [40.5d per yardland]		1	8
for the same time on Thursdays plough 1 rood [18.25d per yardland]	3	11	0
from 26th May to Michaelmas except the festivals, one man-day worth 1.5d [60d per yardland]	5	5	0
at Christmas 2 pullets and 2 hens worth 1d were given [4d per yardland]		7	0
for auxiliary work [76d per yardland]	6	13	4
2 cottars paid rent at Easter and Michaelmas		3	6
Profits of the manorial court		6	8
From PRO C135 1 (12) m.4.			

field books refer to maps and have summary tables listing tenants' names and various details about individual holdings.

The beginning of a fieldbook of Brockhall dated 1606 is given in Table 2.

The field book gives a very precise survey of each land which shows rood portions were intended, although they begin at about 0.7 of a rood and do not reach a rood until the 35th land. There are significant variations that cannot be accidental. The lord gets a preferential larger area in lands 2-9 and 15-16. His lands 25-7, as well as those belonging to the parson at position 24, are of double area. The furlong could have been laid out, ensuring that each land was a rood in area, by varying the land widths to allow for the shortfall in the required 40-pole length (1 pole by 40 poles make a rood), but there is no evidence that any attempt was made to do this.

A fieldbook of Geddington, made in 1716,¹² gives numbered holdings, the number of lands in each holding, the name of the owner and initials of the tenants' names, the width of the holding at each end and its total length. These are all in links, although the manuscript does not say so (but a terrier of Luddington made by the same surveyor, John Booth, in the same year does state that similar measurements are in links).¹³ The area is then given in acres, roods and poles.

¹² NRO Buccleuch 10-52 in Box X354.

¹³ NRO Buccleuch terriers.

Table 2 Part of Brockhall field book, 1606

<i>Flexlond furlong</i>						
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Land no.</i>	<i>Owner</i>	<i>Width poles ft.</i>		<i>Length poles</i>	<i>Area poles</i>	
						<i>roods</i>
1	Common					
2-9	Lord	11	7	30	343	8.575
10	Smith		15	30	29 1	0.703
11	Smith		15	30	29 1	0.703
12	Fulks	1	0.5	30	29 8	0.773
13	Darnell	1	5	30	39 6*	0.984
	B(alk?)	1	11	30	50 10*	1.262
14	Darnell		15	30	29 1	0.703
15	Lord	2	10	31	84	2.034
16	do					
17	Wright		15	32.25	30 3	0.756
19	Lord	1	7.5	33	49 7	1.140
20	Godfre		14.5	33.5	30 6	0.759
21	White		14	34	29 12*	0.744
22	Smith		14.5	35	31 11[.5]	0.793
23	Wright	1	11	35.5	59 14[.5]	1.498
24	Parson	1	15.5	36	70 14*	1.772
25-7	Lord	5	1.5	37.5	190 15	4.775
28-9	Wright	1	11	39	65 15	1.645
30	Darnell		12.5	38.75	30 4	0.757
31-3	Lord	3		38	114*	2.850
34	Darnell	1	3	37.75	44 12	1.120
35	Smith	1	1	37.5	39 13	0.996
36	Darnell	1		37.25	37 4*	0.931
39-40	Wright	2	7	37	85 7	2.255
41	Smith	1		37	37	0.925
42	Darnell	1	2	37	41 10	1.041
43-4	Lord	2		36.5	73	1.825
45	Smith	1	2	36.25	67 1	1.020

From NRO Thornton Collection, uncatagued box 6.

The missing numbers of the first column are as in the original (there are 42 lands not 45). In the width (3rd column) the half feet are expressed as $1/32$ in the original, meaning $1/32$ of a pole not foot. The lengths (column 4) are given in fractions not decimals. Column 6 does not appear in the original.

Analysis of the figures shows that the 5th column is the area in (square) poles (and $1/16$ ths) and that a 16 foot pole was used; a few of the stated areas are not quite correct, there often being slight mistakes in the totals (correct calculations are marked with an asterisk). The manuscript is filled with calculations (which without decimals and calculators were extremely tedious). The 6th column has been added to show the area in roods.

West Field Glendon Balk Furlong

Plot no.	No. of lands	Owner	Tenant	Widths			Length	Area		
				E	W	[Av.]		A	R	P
1	1	Glendon balk	LK	38	44	41	1610	2	0	26
2	2	Montagu	TA	61	70	65	1700	1	0	19
17	13	Maydwell 1 ley, 12 lands	—	380	388	384	1080	4	0	28

The average width of the lands in the examples shown is 6.5–9 yards, which is normal, although in this particular furlong the lengths are larger than usual at 238–354 yards.

The importance of field books cannot be over emphasized. They afford a complete view of a township which can be 'moved' forwards or backwards over many centuries by following the descent of individual estates and farms within it. Field-system structure and furlong sizes can be established, along with details of land size, yardland size, land use, topography, tenure, and the spatial arrangement of the demesne and other estates. Details of the analytical methods used to provide such information will be explained in later chapters.

It is probable that all parishes had field books at an early date, references often being made to 'the old town book', showing the existence of a complete survey. Few medieval field books now survive. St Martins Without (Stamford) has one datable to c. 1410,¹⁴ and the 1433 field book of Muscott (Plate 3), a township in Brockhall parish, is discussed more fully in the *Gazetteer*. There are many field books for the sixteenth century and later (Kingsthorpe in Polebrook 1509, Apethorpe 1551, Higham Ferrers 1567), and all those known are listed in the *Gazetteer*.

A record of equal importance to the field book is the large-scale parish open-field or 'pre-enclosure' map. Furlongs and fields are usually identified; many plans have the owners' names written on each strip, or are accompanied by a terrier or field book related to the map by a numbered or coloured key. The plan of Lois Weedon, 1594, made for All Souls College, Oxford, is a fine example of such an estate map.¹⁵ Another early example is a 1595 copy of a 1583 map of Strixton.¹⁶ Detailed maps of the eighteenth century are commoner, such as that for Higham Ferrers, 1737, reproduced on the jacket of this volume (and Plate 7).¹⁷

14 Exeter Muniments, Burghley House, Stamford, 53/35.

15 Published in *The Field* 1949, by M. W. Beresford, and also used by R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, Map V (1912).

16 NRO Maps 2993, 3076; published in Hall, 'Modern Surveys', 1972, plates 3 and 4; a small part around the village is shown in Hall *Medieval Fields*, 1982, p. 16.

17 NRO Map 1004, dated 1737.