

The Remodelling of a Common-field System

By IAN BECKWITH

RECENT discussion has reminded us that pre-enclosure field systems were probably not static but were often subject to change in response to contemporary economic or social pressures. It has been suggested by one writer that the direction of such changing field patterns in the seventeenth century tended to favour an increase in the number of arable fields so as to reduce the area left fallow each year.¹ The village of Corringham, Lincolnshire, provides an illustration of how a common-field system was remodelled not once but several times before the Parliamentary enclosure of the mid-nineteenth century.

Corringham is situated four miles east of Gainsborough. Originally there were two villages, Great and Little Corringham, which, in the pre-enclosure period, worked their fields separately. However, the two communities have now merged into one long village which straggles between two branches of the River Eau. Great and Little Corringham were enclosed late, between 1848 and 1852, at which time the parish contained 8,000 acres, including 2,800 acres of common pasture. Within the parish there were, besides the Corringhams, several outlying hamlets, which seem to have been shrunken townships and which, with one exception, preserved their independent field systems.

Evidence for the disposition of the arable lands of Great Corringham in the Middle Ages is provided by a grant of a bovaté of land

and some woodland there in about 1200.² The relevant passage in this charter reads as follows:

"Hee autem sunt partes terre. Ex occidentali parte ville tres acre supra villam in magna cultura propinquoires soli. vna acra in Broxwellehil in cultura remotiori versus aquilonem. due acre in Wudefurlang ad Litelethorn. due acre in Litelethorndale. due acre ad Hilakethorn. Ex orientali parte ville ad magnam culturam sub Holm une acra propinquoior soli. una acra ad Rosaghe. una acra ad Crakethorn. ad Bruneshil due acre in cultura remotiori versus aquilonem. ad Copthorn due acre propinquoiores soli. in Haueracres due acre in remotiori cultura versus austrum."

This implies that at the time when this grant was made the arable land of Great Corringham lay in two broad divisions to the west and east of the township. The wording recalls Stenton's statement that the formula by which Lincolnshire holdings were conveyed in the twelfth century suggests that a two-field system prevailed in Lincolnshire.³ Another charter granting a bovaté and sixty acres of wood in Corringham, of about the same date as that just quoted, refers to twenty-six selions and two acres of land scattered in seven separate furlongs.⁴ It happens that several of the furlong names in these two medieval grants of land survived into the eighteenth century and appear on an estate map of 1758.⁵ They show that furlongs which

¹ J. Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past & Present*, no. 29, 1964; M. W. Beresford, 'Glebe Terriers & Open Field in Leicestershire', *Studies in Leics. Agrarian History*, *Trans. Leics. Archaeolog. Soc.*, 1948, p. 94.

² C. W. Foster and K. Major (eds.), *Registrum Antiquissimum*, vol. IV, *Lincoln Record Society*, xxxii, p. 4, no. 1105.

³ F. M. Stenton, *Documents Illustrative of the Social & Economic History of the Danelaw*, p. xxx.

⁴ *Registrum Antiquissimum*, *op. cit.*, p. 5, no. 1106.

⁵ Lincolnshire Archives Office, Bacon Plans 1/1.

appear on the extreme edges of the village in the mid-eighteenth century were already in existence in about 1200 so that the arable lands had apparently already reached their ultimate limits of expansion by the beginning of the thirteenth century. However, this grant does not distinguish between the furlongs on the west and the furlongs on the east of the township. A comparison of the furlong names in the medieval grants with the eighteenth-century map suggests that when the grants were made in 1200 the scribe proceeded to describe the lands being given beginning with the furlongs on the far east of the village and concluding with the furlongs on the far west. This may again suggest a division of the arable into two large fields. However, as we shall see, it is dangerous to push too far the evidence from an eighteenth-century map of a pre-enclosure village as a description of the condition of the fields in the Middle Ages.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the medieval field pattern, so far as it has been determined, had already been altered twice. The evidence for this is contained in a series of bye-laws made in 1601.¹ The bye-laws are endorsed "A copie of the orders set downe by thinhabitants [*sic*] of Corringham and Asebie the 14th day of May 1601." By whom they were copied and from what source is not known at the moment. The script, however, suggests that the copy was made not long after the original document had been drawn up. At the date when the bye-laws were apparently made most of the land in Great Corringham belonged to the manor and soke of Kirton-in-Lindsey. Three of the signatories to the bye-laws, namely John Thorald, Richard Gilby, and John Gilby, were tenants of the manor of Kirton. The status of the others is not clear.² It may be conjectured that the use of the words "thinhabitants," coupled with the fact that tenants of the manor of Kirton were in a minority

among the signatories is evidence that these bye-laws were not made in the manorial court of Kirton, but represent a decision by twelve of the community of the village irrespective of tenurial status.³ In view of the importance of the step taken in clause five of the bye-laws, one would certainly expect this to be a decision requiring the approval of the entire farming community, rather than of a group of farmers who owed suit to a court with jurisdiction over a portion of the village only. However, it might be further conjectured that the presence of the largest single tenant of the manor of Kirton in Corringham, Sir John Thorald, among the signatories indicates that the interests of the Kirton tenants were well represented. Aisby, whose inhabitants were also represented in the decisions embodied in these "Orders", was one of the outlying hamlets within the parish of Corringham. In 1616 it was stated that "The two townships of Corringham Magna and Assebye are conjoynd in situation, and most of the lands lye intermixt in the comon fields of both. . . Assbye, sharing the comon field of Corringham Magna, has anciently 18 oxgangs rented at £3 5s. 4d., viz. each bovat 3s. 5d. There should be 360 acres, besides comons, but now only 234 a. acknowledges."⁴ The bye-laws not only show that familiar practice of communal control of crops and stock "according to ancient rights and practices" which was common in the unenclosed village, but they also provide evidence of a significant alteration in the agricultural practice of Great Corringham at a definite moment in time, and of how that alteration was carried out. If this evidence is not unique it is surely unusual.

The bye-laws contain seventeen clauses. With one exception they follow a familiar enough pattern. They deal with such matters as "setting and diking" along the field boundaries of Corringham and the neighbouring townships, arrangements for the common pastures, and the scouring and cleaning of the

¹ Lincolnshire Archives Office, T.L.E. 26/3/1/3.

² Survey of the Manor and Soke of Kirton, 1616, cited in Oxoniensis, *History of Corringham*.

³ No evidence of these bye-laws appears in the Kirton Manor Court Roll.

⁴ Survey of the Manor and Soke of Kirton, *op. cit.*

ditches and drains. Such rules are not uncommon: usually they reiterate laws which were already in existence but had lapsed, or make explicit some practice which has become orthodox routine but needs the power of enforcement. The significant clause here is clause five which states:

"5. Itm that the foure corne feilds of Corringham be turned in three corne feilds. And that Raynthornes and Bracken hill, wch after this day is sowed wth barley, shalbe used hereafter wth hony hole feild, and the other two feilds to contynue as they now be upon payne for euery aker not so translated as afore said at the next seed tyme 3s 4d."

In this clause we see the community of farmers acting to transform the agricultural practice of their village rather than merely conserving their ancient rights and practices. However, it is not easy to offer a clear interpretation of this clause. If, as is possible, there were two fields in Great Corringham in 1200, apparently by 1601 these had been subdivided into four. On the evidence of the map of 1758 this was an alteration in the pattern of the existing arable land since it seems likely that no more arable was added to the village after 1200. The bye-laws of 1601 then go on to make the arrangements for turning the four fields into three. They state that the furlongs called Raynthornes and Bracken Hill are to be worked with Hony Hole Field. According to clause three of the bye-laws, however, Honey Hole was the name of a furlong in Copthorne Field. The Parliamentary survey of the lands belonging to the Prebend of Corringham in 1650 bears this out for it shows that Raynthornes and Bracken Hill furlongs were at that date being worked with Copthorne Field.¹ This survey gives the other two fields as the East Field and the West Field. According to the 1758 estate map, however, the three fields of Corringham were West, Middle, and Honey Hole Fields. Copthorne was the name of a furlong in Honey Hole Field. This map shows the Raynthornes and Bracken Hill furlongs of the 1601 bye-laws

to have been situated on the west side of the village, at the south end of the West Field. Honey Hole Field (or Copthorne), however, lay on the extreme east side of the village, divided from Raynthornes and Bracken Hill by the village itself to the south-west and by the whole of the Middle Field. The disposition of Raynthornes and Bracken Hill would suggest that at some point between 1200 and 1601 the arable land to the west of the village had been divided into two fields (corresponding to the West Field of the eighteenth-century map plus a field made up of Raynthornes and Bracken Hill furlongs), and that the arable to the east was also subdivided into two fields (corresponding to the Middle Field and Honey Hole Field of the eighteenth-century map). If field nomenclature is anything to go by, the East and West Fields of the 1650 survey probably recall a period when these names corresponded to the actual arrangement of the fields but before the tripartite division decided upon in 1601 had obtained sufficient hold on the imagination of the community to have produced the more rational renaming of the 1758 map.

To what extent the decrease in the number of fields which was carried out in 1601 corresponded to a contraction in the land under plough is not clear. As has been seen, the 1758 map shows many of the medieval furlongs to have been on the extremity of the village. However, the survey of the soke and manor of Kirton in 1616 noted that for Aisby, which as we have seen had its lands intermixed with those of Corringham, "There should be 360 acres, besides comons, but now only 234 a. acknowledges." One would have expected that any reshuffle of fields would have merged Raynthornes and Bracken Hill with the field immediately adjacent rather than with a field on the far side of the village. That this point also struck the village community ultimately is suggested by the Field Book which accompanies the eighteenth-century map referred to above. From this Field Book it seems that

¹ Lincolnshire Archives Office, Parliamentary Survey, v/viii; 1/10.

Raynthornes and Bracken Hill were then being used with the West Field. The same Field Book states that Raynthornes and Bracken Hill had respectively just over twenty acres and just over eleven acres. Thus taken together these two furlongs were little bigger than the average furlong in the West Field. It thus appears that by the mid-eighteenth century there had been a further modification in the arrangement of the fields. It is also clear that by the end of the seventeenth century at least the "text-book" three-field rotation had been abandoned, and that further mutation had taken place in the field system used in Corringham. For example, in one inventory of April 1671 we find a farmer with eighteen acres of wheat, rye, and barley, eight acres of wheat "in the field," and fifteen acres of pease and oats, making altogether five types of crop on forty-one acres.¹

It seems, therefore, that in Corringham at least three different cropping systems had operated at one time or another between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, and that the trend was from a two-field system to a four-field system, and then to a reduction once more in the number of fields. Moreover, within seventy years of the introduction of a three-field system this too was further modified to allow farmers greater flexibility in the choice and disposition of their crops. By the mid-eighteenth century, without altering any further the number of fields, a reallocation of furlongs had taken place between Honey Hole and West fields. To what extent was this the pattern of events elsewhere? In the words of Professor Stenton: "The evidence for the prevalence of a two-field system in Lincolnshire is continued by innumerable later documents. The two great arable fields of these villages are revealed as clearly in Elizabethan

and Jacobean surveys as in the charters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." Stenton goes on to say that "The distribution of the arable in Lincolnshire villages at the beginning of the seventeenth century is illustrated with abundant detail in the large collection of glebe terriers of this date preserved in the Archives Office at Lincoln. Examples of the three-field system occur sporadically in this collection, but a scheme which divides the arable into two great fields is obviously normal in the county."² In seventeen of the villages in the vicinity of Corringham, however, the glebe terriers reveal that nine had three fields by the mid-seventeenth century, six villages had two fields, and the remaining two had four fields.³ No significant pattern in the distribution of field systems appears on the map.

With Corringham's example in mind, it is possible to consider these seventeen villages as all representing various stages in the development of the common-field system. Some villages had not yet abandoned the two-field arrangement. Others, the majority, may well have made the same decisions regarding their fields as did the Corringham farmers in May 1601. One thing may at least be deduced which has general application. Any attempt to construct a map of the fields of Corringham in the pre-enclosure period on the evidence of the glebe terriers alone, or of the eighteenth-century estate map and field book, or of the maps made in connection with the commutation of tithe, would certainly fall short of the truth if it assumed that the field pattern so delineated had survived without alteration or modification from the Middle Ages. It reveals once again that the common-field system was capable of many variations to suit the conditions of the land and whatever economic or social conditions prevailed

¹ Lincolnshire Archives Office, Inv. Di 38/2/F/50 (R. Francis).

² F. M. Stenton, *op. cit.*, p. xxxi.

³ Glebe terriers in the Lincolnshire Archives Office for the villages of Caenby (1679), Fillingham (1638), Heapham (1660), Ingham (1606), Stow (1663), Scotton (1625)—all with two fields; three-field villages are Broxholme (1605), Gate Burton (1608), Cammeringham (1606), Great Corringham (1650), Grayingham (1578), Marton (1634), Northorpe (1638), Pilham (1674), Upton (1578); four-field villages are Scotter (1606) and Little Corringham (1650). The glebe terriers are silent as to any changes in the number of fields.

at any time.¹ The final stage in this story of the remodelling of the fields of Corringham came with the arrival of the enclosure com-

mission in 1848 when the common fields were swept out of existence.

¹ I am grateful to the Archivist, Mrs J. Varley, and to her staff at the Lincolnshire Archives Office for making the documents I have used available to me so readily. For the opinions stated in this article I am entirely responsible.

Notes and Comments

THE SOCIETY'S LATE PRESIDENT

Members of the B.A.H.S. will learn with regret of the death of Mr R. V. Lennard in March this year. He was formerly Reader in Economic History in the University of Oxford, and was President of this Society from 1962 to 1965. He gave a presidential address to the Society at its December conference in 1963, which was subsequently reprinted in this REVIEW under the title: 'Agrarian History: some Vistas and Pitfalls'.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The annual conference of the British Agricultural History Society was held at Trinity Hall, University of Dublin, from 3 to 6 April 1967. An opening reception was given by the Irish Tourist Board and was followed by dinner at which the Society's guests were the Provost of Trinity, Professor Jones Hughes, Dr A. T. Lucas, Professor D. A. Binchy, Professor E. Estyn Evans, Mr Patrick Lynch, Dr John O'Loan, and Mr R. A. Butlin.

Professor Binchy opened the Conference with an evaluation of the 'Agricultural Evidence from old Irish Law Tracts'; and on the following morning Professor Evans described and illustrated 'The Survival of ancient Agricultural Practices in Ireland'. After a paper on 'The Role of the Guinness Brewery in Irish Agricultural Development', members were entertained to lunch by the Directors of the Guinness brewery and were shown round in the afternoon. In the evening Mr R. A. Butlin described 'Agriculture in County Dublin in the Eighteenth Century'.

The following morning Dr O'Loan spoke on 'Farming in Ireland under the Union, 1800-1920', and in the afternoon he and Mr Butlin conducted an excursion to the Wicklow Mountains, Powerscourt House, and Glendalough.

At the annual general meeting held on Tuesday, 4 April, Professor H. P. R. Finberg was re-elected President of the Society, and Mr C. A. Jewell and Mr M. A. Havinden were re-elected Treasurer and Secretary respectively. Dr A. M. Everitt, Mr J. W. Y. Higgs, and Dr M. L. Ryder retired from the Executive Committee under rule. Dr Everitt and Dr Ryder were re-elected, and Mr George Ordish was elected to the vacancy. Mr Higgs, who was Secretary of the Society from its foundation in 1952 until 1964, thus retired from the Executive Committee after fifteen years' continuous service. His retirement was received with great regret.

Dr W. H. Chaloner, the Chairman of the executive committee, presented its report. He was pleased that the increased subscription had not so far resulted in any significant loss of membership. This now stood at 645. The Treasurer reported that the Society's finances were satisfactory and that he had a surplus of £79 3s. 2d. for the year. He said, however, that the new subscription had been fully justified and that the increased income would not only cover the rising costs of publishing the Review, but would also allow for its substantial enlargement in future.

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