

Sand into Gold: the Evolution of the Foldcourse System in west Suffolk, 1200–1600*

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Abstract

This study charts the evolution of field-systems in north-west Suffolk during the later Middle Ages, a period often overlooked by historians of the subject. The whole area comprised extensive open fields in the thirteenth century, but thereafter two distinct and divergent field systems emerged from this common ancestor. On the light soils of Breckland, K J Allison's classic foldcourse system had evolved by 1600 from a more fragmented and flexible medieval predecessor. On the loamier soils, an informal medieval foldcourse system disappeared with the gradual spread of piecemeal enclosures. Such differences are explained in terms of the changing structure of landholding, the influence of lordship, and environmental factors. The evidence suggests that commonfield systems could undergo important – but hitherto unsuspected – institutional changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: changes which were germane to the seventeenth-century improvements in agrarian productivity recently advocated by some historians.

THE main features of East Anglian agriculture in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are well documented. Not only was overall production rising, but it had become locally specialized to a large degree.¹ In part, this specialization had been facilitated by the spread of enclosures across former medieval open fields during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This enclosure movement was so widespread that in 1573 Thomas Tusser described Suffolk as 'severall' countryside, and Reyce wrote of 'manifold enclosures, severed with so many deep ditches'.² This

area was known as the stock-raising or 'wood-pasture' region, where farmers produced 'mutton and biefe, corne, butter, and cheese of the best'.³ Yet the enclosure movement did not encompass all of East Anglia, for it bypassed the eastern and western fringes of Suffolk and the light soils of Norfolk. Here the medieval open fields remained more-or-less intact until at least the seventeenth century, and some parishes were not enclosed entirely until Parliamentary enclosure itself.⁴ These distinctive open areas constituted the 'sheep-corn' districts of East Anglia, where the manure of large sheep flocks turned the blowing sands into profitable barley land.⁵ In general, this distinction between the sheepcorn and wood-pasture regions is useful and valid, although Overton has warned that these

*I am indebted to Bruce Campbell for his detailed criticism of this paper, and to Duncan Bythell and Alan Davison for reading an earlier draft.

¹ J Thirsk, 'The Farming Regions of England', in J Thirsk, ed, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, Cambridge, 1967, p 41; M R Postgate, 'Field Systems of East Anglia', in A R H Baker and R A Butlin, eds, *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, Cambridge, 1973, pp 284–7; C G A Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700*, p 107.

² T Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, Oxford, 1984, p 135; F Hervey, ed, *Reyce's Breviary of Suffolk*, 1902, p 14. See also R A Butlin, *The Transformation of Rural England 1500–1800: a Study in Historical Geography*, Oxford, 1982, p 44, and Clay, *Economic Expansion*, pp 117–8.

³ Tusser, *Husbandry*, p 135; Thirsk, 'Farming Regions', pp 41, 46–9; Postgate, 'Field Systems', p 289.

⁴ B A Holderness, 'East Anglia and the Fens', in J Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V, i, Cambridge, 1984, pp 205–7.

⁵ Thirsk, 'Farming regions', pp 42–6; D MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*, Oxford, 1986, pp 28–30.

divisions should not be accepted uncritically.⁶

Pasturing and cropping arrangements on these open fields were organized according to a complex and peculiar system known as the foldcourse.⁷ A foldcourse represented the exclusive right to erect a sheep fold on the fallow areas of the open fields, although many foldcourses also enjoyed grazing rights over other areas, such as permanent pastures. Hence communal grazing rights over the fallow arable were not extensive, as they were in the Midland three-field system, but were restricted to the owners of foldcourses. For a period after the harvest, known as *shack*, villagers possessed some grazing rights over daytime fallows, but at all other times access to the majority of pasture grounds was restricted to the carefully specified and delimited foldcourses. Communal cropping patterns were necessary to ensure that large, compact blocks of fallow arable were made available to each foldcourse, but the very nature of the system dictated that the cropping unit was the shift rather than the field.⁸ Ownership of these foldcourses was a seigneurial monopoly, and the rights of tenants were strictly limited. The only concession granted to tenants was an allowance to keep a few sheep in the lord's fold, known as a *cullet* right, and even their cattle had to be kept in a communal herd. Consequently, 'sheep

farming was the business of big men . . . the lords who were exploiting the privileges of the foldcourse . . . dominated the scene': a statute of 1533 even described them as 'covetous sheep farmers'.⁹

This brief summary is actually a description of the classic foldcourse system of c.1600 based on Allison, whose work is an outstanding pioneer study of a difficult subject. Its prime objective is to describe the agrarian system which prevailed before the 'new Norfolk husbandry' emerged in the later seventeenth century, and is regarded as the definitive work on foldcourses.¹⁰ The only substantial criticism to be levelled at Allison is whether his classic foldcourse model did in fact exist in all sheep-corn villages: Simpson, for example, has pointed to some subtle but significant local variations in foldcourse operation.¹¹ This issue certainly requires further research, as indeed does the glaring question of the foldcourse system's historical evolution. Hardly any work has been undertaken on how or when this foldcourse system emerged, which is surprising when one considers that the movement towards enclosure in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – and its attendant social tensions – is comparatively well documented in East Anglia.¹² What happened to the foldcourse system during this same period? Was Allison's classic model operating in c.1300: if not, what agrarian system pre-dated it, and when did it eventually emerge?

The scope of this article is geographically limited, but its findings should have general relevance to most of East Anglia: indeed, it would complement Campbell's pioneering

⁶ He argues that farming practices were not always uniform within these areas, and that 'while the sheep-corn and wood-pasture divisions provide some basis for a regional division they are an inadequate characterization of *farming* regions'; M Overton, 'Agricultural Regions in Early Modern England: an Example from East Anglia', University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Department of Geography Seminar Papers, 42, p. 23. See also below, n 66.

⁷ The basic works on foldcourses are K Allison, 'Sheep Corn Husbandry of Norfolk', *Ag Hist Rev*, 5, 1957, pp 12-31; A Simpson, 'The East Anglian Foldcourse: some Queries', *Ag Hist Rev*, 6, 1958, pp 87-96; Postgate, 'Field Systems', pp 313-22.

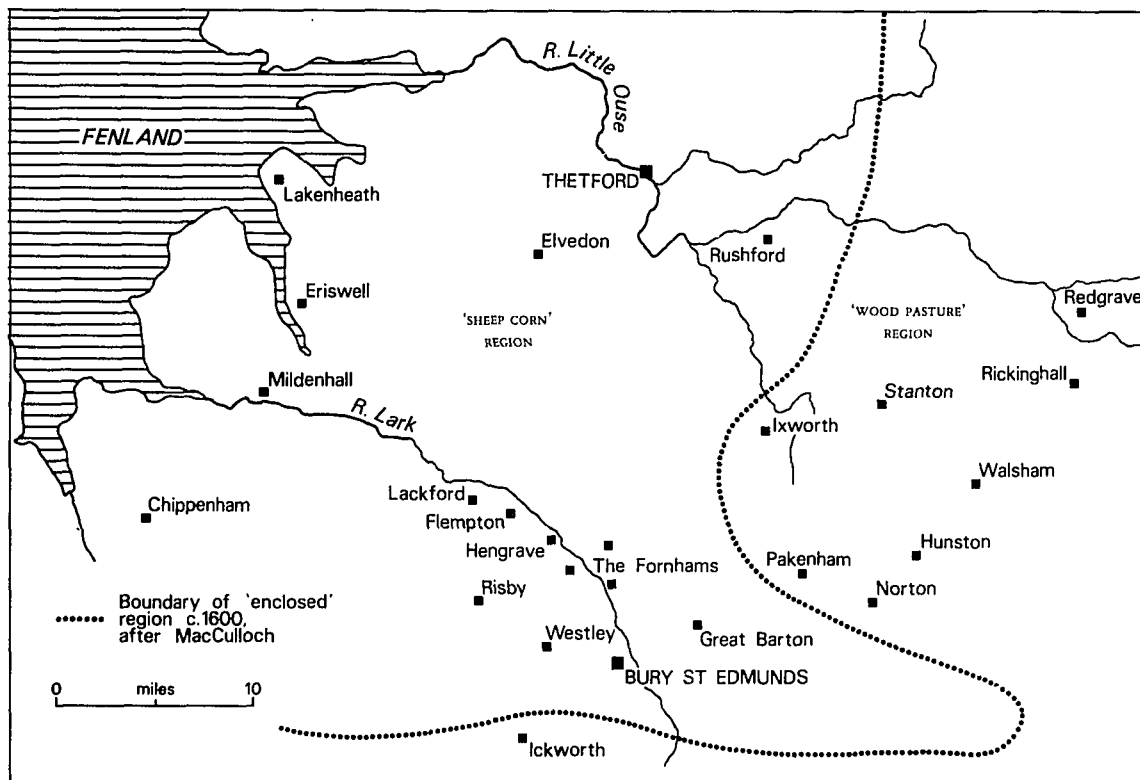
⁸ In the Midland three-field system, crop rotations were based on furlongs and fields, and, because these were relatively constant features, the system itself possessed a relative permanence. In contrast, crop rotations in East Anglia were normally applied by shifts, a shift being a group of lands cropped alike in any one year. Shifts were in no way constrained by field or furlong divisions, for they regularly transcended such boundaries, and consequently the 'field'-system was relatively impermanent. See Postgate, 'Field Systems', pp 296-300.

⁹ Simpson, 'Some Queries', pp 181 and 184.

¹⁰ Allison, 'Sheep Corn Husbandry', p 99.

¹¹ Simpson, 'Some Queries', pp 87-90. See below, n 89.

¹² Postgate, 'Field Systems', pp 287-90. For general trends, see J Cornwall, *Revolt of the Peasantry 1549*, 1977, pp 11-28; S K Land, *Kett's Rebellion: the Norfolk Rising of 1549*, Ipswich, 1977, pp 8-9.



MAP 1
North-west Suffolk in the later Middle Ages

work on the region's late medieval field-systems.¹³ Its focus is a small area of north-western Suffolk which straddles the poor sands of Breckland and the heavier loams of high Suffolk (Map 1). In the fourteenth century much of this area comprised extensive open fields. A few enclosures of both arable and pasture land did exist, but cumulatively did not constitute a substantial proportion of the overall area of any one village. Yet by c1600, much of the heavier land in the eastern and southern portion of the study area had become enclosed, whilst the lighter land in and around Breckland remained largely open. In fact, the distinction between these 'open' and 'enclosed'

villages is not always as clear as historians have sometimes suggested, for some 'enclosed' villages also possessed sizeable areas of open fields.¹⁴

The exact chronology and extent of enclosure on the loams of west Suffolk awaits documentation, and is a subject dealt with only fleetingly here. There are, in fact, three issues central to this discussion. First, why did an area of extensive open fields in c1300 give rise to two widely divergent field-systems by c1600?: on the one hand, a landlord-dominated foldcourse system on open fields in the sheep-corn region, and, on the other hand, an enclosed wood-pasture region. Secondly, were there any

¹³ B M S Campbell, 'The Regional Uniqueness of English Field Systems? Some Evidence from Eastern Norfolk', *Ag Hist Rev*, 29, 1981, pp 16-28.

¹⁴ A point which lends credence to Overton's reservations about a strict delimitation between agricultural regions in East Anglia, see below, p 55.

substantial changes in cropping and pasturing arrangements on these open fields during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? In other words, was there a historical evolution of the foldcourse system as monumental as the onset of enclosure in the wood-pasture region? Thirdly, what determined whether a village's fields remained open or became enclosed? Differences in soil type are acceptable as a broad explanation, but they do not satisfactorily explain why one village retained its open fields whilst its neighbour became enclosed. Did the existence of foldcourses act as a bulwark against enclosure?

The findings of this local investigation may, in fact, prove to have wider implications. Bruce Campbell has emphasized the importance of lordship in explaining regional differences in field systems, an oft-neglected topic which can be profitably explored here.¹⁵ Similarly, much of the literature on agricultural development, and on the evolution of field-systems in particular, has concentrated almost exclusively on improvements and changes which occurred in periods of population growth. There has been little research into the structural changes in farming arrangements and field-systems during periods of demographic decline, such as the later Middle Ages. Did the peculiar social and economic conditions of the fifteenth century effect any significant changes in field layout and organization, changes which could form the basis of more productive field-systems in later centuries?

I

In order to throw light on these neglected aspects of East Anglian agrarian history, more detailed research is necessary on the variety and evolution of local field-systems. Fortunately, enough is already known about the pre-industrial field-systems of Breckland to justify some general observations

on the development and evolution of foldcourses.¹⁶ This research has established two main points about Breckland's foldcourse system. First, the system of c 1600 operated locally in a very similar fashion to the East Anglian model described by Allison.¹⁷ The second point to emerge, however, is that Breckland's *medieval* foldcourse system was much more flexible and variable, and in some significant respects operated differently from its seventeenth-century successor. Indeed, it was also rather different from the agrarian arrangements employed on open fields elsewhere in medieval East Anglia.¹⁸

It is important to stress that there were many basic similarities between Breckland's medieval foldcourse system and Allison's model of c 1600. For instance, in both periods the manorial lord possessed the exclusive right to create folds, and also controlled the foldcourses' day-to-day operation.¹⁹ Yet the differences are of greater interest. Communal cropping was practised in medieval Breckland, but was more flexible over both time and place than the shift system of the seventeenth century which Allison described. For example, documents from the early modern period describe in considerable detail both the location of shifts and the cropping rotations imposed on them, because the shifts themselves were applied with relative consistency and rigidity. However, such descriptions are less

¹⁶ For the field-systems of medieval Breckland, see M Bailey, *A Marginal Economy? East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1989, pp 40-85; for the early modern period, see Postgate, 'Field Systems', pp 300-3; and M R Postgate, 'The field systems of Breckland', *Ag Hist Rev*, 10, 1962, pp 80-101.

¹⁷ As we shall see, the variations between local foldcourse systems were greater in the Middle Ages than in the early modern period. By the mid-seventeenth century, it is reasonable to argue that the East Anglian foldcourse system had largely matured. It is this later and standardized foldcourse system which is described by Allison.

¹⁸ Arrangements in medieval Breckland may have been flexible when compared to arrangements in later centuries, but they were still relatively formal in comparison to other areas of medieval East Anglia. For instance, few communal controls operated over the medieval open fields of eastern Norfolk, an area of relative freedom and individualism, B M S Campbell, 'Population Change and the Genesis of Common Fields on a Norfolk Manor', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXIII, 1980, pp 174-5.

¹⁹ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 72-4, and 76.

¹⁵ Campbell, 'Regional Uniqueness', pp 27-8.

common in medieval documents because individual shifts were more impermanent and prone to be broken down or changed after a short period, especially in periods of high demand for grain. The tendency towards a less formal shift system was particularly evident in villages on the edge of Breckland, where a more complex field-layout and a more fragmented manorial structure did little to facilitate strict communal cropping arrangements.²⁰

Perhaps the most significant difference between the medieval foldcourse system and its successor was in the nature of fold ownership, for in the Middle Ages there was no evidence of a seigneurial monopoly. Folds could belong to free and unfree peasants alike, and in some villages the total number of peasant-held folds outnumbered those belonging to the demesne. Peasant folds appeared in two basic forms. Temporary folds for a limited period (normally up to a year), obtainable by seigneurial licence and usually confined to the tenant's own arable land; and permanent folds, the right to which was attached to land or a tenement and was consequently protected by custom.²¹

The existence of peasant folds in the Middle Ages has certainly been acknowledged by historians, although their extent and number in Breckland has patently been underestimated.²² The presence of so many peasant folds can only imply that the medieval foldcourse system operated in a more fragmented and flexible manner than did the model described by Allison. The comparative rigidity of Allison's system is clearly illustrated by the example of Holkham in 1590, where the entire village was neatly divided between four compact, seigneurial foldcourses.²³ Organizing

communal shifts to accommodate these was a relatively simple task compared to arrangements in medieval villages, where the numerous small, dispersed, and fragmented peasant folds served to disrupt and undermine any such orderly or rigid format.

The greater fragmentation in the medieval system may help to explain some of the queries raised by Simpson concerning Allison's model. Simpson chastised Allison for his ambiguity on the question of who received the benefit of the fold's manure: essentially, Allison implied that all of the fallow arable lying within a foldcourse would be manured, regardless of ownership, whilst Simpson believed that it would be concentrated on the lord's demesne land.²⁴ The evidence from medieval Breckland indicates that there is no ambiguity here, for both interpretations are correct: demesne flocks were folded across all the open fields on the coarse soils of central Breckland, although in villages on the edge of the region the same flocks tended to be concentrated more on the demesne arable.²⁵

It would appear that – even in the seventeenth century – there were subtle local differences in the organization of foldcourses, a discovery which adds weight to Overton's point about the variations in farming practices within apparently distinctive 'regions'.²⁶ These differences were even greater in the Middle Ages, when it would be wrong to assume that an 'East Anglian foldcourse system' operated in a uniform or standardized format throughout the region. Campbell makes a similar point by arguing that the foldcourse system proper, such as existed in Breckland, should be distinguished from the right of 'liberty of fold', which was commonly found throughout

²⁰ Compare, for instance, the description of shifts in Elveden in 1616 with the medieval evidence: Postgate, 'Field Systems', p. 300, and Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp. 58–9. For the flexibility of medieval shifts during high demand for grain, see *ibid.*, pp. 208, 216–7.

²¹ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp. 67–8, 70–2.

²² Compare, for instance, H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*. Cambridge Mass., 1915, p. 342, and Postgate, 'Field Systems', p. 317, with Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp. 68–9.

²³ Allison, 'Sheep Corn Husbandry', p. 17.

²⁴ Simpson, 'Some Queries', p. 89–90.

²⁵ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp. 82–5. Similarly, the physical delimitation of many peasant foldcourses was restricted to the fallows of their owner's own arable land.

²⁶ See above, n. 6.

medieval East Anglia and was not necessarily connected with foldcourses.²⁷ Hence, compared with the early modern period, a variety of flexible foldcourse and folding systems operated on East Anglia's open fields; and, furthermore, in Breckland a much greater proportion of folds was in the hands of peasants.

II

This brief comparison demonstrates clearly enough that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries must have represented a crucial period in the evolution of the classic foldcourse system described by Allison. It also implies that whilst some villages underwent piecemeal enclosure, those villages which retained their open fields *also* experienced significant changes in agricultural organization. In Breckland, such changes were undoubtedly facilitated by the disappearance of the highly fragmented medieval landholding structure, and the gradual extinction of the smallholder. From the mid-fourteenth century, there was a slow but certain tendency in Breckland towards larger holdings, culminating in the creation of vast estates within three to four centuries. Ultimately, this resulted in a severe depopulation of the region, sometimes to the extent that whole villages were deserted, but at the same time it facilitated the imposition of a more rigid system of exploiting the land.²⁸ It is not coincidental that the foldcourse system assumed its most rigid and discernible form in the seventeenth century, after almost three centuries of

systematic engrossment and rural depopulation.²⁹ The dwindling numbers of smallholders, and the attenuation of their common rights, were central to the evolution of the foldcourse system described by Allison.³⁰

Although the emergence of a new landholding structure provided a framework within which a more standardized and rigid foldcourse system could develop, an important factor in the foldcourse's development was a gradual change in seigneurial attitudes to sheep farming. It is obvious from the nature of thirteenth-century fold ownership that peasants possessed more substantial and secure rights in the medieval foldcourse system than did their seventeenth-century successors. Prior to c1300, Breckland landlords often took only a limited direct interest in large-scale sheep farming. As a consequence, they were prepared to extend both permanent and temporary fold rights to a select band of peasants.³¹ Hence sheep farming in many thirteenth-century Breckland villages was concentrated into the hands of the peasantry. However, two main changes had occurred by the late sixteenth century. First, the overall scale of sheep farming had increased appreciably, and, secondly, the vast majority of sheep were now owned by landlords rather than the peasantry.³² It seems logical to presume that such drastic changes were only possible through a significant (but gradual) reorganization of

²⁷ Campbell, 'Regional Uniqueness', pp 22-6. Liberty of fold was fairly common throughout East Anglia, and referred to the lord's monopolistic right to fold his own land. This concept is distinct from foldcourses, which were largely confined to the region's lighter soils, and which encompassed a wider range of rights and communal cooperation.

²⁸ G E Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 1968, pp 26-31; Holderness, 'East Anglia', p 207; Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 51-4.

²⁹ For the gradual disappearance of the smallholder in Chippenham, on the south-western tip of Breckland, see M Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Cambridge, 1974, pp 66-71.

³⁰ Likewise, East Anglia's fragmented manorial structure, which had seriously undermined the imposition of strict communal controls in agriculture in the Middle Ages, was gradually rationalized after the Black Death by the purchase and absorption of subsidiary manors within individual villages. Some commentators have regarded this as an important prerequisite to improved farming, J Spratt, 'Agrarian Conditions in Norfolk and Suffolk 1600-1650', *Bull Inst Hist Res*, 15, 1937-8, p 114.

³¹ For speculation as to why Breckland lords in particular were prepared to allow such a high degree of alienation, see Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, p 72.

³² For the growth of the sheep population in this period, see M R Postgate, 'An Historical Geography of Breckland', unpublished London MA thesis, 1960, p 147; Thirsk, 'Farming Regions', p 43.

the foldcourse system in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³³ But is there explicit evidence from Breckland that the 'classic' system, as described by Allison and Postgate, was the product of centuries of evolution?

Little is known about the exact operation of Breckland's foldcourse system before the thirteenth century, but the right of foldsoke was certainly established at Domesday. During the twelfth century, traditionally a period when landlords took little direct interest in their demesne lands, it is reasonable to suppose that Breckland peasants were allowed to erect folds on a wider scale in lieu of their lords.³⁴ As long as the demesne arable still received enough manure to keep it in good heart, then alienating folds was acceptable. To ensure this, and because few thirteenth-century Breckland landlords kept many sheep themselves, the demesne foldcourses were normally stocked with the sheep of peasants who did not possess their own folds. Indeed, this was compulsory in most villages.³⁵ There appear to have been few—if any—formal restrictions on the number of peasant sheep in the lord's fold, although cumulatively each fold could not exceed a certain size.

From the fourteenth century, however, there is ample evidence that landlords sought to claw back these earlier concessions, and slowly reassert their theoretical monopoly of fold ownership. Inevitably, this movement coincided with a growing seigneurial interest in sheep farming; for instance, Bury

St Edmunds Abbey did not begin large-scale rearing on many of its manors until the early fourteenth century, and the Cluniac priory at Thetford greatly increased its operations in the fifteenth.³⁶ The initial expansion of seigneurial flocks was achieved without any significant structural changes to the informal medieval system, for landlords were able to increase their own activities simply by squeezing out the peasantry. For instance, there were 599 sheep recorded in Culford in the Lay Subsidy of 1283, of which only 0.8 per cent were demesne-owned, yet by the mid-fifteenth century Bury Abbey had established a farm of over 2000 sheep there. At Lakenheath, where the Priory and Convent of Ely *had been* active and prodigious sheep rearers since an early date, they increased their share of all sheep in the village from 40 per cent in the 1300s to around 70 per cent by the 1460s.³⁷

The rising importance of seigneurial flocks in Breckland was a gradual process, and to a large extent was precipitated by the general demographic decline of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As there were now fewer peasants to use the demesne folds for their stock, landlords simply began to fill them with their own sheep. For instance, it had always been compulsory for unfree peasants without their own folds to place their sheep in the lord's fold. But because the scale of peasant sheep farming had become so large by the thirteenth century, many Breckland villages needed separate communal folds, or *falda de collecte*, to accommodate them all: only in the smaller villages were peasant sheep actually folded with the demesne flock.³⁸ By the fifteenth

³³ Of course, the extent and timing of changes in the foldcourse system varied from village to village according to intensely local factors. The main manor in Sturston, in Norfolk Breckland, was held by an aggressive landlord in the late sixteenth century, and its foldcourse system probably conformed to Allison's model from this period. Yet in Lakenheath, for instance, monopoly of fold ownership was not achieved until the eighteenth century, Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 75–6.

³⁴ Although one reference in Domesday Book indicates that alienation had occurred in some villages at an even earlier date: in 1086, landholders in Risby 'belonged to the fold', '*excepto uno quia faldam habet per se*', *Little Domesday Book*, f 356b.

³⁵ On the Bishopric of Ely estates in 1251, the sheep of unfree peasants '*debent iacere in falda domini*': Cambridge University Library EDC G3/27, ff 146 (Bridgham), and 150 (Feltwell).

³⁶ H E Hallam, *Rural England 1066–1348*, 1981, p 51; Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 290–1.

³⁷ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, tables 3.7 (Culford); 4.15 and 5.7 (Lakenheath).

³⁸ At Lakenheath before the Black Death, some peasants had to place their sheep '*in falda domini de collecte*', and the manor also employed a 'village' shepherd as distinct from those working on the demesne. CUL EDC 7/15/11/Box 1/9 m 26; EDC 7/15/14. *Collecte* folds were also common in East Norfolk, and were used to tathe the demesne land: however, the Lakenheath *collecte* flock was patently folded on peasant land, Campbell, 'Regional Uniqueness', p 23; Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, p 83.

century however, references to communal folds disappear from manorial records, presumably because they had now been absorbed into the demesne folds. To some extent this made sense, because depopulated villages simply had fewer peasant-owned sheep, and therefore less need for a separate fold. Yet by absorbing the former *collecte* folds, landlords were at once able to expand their own flocks and reduce those of the peasantry.

It might be tempting to regard the decline of peasant sheep farming simply as a consequence of changing economic and demographic conditions. However, some landlords accelerated the process by deliberately restricting peasant operations, so that after the Black Death temporary fold licences were seldom granted to peasants on the Bury Abbey estates. In other cases, landlords committed overt infringements on peasant rights, and Bury Abbey sometimes retained peasant-owned foldcourses for their own use when the land to which they were attached had been escheated into its hands.³⁹ This fervent seigneurial interest in sheep farming still requires a proper explanation, but many landlords probably regarded sheep as their best defence against declining agrarian revenues in the fifteenth century. Wool prices were certainly depressed in this period, but sheep rearing was not labour intensive, and – compared with arable farming and collecting rents from an obstructive peasantry – it was administratively simple.

By these methods, manorial lords gradually tightened their control of local sheep farming, and in the process increased the size of their own flocks. The extent and timing of this movement varied from manor to manor, but the important point is that it was accommodated within the existing, rather informal, foldcourse system: there is no evidence of any major structural changes

before the mid-fifteenth century. However, in the ensuing century or so, rising agricultural prices encouraged landlords to increase production still further, and this could only be achieved by rationalizing the medieval foldcourse system. Landlords were certainly successful in raising output, for the sheep population of the sheep-corn areas grew rapidly in this period.⁴⁰ As a result, a real distinction between corn growers and sheep farmers emerged, and a new class of capitalist flockmasters was created. Most notable amongst these were the Townshends of Raynham, the Fermours of East Barsham, and the Heydons of Baconsthorpe, whose wealth and success is well documented.⁴¹ Yet such vast pastoral operations inevitably conflicted with the interests of arable farmers, the smallholders and tenantry. Indeed, historians have argued that these extensive pastoral activities were only made possible because the foldcourse system was inherently exploitative: they argue, somewhat blandly, that landlords 'used' the foldcourse system to invade peasant rights, or that the foldcourse system 'encouraged' landlords to specialize in large-scale sheep farming.⁴² In this light, the foldcourse is seen as some powerful and iniquitous force, a servant ready to satisfy the rapacity of its seigneurial master. Whilst there is some truth in this, it is also important to stress that the flockmasters shaped the classic foldcourse system just as much as the system shaped their fortunes.

Evidence for this is patchy, but clear nonetheless. After the mid-fifteenth century, the continuing growth in seigneurial flocks was largely due to seigneurial

³⁹ Which happened at Risby immediately after the Black Death, West Suffolk Record Office Bury St Edmunds E. 3/15. 13/2. 11, and at Fornham in the fifteenth century, WSOB E. 3/15. 7/2. 10.

⁴⁰ Postgate, 'Historical Geography', p 147. K. Allison, 'Flock Management in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XI, 1958, p 99.

⁴¹ A Simpson, *The Wealth of the Gentry*, Cambridge, 1961, pp 182-4; Land, *Kett's Rebellion*, pp 8-9; A Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, 2nd edition, 1973, p 71.

⁴² This view of the foldcourse system is explicit in many works. See, for instance, S T Bindoff, 'Kett's Rebellion', *Historical Association Pamphlet* G12, 1949, pp 8-9; Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, pp 71-2; Cornwall, *Revolt of the Peasantry*, p 15; Land, *Kett's Rebellion*, pp 8-9.

aggression rather than rural depopulation. By this time, swollen demesne folds were becoming an intolerable strain on the medieval system, and some rationalization, or further restriction of peasant rights, was necessary if growth was to continue. The ancient peasant right to place a (theoretically) large number of sheep within the seigneurial fold was increasingly inconvenient to a landlord seeking to expand his own operations. Once landlords became committed to rearing their own flocks on a large scale, they no longer had any pressing need for peasant sheep to be folded on the demesne, and a move to reduce the scale of peasant sheep farming was bound to occur sooner or later. In some places – as we shall see – this resulted in flagrant abuse of the system. In others, landlords were content to impose formal restrictions on the number of sheep each tenant could keep in the lord's fold. This was essentially the 'cullet' right described by Allison, but here it is contended that this first appeared – in Breckland at least – around the fifteenth century, and that in earlier centuries peasants could theoretically keep an unrestricted number of sheep in the lord's fold.

There is explicit evidence that the 'cullet' restrictions described by Allison were a product of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At Mildenhall in 1465 the court recorded that all residents had agreed with the lord to keep a certain number of sheep '*pro tenura sua pro porcione terrarum suarum*', and thereafter men were amerced for pasturing sheep '*extraneos de Culieth*'.⁴³ At Flempton in the mid-sixteenth century, the manorial lessee was in dispute with a group of tenants over common rights in the village, which resulted in the tenants' conviction at the Star Chamber for various 'riotts and misdemeanours'. At this stage of the proceedings the manorial lord, Sir Thomas Kitson, offered to mitigate their sentences if they accepted certain demands over common rights. One

such demand was an agreement on cullet sheep, whereby the tenants would only be able to place a specified number of sheep in the lord's fold. Hence it was agreed that John Stapleton 'shall yearly . . . have and use the feed and goeyng of 6 sheep or any less number in and with the flock'.⁴⁴

The tightening of cullet rights was only one aspect of the general movement to impose restrictions on grazing rights for peasant sheep. Tenants in some villages were stripped of their right to keep any sheep at all. For instance, sheep rearing had been an important source of income to the inhabitants of Chippenham in the thirteenth century. However, fifteenth-century manorial courts repeatedly questioned the right of peasants to hold folds, and in the 1540s the demesne lessee even tried to deny tenants their right to have cullet sheep in the lord's fold. The lessee must ultimately have been successful, because in the seventeenth century every sheep in the village belonged to the manorial lord.⁴⁵ In other villages, landlords even prohibited the lessees of the demesne arable from keeping their own flocks. John Drury leased certain lands with a foldcourse in Risby, but the fold itself was stocked with sheep belonging to the landlord. Despite this, Drury had to supply hurdles for the fold and to pay the wages of the resident shepherd each year. His only benefit in this agreement was the right to tathe the flock over his arable land, and the meagre concession 'to have goinge in the seid flocke during the said ferme fourtie sheep'.⁴⁶ Naturally, the wool profits from the flock, a considerable sum, accrued to the landlord himself.

The development of a more formal foldcourse system from the mid-fifteenth century also involved a general tightening

⁴³ WSOB E. 18/451/5, courts held July 1465 and 1476.

⁴⁴ WSOB 449/3/4 m 7. Of other tenants, Gregory Brette was allowed four sheep, Francis Frank one, and John Norkard eight.

⁴⁵ M Spufford, *A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure*, Occasional Papers, Dept of Local History, Leicester University, 20, 1965, pp 20 and 44; Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, pp 63–4.

⁴⁶ WSOB 449/2/579.

of cropping and pasturing arrangements. The earlier system of numerous folds and highly flexible shifts was ideal for ensuring that as many of the medieval smallholdings as possible received manure. Yet such a fragmented and informal foldcourse system was inherently obstructive to large-scale sheep and grain farming. However, as holdings were engrossed, as subsidiary manors were bought up, and as the landholding structure was rationalized, so individual landlords came to enjoy greater coercive power over local farming practices: as a consequence, they found that they could increase agricultural output by imposing stricter controls upon the system of cropping and pasturing. There is not one explicit reference to shifts in the extant fourteenth- and fifteenth-century court rolls of Lackford and Flempton, but in the mid-sixteenth century the lord secured a legal agreement with the villagers that they 'shall keep shifts in Sowing of their lands there and shall not sow the same lands out of Shift or Order to the annoyance of the Sheeps Course'.⁴⁷ This does not mean that shifts were absent in the Middle Ages: the suggestion is that the sixteenth century saw greater interest in imposing a more rigid shift system. At Elveden in 1612 farmers agreed 'to plow the arable londs . . . according to shift, as have been accustomedly used for twenty years last past'.⁴⁸ The cropping system at Elveden had evidently undergone significant restructuring in the late sixteenth century, a change aimed at maximizing the area available to the lord's expanded flocks. Indeed, the same document explicitly notes that ploughing out of turn was 'to the prejudice and hurt of the lord's flock'. This represents a much more carefully structured and standardized

use of arable land than had existed in the Middle Ages.⁴⁹

This rationalization enabled landlords not only to keep more sheep, but also to grow more grain through the development of brecking. The practice in Breckland of cropping arable land at different levels of intensity (as infield, outfield or breck) has been described by Postgate, but it was not until the sixteenth century that this system really matured. A distinction between infield and outfield was evident in the Middle Ages, but *true* brecks – ie, occasionally tilled heathland – were rare and small.⁵⁰ Large-scale brecking was not practised extensively until the sixteenth century, and the reasons for this seem obvious. First, there was not enough manure to cultivate large areas of heathland in the Middle Ages, in contrast to the later period when there was a much larger sheep population. Secondly, peasant grazing and litter rights on the medieval heaths presented a formidable obstacle to its large-scale cultivation, so that the attenuation of these was an important prerequisite to brecking.⁵¹ The standardization of foldcourses, and the development of brecking, allowed the simultaneous expansion of both grain and sheep farming.

The wealth of extant documentary evidence relating to the sixteenth-century foldcourse system is largely due to the increase in legal disputes about its operation, and this growth in litigation is a sure indication that the system was undergoing significant changes. The disputes concerned a number of issues, but were all seeking to extend/clarify seigneurial rights, or to rationalize the system. The importance

⁴⁹ Indeed, there are a number of documents from around 1600 which contain highly detailed descriptions of the size and composition of each shift. This in itself suggests an increased formalization of the cropping system. It is not coincidental that there is very little explicit evidence of the operation of shifts from the Middle Ages, when the system was much less formal.

⁵⁰ Compare Postgate, 'Field Systems of Breckland', with Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 62–5.

⁵¹ The general nature of peasant rights on the medieval heaths are described in Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 55–6.

⁴⁷ WSROB 449/3/4 m 5.

⁴⁸ Ipswich and East Suffolk Record Office HD 1538/212 (my italics).

placed by landlords on controlling foldcourses is reflected in one case from the late sixteenth century, where two manorial lords both claimed to possess foldcourse jurisdiction over the same village. Such a conflict was always possible, simply because East Anglian villages often contained more than one manor, although normally one of the landlords was designated 'chief lord' and therefore assumed overall responsibility for regulating communal farming practices.⁵² However, the village in question, Rushford, was unusual because it straddled the Norfolk/Suffolk border, and a dispute arose over foldcourse jurisdiction on the parish's Suffolk side. It was argued that because the dissolved Thetford priory had held a number of foldcourses in (Suffolk) Rushford at various times in the fifteenth century, then the successors to its land must be chief lords there. However, it was established that these had not been *seigneurial* folds, but were either alienated folds or held on leasehold, and therefore the priory's rights – and hence those of its successors – extended no further. This was sufficient to establish that Rushford college was the chief lord of the village's Suffolk sector and so possessed full jurisdiction over foldcourses there.⁵³

Most of the legal records concern the direct activities of landlords against tenants. There were numerous attempts to extend the capacity of *seigneurial* folds beyond customary limits, often by amalgamating and enlarging *demesne* folds. Hence it was noted that the Monkhall and Stanes flocks in Rushford 'for diverse years past have been united into one'.⁵⁴ Yet the expansion of *demesne* folds often necessitated a radical restructuring of existing pasture arrangements. In some celebrated cases this entailed flagrant or even violent abuse of communal rights. At Sturston and Narford (Norf) in the late sixteenth century, rapacious landlords enclosed the commons, seized

foldcourses, and evicted tenants in order to expand their own sheep rearing activities.⁵⁵

On the whole, however, the violent methods employed at Sturston were rare and most landlords attained the same end gradually, through generations of attrition and litigation. There were two main objectives of this litigation: to attenuate peasant sheep-rights in the evolving system, and to refine all other cropping and pasturing arrangements so that greatly enlarged *seigneurial* foldcourses could be accommodated. Much of this legal action was successful; landlords possessed the wealth and resources to win court cases, and in any event were merely trying to reassert a legitimate monopoly which had been 'temporarily' alienated by their medieval predecessors. They suffered few legal reversals against tenants, although in one notable case at Eriswell the *demesne* lessee unsuccessfully disputed a tenant's right to erect a fold.⁵⁶

The swollen foldcourses of the sixteenth century were inevitably accompanied by constant overstocking of communal pastures and heaths with *seigneurial* flocks.⁵⁷ This represented perhaps the most persistent abuse of customary practices, and it was not uncommon for landlords to then enclose these pastures, legally or otherwise, and subsequently prevent villagers from using them. The tenants of Flempton and Hengrave enjoyed intercommoning rights on the parish boundaries at Dunsfield, but in the mid-sixteenth century Thomas Kitson secured the use of this ground 'in severalty and discharged of all common'.⁵⁸ Similarly, Ixworth heath provided permanent pasture for both the manorial flock and the villagers' cattle, but had become so overstocked by the late sixteenth century that it was

⁵² For chief lords, see Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 73–4.

⁵³ Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, Add Ms 740/785, ff 55–8.

⁵⁴ IESRO HD 1538/212, document dated 1612.

⁵⁵ K Allison, 'The Lost Villages of Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology* 31, 1955, p 136, and 'Sheep Corn Husbandry', p 25.

⁵⁶ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, p 75.

⁵⁷ The evidence for swollen flocks and the problems they created is documented in Allison, 'Sheep Corn Husbandry', pp 22–7. See also Thirsk, 'Farming Regions', p 43, and Postgate, 'Field Systems', p 319.

⁵⁸ WSROB 449/3/4 ff 3–4.

'lesse profitable to eyther lord or tenant'. Consequently the lord, Sir Daniel Norton, skilfully negotiated the right to enclose 100 acres for the exclusive use of his sheep flock, 'without the lest denyall or interruption of any of the said tenants'.⁵⁹

Landlord enclosure of common pastures was a source of friction between East Anglian lords and their tenants in this period. But social friction also arose from the obstruction of foldcourses by tenants, and some legal action sought to protect foldcourse owners from such infringements. Tenants sometimes enclosed their own land, thus denying access to the foldcourse, which happened in a well-known dispute at Westley in the late 1540s.⁶⁰ At Elveden in 1538 a group of villagers had moved the boundary stones of a foldcourse, thus illegitimately gaining access to over 100 acres of land. Sir Richard Fulmerston, the new lessee of the foldcourse, was well aware of this infringement, but 'hath no extents, rentalls, deeds ne other writings' to vindicate his case. In the event it took a lengthy commission of inquiry to establish his rights.⁶¹

Further examples of tenant abuse of the foldcourse system can be found throughout East Anglia in the sixteenth century, and could be interpreted as aggressive and gratuitous attacks on seigneurial rights.⁶² Yet in the light of evidence presented here, such actions could be construed more as frustrated outbursts at the long-term erosion of *tenant* and communal rights. Frustration of this kind almost certainly contributed to the smouldering discontent behind Kett's Rebellion in 1549, and most observers acknowledge that the revolt drew support from the sheep-corn regions of East

Anglia.⁶³ Was Breckland involved in the events of 1549? Fletcher believes not, on the basis that there were no hundredal representatives from Breckland among the rebel signatures at Mousehold Heath.⁶⁴ Yet this evidence may be misleading, for there is much to imply that Breckland inhabitants did participate: the rebellion started at Wilby on Breckland's Norfolk edge, the huge Castle Rising camp established a bridgehead in Breckland (at Thetford) before moving to Norwich, and the agitator John Chandeler claimed that the rebellion had the support of 7000 men from Bury St Edmunds and north-west Suffolk.⁶⁵ Yet whatever the contribution of Breckland to the events of 1549, and whatever the strength of popular feeling about the abuses of common rights, the average farmer could ultimately do little to prevent the agrarian changes around him: any obstructive activity amounted to little more than teething trouble in the evolution of the foldcourse system.

III

Taking East Anglia as a whole, enclosure of common pastures generated far more friction between lords and tenants than did the piecemeal enclosure of arable land. This is an important point, and the reason is simply that peasant farmers were themselves behind much of the early enclosure of arable land in central districts of East Anglia. More research is necessary before we can establish exactly how far this movement had developed in our period, but Map 1 indicates the traditional area of 'enclosed' villages at the end of the sixteenth century. Yet it would be wrong to assume that *all* of these village lands had become enclosed, or that there was no enclosure in the predominantly

⁵⁹ WSR0B E. 7/14/403.

⁶⁰ D MacCulloch, 'Kett's Rebellion in Context', *Past & Pres*, 84, 1979, p. 52.

⁶¹ IESRO HD 1538/212.

⁶² Postgate, 'Field Systems', p. 320.

⁶³ MacCulloch, 'Kett's Rebellion', pp. 53-4; J Cornwall, 'Kett's Rebellion in Context', *Past & Pres*, 93, 1981, p. 161. See also MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*, pp. 289-314.

⁶⁴ Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, p. 75.

⁶⁵ J Cayton, *Robert Kett and the Norfolk Rising, 1512*, p. 49; MacCulloch, 'Kett's Rebellion', p. 53; Cornwall, *Revolt of the peasantry*, pp. 206-7.

'open' villages.⁶⁶ There had been a few hedged enclosures in Breckland since at least the thirteenth century, as, for instance, in Fornham where fourteen acres of demesne land lay in *Nethercroft*.⁶⁷ Furthermore, there were some attempts to enclose open fields in Breckland, for at Elveden in the early sixteenth century there were 'three new closes bene nowe severally inclosed'.⁶⁸ In the main though, the cumulative importance of enclosures on the coarse sands of central Breckland was slight: only in the villages on its periphery, where soil quality was higher, did the movement make any real impact. For instance, on the edge of Norfolk Breckland at Feltham 18 per cent of demesne land lay enclosed by the late sixteenth century.⁶⁹ In fifteenth-century Mildenhall there were some attempts at piecemeal enclosure by peasants, although at Great Barton this movement was not evident until the next century. Hardly any documentary evidence of enclosure exists at Barton until 1518, when it was recorded that the vicar had 'newly enclosed one piece of land with hedges', which heralded a spate of enclosure over a small area of Westwall field.⁷⁰

Documentary evidence for enclosure is more plentiful from villages on the heavier soils, but statements about its exact chronology must await detailed research. At the moment, all that can be stated with confidence is that references to enclosure appear more frequently after the late fourteenth century; that the movement was essentially piecemeal; and that by c1600 much of high Suffolk was enclosed. Within these general parameters, the rate of change varied, and was certainly slowest in villages closest to Breckland. Ixworth parish straddles both loam and coarse sand, and by c1600 contained a roughly equal mixture of open and enclosed fields. In 1627, 64 per

cent of the demesne arable lay 'open in ye field', and yet 'the remainder . . . are contained in eight great pieces, composed of many small pieces formerly, now lying together'. Piecemeal enclosures continued here throughout the seventeenth century, with the final touches applied by parliamentary enclosure in 1807.⁷¹

To the south and east of Ixworth, the wave of enclosure had engulfed much larger areas of open field by c1600. A survey of Ickworth in 1665 reveals a patchwork of hedged enclosures, and the remnants of only a small area of open field: yet the village's medieval field-system is evoked by references to 'Ickworth Little field' and 'Ickworth Great Common field'.⁷² Walsham-le-Willows was patently an area of extensive open fields in the fourteenth century, but by 1577 around three-quarters of the village had been enclosed and laid down to grass. A few small parcels of land had been enclosed at a relatively early date, for in 1368 one rood of enclosed villein land was described in a land transfer. However, the main surge of activity occurred in the late fifteenth century, when there were numerous presentments for digging ditches and raising hedges.⁷³ At Norton there was considerable activity at an earlier date, especially in the 1430s and 1440s. The court either presented tenants explicitly for creating enclosures ('*x fecit unum inlausum*'), or for not allowing other tenants access to their land during the shack period (1 August – 2 February).⁷⁴

⁶⁶ See above, n 6 and 14.

⁶⁷ British Library, Add MS 34689, f 6.

⁶⁸ WSROB J515 f 45.

⁶⁹ Postgate, 'Historical Geography', p 115.

⁷⁰ Mildenhall, WSROB E.18/451/4; Barton Magna, WSROB E.18/151/1, courts held December 1518 and July 1524.

⁷¹ WSROB 2753/16/39 f 53; Postgate, 'Field Systems', p 287; C Paine, 'Ixworth, west Suffolk: a Study of a Small Market Town in the Seventeenth Century', duplicated, WSROB, 1972, ch 5.

⁷² O Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, 1986, p 129.

⁷³ K M Dodd, (ed), *The Field Book of Walsham-le-Willows*, Woodbridge, 1974, p 43; WSROB HA504/1/7 m 8; D Dymond, 'The Parish of Walsham-le-Willows: two Elizabethan Surveys and their Medieval Background', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 33, 1974, pp 204–8.

⁷⁴ WSROB 553/1–4. References to 'shack' regulations are the best indication that some form of communal agriculture was practised in Norton at some stage. I am indebted to David Dymond for allowing me access to his transcripts of the Norton (Littlehaugh) court rolls.

Whilst it is obvious that the enclosure movement advanced further in some villages than in others, and that its exact timing varied from village to village, the reason for these differences is less obvious. An answer to this might also provide a key to understanding why the 'common ancestor' of open fields eventually gave rise to two entirely different field-systems by c1600. Soil quality and landholding structure were probably important factors, as was the nature of local lordship: enclosers in one village might have met with greater seigniorial resistance to their activities than those in another. All of these elements require further investigation, but it would be interesting to speculate on one other possible explanation: the diverse character of the medieval foldcourse system.

We have established that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a more rigid and clearly defined foldcourse system evolved in Breckland. What is less apparent, and what has received little attention from historians, is that the contemporary enclosure movement in the wood-pasture region actually extinguished an earlier, informal foldcourse system from the loams of high Suffolk. In the Middle Ages foldcourses had operated over the open fields of a number of villages situated well inside the wood-pasture region delimited in Map 1. Domesday Book records foldsoke in Pakenham and Stanton, and a peasant fold was still nominally employed in Stanton in 1424.⁷⁵ Sokemen living at Hunston in the 1180s were entitled to erect a fold for a small fine, there were possibly two folds in Hepworth in the 1280s, and a fold-right was attached to a peasant tenement in Rickingham.⁷⁶ There were also folds in

medieval Norton, Redgrave and Walsham.⁷⁷ It is clear, therefore, that the evolution of a more formal foldcourse system in some villages was paralleled by its extinction in others.

To what extent can this phenomenon be explained by local differences in the medieval foldcourse system? Was the system which had operated in, say, fourteenth-century Norton and Walsham significantly different from that operating in Breckland, and does this difference help to explain its subsequent disappearance? There is little explicit evidence available, but from information recorded in court rolls it appears that the system of folding employed on Walsham's open fields was less rigid than that operating in central Breckland at the same time. In medieval Walsham, peasants had access to both temporary and permanent folds, although the latter were less common than in many Breckland villages. By the 1330s only two (small) permanent peasant folds remained, since three others had been systematically purchased by Ixworth Priory.⁷⁸ However, permanent folds were less important to Walsham's peasantry than the right to erect temporary folds, a right which was frequently exploited in the 1330s and 1340s when demand for manure was high. The exact number of folds varied each year, although in 1335 there were as many as 960 sheep in nine temporary folds, charged at 6d per score. Most of these sheep belonged either to the fold owners themselves, or to freemen.⁷⁹ It is significant

⁷⁵ For Norton and Walsham, see below, n 79 and 87; Redgrave, BL Add MS 31970 f 77.

⁷⁶ WSROB HA 504/1/3 mm 20 and 23; 504/1/4 m 10. Presumably the Priory was seeking to expand its sheep farming activities in the early fourteenth century. See also above, n 73. I am grateful to Ray and Jean Lock for allowing me access to their transcripts of the Walsham courts.

⁷⁷ WSROB 504/1/3, mm 19, 20, 23, 24, 28; HA 504/1/4, mm 10, 13, 15, 16, 21, 22, 24-31, 34. The startling increase in Walsham's sheep population in the 1330s is difficult to explain precisely. There is evidence of increased flooding in fen pastures around this time, which may have encouraged the transfer of sheep to higher, drier grounds; see M Bailey, 'Per Impetum Maris: Natural Disaster and Economic Decline in Eastern England, 1275-1348', in B M S Campbell, ed, *Before the Black Death: Essays in the Crisis of the Early Fourteenth Century*, Manchester, forthcoming.

⁷⁵ Little Domesday Book, ff 361b and 364a; WSROB 574/60.

⁷⁶ R H C Davis, ed, *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds and Related Documents*, Camden Society, 3rd ser, 84, 1954, pp 46 and 125; W Corbett and T Methwold, 'The Rise and Devolution of Manors in Hepworth, Suffolk', *Proc Suff Inst Arch*, 10, 1900, pp 37 and 41.

that after the Black Death very few temporary folds were granted by the lord.

These temporary folds appear to have been the peasantry's only source of sheep manure. In Walsham, as in Breckland, customary tenants who did not possess their own fold were required to place their sheep in the cullet fold each night.⁸⁰ However, the demesne and cullet flocks were folded strictly on demesne land, and the lord was a jealous guardian of this monopoly. This is a significant variation from arrangements in central Breckland, where demesne and cullet flocks were folded on all land, irrespective of its ownership.⁸¹ The confinement of manorial flocks to the demesne is clear from a number of Walsham court rulings after the Black Death. For instance, in 1388 two peasants persuaded a shepherd to remove their sheep from the cullet flock during the summer. When this was discovered by the authorities, the lord attempted to sue them for the loss of eight acres of manure on the demesne, valued at two shillings per acre. Similarly, in 1383, the manorial shepherd was amerced for illegally using the lord's fold to manure three roods of peasant land.⁸²

Sheep were essential to maintaining soil fertility in central Breckland, and as a consequence ranged over much of the open fields there. In contrast, sheep in Walsham were folded primarily on the demesne, and on the land of the few peasants who were prepared to pay for the right. In high Suffolk, where soil quality was higher and the area of permanent pasture more restricted, sheep featured less prominently in the local economy than in Breckland. In the Subsidy Returns of 1283, for example, there were under four recorded sheep per taxpayer in Walsham, as opposed to at least twenty in most Breckland villages.⁸³ As a

consequence, communal cropping arrangements, which in Breckland were designed to create compact areas of fallow arable for sheep, were much less formal in Walsham. Walsham possessed a loosely controlled commonfield system, which in many respects was similar to that operating in eastern Norfolk: shack regulations applied, but no communal rotations are discernible from the records.⁸⁴ Where Walsham differs from eastern Norfolk is in the number of permanent and temporary peasant folds operating on the open fields. Their existence *must* have necessitated some informal cropping agreements over certain areas of the fields, although – being a predominantly peasant arrangement – the manorial documents remain silent on the matter.

Whilst Walsham's rather informal fold-course system was partly due to the relative unimportance of sheep in the village, it also owed something to the village's complex manorial structure, and the tendency for manorial jurisdiction to transcend parish boundaries regularly: both of which undermined attempts at strict communal agriculture.⁸⁵ The greater emphasis on individualism in Walsham's agricultural arrangements, and the lack of any real seigneurial interest in large-scale sheep farming, militated against the development of more formal foldcourse arrangements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Given that Walsham's soils were inherently suited to good grassland and mixed arable farming, then enclosure was much the more likely development.

A similar picture emerges from Norton, although there the restrictions on peasant

⁸⁰ WROB HA 504/1/3 m 23; 504/1/7 m 15; 504/1/8 m 10.

⁸¹ Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 81–4.

⁸² WROB HA 504/1/9 m 1; HA 504/1/8 m 8.

⁸³ E Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred in the Year 1283*, Cambridge, 1910, pp xxx–xxxi.

⁸⁴ Campbell, 'Regional Uniqueness', pp 26–7.

⁸⁵ In eastern Norfolk, an area of very limited communal farming practices, medieval landholdings were small and the manorial structure was highly fragmented. Where lordship was more prominent, for instance in north-west Norfolk, communal farming practices were more evident, B M S Campbell, 'The Complexity of Manorial Structure in Medieval Norfolk: a Case Study', *Norfolk Archaeology* 39, 1986, pp 225–61. This general correlation applies to our study area: the greater complexity of manorial structure on the loams of high Suffolk, where villages lay closer together, must have undermined attempts at communal agriculture compared with villages in central Breckland. See Bailey, *Marginal Economy?*, pp 67 and 83–5.

sheep farming were apparent even earlier. The 1380s and 1390s were decades of widespread foldcourse abuse in north-west Suffolk, but there is no evidence of any illegally erected folds in Norton during this period: there was, on the other hand, some piecemeal enclosure, and – significantly – widespread damage to corn by cows.⁸⁶ The decline of sheep farming in Norton, and the disappearance of its foldcourse system, is confirmed by some fifteenth-century evidence. A rental of 1451-2 recorded that three tenants held foldcourses in Norton. In fact, the rental was merely recording a theoretical right to erect folds, because an account of 1424 had noted that all of these foldcourses were now defunct, presumably due to the spread of enclosures.⁸⁷

IV

This paper has touched upon a whole range of important social and agrarian developments, but its main aim has been to broach difficult aspects of the foldcourse system, a complex and often confusing subject. As a result, it might have raised more questions than it has answered, but hopefully some useful points have emerged. Historians have long been aware that increased regional specialization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries sharpened the distinction between the sheep-corn and wood-pasture areas of East Anglia. By taking an area of north-west Suffolk, this article has tried to describe the dual changes in agrarian organization which made this development possible; the evolution of a more rigid and clearly defined foldcourse system on the sandy soils of Breckland, and the spread of piecemeal enclosures on the heavier arable land of 'high' Suffolk. By 1600, a transitional zone between open and enclosed villages had emerged, though its

boundary was less distinct than that implied in Map 1.⁸⁸

Most studies of foldcourses have concentrated on the system in its mature form, and, indeed, Allison's model was constructed from documentary evidence dating mainly from the period 1550-1650. The aim of this article has been to explain, for Breckland at least, how and why this mature system evolved from a more flexible and informal predecessor. It is suggested that the complex manorial structure of thirteenth-century villages, the large number of fragmented smallholdings, and the domination of sheep farming by the peasantry, could only have been accommodated within relatively informal cropping and pasturing arrangements. However, the progressive amalgamation and engrossment of holdings, and the growth of seigneurial sheep farming at the expense of the peasantry after the late fourteenth century, provided a powerful stimulus for change. The peasantry's exclusion from large-scale sheep farming, and the emergence of a new class of aggressive flockmasters, were central to the breakdown of the medieval foldcourse. In its place emerged a more standardized, landlord-dominated system, but a system capable of producing both more wool and more grain than had previously been possible.

We should resist attempts to describe the foldcourse system as if it operated in some standardized form throughout East Anglia. Local nuances and peculiarities were prominent in the Middle Ages, although as the system evolved and matured, so they became less pronounced.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the

⁸⁸ Overton, 'Agricultural Regions', p. 23.

⁸⁹ Simpson's article on the foldcourse was designed to draw attention to evidence from some villages which did not correspond entirely with Allison's classic model, Simpson, 'Some Queries', pp. 87-90, and above, n. 11. This article argues that such discrepancies were the norm, and that their existence in no way invalidates the basic features of Allison's model. In general, as local foldcourse systems evolved, so the differences between them became less pronounced. What Simpson's work emphasizes is that local foldcourse systems evolved at different paces, depending on various local factors, and that extant documentary evidence can only 'photograph' these systems at varying levels of maturity.

⁸⁶ WROB 553/57.

⁸⁷ WROB HD 530; 553/26 and 28.

evidence presented here, emphasizing the foldcourse's evolutionary nature, provides a context in which many of the sixteenth-century disputes over foldcourses can be understood. The dominant features of sixteenth-century agriculture in the sheep-corn region are vividly and accurately described by Allison and Simpson: the expansion of seigneurial foldcourses, the extinction of shack, and the attenuation of other communal rights. The tendency has been to emphasize these as sources of social friction and rural depopulation, but this article has tried to stress the other side of the coin.⁹⁰ Such events should not be viewed simply as the inevitable social and economic by-products of a peculiar agrarian system, for at the same time they were shaping and creating the very system that Allison describes. The frequent litigation over foldcourses in the sixteenth century reflects a system in rapid transition.

To describe the evolution of the foldcourse, and to document the spread of enclosures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is a relatively simple task. It is much more difficult to establish exactly why, from the common ancestor of open fields, some East Anglian villages developed the rigid foldcourse system whilst their neighbours became enclosed. This article has considered the differences between medieval foldcourse systems, and speculated as to their influence upon subsequent developments. In eastern Norfolk, where fold rights existed in the Middle Ages but not foldcourses, the influence of lordship on farming arrangements waned dramatically from the fifteenth century. Fold rights in 'high Suffolk' villages, such as Walsham and Norton, were more extensive than in eastern Norfolk, although lordship still tended to be rather fragmented and the area was inherently suited to mixed husbandry: hence in the fifteenth century, landlords were more tolerant of enclosure and less

committed to a foldcourse system. Consequently, we may conclude that the existence of foldcourses in the Middle Ages was not in itself sufficient to ensure their survival and evolution into the early seventeenth century. It is evident, therefore, that lordship could have a significant local influence on field-systems, an influence which did not necessarily wane with the decline of 'feudal' lordship.

This study of west Suffolk's field-systems may also prove to have wider implications. It has been argued by some economic historians of the early modern period that the greatest advances in grain yields and agrarian productivity were made during the eighteenth century, advances which were closely related to the enclosure movement.⁹¹ However, recent research has suggested that substantial gains in productivity are discernible from the seventeenth century, and – by extension – that considerable technological advance was attainable within commonfield farming systems.⁹² If this revision is correct, then two speculations which run contrary to popular opinion are justified. First, that enclosure was not an essential prerequisite for agrarian progress and secondly, by extrapolating backwards, that medieval commonfield systems were capable of sustaining significant rises in agrarian productivity.

The evidence from west Suffolk provides a context for any speculation. It shows that the decision-taking environment within commonfield systems could change significantly between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and with it the capacity for increasing productivity. The rather informal and flexible foldcourse system which operated in medieval west

⁹⁰ For instance, M Turner, 'Agricultural Productivity in England in the Eighteenth Century: Evidence from Crop Yields', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, xxxv, 1982, pp 489–510; N F R Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution*, Oxford, 1985, p 44.

⁹¹ R C Allen, 'The Efficiency and Distributional Consequences of Eighteenth-Century Enclosure', *Economic Journal*, 92, 1982, pp 937–53; R C Allen, 'Inferring Yields from Probate Inventories', *Jnl Econ Hist*, 48, 1988, pp 117–23.

⁹² Allison, 'Lost villages', p 135; 'Sheep Corn Husbandry', p 25.

Suffolk, the small and fragmented nature of peasant holdings, and the large number of participants in this system, all presented immutable, institutional, barriers to progress. Thereafter, changes in both landholding structure and communal regulations created a rather different decision-making environment in the seventeenth century,

changes which presaged an increase in agrarian output. The implication of these findings is clear: the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries represent a crucial period in the evolution of commonfield systems in East Anglia, and perhaps elsewhere. Historians may overlook this period at their peril.

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