

Some Terminological Problems in Studies of British Field Systems¹

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STUDIES of British field systems are at present in a somewhat paradoxical position. On the one hand, the debate about the origins of field systems has reached a critical phase. It seems that British agrarian studies follow approximately a twenty-five-years' cycle, with the generalizations, propounded in 1915 by H. L. Gray, in 1938 by C. S. and C. S. Orwin, and in 1964 by J. Thirsk, each marking a peak in the cycle.² If so, then we are set once again for a further series of local studies intensively pursued.³ An exciting time lies ahead in the testing and refining of the ideas recently put forward by Dr Thirsk. On the other hand, there exists a serious danger that the good ship 'The Great Debate about the Origins of English Field Systems', so recently put to sea again after a refit, may all too soon flounder on the rocks of terminological ambiguity. Does an 'open field' of, say, Finberg 1961 vintage share the characteristics of an 'open field' of, say Postan '66? It is obviously the case that a Thirsk '64 is very different from a Titow '65.⁴

We are dangerously near to repeating the errors made by M. W. Beresford and E. Kerridge in their unnecessary debate over the origins of ridge-and-furrow—unnecessary because the sound of argument only died down when it was realized that they were discussing

different forms of ridge-and-furrow.⁵ This particular controversy, in addition to illustrating the absolute necessity for a precise definition of one's terms, highlights two of the pitfalls facing all studies of agrarian history: first, the myopic nature of the search for mono-causal explanations; secondly, the fallacious nature of the assumption that from a similarity of form may be inferred a similarity of function and even of genesis. This is one pitfall in agrarian history which the late Professor Lennard might well have added to the list which he compiled in 1963.⁶ It is in one sense annoying that, more than fifty years after H. L. Gray's classic work was published, we still have no agreed terminology for studies of English field systems. In another sense it is inevitable, for numerous subsequent studies have demonstrated the diversity of British field systems, both in space and in time. Only the construction and adoption of a uniform terminology can rescue us from this paradoxical situation. If we are to attempt to arrive at any general conclusions, then we must carry on the discussion with the sharpened tools of an unambiguous terminology.

Classification—and the construction of an agrarian terminology is a form of classification—is a necessary preliminary in most sciences. It

¹ This paper was read on 26 October 1968 to a conference, organized by the Agrarian Landscape Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers, on the theme 'The Terminology of Commons, Common Fields, and Field Systems'.

² H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*, 1915; C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 1938; J. Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past and Present*, 29, 1964.

³ A. R. H. Baker, 'Howard Levi Gray and *English Field Systems*: an Evaluation', *Agricultural History*, 39, 1965, pp. 86-91.

⁴ H. P. R. Finberg, 'Recent Progress in English Agrarian History', *Geografiska Annaler*, 43, 1961, pp. 75-9; M. M. Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime. England', being pp. 548-62 of M. M. Postan (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Vol. 1, The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn, 1966; J. Thirsk, *op. cit.*; J. Z. Titow, 'Medieval England and the Open-Field System', *Past and Present*, 32, 1965, pp. 86-102.

⁵ For a summary of the debate, see: J. C. Jackson, 'The Ridge-and-Furrow Controversy', *Amateur Historian*, 5, 1961, pp. 41-53.

⁶ R. Lennard, 'Agrarian history: some Vistas and Pitfalls', *A.H.R.*, 12, 1964, pp. 83-98.

is often said that the state of classification is a measure of the maturity of a science. According to L. S. Stebbing, "the earliest stage of a science is the classificatory stage: it is not long since botany passed beyond this stage and sociology has hardly done so yet."¹ During the last twenty-five years the established classifications in botany, zoology, pedology, and other sciences have been subject to increasing criticism, as advances in knowledge have undermined the basis of classifications established in the nineteenth century. A brief examination of the procedures of scientific classification shows that the grouping of objects into classes on the basis of properties or relationships which they have in common can be reached by two distinct methods: classification and division. In classification, objects are grouped on the basis of properties they have in common. Nineteenth-century taxonomists were concerned primarily with properties which were inherent in the objects classified. Modern biologists, however, have found it necessary to classify plants and animals on the basis of relationships. Thus grouping into classes can be made either on the basis of similarity between connected and different objects, or on the basis of a relationship between connected and different objects. Whereas in classification individuals are grouped into classes and classes then included within super classes, in logical division an initial class is taken to include all individuals and this class is subdivided into subclasses on the basis of some principle. The initial class to be divided is called the genus, which is then divided into its constituent species.²

The relevance of these scientific procedures for agrarian studies may be seen at two points. In his study of field systems in Devon, H. P. R. Finberg suggested that the infield-outfield system and the Midland system were two species of the same genus, *open-field system*, and that they probably evolved side by side, "moulded by the contrasting qualities of the highland and

lowland landscapes."³ This provides an echo of Charles Orwin's belief 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."⁴ Although this view might be held when considering the ultimate origins of field systems—who knows? the ultimate origins we shall never know—it is hardly tenable when looking at the period for which we have adequate documentation. The diversity of the open fields both in appearance and in organization has been demonstrated in countless local studies. To quote M. M. Postan's recent review of the present state of knowledge: "So great were the [physical, demographic, and social] variations that no student of medieval agriculture would nowadays dare to assemble all the medieval agrarian institutions into a portmanteau model capable of accommodating the whole of England during the whole of the Middle Ages."⁵ This being so, we must turn to the procedures of classification rather than of division: to build up a picture of reality rather than to break down some notional system.

Furthermore, it would seem desirable to classify and define agrarian terms on the basis of relationships rather than of similarity. Definitions of agrarian terms could be formulated in terms of three sets of criteria: formal definitions, based on morphology, would be descriptive; functional definitions, based on organizational relationships, would be analytically descriptive; genetic definitions, based on the origins of agrarian forms and structures, would be explanatory. Formal definitions are too narrowly based to be of much use. In a map which formed the frontispiece to his book, H. L. Gray delimited the area within which the Midland open field system was practised.⁶ Further studies have gradually extended these limits but some, possibly many, of these studies have been based on the false assumption that all open fields were operated along the lines of the Mid-

¹ L. S. Stebbing, *A Modern Elementary Logic*, 1963, p. 108.

² A clear summary of the procedures of scientific classification is D. Grigg, 'The Logic of Regional Systems', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 55, 1965, pp. 465-91.

³ H. P. R. Finberg, 'The Open Field in Devon', being pp. 265-88 of W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, *Devonshire Studies*, 1952.

⁴ C. S. Orwin, 'Observations on the Open Fields', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 8, 1938, pp. 125-35.

⁵ M. M. Postan, *op. cit.*, p. 571.

⁶ H. L. Gray, *op. cit.*, frontispiece.

land system. From a field pattern which includes unenclosed parcels of arable land has been inferred an agrarian organization which includes communal regulation of cultivation, particularly dictation of the fallow period and throwing open of both arable and meadow for common pasturing by the stock of all commoners after harvest and in the fallow season. Open-field patterns have been assumed to reflect Midland field husbandry. The form of fields has been confused with their functioning. A similarity of form cannot safely be taken as an indication of a similarity of function or of genesis. The terminological framework to studies of field patterns now presented to us by German scholars is in fact formally based: "In view of the fact that many field patterns are composed of very different parts, it seemed desirable to base their analysis and basic definition on *one* criterion which could be used in every case. The other aspects of a given field pattern could then be referred to in the description of the individual cases. It was thus decided to classify field patterns according to their forms rather than to their functions or their origin."¹ It is certainly necessary to avoid confusing formal characteristics with functional relationships. If formal definitions have to be constructed in order to avoid this confusion, then they are clearly necessary. But it would be unwise to regard them as anything more than a preliminary classification. Little agreement would yet be possible over genetic definitions. Attempts to formulate such definitions beg too many questions. On the other hand, functional definitions of the organization and structure of agrarian forms would seem to be more feasible than genetic definitions and more analytical than formal definitions.

The provisional glossary of agrarian terms propounded by R. A. Butlin some years ago contained few, if any, genetically defined terms.² About half of the terms considered were defined formally, about half functionally. There has as yet been no systematic examina-

tion of the definitions formulated by Mr Butlin and on re-reading his glossary one encounters again some controversial suggestions. He suggested, for example, that the term 'furlong' be retained as defining a measure of length but rejected as meaning a block of selions in the common arable field, for which the term 'shott' was preferred.³ Mr Butlin thought that 'shott' could serve as a standard term, in preference to the various local terms which have been used in the same sense, such as 'furlong', 'flatt', and 'wong'. This suggestion was certainly based on a desirable principle: the need to establish an accepted terminology which will allow local historians to exchange their parochial terminologies for a more general one. But how many agrarian historians have discussed, let alone accepted, Mr Butlin's suggestion? Mr Butlin also thought that the term 'field system' should be replaced with the term 'common-field husbandry'.⁴ This would seem to be unacceptable, in that it implies that all field systems were variants of common-field husbandry. H. L. Gray's more neutral definition of a field system, as "the manner in which the inhabitants of a township subdivided and tilled their arable, meadow and pasture," remains unobjectionable.⁵ Mr Butlin further suggested that the term 'open field' could well be discarded. He called it "a confusing term," an "over simplification."⁶ Again, how many agrarian historians are continuing to employ this term?

This paper has so far considered the types of terminological definitions available. Before going on to deal with the specific terms 'open field' and 'common field' two further general problems must be mentioned. First, the spatial variations in agrarian terminology: I have already touched upon the need to construct not only a basic and widely accepted terminology but also to formulate regional terminologies compatible with it. Secondly, there are the temporal variations in agrarian terminology, the problem here being the changes in the meanings of terms through time. G. Whitting-

¹ H. Uhlig and C. Lienau, 'Types of field patterns', *Basic Material for the Terminology of the Agricultural Landscape*, 1, Giessen 1967, pp. E4-5.

² R. A. Butlin, 'Some Terms used in Agrarian History', *A.H.R.*, 9, 1961, pp. 98-104.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

⁵ H. L. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶ R. A. Butlin, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

ton's recent study of the terminology of strip lynchets demonstrated that the original meaning of the word lynchet was very different from the one it conveys today.¹ What, then, are we attempting to define? The meanings of terms as they were used by their contemporaries, or the meanings of terms as they could most usefully be employed today? In France, two parallel studies are being undertaken: one by P. Fenélon of the vocabulary of agrarian terms as they were originally devised and subsequently changed, the other by a group of geographers of a glossary of agrarian terms to be employed in current research.² The terms which we are attempting to define are not necessarily those used either locally or historically. Dr Whittington has pointed out, for example, that 'strip lynchet' is not a term used by the inhabitants of the areas in which the terraces are found.³ Definition of the term is thus an academic exercise. This dichotomous usage needs to be kept in mind. If, for example, we are able today to adopt a definition of 'common field' in terms of specific functional characteristics, then simply to encounter the term 'common field' in, say, seventeenth-century records does not allow us to identify an agrarian form with those defined functional characteristics. The term 'common field' as it appears in historical records may mean something very different from the standard definition we adopt today, and indeed the term may change its meaning both spatially and temporally, being used in historical records to refer to different types of agrarian structures at different places and at different historical periods.

Finally, it is necessary to consider in more detail the terms 'open field' and 'common field'. Should 'open field' and its associated

term 'open-field husbandry' be discarded? *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'open' is "The part of country not enclosed. Ground without buildings, trees, etc. Unenclosed, unwalled, unconfined."⁴ In reality, most so-called 'open fields' were enclosed, their peripheries being marked by an enclosure of some kind, be it bank, ditch, hedge, or fence. Mark Pierce's map of Laxton in 1635 shows that even the 'open fields' of that supposedly classic parish were surrounded by hedges.⁵ The fields themselves were enclosed. But their internal subdivisions, the parcels and strips, were open and unenclosed. Even as a formal definition the term 'open field' is confusing. In a letter written to the Editor of the *AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW* in 1962, I suggested that a pattern of unenclosed strips and parcels within enclosed fields might better be termed 'subdivided fields' rather than 'open fields' and I used this term in my study of Kentish field patterns of the seventeenth century and earlier.⁶ This practice has not been more widely adopted but there has since 1962 developed a growing awareness that not all 'open fields' (i.e. subdivided fields) functioned or originated in the same way.⁷ Dr Thirsk has suggested that a distinction be made between two kinds of 'strip fields' (i.e. subdivided fields).⁸ She has argued that fields comprised of unenclosed parcels not definitely known to have been cultivated or grazed in common are best described as 'open fields', the term 'common fields' being best reserved for fields over which common rules of cultivation and grazing are known to have operated. While agreeing with Dr Thirsk that Dr Titow's persistence in regarding the terms 'open field' and 'common field' as freely interchangeable will confuse rather than clarify the

¹ G. Whittington, 'Towards a Terminology for Strip Lynchets', *A.H.R.*, 15, 1967, pp. 103-7.

² E. Juillard, 'Géographie Rurale Française: Travaux Récents, 1957-63', *Études Rurales*, 13, 1964, pp. 46-70.

³ G. Whittington, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1, 3rd edn, 1966, p. 695.

⁵ C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *op. cit.*, endpieces.

⁶ Letter to the Editor, *A.H.R.*, 10, 1962, p. 28; A. R. H. Baker, 'Field patterns in seventeenth-century Kent', *Geography*, 50, 1965, pp. 18-30.

⁷ J. Thirsk, 'Preface to the Third Edition', being pp. v-xv of C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 3rd edn, 1967.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix. Incidentally, 'strip' is not an appropriate description of the shape of all the parcels of subdivided field. Shapes of parcels could vary considerably.

interpretation of the evidence, I can see some serious disadvantages in continuing to employ the term 'open field' at all.¹ We cannot go back through the field systems' literature of the last fifty years and correct the errors of our predecessors—or indeed our own errors. For this reason and in this particular context, an entirely new term is better than the redefinition of an old one. Otherwise a single term will be encountered in the literature with a dual meaning. Three years ago saw the reprinting by the Standing Conference for Local History of the booklet by F. G. Emmison, *Types of Open-Field Parishes in the Midlands*, first published in 1937. The reprinted version emerged, at Dr Thirsk's suggestion, with a new title, *Some Types of Common-Field Parish*.² The term 'common-field' had been substituted for 'open-field' in the title, although regrettably the latter term was retained in the text. In this instance, the duality of meaning exists within a single publication. It is, of course, also unfortunate that many French agrarian historians have in the past adopted the English terminology and so referred to *l'openfield*. This ambiguity will be eliminated in the newly devised French glossary of agrarian terms, by the substitution of *paysage ouvert*.

The term 'common field' presents fewer problems. Mr Butlin's definition of 'common arable land', as "arable land contained in common fields and becoming commonable after harvest," has been widely adopted. So too has his definition of 'common-field husbandry' as "a system of husbandry based on the cultivation of common arable and meadow."³ This apparent pool of unanimity has recently been disturbed by a stone cast into it by Dr Titow who continues to believe that a single explicit

reference to a piece of land lying 'in the common field' or *in communi campo* is "sufficient to indicate the presence of the open-field system" (meaning common-field system, because for Dr Titow these two terms are freely interchangeable).⁴ To Dr Titow the word *common* in historical records describes land worked under the common-field system. This was certainly not the case in Kent where references in documents to 'common fields' simply described a field of unenclosed parcels in intermingled ownership and/or occupation.⁵ We must refrain from imposing functional interpretations on what were only formal descriptions. There is even evidence that on one Kent manor a former demesne field was leased out in unenclosed parcels to different tenants and came to be known as the 'Common Field' for the first time during the sixteenth century.⁶ This 'common field' of the sixteenth century was no part of a 'common field system' as we employ this term today. We need to inspect the medieval evidence again, to see whether references to 'common fields' were in fact describing subdivided fields and not necessarily common fields. It may well be, of course, that in some parts of the country at various times fields described in historical records as 'open' were 'common' too.

There are two obvious conclusions to be drawn from this brief survey of some of the terminological problems associated with studies of British field systems. First, the problems must be solved and a terminological framework formulated and adopted. Secondly, terminological problems are soluble—unlike some of the other sets of problems facing agrarian historians.

¹ J. Thirsk, 'The Origin of the Common Fields', *Past and Present*, 33, 1966, pp. 142-7; J. Z. Titow, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

² F. G. Emmison, *Types of Open-Field Parishes in the Midlands*, 1937; F. G. Emmison, *Some Types of Common-Field Parish*, 1965.

³ R. A. Butlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 and 101.

⁴ J. Z. Titow, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵ A. R. H. Baker, 'Field patterns in seventeenth-century Kent', *Geography*, 50, 1965, pp. 18-30.

⁶ A. R. H. Baker, 'Field Systems in the Vale of Holmesdale', *A.H.R.*, 14, 1966, pp. 1-24.