

The subject of enclosure has produced a controversial literature where claims of decisive economic gains in productivity were hotly debated amid accusations that they were achieved through class robbery and the creation of a rural proletariat. In this judicious survey Dr Michael Turner reviews the evidence on these and related issues.

Parliamentary Enclosures:

Recently, historians have re-opened many long-standing debates concerning the relationship between land enclosures and economic and social change in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. By using a wider range of contemporary documents and employing more rigorous economic and statistical models than before, the perceived backwardness of open-field farming and the productivity gains of enclosures have been re-examined. The social consequences of enclosure are under fresh scrutiny as well, and the ill-effects polemicised in the first decade of the twentieth century, but subsequently refuted, have been reinvestigated and found in many respects to be true.

Enclosure changed agricultural practices which had operated under systems of co-operation in communally administered landholdings, usually in large fields which were devoid of physical territorial boundaries. In their place it created systems in which agricultural holding was on a non-communal, individual basis where man-made boundaries separated one person's land from that of his neighbours. Open-field farming and landownership structure was thereby replaced by individual initiative and individual landholding; specific ownership of land was registered; shared ownership was separated (by identifying common rights of property); and communal obligations, privileges and rights were declared void for all time. Much the same can be said of the counterpart enclosure of commons and wastes [Turner (4) and (5)].

The extent of enclosure

We are concerned here with parliamentary enclosure. This dominated the period from 1750-1830, with remnants reaching into the twentieth century. It was sanctioned by act of parliament, occasioned by private and local petitions and bills for the enclosure of the whole or parts of villages, parishes, townships, and hamlets. The first enclosure act was in 1604 in Radipole in Dorset, but it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that they became so frequent as to warrant measurement (see figure 1). Private enclosures also took place - local agreements which in previous centuries had often been ratified locally or by the London courts-but after 1750 private enclosure was dwarfed by the statutory instrument. It remains unclear why parliamentary enclosure became dominant; perhaps the subdivision of rights became so complicated with increasing numbers of interested parties that it required a system of referees to separate claims of ownership; or perhaps there was opposition to land reform or squabbling over the redistribution of spoils, making a statutory instrument both necessary and inevitable.

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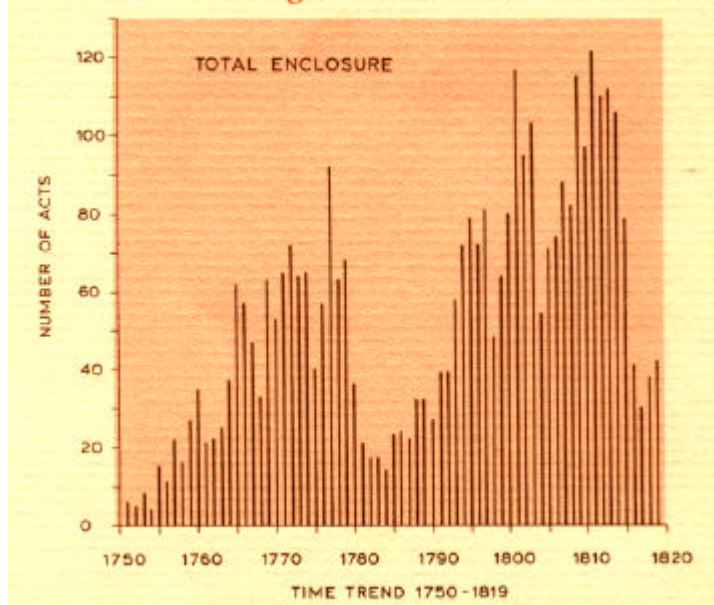
Gains and Costs

Recourse to parliament has been described as class robbery played according to rules of property which, although fair, were laid down by a parliament of property owners and lawyers. It has been suggested that the mere fact of applying to parliament is evidence of opposition. These are strong claims and will always be debated. What is without doubt is the physical impact of parliamentary enclosures (see table 1 and figures 1 and 2). There were similar, though less dramatic land reforms in Wales and Scotland [Turner (5)].

Temporal and spatial patterns

Until recently it was assumed that parliamentary enclosure had the largest single impact of any other form of enclosure [Wordie (6)]. While the figures of acres enclosed by parliamentary means are not in much dispute, the impact of other periods of enclosure is only partially known. From evidence of parliamentary enclosure itself, and from estimates of private and piecemeal enclosure in the period after 1500, it is possible to build up a partial picture of the disintegration of the

Figure 1: Chronology of Parliamentary Enclosure in England 1750-1819



former open fields. By estimating the likely acreage of enclosure before 1500 and adding this to the

post 1500 estimates a grand total of acreage can be calculated. But when this calculation was made it came to only 75 per cent of the land area of England. What of the missing 25 per cent? The author of this calculation [Wordie (6)] ascribes this residual to the only century which is largely unrepresented in the written record, the seventeenth. This produces the following chronology:

Already enclosed in 1500	c.45.0%
enclosed 1500-1599	c. 2.0%
enclosed 1600-1699	c.24.0%
enclosed 1700-1799	c.13.0%
enclosed 1800-1914	c.11.4%
commons remaining in 1914	c. 4.6%

It is proper to suggest two respects in which these figures deceive the reader, and this can act as a useful reminder of the full impact of parliamentary enclosure. First, if there was that much seventeenth century enclosure, then unlike other enclosure movements it passed with remarkably little contemporary reporting. More likely, there was more non-parliamentary enclosure throughout the last 500 years than we can assuredly measure. Additionally, to allocate enclosure to broad time periods which are unrelated to the passage of human experience is to misinterpret and understate the impact of parliamentary enclosure in its economic and social setting. 24 per cent of England's land area *may have been enclosed* in the seventeenth century, but 18 per cent *was enclosed* by parliament in two short bursts of activity each of about 20 years duration: in the 1760s and 70s, and during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (see figure 1).

Secondly, in some counties parliamentary enclosure was negligible (the Welsh borders, and south-east and southwest England); but in others it was massively important (over 50% of Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire was enclosed in less than a century). Enclosure activity was particularly dense in the south and east Midlands and became progressively less important radiating outwards (see figure 2). This reflected the survival by about 1750 of the ancient system of open-field farming [for regional variations see Turner (4)].

This spatial pattern can be related to the chronological pattern. The heavier arable soils of the Midlands were the first to be enclosed in the 1760s and 1770s and much of this arable was converted to grassland farming. The lighter soils still in open fields, and the commons in counties like Cumberland, were enclosed mainly during the French wars, this time in order to extend the arable into marginal lands or to improve the existing arable.

Why enclose?

Some motivating forces behind enclosure are revealed in these spatial and temporal patterns. The second quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of depressed prices. There was cheap and plentiful food for a static or slowly growing population, but cheap food at the market meant static or even declining incomes per unit of output for the farmers. In consequence there was a move out of the broadly fixed incomes obtainable from arable farming into the expanding sector of pastoral farming. Demand for meat and dairy products increased, and this gave farmers the opportunity to expand their own incomes by substituting grass for crops. Districts with heavy soils responded first, and a relative profusion of enclosure for conversion to pasture took place. Even in the open fields there were moves to increase the grass acreage. Although prices and farm incomes recovered after 1750 the pattern was already set for heavy-soiled regions to continue moving into grassland farming. Hence the emphasis of parliamentary enclosure in this period in the south and east Midlands.

By the late 1790s the situation had changed dramatically to one of steeply rising prices, led by the increase in corn prices. Enclosure now occurred to take advantage of this. The object was to improve the existing arable in light soiled areas, and extend the arable into marginal areas (marginal economically and also geographically). This pushed the limits of cultivation higher up the mountains and deeper into the wastes. Modern economists identify a statistically testable relationship between price fluctuations and the occurrence of enclosure.

Similarly there is a strong relationship between enclosure and the ease or difficulty of borrowing money. Apart from times of war, when the cost of borrowing was high, the rate of interest in the eighteenth century was at low levels, and even during the French wars when the rate of interest was unprecedentedly high the 'real' cost of borrowing was low, because the general rate of inflation was greater than the rate of increase of interest rates.

The relationship between enclosure activity and the extension of the market (demographic change), is somewhat of a 'chicken and egg' mystery. Did prior population growth inspire reorganisation in agriculture, or was reorganisation and extension of output a precursor of demographic change? At the very least we need a clearer picture of productivity changes in agriculture and specific productivity changes attributable to enclosure. Articles in recent issues of the *Economic History Review* explore such questions without yet providing definitive answers. [See *EcHR* 1982 (no.4), 1983 (no.2), 1984 (no.2), and 1985 (no. 3).]

Enclosure and productivity

These then are the economic conditions which we think were conducive to investment in enclosure. Nevertheless, enclosure was the action of

Table 1 Statistics of English Parliamentary Enclosures

	Millions of acres	Area as % of England
Pre-1793	2.6	7.9
1793-1815	2.9	8.9
1816-1829	0.4	1.2
Total pre-1830	5.9	18.0
1830 onwards	0.9	2.9
Total	6.8	20.9

individuals or groups. What were their motives? A well established view suggests that enclosure allowed scale economies (i. e. the gains from larger farms) to be introduced by reorganising landownership and tenancy into larger ownership and farm units. It allowed landlords (nearly always described by this old line of argument as capitalistic and rapacious) to renegotiate rents upwards, and to accumulate more of the surpluses from scale economies into their own pockets, although it was their down-trodden tenants whose labour had earned the surpluses. In this simple form, therefore, there was a redistribution of income from the tillers of the soil (the real farmers) to the owners of land (usually owners by dint of chance inheritance). An alternative, less polemical, has recently been offered, based on empirical-measurement and economic analysis. It says that the farming community threw off the shackles of the open fields, which were wasteful of land (allowing too frequent fallows), and were restrictive and conservative in operation,

with too few crops, too little crop choice, and stylised crop rotations. The newly-liberated countryside produced heavier yields of crops to everyone's advantage. Boo.. <f these views Halve been questioned. l Here is no evidence that average farm sizes became larger over the course of the eighteenth century to *any considerable degree*, though this does not mean that scale economies and efficiency gains could not develop from enclosures. The landlords could only be as rapacious as their tenants could be efficient. Both landlords and tenants had much to gain from enclosure. Arthur Young was probably right when he observed that both rents and output - landlords' and farmers' incomes improved in proportion after enclosure.

The debate over the relative efficiencies of open-field and enclosed farming, however, is unresolved. There is evidence both of open-field adaptation to meet changing economic circumstances, and also of backwardness. For Oxfordshire M. Havinden [reprinted in Jones (2)] substantiated the former view in a classic defence of the open fields. Adaptation was so accomplished here that enclosure was held in abeyance until well into the nineteenth century. But this was not the case everywhere. In neighbouring Buckinghamshire unchanging crop and rotation patterns persisted, and farmers' attempts to extend grassland cultivation were frustrated by unbending openfield regulations. Enclosure came decades earlier in north Buckinghamshire than in Oxfordshire. Contemporary evidence shows that open-field farming was a restraint on productivity. There were losses in the open fields due to trespass, the employment of wasteful fallows, and the inefficiency of having scattered holdings. Scattering was 'the evil of bad cultivation', and common-field husbandry 'allowed not of turnipping, nor of any other late and valuable improvements in agriculture' [Turner (4)]. Table 2 compares the different cropping profiles and estimates of productivity per acre (c.1801) for open and enclosed parishes in Northamptonshire, a county which was not untypical in this respect.

We can see from Section A of this table that the enclosed farms had a more even dtribution of grain crops; a markedly lower acreage under pulses (such as peas and beans); and a bigger area of root crops. Section B shows the higher grain output per acre obtained by the enclosed farms. Finally, Section C shows that this increase in productivity was more than sufficient to compensate for the lower acreage under grain so that more grain was produced than in the open fields. This allowed the land that was saved to be put to other uses, like grass.

But farming is the business of farmers, and one contemporary reminds us that they were protected from their own bad practice inclinations by those very same communal obligations of open-field agriculture which

enclosure sought to remove. Enclosure could certainly make a good farmer better, but it could make these bad ones worse.

Social consequences

The Hammonds exposed the damaging social consequences of enclosure, because it destroyed the social fabric of village life, and eventually was fatal to three classes; the small farmer, the cottager, and the squatter [Hammonds (1)]. It was argued, in contradiction, that enclosures created more not fewer employment opportunities with the initial construction and subsequent upkeep of hedges and ditches. Furthermore, at an estimated £2 to £3 per acre, enclosure costs were said to be small in relation to the improved value of the land, while the owner could resort to mortgage facilities if necessary. Thus the small farmer, or more especially the independent owner-occupier was not dealt a savage blow. The architect of this anti-Hammonds line, J. D. Chambers [reprinted in Jones (2)], claimed that the numbers of small owner-farmers actually rose not fell after enclosure. Accordingly, the mechanism which turned a farming rural proletariat into an industrial urban one was not enclosure, but an expanding population. A demographic revolution created more manpower than there were employment opportunities in a relatively fixed resource countryside. The exodus to the towns, therefore, arose from the push of demography and the pull of urban work, not from the push of enclosure. This view became a virtual orthodoxy. Recently, however, methods of investigation and analysis have swung opinion back towards the Hammonds' view, though without the political and polemical bias they employed.

There, were some unequivocally damaging effects of enclosure. By enclosing commonable lands and removing them from general village use - including local rights to depasture animals on the stubble of the arable fields after harvest, and on the fallow field - the landless, who were always the majority in number, were deprived of general access to open places for fuel gathering, tethering and grazing animals, and recreation. After enclosure, such places were either non-existent or greatly reduced in size and numbers. Even those who successfully claimed and were granted land in lieu of common rights found that the land they received was little more than a large (sometimes small!) garden, but a garden which attracted a proportion of enclosure and fencing costs. In reality, enclosure costs, when the unavoidable costs of fencing are included, could be as high as £12 per acre. Many common rights claimants sold up their newly acquired land at or shortly after enclosure, and lost all semblance of independence, becoming totally wage-dependant. This heightened class

Table 2: Crop Distributions, Productivity, and Grain Output in Northamptonshire, c. 1801.

	(A) Crop Distribution acres per parish							(B) Productivity bushels per acre			(C) Output bushels per parish			
	wheat	barley	oats	total grain	pulses	roots	total crops	wheat	barley	oats	wheat	barley	oats	total grain
45 parishes in open fields	190.3	164.8	48.9	404.0	178.3	24.8	615.4	17.9	24.0	22.7	3406.4	3955.2	1110.0	8471.6
102 enclosed parishes	141.7	134.5	105.3	381.5	60.4	56.2	509.8	19.5	27.6	27.0	2763.2	3712.2	2843.1	9318.5

Sources: Adapted from the 1801 crop returns in Public Record Office HO/67, and a harvest enquiry of 1795 in Public Record Office HO/42/36 and 37, 5th and 27th November 1795.

consciousness and accelerated social differentiation within the village [Snell, (3)].

Although small owner-occupiers increased in number at enclosure, as Chambers claimed, this is now known to be a distortion of the real events. Before enclosure common rights were vested in non-real property, but at enclosure they were translated into real property (land) thus initially swelling the numbers of 'land' owners. Many of them subsequently sold these newly acquired but excessively small plots. More substantial landowners also found that

Much enclosure before 1780, therefore, was probably labour shedding.

Economic gains but social costs

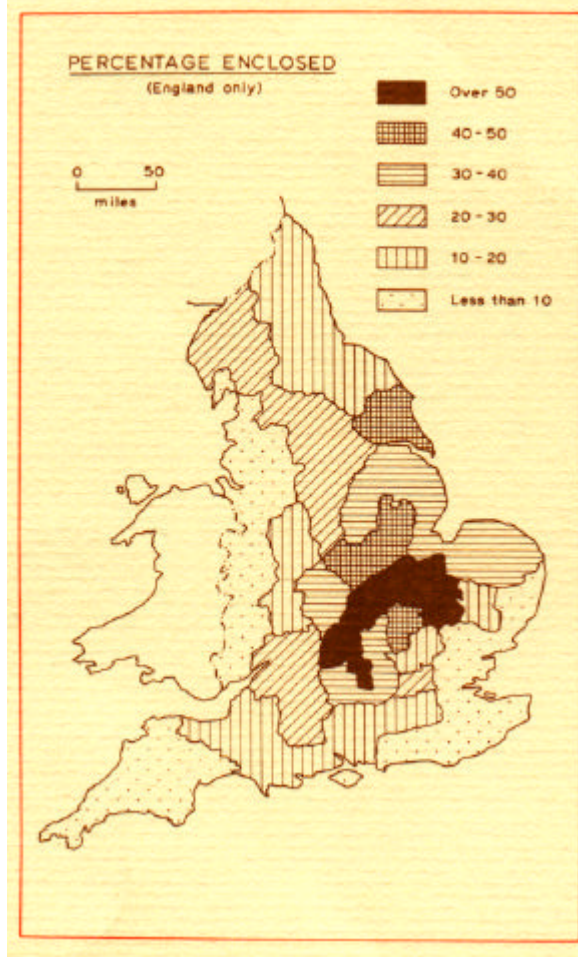
Enclosure certainly shook the countryside up, but demographic change, especially after 1780 is still much the most likely candidate for the emergence of a rural proletariat which tramped to the towns. Enclosure lubricated the process, but was not its sole nor necessarily main cause. The

their ancestral lands had been greatly reduced in size (especially by redeeming or commuting tithes by a once-and-for-all payment of land). Although shedding the tithe was welcomed, their land was often rendered too small for complete independence, and they were also burdened with enclosure and fencing costs. A turnover of property occurred which was closely related to the incidence of enclosure. The Land Tax (which is a record of ownership and occupancy), reveals that in Buckinghamshire, for example, within two or three years of enclosure, 30 to 50 per cent of pre-enclosure landowners sold their land, in comparison with the normal activities of the land market which suggest a turnover rate of less than 20 per cent every decade. In Northamptonshire this turnover was most pronounced among the smallest landowners. The 'head count' only grew through the recognition during enclosure of what was a common right. A failure by Chambers fully to appreciate this point distorted his and others' appraisal of enclosure.

There is also a growing appreciation that there was a mounting record of opposition to enclosure. The Hammonds' famous dictum that 'the suffrages were not counted but weighed', meaning that it was

landownership strength measured in property rather than in gross numbers which influenced parliament, has become the reasonable answer to those who claimed that parliamentary enclosure was a process which recognised the rights even of humble men. Finally, it is unlikely that enclosure increased long-term employment outside the immediate task of building fences and ditches. Up to 1780 there was a move to convert arable to pasture, involving a transition from a more to a less labour intensive system.

Figure 2: Density of Parliamentary Enclosure in England



missing link is the role agriculture played in the process of demographic change. Agriculture became more efficient in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and enclosure was one contributory improvement. But did this efficiency promote improvements in living standards, or did agriculture respond to such changes which were already in train? This is certainly the next important question to raise, and it may be answered by investigating at local levels the changes which took place in land management. In this way future research may disentangle the productivity changes that actually occurred, from the latent potential for further improvements that was frustrated by the persistence of an open-field system at a time of population increase.

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ReFRESH is sponsored by the Economic History Society and edited by Dr. Anne Digby and Prof. Charles Feinstein. Financial support from the E. S. R. C. is gratefully acknowledged.

The editors would welcome comments on this issue and suggestions for topics which might be included in future issues. ReFRESH 4 will be published in the Spring of 1987 and contain articles by Nick Crafts on *The Industrial Revolution Revisited* and by Tom Devine on *The Highland Clearances*.

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ISSN 0268-683X