

Discourses on British Field Systems

By ALAN R H BAKER

THE debate about the origins and development of British field systems must be one of the longest-running dramas of historico-geographical detection: it has, after all, endured for at least a century, since the publication in 1883 of F Seebohm's discussion of the English village community.¹ Far from flagging, the debate generated principally by H L Gray, by C S Orwin and C S Orwin and by J Thirsk, and sustained by numerous historians and geographers, has taken on a new lease of life.² The discussion thrives on the identification of new problems, on the utilization of new sources, on the application of new analytical techniques and on the consideration of new interpretative theories. Furthermore, temporal flexibility and spatial diversity characterized field systems, rendering difficult any mediation between local particularization and broad generalization. That such a dialectical tension can be mutually productive would not be agreed by all students of field systems. Both antagonists and protagonists of such a view could find support for their positions in three recently-published studies of British field systems.³

Consistently and explicitly theoretical approaches to the understanding of field systems have rarely been attempted, even though all historical enquiry occasionally demands imaginative leaps across gaps in the evidence. But Carl Dahlman relies un-

ashamedly and exclusively upon secondary sources and upon a theoretical approach in his search for an explanation of the totality of relations that formed 'the open field system'. After identifying the salient characteristics of the system, Dahlman endeavours to construct an economic model which will adequately account for all of them, in the explicated belief that existing views cannot do so. His approach is grounded in economic theory relating to property rights, to transaction costs and to institutions. His argument is complex. Theoretical analysis of the economics of common pastures, of common fields and of enclosure leads Dahlman to conclude that open field systems were economically rational institutions intended to maximize communal organization in order to minimize transaction costs. Dahlman argues that through village councils decision-costs about the use of resources could be kept low by the implementation of a known and stable rule for the reaching of collective decisions, and this saved on the costs of a chain of private transactions. 'The collective ownership of the waste saves on the costs of establishing joint usership of the grazing areas as compared with private property in the waste because it eliminates the necessity of a series of transactions. The scattering [of parcels in open fields] while imposing some costs on the individual, saves on other costs by virtue of the fact that it creates the incentive for the farmer to keep the collective decision-making organization strong and viable; thus, scattering saves on the costs of market exchanges required to make the farmer participate in the communal grazing.'⁴ Collective property rights were

¹F Seebohm, *The English Village Community*, 1883.

²H L Gray, *English Field Systems*, Cambridge, Mass, 1915; C S Orwin and C S Orwin, *The Open Fields*, Oxford, 1938; J Thirsk, 'The Common Fields' *Past and Present*, XXIX, 1964, pp 3-29; A R H Baker and R A Butlin (eds), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, Cambridge, 1973.

³C J Dahlman, *The Open Field System: a Property Rights Analysis of an Economic Institution*, Cambridge, 1980; R A Dodgshon, *The Origin of British Field Systems: an Interpretation*, 1980; T Rowley (ed), *The Origins of Open Fields*, 1981.

⁴Dahlman, *op cit*, p 138.

cheaper than private property rights and farmers chose to preserve the scattering of their plots because this provided an incentive to farm collectively. In this way, Dahlman argues, an apparently inefficient system can be shown to have been an economically rational one, devised, imposed and preserved in order to maximize private wealth. The open field system gave way to enclosure only when agricultural specialization became profitable and a greater flexibility in production desirable. Creditably, Dahlman self-critically evaluates his theoretical interpretation and in doing so both adjusts it to bring it into closer accord with earlier work and rehabilitates much of this work within his own framework. This is a difficult but provocative book. Its strongly theoretical flavour will be unpalatable for many students of field systems but it ought nonetheless to be a stimulant.

A more broadly-based but equally interpretative approach to the origins of British field systems is attempted by Robert Dodgshon who has pulled together into a book the strands of an argument which he has been developing in an impressive series of disparate papers published during the last ten years.⁵ His book will demand notice from students of field systems who have neglected his papers, perhaps because of Dodgshon's concentration upon Scottish rather than English systems. From a perceptive critique of past work, Dodgshon concludes that the existing lack of consensus about the origins of field systems means that a new formulation of the problem is needed. Dodgshon is convinced that field systems were not consciously-designed institutions, considered responses to the desire for a communal system of farming. Field systems were, in his view, much more makeshift in character and origin, products of an amalgamation of responses to diverse influences not all of

which bore directly or exclusively upon the question of field layout. Field systems, he reasonably argues, need to be investigated as part of the total history of rural communities. Dodgshon pursues three main themes. Firstly, he investigates the origin of subdivided fields and argues that they were primarily products of piecemeal colonization (the sharing out of assarts) and that communal farming emerged as a response to the logistical problems posed by the formation of subdivided fields. Subsequently, scattered parcels were formalized into shared holdings. Secondly, he explores the nature of infield-outfield systems and suggests that the significant distinction was a tenurial one, between assessed (infield) and non-assessed (outfield) land, rather than a technical one, based upon cropping and pasturing practices. Thirdly, Dodgshon examines the evidence for the splitting of townships in medieval Britain into two or more sub-townships, postulating that such major reorganizations had important repercussions both for the remodelling of field patterns within such townships and for the adoption of similarly rationalized field systems in others, even though they did not undergo the splitting process themselves. This is an important book, simultaneously circumspect and provocative, the admirable product of a controlled and informed imagination.

Open rather than closed minds were assembled at an Oxford seminar on the origins of open-field agriculture, and Trevor Rowley has brought their private ideas into a public world. The result is a very readable collection of ten thoughtful essays. C C Taylor considers very cautiously the limited light which archaeological evidence can logically be expected to throw upon the origins of subdivided field systems, whereas David Hall more ambitiously but not always convincingly argues that the archaeological evidence indicates an eighth- and ninth-century origin for subdivided fields laid out *ab initio* rather than being products of an

⁵For a critique of these papers, see: A R H Baker, 'Observations on the open fields: the present position of studies in British field systems' *Jour Historical Geography*, V, 1979, pp 315-23. For the reply, see R A Dodgshon, 'Observations on the open fields: a reply' *Jour Historical Geography*, V, pp 423-6.

evolutionary process. Della Hooke examines minutely the evidence of pre-Conquest charters of the West Midlands, concluding that subdivided common, meadow and arable lands were well-established in some areas by the late Anglo-Saxon period. H S A Fox contributes a scholarly survey not so much of the earliest origins but of the adoption of what he persists in calling the Midland field system. His combined topographical and comparative approach leads him to conclude that Thirsk's chronology of the maturation of common field systems was correct relatively rather than absolutely and that the system was probably a response to the growing scarcity of pastures rather than to the growing pressure of populations and that it was possibly linked to the fission of multiple estates and their settlements in the late-Saxon period. Searching for an explanation of regional variations in field systems, Bruce Campbell also questions whether the structural remodelling of field systems should be seen as a response to differential population pressure because an alternative response was technological innovation (the adoption of new methods) and involution (the intensification of existing methods). Thus very progressive agricultural methods came to be associated with highly irregular field systems in certain regions. While this regional variation might have been related to population pressure it was, Campbell argues, also likely to have been associated with differences in lordship: regular common field systems being linked to strong lordship, irregular field systems to weak lordship. In another general essay Dodgshon usefully summarizes the views expounded in his book.

The remaining contributions in the Rowley volume are somewhat more local and less speculative in character. Brian Roberts argues that comparison of field forms derived from widely differing spatial and temporal contexts is 'an attractive but dangerous exercise'. Nonetheless, his par-

ticular concern with the field system of one County Durham township does not prevent his offering generalizations about the origins of townfields and comparisons with continental European studies. The difficulty he encounters in tracing the origins of the field systems of a single township underscores the problems faced by endeavours to generalize about field systems as a whole. Victor Skipp's detailed examination of the evolution of settlements and open fields in five contiguous north Arden parishes leads him to conclude that 'although an evolution from communal assarting and co-aration could never be proved, so much circumstantial evidence seems to point in this direction . . . that it would at least appear to be the most likely available explanation'. Planned field systems in Holderness are investigated by Mary Harvey, who suggests for them a post-Conquest origin related to lordship and to tax assessments. Finally, Glanville G R Jones's examination of early customary tenures in Wales leads him to conjecture that the origins of subdivided fields in both England and Wales must be sought in a distant British past. The variety of approaches and views represented in these papers produced an editorial despondency, for Rowley pronounced: 'It is impossible to come to any conclusions which would be either chronologically or geographically valid. There was no consensus at the seminar.'

Such a negative assessment, if justified, would be a sad commentary upon more than a century of scholarship. But Dodgshon has also opined that there is still no agreement on any major aspect of the origins of field systems. Such pessimism is arguably both ill-founded and mis-placed: much has been learned (the discoveries of earlier workers are too easily understated in order to excuse our own limited achievements), and the whole truth will never be revealed (to believe otherwise is to create the intellectual frustration of expectations beyond realization). The spatial diversity, the temporal flexibility and

the functional complexity of field systems linked both with the incomplete and inconclusive character of much of the evidence relating to them and with the inevitably sterile, endless, search for ultimate origins constitute an eternal triangle: no matter how much pressure is exerted upon one or more sides, it retains its shape and steadfastly refuses to be changed into a circle. Each generation of students, it seems, has to learn this lesson anew: in the study of field systems 'there is no such thing as success, only degrees of unsuccess'.⁶

Although the precise origins — in terms both of chronology and of causes — of many subdivided field systems are unknown and will remain unknowable, understanding of the functioning and transformation of such systems in particular periods and places has advanced considerably and is undoubtedly capable of being further enhanced. A research emphasis upon function and processes of change is likely to be more enlightening than one upon genesis and origins. In particular, any attempt to offer a mono-causal explanation of the development of subdivided field systems must surely now be discredited at the outset. The roll-call of the 'causes' of such systems is long: it includes co-aration, shareholding, partible inheritance, piecemeal colonization, risk aversion, planned rationalization and remodelling, and the minimization of transaction costs. To require only one of these to step forward as the prime instigator is to misunderstand the nature of the problem, the essentially interdependent development of the individual components of a system. It is unduly simplistic, for example, to argue that all open field systems were products of risk aversion when this objective could also be achieved by

enclosed field systems and when other processes can more convincingly be shown to have produced patterns of scattered parcels.⁷ At least a more functional, at best a more holistic, interpretation of field systems is to be expected and is now almost invariably attempted by those who have immersed themselves in detailed studies of particular open field systems.

The limitations of mono-causal explanations ought not to deter — indeed, should encourage — attempts to formulate comprehensive generalizations which will serve to integrate conceptually the processes operating in the development of field systems both through time and over space. Many of the generalizations advanced tentatively a decade ago remain worthy of further consideration.⁸ The works under review here build upon those generalizations rather than undermine them: they signal most significantly a shift of emphasis towards the Anglo-Scandinavian period as being especially formative, and consequently towards a more effective combination of archaeological, topographical and documentary evidence than was offered previously. Given the different field systems which have been specified for particular periods and places, two important, comparative, tasks demand attention: the recognition of synthesizing concepts which will enable us firstly to interpret changes in field systems historically and, secondly, to understand contrasts in field systems geographically. For any *general* interpretation of field systems to be acceptable it must be capable of accommodating their *regional* differences.

One potentially integrative concept is that of scarcity.⁹ Before and throughout the early medieval period, British agricultural communities struggled not to produce a surplus

⁶The phrase was originally applied to the practice of historical geography: H C Darby, 'An Historical Geography of England: Twenty Years After' *Geog Jour*, CXXVI, 1960, pp 147-59 (on p 155).

⁷D N McCloskey, 'The Persistence of English Common Fields' in W N Parker and E L Jones (eds), *European Peasants and their Markets*, Princeton, 1975, pp 71-119, and 'English Open Fields as Behaviour towards Risk' *Research in Economic History*, I, 1976, pp 124-70. For discussion of the risk-aversion thesis, see Baker, *op*

cit, pp 317-20 and D N McCloskey, 'Another Way of Observing the Open Fields: a Reply to A R H Baker' *Jour Historical Geography*, V, 1979, pp 426-9.

⁸Baker and Butlin, *op cit*, pp 619-56.

⁹J-P Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, Paris, 1960; trans A Sheridan-Smith, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, London, 1976, pp 122-52.

— as historical materialists might argue — but in order to survive. The struggle was fundamentally between man and nature: its outcome was a 'naturally' produced scarcity rather than a 'socially' produced surplus. In an economy within which *capital* did not yet play a leading role and in which *labour* tended to be in plentiful supply, it was *land*, in its varied forms, which constituted the scarce resource. This concept of an enslaving scarcity is, of course, one that cuts across liberalizing optimism about the progressive conquest of nature embodied in the romantic narrative success story of the making of the landscape in terms of woodland clearance, marshland drainage and heathland reclamation. Pressure upon resources — wastes, woods, pastures, meadows, and arable — was continuous but not (given, for example, demographic fluctuations) on a constant level. The problem of scarcity was countered by both social and technical solutions: a common field system may be viewed as a group project to overcome scarcity, as a means of ensuring personal survival, preserving a collective but not an individual freedom. The considered use of physical resources and their increasingly sophisticated management in order to limit — and possibly to transcend — scarcity become, according to this view, the *general* issues requiring adequate explanation in any *particular* historical context. A planned response — whether by individual householders or by whole communities — to the problems of scarcity may be postulated as the norm and the historical and archaeological record searched for evidence of it.

The concept of scarcity and the idea of planning have been implicit in many studies of field systems and are increasingly being made explicit. H L Gray long ago recognized the role of extensive wastes, woods, pastures, and meadows in the development of what he termed irregular field systems: where such foraging resources were, for whatever reason, scarce, the arable itself was likely to be managed additionally for

pasturage.¹⁰ Such management practices varied in detail from one community to another but, as Fox stresses, their *principle* underpinned the regular open field system of many Midland townships. As pasturage resources became increasingly scarce, so their management tended to become more precisely regulated. Similarly, Maitland long ago detected a movement in land law from the vague to the definite, and Dodgshon now argues that as certain categories of land resource became more scarce so property rights came to be more assiduously defined.¹¹ Dodgshon paints a convincing picture of adaptable farming communities emerging in response to the practical problems posed by subdivided fields, with some resources within a township being communalized before others. Over time there was a cumulative recognition of devices for controlling the resources of a community: there emerged a variety of regulations and arrangements for controlling grazing, for the planned use of scarce pasture resources. Such control might be exerted by small groups of farming households acting in their collective interest or by all of the farmers in a township where the lordship was strong enough to translate local agreements into ones affecting an entire community. Evidence is coming increasingly to light of the ability of farming communities throughout the British Isles at differing times to undertake wholesale physical replanning, the *remembrement* of their farm holdings, of their field and parcel patterns, and even of their settlements. The challenge here is to reveal the planning principles, the conscious ideas, which operated to produce particular regulated landscapes: to decode convincingly not only the letters, words and sentences of such a landscape but also its grammatical and syntactical rules.

Similar ends could, of course, be achieved by varied means and to differing degrees: a uniformity of field forms and systems is not

¹⁰ Gray, *op cit*, pp 47, 83–97.

¹¹ Dodgshon, *op cit*, pp 52–3.

to be expected either temporally or spatially. The geographical diversity of British field systems has been as much a challenge to scholars as has their historical complexity. The rationale for stressing differences rather than similarities is provided, for example, by Postan's claim that 'it is even more dangerous to generalize about the organization of medieval agriculture than about its physical and demographic background. The rules and institutions which regulated medieval agriculture and ordered rural society differed in almost every particular from place to place and from generation to generation.'¹² Countless local and regional studies appear to provide support for this view and it is easy to make a case for the uniqueness of any particular field system. It is much more difficult to search for acceptable generalizations. Spatial differences locally, regionally and nationally in the complex of factors — physical, socio-economic, cultural, technological — influencing field systems inevitably resulted in contrasting rural settlement patterns and farming systems. These spatial differences were compounded by temporal discontinuities (the history of British farming systems is not one of continuous and uninterrupted progression towards increasing sophistication, commercialization and specialization) and diffusions (the process of the diffusion of agricultural innovations meant that, in respect both of individual practices and of entire farming systems, there existed time-lags in agricultural development from one area to another). The identification and interpretation of basic regional contrasts in British field systems at particular moments or periods in their history remains a difficult but worthwhile task. Such endeavours — for example, those of H L Gray and of Joan Thirsk — at the very least provide a regional framework within which further research can be conducted and correlated.

¹² M M Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime. 7. England' being pp 548–632 of M M Postan (ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe: I. The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn, 1966. The quotation comes from p 571.

But behind and beyond this regional complexity there might be detectable a fundamental simplicity. Baker and Butlin suggested that it could be argued in general that British field systems after, say, 1086, became increasingly varied, both in terms of the farming methods and systems of organization being practised. They considered that both theoretically and empirically there was reason to believe that an early and basic form of settlement and agrarian organization throughout much of western and central Europe, including the British Isles, was the hamlet and its associated infield-outfield system and that a variety of settlement and field systems evolved from this basic model.¹³ This view is strengthened in principle (if not precisely in practice) by more recent work. For example, Dodgshon's studies lead him to challenge the notion of regional types of field systems possessing substantive differences: 'Field systems everywhere were structured in response to the same basic problems. When sorting out regional differences, it is the variety of response, not the variety of influences, that we need to focus upon.'¹⁴ Similarly, while finding some room for the role of diffusion, Fox concludes that 'there is much to be said for the notion that communities arrived independently at the same solutions as they approached towards the adoption of the Midland system'.¹⁵ And although Campbell challenges the Thirsk thesis in his interrogation of the regional dimension of common field origins, by suggesting that the remodelling of field systems was likely to occur in areas of low population pressure and strong lordship, he nonetheless also extends it by associating areas of high population pressure and weak lordship with the intensification of irregular field systems with a minimum of common rights and regulations.¹⁶ The complex medieval field systems of East Anglia studied

¹³ Baker and Butlin, op cit, pp 655–6.

¹⁴ Dodgshon, op cit, p 25.

¹⁵ Rowley, op cit, p 102.

¹⁶ Rowley, op cit, p 125–9.

by Campbell contrast with the Midland system described by Fox and the early field systems envisaged by Dodgshon. But all three systems have both theoretical and evidential links, whose detailed investigation — as opposed to general exploration — demands more and closer co-operation among students of British field systems than has been customary. Perhaps the research effort in this academic field now needs to be remodelled, the efforts of pioneering indi-

viduals concerted into a communal organization. The study of British population history has progressed in this way.¹⁷ A modest first step would be for Campbell, Dodgshon and Fox to work as a collective, synthesizing their ideas and experiences. Seebohm would have relished the formation of such a scholarly community.

¹⁷Through the collaborative work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure: E A Wrigley and R S Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871*, London, 1981.

NOW AVAILABLE

Oxfordshire Village Life:

***The Dairies of George James Dew (1846–1928),
Relieving Officer***

edited by PAMELA HORN

100 pp (including index) + 2 illustrations

price £3

A unique record of poor law matters in the 1870s as seen by an 'insider'. Dew also has some perceptive comments to make on labouring life, agricultural trade unionism, school attendance, child employment, rural feasts and festivals, country sports, and village superstitions.

Also available by Pamela Horn

William Marshall (1745–1818) and the Georgian Countryside

88 pp (including index) + 3 illustrations

price £3

A Georgian Parson and his Village:

The Story of David Davies (1742–1819)

90 pp (including index) + 2 illustrations

price £2.80

The life and career of the author of *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (1795).

In conjunction with the Institute of Management Services

The Development of Modern Management

by C A HORN

c 120p

price £3

All obtainable *post free* on *pre-paid orders* from

BEACON PUBLICATIONS

11 Harwell Road, Sutton Courtenay, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4BN