

The Regional Uniqueness of English Field Systems? Some Evidence from Eastern Norfolk

By B M S CAMPBELL

THE assumption that England possessed a number of regionally distinct field systems, differentiated from one another by certain unique attributes, has been implicit in much writing on English field systems. Yet in the present state of knowledge, with the full geographical extent and precise mode of operation of the common-field system imperfectly known, the possibility remains that the different systems which existed transcended regional boundaries and thus were not exclusively regional in character. Local and regional idiosyncracies of terminology and tenure certainly existed, but by themselves these do not constitute evidence of unique local or regional field systems. In fact, an examination of field systems on strictly functional grounds may well demonstrate the contrary, as in the case of Kent, where A R H Baker has shown that there was little peculiarly Kentish about the 'so-called "Kentish system"'.¹

This issue of the regional uniqueness, or otherwise, of English field systems is not only important in its own right but also bears upon our understanding of the origin and development of the common-field system. Any explanation of the origin of the system must account for the fact that field systems became co-ordinated and systematized in different ways, and to a different extent in different parts of the country. As yet no convincing reasons for this have been advanced. H L Gray

thought that spatial variations in field systems could be attributed to colonization by different ethnic groups but this view has now been largely discredited.² Even Joan Thirsk's more recent hypothesis, that regional variations in field systems reflect regional variations in population density, in the relative importance of pastoral and arable farming, and in soil and terrain, leaves certain facts unexplained.³ There are several exceptions to her observations that 'the classic common-field system represented an intensive system of farming for corn that was characteristic of all well-populated villages in plains and valleys in all parts of the kingdom', and that 'field-systems and the rigour of their rules and regulations varied according to the type of farming practised, and perhaps according to the size of populations'.⁴ Conspicuous exceptions are the greater part of East Anglia and the extreme south-east of England. Any further advance in our understanding of the genesis of the common-field system in England will therefore partly depend upon a fuller knowledge of the distribution, mode of operation, and course of development of each of its variant forms.

Among the most interesting areas for the study of field systems are areas which were characterized by intensive arable farming and

¹ A R H Baker, 'Some Fields and Farms in Medieval Kent', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXX, 1965, pp 152-74; B M S Campbell, 'Commonfield Origins: The Regional Dimension', in T Rowley (ed), *The Origins of Open Field Agriculture* (forthcoming).

² H L Gray, *English Field Systems*, Cambridge, Mass, 1915. See also A R H Baker, 'Howard Levi Gray and English Field Systems: An Evaluation', *Agricultural History*, 39, 2, 1965, pp 86-91.

³ J Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past & Present*, 29, 1964, pp 3-25; J Thirsk, 'The Origin of the Common Fields', *Past & Present*, 33, 1966, pp 142-7; J Thirsk, 'Preface to the Third Edition', pp v-xv in C S and C S Orwin, *The Open Fields*, Oxford, 3rd edn, 1967.

⁴ *Ibid*, p xi.

high population densities. In such areas subdivided fields were often especially well developed and the problems of reconciling the mutually dependent but conflicting demands of pastoral and arable husbandry were particularly acute. One such area was East Anglia. During the middle ages parts of this large and diverse region (notably eastern and south-eastern Norfolk) supported higher densities of population, and were characterized by higher levels of assessed lay wealth and more intensive methods of farming than any other part of the country.⁵ At present, however, specific knowledge of the field systems which operated in East Anglia is confined to western Norfolk and adjacent portions of Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, away from the most economically advanced localities.⁶ Moreover, the excellence of sixteenth and seventeenth century sources has attracted attention away from earlier periods so that even in western Norfolk little is known of field systems before the major agrarian changes of the later middle ages. It therefore remains to be proven that the field system which is known to have existed in western Norfolk in the post-medieval period had at one time prevailed

throughout East Anglia. Since this system possessed certain highly individual characteristics this consideration is of some importance to the wider issue of regional uniqueness.

The individuality of field systems in western Norfolk largely derived from a unique fusion of the two opposing elements of flexibility and control; rights of common grazing, on the aftermath of the harvest (harvest shack) and on strips lying fallow throughout the year, applied to fields characterized by the utmost irregularity of layout and holdings which employed a highly flexible system of cropping. The irregularity of field layout and flexibility of cropping posed no great obstacle to the institution of harvest shack but presented serious problems to common grazing of the arable at other times of the year. These problems were resolved by means of an institution known as the foldcourse. Foldcourses comprised two essential elements; on the one hand the imposition of irregular cropping shifts to rationalize the distribution of unsown strips (including the provision of compensation for cultivators disadvantaged by possessing a disproportionate amount of land in the fallow shift), and on the other, the supervised grazing of communal flocks upon the fallow. Difficulties of access to the fallow strips and of control and manoeuvrability of livestock meant that rights of fallow grazing were confined to sheep. Accordingly, as soon as spring lambing was past, sheep were collected into communal flocks which were fed upon the heaths and sheepwalks by day and folded upon the fallow arable by night, whose soil they tathed with their treading, dung and urine. Within the commonfields the sheep were controlled by means of moveable folds, which permitted the grazing of relatively small blocks of fallow and also facilitated a more systematic pattern of grazing and dunging than would otherwise have occurred. In fact, the fertilization of the arable appears to have been the principal objective of the system, for the tathe of the sheep fold seems to have been of greater benefit to the arable fields than was

⁵ For the distribution of population and wealth in medieval England see the maps in H C Darby (ed), *A New Historical Geography of England*, Cambridge, 1973, pp 46, 139, 191. For East Anglian agriculture see B M S Campbell, 'Field Systems in Eastern Norfolk during the Middle Ages: A Study with Particular Reference to the Demographic and Agrarian Changes of the Fourteenth Century' (University of Cambridge, unpublished PhD thesis, 1975), pp 83-95, 105-17, 337-54.

⁶ Studies which have concentrated upon the field systems of this area are Gray, *op cit*, pp 305-54; J Saltmarsh and H C Darby, 'The Infield-Outfield System on a Norfolk Manor', *Econ Hist Rev*, III, 1935, pp 30-44; K J Allison, 'The Sheep-Corn Husbandry of Norfolk in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Ag Hist Rev*, V, 1, 1957, pp 12-30; M R Postgate, 'The Field Systems of Breckland', *Ag Hist Rev*, X, 2, 1962, pp 80-101; M R Postgate, 'The Open Fields of Cambridgeshire' (University of Cambridge, unpublished PhD thesis, 1964); M Spufford, 'A Cambridgeshire Community, Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure', *Occasional Paper, Dept of English Local Hist, Univ of Leics*, XX, 1965. For the most recent account of East Anglian field systems see M R Postgate, 'Field Systems of East Anglia', being Chapter 7 in A R H Baker and R A Butlin (eds), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, Cambridge, 1973.

the meagre pasturage available on the fallow to the sheep.

The use of sheep as walking dung machines, to transfer nutrients from the permanent pasture (which remained an essential adjunct to the system) to the arable, was a principle common to most areas of sheep-corn husbandry, but only in East Anglia does it appear to have been codified and integrated into the common-field system.⁷ Even more unusual is the fact that responsibility for this component of the field system was vested in the manorial lord rather than the corporate authority of the entire commonfield community (especially as in East Anglia there was generally a total lack of coincidence between manor and vill). In common-field villages elsewhere all rights of common grazing belonged to all the cultivators. It may be that in East Anglia the irregularity of holding layout and flexibility of cropping arrangements were such that the organization of fallow grazing demanded the superior authority of the manorial lord, but the subordinate position in which this placed the majority of cultivators was a potential weakness of the system. An unscrupulous lord could fold his tenants' sheep on the demesne to the neglect of their own land, thereby appropriating dung to his own use: or, if he was more interested in his wool clip than his corn yields, he could overstock the fields and pastures and expand his own flock at the expense of his tenants'.⁸ Ultimately, abuses such as these brought the system into disrepute and led to its decline and dissolution. This, however, was a development of the post-medieval period. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct field arrangements in

the more fertile and thickly settled locality of eastern Norfolk at their medieval zenith.

I

In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries manorial records show that extensive common fields dominated the landscape of eastern Norfolk, and that the subdivision of land was intense. Two and a half centuries later, by which time the common fields had already been much modified by consolidation and enclosure, the first topographical descriptions of entire townships become available and it is possible to assess the relative disposition of arable and pasture and reconstruct the original cadastra of the commonfields. This evidence shows that the ratio of pasture to arable was generally low, significantly lower than in western Norfolk, although subject to wide variation from township to township according to prevailing soil conditions. It also shows that, as was usual in East Anglia, the layout of the commonfields was highly irregular.⁹

The first of these points requires little elaboration. Eastern Norfolk was a closely-settled locality and arable land was consequently at a premium with the result that common pastures tended to remain only where soils were too light or poorly drained for cultivation. Given the uneven distribution of such soils some townships (particularly those in the vicinity of the Broadland marshes and the sandy heaths to the north of Norwich) were quite generously endowed whereas others, often in close proximity,

⁷ E Kerridge, 'The Sheepfold in Wiltshire and the Floating of the Water Meadows', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, VI, 1954, pp 282-9; J Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, Cambridge, 1967, pp 33, 51, 56, 70, 92, 136, 188, 250; E Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England*, 1973, pp 20-1, 77-84.

⁸ For examples see K J Allison, 'The Lost Villages of Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology*, XXXI, 1957, pp 116-62; K J Allison, 'Flock Management in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XI, 1958, pp 98-112.

⁹ The maps and surveys upon which these and the following observations are based include those of Westwick (1547), Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO) Pet MS 584; Cawston (c1580), NRO NRS 21404 A; Coltishall (1584), King's College, Cambridge (hereafter KCC) E 28; Hempstead with Lessingham (1584), KCC P 34; Blofield (1586), NRO NRS 16646 37 G; Horstead-with-Stanninghall (1586), KCC N 52; Horsford (1613), NRO Aylsham Collection 54; Worstead (undated 17th century), NRO Church Commissioners' Map 11905. For a fuller discussion see B M S Campbell, 'The Extent and Layout of Commonfields in Eastern Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology* (forthcoming).

were not. At Horsford, Hevingham and Cawston, for instance, the open fields formed large but isolated islands of arable in a sea of pasture, whereas the converse applied on the rich loams of Flegg and adjacent areas, where the arable fields frequently stretched without interruption from township to township. At Coltishall, according to a survey of 1584, the common fields merged across the parish boundary with those of each of the neighbouring townships of Belaugh, Tunstead, Sco Ruston, and Hautbois and common pasture consisted of a mere 80 acres out of a total acreage of 1190. As will be seen later, the near elimination of common pasture in many townships in eastern Norfolk had important implications for the numbers of livestock that were kept and, more especially, for methods of feeding them.

As variable as the distribution of pasture and arable, in fact possibly even more so, was the internal layout of the common-fields. Confronted with this topographical complexity many sixteenth-century surveyors resorted to the purely descriptive device of dividing townships into a number of sectors or precincts, each of which was further subdivided into a number of quarantines or furlongs, the constituent strips of which were then itemized. The divisions which they adopted were usually determined by physical features such as roads, streams, field boundaries, and the orientation of strips, and their descriptions therefore tend to reflect the peculiar topography of each parish. Thus at Coltishall there were nine precincts, ranging in size from $43\frac{1}{2}$ acres to $248\frac{3}{8}$ acres, while at Lessingham a contemporary survey describes only four precincts although, as at Coltishall, they show a complete lack of uniformity in size.¹⁰ This variation in the number and size of the precincts described by the surveyors, as of the other units which they employed, illustrates the all-pervading irregularity which characterized the number and size of common-fields in this locality. Such field

names as are given relate to indeterminate areas, and it is plain that, with the exception of the strip, none of the areal units described possessed more than topographical significance. The individual strip was the fundamental unit of cultivation and to gauge a reliable impression of the original size and number of the strips, before they were affected by consolidation and enclosure, it is necessary to turn to earlier sources of evidence.

By the first half of the fourteenth century land holdings in eastern Norfolk were both attenuated in size and fragmented in layout. Statistics derived from data relating to a single manor almost certainly understate holding size but nevertheless convey the distinct impression that the majority of peasant holdings were extremely small. On the Prior of Norwich's manor at Martham, for example, an extent of 1292 shows mean holding size to have been as low as $2\frac{1}{4}$ acres (and it probably declined further during the next fifty years), whilst of 2122 arable strips 94 per cent were smaller than 1 acre, 66 per cent were smaller than $\frac{1}{2}$ acre and 16 per cent were smaller than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre.¹¹ Evidence from other manors in this locality reveals conditions which were much the same. At Coltishall mean holding size, as indicated by the obituaries of 400 deceased tenants recorded in the court rolls between 1280 and 1400, was less than 3 acres, whilst of 900 land parcels transacted in the court rolls between 1275 and 1349, 91 per cent were smaller than 1 acre, 69 per cent were smaller than $\frac{1}{2}$ acre, and 32 per cent were smaller than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre.¹² At Hevingham similar evidence reveals an almost identical state of affairs at the close of the thirteenth century, with few holdings larger than 3 acres and 86 per cent of land parcels smaller than 1 acre.¹³ Moreover, as the

¹¹ BM: Stowe MS 936.

¹² KCC: E 29-38.

¹³ NRO: NRS 14761 29 D 4, NRS 14634 29 D 2, NRS 14473 29 C 1. Similar conditions prevailed at Lessingham (BM: Add MS 24,316, ff 51-6), Worstead (NRO: Dean and Chapter Muniments, Register V, ff 132-5), Hautbois (PRO: SC 11 Roll 475), Burgh (PRO: SC 12 Portf 22 no 10), Hemsby (NRO: Middleton, Killin and Bruce,

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of field layout at Coltishall see Campbell, *op cit*, 1975, pp 147-55.

detailed extent of Martham confirms, these holdings were not only diminutive in size but were also highly irregular in layout, a characteristic which was exacerbated by the combined action of an active peasant land market and, on most manors, a custom of partible inheritance. Such small and irregular holdings were fundamental to the way in which these extensive, minutely subdivided arable fields were worked, promoting the adoption of certain common rights but inhibiting the development of others. Of the former the most fundamental was arguably the right of shack feed on the aftermath of the harvest.

Harvest shack was a practical, common-sense response to the opportunities for pasturing livestock on the aftermath of the harvest where permanent pasture was scarce and arable fields were subdivided. It therefore tended to be found wherever holdings were heavily fragmented and strips were small, as was indeed the case in eastern Norfolk. At Horstead-with-Stanninghall an enclosure award of 1599 records the dissolution of 'libertie of shack in the tyme of shackle', and passing reference is made to either *shack* or *tempore aperte* at Antingham, Bassingham, Cawston, Lessingham, Martham, North Walsham, and South Walsham.¹⁴ At Gimingham there is reference to 'the shack tyme of winter' whilst at Catton and Hellesdon rights of common pasture applied to the arable fields *a tempore quo blada in eisdem terris crescentia leventur et adventet usque ad tempus quod dicte terre reseminentur*.¹⁵ Explicit testimony of the duration of this right is, however, available only for three townships in this locality; at Postwick and Reedham rights of common

pasturage applied to the arable fields for a period of six months (1 August — 2 February and 29 September — 25 March respectively), whilst at Ingham this period was slightly longer, lasting for seven months from 29 September to 3 May.¹⁶ On the other hand, once grass and plant growth ceased in mid-November the forage available on the arable became so meagre as to be virtually valueless. This no doubt underlies the fact that villein tenants were obliged to pay *bossagium* and *faldagium* and place their sheep in the lord's fold only up until 10 November, and extra cowherds and shepherds employed on the demesnes to supervise the stubble grazing of livestock were rarely retained for more than three months in the autumn. At Martham, for instance, in 1380 two shepherds were employed during the last three weeks in September whilst the harvest was being gathered in, of whom one was retained for a further ten weeks until the middle of December, when he too was laid off.¹⁷

But just as the fragmentation of holdings encouraged the institution of harvest shack so it also hindered the institution of collective grazing rights at other times of the year. An essential precondition for common grazing of the fallow was the segregation of sown from unsown strips. In western Norfolk in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this was achieved by the imposition of a system of irregular cropping shifts, but in this case neither the subdivision of fields nor the complexity of holding layout was as great as in eastern Norfolk in the middle ages. Where holdings were so small, so fragmented, and so irregular, and moreover subject to constant change, the problems presented to the operation of even the most ingenious communal rotational scheme would have been virtually insurmountable. These problems were further compounded by the complexity and intensity of cropping practices in this area.

19.11.68), and Thurne (W Hudson, 'The Abbot of St. Benet and his Tenants after the Peasant Revolt of 1381', *Antiquary*, 29, 1894, p 256).

¹⁴KCC: N 10; Walter Rye, *Some Rough Materials for a History of the Hundred of North Erpingham in the County of Norfolk*, I, Norwich, 1883, pp 14, 28; NRO: NRS 21404 A, NNAS 5930 20 D 4; PRO: DL 44/295, E 142 no. 83(4); KCC: P 34.

¹⁵PRO: DL 44/295; NRO: Dean and Chapter Muniments, Register I, ff 252 and 254v.

¹⁶PRO: C134 File 104 (1) and File 95 (14); C135 File 74 (8).

¹⁷NRO: NNAS 5896 20 D 1.

Detailed evidence of rotations, and thus the incidence of fallowing, is available only for demesnes (most of which comprised at least some open-field land) and may be deceptive as the tiny holdings of the peasantry were probably cultivated with greater intensity. Even so, by the second half of the fourteenth century, when most account rolls begin to record the area of fallow on a regular basis, no demesne in this locality was fallowing land more frequently than once every five or six years, and several were fallowing it as infrequently as once a decade (see Table 1). Furthermore, fallowing had been even less frequent during the first half of the fourteenth century when 'high-farming' was at its peak, often less than once every twelve years. There were even occasions on some demesnes when fallows were dispensed with altogether and the entire arable area brought into cultivation, although this policy was rarely pursued for more than two or three years in succession. Notwithstanding the intensity of cropping which was the consequence of this near elimination of fallows, none of these demesnes appears to have suffered from a deterioration of productivity.¹⁸ Far from it, most of them sustained a level of output per acre which was exceptional by the standards of the day. Wheat, for instance, the most demanding cereal crop, yielded an average of 15 bushels per acre on almost all demesnes in eastern Norfolk, and on the most productive, such as the neighbouring demesnes of Martham and Hemsby (both of which belonged to Norwich Cathedral Priory), averaged well over 20 bushels, and rose to over 30 bushels in a good year. Barley, the principal grain grown in this area, yielded at a broadly similar if somewhat lower rate, yields of 25 bushels being by no means unknown.

This seeming paradox, of the near elimination of fallows coupled with a high and sustained level of productivity, was the product of a progressive and carefully

TABLE 1
Proportion of total arable annually fallowed on various demesnes in eastern Norfolk, 1269–1428

Demesne	Time-span (years)	Number of A/C Rolls	% total arable area fallowed		
			min	mean	max
<i>Pre-1350</i>					
Halvergate	1268–74	4	0	0	0
Flegg	1340–41	1		0	
Heigham By Norwich	1302–06	2	2.5	3.15	3.8
Acle	1268–80	7	1.3	5.2	11.4
South Walsham	1270–97	9	0	6.8	13.4
Martham	1294–1350	19	0	8.1	25.3
Hemsby	1294–1342	13	1.8	9.4	14.2
Suffield	1272–1300	9	2.1	11.7	21.2
Hanworth	1272–1306	19	0	12.4	25.5
Knapton	1345–48	2	19.15	20.3	21.5
<i>Post-1350</i>					
North Walsham	1367–1427	5	3.7	7.8	9.9
Potter Heigham	1389–90	1		9.4	
Thwaite	c1386–87	1		10.4	
Scottow	c1364–65	1		10.6	
Ashby	1378–92	2	11.1	13.15	15.2
Flegg	1351–1428	14	0	13.3	25.2
Ludham	c1354–55	1		13.3	
Martham	1355–1420	19	2.9	13.4	27.9
Hoveton	1392–1422	2	10.8	13.55	16.3
Heigham By Norwich	1380–81	1		15.9	
Plumstead	1359–1420	15	11.0	16.0	27.7
Hevingham	1357–58	1		17.3	
Shotesham	1352–53 or 1368–69	1		17.8	

Figures in italics are estimates.

Sources: PRO SC 6/929/1–7, SC 6/936/2–8 and 18–32, SC 6/937/1–10, SC 6/944/1–9 and 23–31; NRO Dean and Chapter Muniments MS 4652–65, 4945–64, 5127–43; NRO Diocesan Est/2, 9, 11, 12; NRO Church Commissioners' 101426 2/13 and 11/13; NRO NNAS 5892–5903 20 D 1, NNAS 5904–16 20 D 2; NRO NRS 13996 28 F 3; Windsor, St George's Chapel XV 53 98–9.

¹⁸ For a converse situation on less intensively cultivated demesnes see J Z Titow, *Winchester Yields: A Study in Medieval Agricultural Productivity*, Cambridge, 1972.

balanced system of husbandry. This is illustrated by the pains that were taken to conserve and improve soil fertility. Animal manure, for example, the prime source of fertilizer, was put to maximum use by being carefully collected and then systematically spread upon the land and ploughed in, an operation which was essential if losses from the twin processes of leaching and oxidization were to be kept to a minimum. So great was this concern to make maximum use of available supplies of livestock manure that some demesnes in the vicinity of the Broadland marshes even went to the length of gathering up the manure from the sheep and cattle pens on the marshes and transporting it back to the demesnes to be spread on the fields. Elsewhere supplies of farmyard manure were supplemented by marl, or even, in one instance, night soil purchased from Norwich, and the whole procedure was reinforced by repeated ploughings which stirred up the nutrients within the soil and improved its texture. As well as these direct measures of improving fertility an important part was also played by the choice of crops and the way in which they were rotated with one-another. Thus, a pronounced emphasis upon spring-sown crops — barley, oats and legumes — ensured that about two-thirds of the arable was annually fallowed on a half-yearly basis, whilst the cultivation of legumes on a large scale both restored the nitrogen content of the soil and supplied valuable fodder to the livestock, whose manure was returned to the soil.¹⁹ Also, since crop rotations were themselves extremely flexible, allowance could readily be made for local and annual variations in soil conditions. In fact, the only purpose for which the occasional bare fallow appears to have been retained was to cleanse the land of weed growth, a function for which the employment of heavy seeding rates

and use of oats as a smother crop were but partial substitutes.²⁰

If it is assumed that the peasantry cultivated their small holdings at least as intensively as the manorial lords cultivated their demesnes, then, with less than 10 per cent of all common-field strips lying fallow each year, the difficulties of instituting a system of common rotation would have been as great as its desirability would have been small. In other words, under this system of cultivation the amount of land available for temporary pasturage would have been too meagre to have merited the concessions and compromises involved in arranging for it to be grazed in common. Indeed, by interfering with a highly flexible and effective system of cropping such an action might even have been counter-productive. The weight of circumstantial evidence, therefore, suggests that rights of common grazing did not apply to fallow strips in these common fields. The sole exception to this rule appears to have been the township of Little Plumstead, located on the edge of Mousehold Heath just five miles north-east of Norwich, where there is a solitary reference in an *Inquisition Post Mortem* to fallow arable remaining subject to rights of common pasturage for the whole year.²¹ Elsewhere, however, cultivators made their own arrangements for grazing fallow strips, probably using a system of tethering, just as they enjoyed complete freedom in matters of cultivation. Only in shack time, after the harvest, were the arable fields grazed in common.

It follows from the conclusion that fallow strips were grazed in severalty rather than in common that rights of foldcourse, as they were known in western Norfolk, did not apply to these common fields. This is borne out by a limited amount of direct evidence.

¹⁹ Legumes accounted for between a fifth and a seventh of a sown area.

²⁰ Fallow land was generally ploughed at least four, and occasionally as many as six times before being returned to cultivation. The most common seeding rates were 4 bushels per acre for wheat and legumes, 6 bushels per acre for barley and 8 bushels per acre for oats.

²¹ PRO: C135 File 64 (2).

For instance, on several manors, as at Blickling in 1410–11, tenants paid to have their land tathed by the lord's fold, a transaction which would not have been necessary if the manorial flock was entitled to common grazing on the fallow.²² So highly valued was the tathe of the fold — it was valued at 2s per acre at Antingham and 2s 6d per acre at both Blickling and Saxthorpe — that it was evidently reserved to the exclusive use of the demesne. This is specified as having been the case at Gimingham and Hevingham, an account roll of the former referring to *agistamento de xiiij^{xx} bidentes de collecto in falda domini per messorum pro dominica terra compostand hoc anno* (the term *bidentes de collecto* probably refers to the cullet sheep which villein and other tenants were obliged to place in the lord's custody).²³ That sheep folds and flocks were confined to the demesnes is also implicit in certain more general statements. At Horstead-and-Stanninghall the fellows of King's College, Cambridge were entitled, as lords of the manor, to 'feede and depasture their sheepe in and uppon the . . . Commons and heathe ground and in and upon the . . . inclossuer called the hundred Acres and upon other demesnes of the said Manor wth libertie of shackle for the same sheepe yeerlie in shackle tyme', and at Catton there was 'A Foldcourse for 300 sheep being only on the Shack of the Lands belonging to the sd. manor'.²⁴

Whilst reinforcing the impression that there was no attempt to co-ordinate the distribution of fallow strips and subject them to rights of foldcourse or any other collective grazing right, these references nonetheless testify to seigneurial intervention in certain aspects of animal husbandry. In particular, manorial lords enjoyed certain privileges with regard to sheep folding. On many manors, such as Gimingham and Hevingham, the lord was entitled to the tathe of his customary tenants' sheep, a right which is specified in a number of manorial extents. Thus, at Heigham-by-Norwich in 1275 it was recorded of Simon Bele, villein, that *debet habere omnes bidentes suas in falda domini a Pentecosta usque ad festum Sancti Martini*.²⁵ In addition, at Horstead-and-Stanninghall and Catton, as also at Gimingham and Hevingham and several other townships, the manorial lord was entitled to feed his flock upon the common pastures and upon the common fields in shack time after the harvest. Such rights went by the collective name of 'liberty of the fold' (*libertatibus faldagii*) and in this form are recorded on many, although not all, manors in the area.²⁶ Nevertheless, there is nothing to suggest that manorial lords enjoyed superior rights of pasturage over their tenants' land when it lay fallow: in this respect there was a fundamental difference between 'liberty of the fold' and the right of foldcourse.

This fundamental difference between the right of foldcourse and its diminutive, 'liberty of the fold', reflected the varying importance of sheep rearing within the rural economy. In sandy western Norfolk sheep rearing was at least as important as the grain production with which it was so closely integrated, and

²² *Et de vijs. vjd. receptis de diversis hominibus pro iij acris terre cum falda domini compostand hoc anno pro acra ijs. vjd.* (NRO: NRS 10196 25 A 1). Similar payments are recorded at Antingham (NRO: MS 6031 16 B 8) and Saxthorpe (NRO: 19677 42 E 3).

²³ NRO: MS 6001 16 A 6. The entry relating to Hevingham is much the same (NRO: NRS 14747 29 D 4). Other references to 'cullet sheep' occur at Ashby (NRO Diocesan Est/9) and Martham (NRO: NNAS 5900 20 D 1). See also N Davis, 'Sheep Farming Terms in Medieval Norfolk', *Notes & Queries*, 16, 1969, pp 404–5, and Allison, op cit, 1957, p 21.

²⁴ KCC: N 10; NRO Dean and Chapter Muniments MS 2669. Also an inquisition on behalf of the Abbot of St. Benet at Holme found that he had *faldam . . . in solo ipsius Abbatis apud Antyngham* (NRO NRS 3102 13 B 2) whilst at South Walsham Lady Margery Folyet possessed *cursus unius falde tempore aperto* (PRO: E 142 no 83(4)).

²⁵ NRO: Diocesan Est/2 (2/2). An almost identical arrangement prevailed at Taverham (BM: Stowe MS 936, f 30).

²⁶ Rye, op cit, pp 16, 27, 37, 77; NRO: Dean and Chapter Muniments, Leases 1st Ledger Book, f 128. References to 'foldcourses' at Cawston (NRO MS 12538 30 D 5), Roughton (Rye, op cit, pp 165–7) and Westwick (NRO Pet MS 584/2/16) are to sheep-walks 'where never plough or fould for tashing doth com' (BM: Add MS 27403, cited in Postgate, op cit, 1973, p 317).

most manors carried large flocks, but in eastern Norfolk, where soils were heavier and more fertile, corn production was pre-eminent and sheep rearing was relegated to a much less prominent position.²⁷

Demesne flocks, according to manorial stock accounts, were generally either small or non-existent. This is partially explained by the fact that on large estates, such as those of Norwich Cathedral Priory and St Benet's Abbey, it was the practice to manage flocks on an inter-manorial basis and account for them separately. In 1343, for instance, St Benet's Abbey had 1900 sheep on the marshes attached to its granges of Hoveton, Ashmanhaugh, Worstead, Barton, Hardele and Kybald, whilst in 1420/21 a flock of 610 was inter-manorial between the three lay manors of Blickling, Gunton and Erpingham.²⁸ However, sheep rearing on this scale was possible only in the immediate vicinity of extensive marshes and heaths, and consequently on most manors the virtual absence of sheep from the stock account is probably a genuine indication of the unimportance of sheep in the rural economy. When this was the case, manorial lords appear to have relied upon their tenants' sheep to fold the demesnes, although to judge from the areas folded each year even these sheep were few in number. Folding was generally unrelenting from Lamas-tide until Martinmas (3 May — 10 November), a period of twenty-seven weeks,²⁹ yet on no demesne for which account rolls survive did the area folded ever exceed 35 acres, which implies that flocks

rarely comprised more than 200 animals.³⁰ At Martham, one of the most productive demesnes in eastern Norfolk, situated in the immediate vicinity of extensive marshland pastures, the acreage folded averaged only twenty-four acres between 1363 and 1400, whilst at Plumstead, a manor with an even more favourable location, it averaged twenty-six acres and never exceeded thirty-two acres.³¹ These were both intensively cultivated demesnes and it is possible that the smallness of the area available for folding rather than the small size of sheep flocks underlies these low figures, but, on the other hand, there is nothing to suggest that these demesnes failed to take up their full option on their customary tenants' sheep. On the contrary, there are cases in the court rolls of Martham of tenants who were prosecuted for evading their obligation to place their sheep in the lord's fold and at Plumstead the tathe of the fold was supplemented with additional manure bought in from outside.³² On other demesnes the area folded was frequently smaller still, as at Flegg where it averaged only nine acres between 1355 and 1427, and there were some demesnes, such as Suffield, where folding does not appear to have taken place at all.³³ In the few rare instances when the number of cullet sheep is recorded the small size of these flocks is confirmed. At Gimingham the number of cullet sheep folding the demesne ranged from 143 in 1358/59 to 280 in 1367/68, but was generally below 200 in number.³⁴ With flocks of this size it is no surprise to find that the acreages folded were never large and that the tathe of

²⁷ At Sedgeford in north-western Norfolk — Norwich Cathedral Priory's principal sheep manor — the profits of the fold regularly yielded over £15 a year in the late thirteenth century, whereas at Taverham, close to Norwich and in the vicinity of extensive sandy heaths, they rarely yielded more than £5, and on the important corn manor of Plumstead, usually less than £1 (NRO: Dean and Chapter Muniments, *Proficuum Maneriorum*).

²⁸ NRO: Diocesan Est/2 (2/11), NRS 10535 25 B 5.

²⁹ This is the period most commonly specified in manorial extents during which tenants paid *faldagium* and were obliged to place their sheep in the lord's fold: NRO Diocesan Est/2 (2/2); PRO SC 11 Roll 471, DL 29 289/4747.

³⁰ 'A thousand sheep would fold an acre of common-field land in a night', Thirsk, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, p 188. Similarly, Kerridge has estimated that it took 200 sheep a week to tathe one statute acre (E Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution*, 1967, pp 74–5).

³¹ NRO: NNAS 5894–5903 20 D 1, NNAS 5904–05 20 D 2, Dean and Chapter Muniments MS 5127–38.

³² NRO: Dean and Chapter Muniments MS 4998–99.

³³ NRO: Diocesan Est/9; PRO SC 6/944/1–6.

³⁴ PRO: DL 29 288/4719–20; NRO: MS 6001 A 6, NRS 11331–32 26 B 6, NRS 11058–60 25 E 2, NRS 11069 25 E 3.

the fold was jealously reserved to the demesne.

Under these circumstances manorial lords therefore had neither the need nor the desire to annex their tenants' land as well as their sheep and 'liberty of the fold' remained a right by which dung was appropriated to the demesne.³⁵ Indeed, several references in extents and account rolls imply quite strongly that villein tenants alone paid *faldagium* and were subject to the lord's liberty of the fold.³⁵ It would thus appear that this right was less an instrument of common-field management than of seigneurial exploitation and, as such, cannot be classed as part of the field system of this area. In fact, 'liberty of the fold' detracted from, rather than contributed to, the operation of these common fields. The right of the lord's flock to harvest shack meant that he had a vested interest in preventing enclosure and gave him the power to obstruct it, whilst his own right to the tathe of his customary tenants' sheep reduced the productivity of their land. However, these were essentially indirect influences upon the operation of these common fields; they did not seriously alter the pattern of remarkable freedom from all but the most fundamental common rules and regulations.

II

As the foregoing discussion has revealed, eastern Norfolk's common fields were more remarkable for their extent and degree of subdivision than for any superimposed field organization. By the close of the thirteenth century the only concession which appears to have been made to the fragmentation and intermixture of holdings was the institution of common grazing rights on the aftermath of the harvest. With this exception, their form found little expression in their function. As these common fields were so singularly lacking in system, therefore, it follows that

there could have been little that was peculiarly East Anglian about them; not even, in a negative sense, the absence of so many of the rules and regulations usually associated with common-field systems (for which Kentish field systems provide a direct parallel).³⁶ Some individuality certainly derived from the lords' superior position in matters of sheep folding; this, too, was related to analagous rights elsewhere, both within and outside East Anglia, and was more a manifestation of seigneurial privilege than an essential and integral part of the field system.³⁷ Moreover, the lords' control over their tenants' sheep was not absolute: it was restricted to customary tenants. The area's substantial freeholding population remained exempt.³⁸ The latter, even more than the former, therefore, enjoyed almost complete autonomy in the management of their land, an autonomy which, if the husbandry of the demesnes is at all representative, they undoubtedly exploited to the full.

Such conclusions clearly have a number of wider implications at both a regional and a more general level, not least in the modification which they make to established models of East Anglian field systems. Much still remains to be known about the function of field systems elsewhere in East Anglia, but meanwhile the evidence of field systems in eastern Norfolk does at least demonstrate that the peculiar pastoral practices long deemed to have been the special hall-mark of this region

³⁵ BM: Stowe MS 936, f 30; NRO: Diocesan Est/2 (2/2) and (2/8); PRO: SC 11 Roll 471.

³⁶ Cambell, *op cit*, forthcoming, Baker, *op cit*, 1965. Also A R H Baker, 'Field Systems of Southeast England', in Baker and Butlin, *op cit*, pp 393-419. Subdivided fields devoid of common rules of cultivation and grazing have also been identified in the Lincolnshire fenland, see H E Hallam, *Settlement and Society: A Study of the Early Agrarian History of South Lincolnshire*, Cambridge, 1965, pp 137-61.

³⁷ H S Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, Cambridge, 1937, p 77; P D A Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham, 1240-1400*, Oxford, 1965, p 62; M M Postan (ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, *The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2nd edn, 1966, p 601.

³⁸ For the number and distribution of freemen see B Dodwell, 'The Free Peasantry of East Anglia in Domesday', *Norfolk Archaeology*, XXVII, 1939, pp 145-57; H C Darby, *The Domesday Geography of Eastern England*, Cambridge, 1952, pp 361-2.

were, in fact, absent from large parts of it. Indeed, when more is known about field systems in Suffolk and Essex (as yet a serious gap in our knowledge) it may even transpire that the sort of loosely controlled common-field system identified in eastern Norfolk was the predominant form of East Anglian field system.³⁹ On currently available evidence it does seem that foldcourses, and the cropping shifts which were such an essential part of them, were confined to areas where soils were light and readily exhausted, pastures were extensive, and sheep rearing was the predominant pastoral activity. The light sand and good sand regions of western Norfolk and north-western Suffolk fulfil these criteria and, for that matter, also provide abundant evidence of foldcourses; but this is less true of much else of East Anglia, particularly on the boulder clays of high Suffolk and south-central Norfolk. In these areas, although there may have been a seigneurial monopoly of sheep folds, the existence of foldcourses remains to be proven.

Nevertheless, although East Anglian field systems are now revealed as less uniform than has hitherto been supposed, the differences between them should not be exaggerated; certain characteristics were shared by all of them, including an irregularity of field layout, haphazard inter-mixture of holdings, flexibility of cropping practice, common grazing of the aftermath of the harvest, and, perhaps most significantly of all, a seigneurial monopoly of sheep folds. This last feature, contrary to earlier belief, was subject to considerable variation within the region and did not always play a direct role in the management of the common fields. Nonetheless, that seigneurial control of sheep folding prevailed in principle, even where foldcourses were non-existent, is important, for it suggests that the East Anglian foldcourse may indeed represent 'the survival and

special development of a seigneurial monopoly which was once widespread'.⁴⁰ In other words, what in eastern Norfolk remained a mere manorial imposition, in western Norfolk, under different physical and social circumstances, was transformed into an integral and essential part of the field system. Proof that the foldcourse system actually originated in this way has yet to be found and requires a careful examination of medieval rather than later evidence, but such an interpretation does render this institution somewhat more explicable, and could explain why the right of foldcourse inhered in the manorial lord and not in the whole common-field community. Moreover, if foldcourses were imposed from above rather than evolved from below, then their failure to develop beyond a rather rudimentary stage in eastern Norfolk, even where the necessary physical conditions prevailed (as in the vicinity of the Broadland marshes and sandy heaths to the north of Norwich), may have been as much a reflection of the weakness of the manorial nexus in this locality as of any fundamental difference of geographical environment.

Placed in perspective, therefore, the foldcourse system emerges, like the infield-outfield system of Breckland, as a sub-regional response to particular environmental and social conditions.⁴¹ As such it was uniquely East Anglian, but whether the same was true of field systems in the remainder of the region is another matter. Certainly, field systems in eastern Norfolk showed little essential difference from loosely organized field systems elsewhere. This point is important, for earlier writers, preoccupied with uniqueness, have tended to stress institutions such as the foldcourse and aspects of land tenure peculiar to this region and have played down the very real similarities which existed between these and other field systems. In this context there is a particularly close resem-

³⁹ For a case study of Suffolk field systems see D P Dymond, 'The Parish of Walsham-le-Willows: Two Elizabethan Surveys and their Medieval Background', *Proc of the Suffolk Inst of Archaeology*, XXXIII, 2, 1974, pp 195-211.

⁴⁰ A Simpson, 'The East Anglian Foldcourse; Some Queries', *Ag Hist Rev*, VI, 2, 1958, pp 87-96.

⁴¹ Postgate, *op cit*, 1962.

blance between the field systems of eastern Norfolk and those of northern Kent.

With the reservation that there is yet some doubt whether Kentish subdivided fields were ever grazed in common after the harvest, there is little in terms of system to distinguish them from the common fields of eastern Norfolk.⁴² In neither case did common rotations exist, and in neither case were fallow strips pastured in common, with the result that both field systems gave scope to almost unlimited individualism in matters of husbandry. Moreover, the freedom which individual land holders enjoyed in the cultivation of their land was paralleled by their freedom to divide their holdings between heirs and even dispose of land *inter vivos*. As a result small holdings predominated, population densities were exceptionally high, and husbandry tended to be both intensive and productive. Yet underlying the high level of economic development attained by both eastern Norfolk and northern Kent by the high middle ages, and the close affinity displayed by their field systems, were settlement histories which could scarcely have been more different. Northern Kent was settled relatively early by Romans and Jutes, whereas eastern Norfolk was settled relatively late by Angles, Frisians and Danes. Such contrasting settlement histories, and yet such similar field systems, conflict with the hypothesis that regional differences in field systems were the outcome of the introduction to this country of different common-field systems by colonists coming from different parts of the continent.⁴³ Ethnic differences may well have underlain many of the detailed variations in tenure and custom but they do not seem to have given rise to functionally distinct and regionally unique field systems.

Rather than supporting a theory of regional uniqueness and an ethnic origin of

field systems, the field systems of eastern Norfolk and northern Kent (with their intense subdivision of land and haphazard inter-mixture of holdings) accord better with a concept of gradual organic growth. In fact, both localities furnish examples of townships (Martham in Norfolk and Gillingham in Kent) in which subdivided fields have been shown to have evolved spontaneously during the early middle ages.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, although supporting a theory of gradual growth, the development of these field systems differed in one all-important respect from that postulated by Thirsk; neither in eastern Norfolk nor in northern Kent did it culminate in the regularization of holding layout and the co-ordination of farming practices. Yet, according to Thirsk:

'... as the parcels of each cultivator became more and more scattered, regulations had to be introduced to ensure that all had access to their own land and to water, and that meadows and ploughland were protected from damage by stock. The community was drawn together by sheer necessity to cooperate in the control of farming practices.'⁴⁵

Undoubtedly the systematization of field systems conferred many real advantages but, on the other hand, as the experience of eastern Norfolk clearly demonstrates, failure to systematize was not necessarily inimical to agriculture and may even have bestowed certain advantages of its own. Thus, in eastern Norfolk the absence of communal controls meant that cultivators were free to innovate and thereby raise the intensity and productivity of agriculture. By the early fourteenth century the standard of cultivation in these irregular common fields had attained an exceptionally high level. This would suggest that the intensification of agricultural method was an alternative response to the

⁴² See above, n 36.

⁴³ This was the interpretation put forward by H L Gray in 1915. See Baker, *op cit*, 'Howard Levi Gray and English Field Systems'.

⁴⁴ B M S Campbell, 'Population Change and the Genesis of Commonfields on a Norfolk Manor', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXIII, 2, 1980, pp 174-92, A R H Baker, 'Open Fields and Partible Inheritance on a Kent Manor', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XVII, 1964, pp 1-23.

⁴⁵ Thirsk, *op cit*, 1964, reprinted in R H Hilton (ed), *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, Cambridge, 1976, p 16.

regularization of existing holdings and farming practice, as populations grew and land became more and more subdivided. These two responses were to a large extent mutually exclusive, for the methods of husbandry employed in eastern Norfolk by the early fourteenth century would have been incompatible with field systems which were any more closely controlled (ie which employed common rotations and enforced communal grazing of the fallow). It is also arguable that an absence of common rules left field systems more adaptable, better able to accommodate further increases in population.

The question thus arises, what caused some townships to regularize the layout of holdings and fields and adopt common rules of cultivation and grazing, and others not? Obviously there is no simple answer, but the experience of eastern Norfolk does suggest that one decisive factor may have been the balance of power between the manorial authorities and the peasant community. A conspicuous feature of East Anglian field systems is the part evidently played by the manorial lord in the institution of certain rights, notably the right of foldcourse, and in attempts, mostly abortive, to standardize the size of customary holdings.⁴⁶ The effective-

ness of the manorial lords in making any more radical changes was, however, severely curtailed by the weakness of the manorial nexus on the one hand, and the existence of a well developed peasant proprietorship on the other. In eastern Norfolk not only was there virtually no coincidence between manor and vill but the peasantry, many of whom were freemen and sokemen, were accustomed to divide, alienate, and cultivate their holdings as they pleased, and were patently unwilling to surrender any of these rights in favour of the introduction of a communal system of husbandry. So it would therefore seem that, far from having been evolved from below, the systematization of field systems was imposed from above; hence the generally close association between areas of strong manorialism and regular, highly systematized, field systems. How much more credible, therefore, is a theory which attributes the regularization of field systems, not to the corporate action of the peasant community, but to the intervention of some superior authority such as the manorial lord. The manorial lord is more likely than the peasant community to have been successful in reconciling the host of individual interests involved, and he possessed the authority to carry through and enforce the major reallocation of land which the regularization of holding and field layout would have required. It is to be hoped that further research into medieval field systems will cast additional light on this particular relationship.

⁴⁶ Manors where customary holdings had at one time been standardized include Martham (BM: Stowe MS 936), Lessingham (BM: Add MS 24, 316, ff 51-6), Cawston (PRO: SC 11 Roll 471), and Hevingham, Cricot Hall (NRO: NRS 19280 33 F 9).