

The form, function and evolution of irregular field systems in Suffolk, c.1300 to c.1550*

by Mark Bailey

Abstract

The evolution of irregular fields deserves more attention than it has yet received in the voluminous literature on British field systems. This article briefly describes the form and function of three different types of irregular system in c.1300, and then reconstructs the changes to their layout and organization over the next two and a half centuries. It demonstrates that irregular fields were dynamic systems, and therefore liable to change their form and function over a relatively short period of time. It also provides support for the contention that structural changes to open fields were more likely to occur during periods of demographic decline, when the obstacles to, and risks associated with, such changes were reduced. Finally, it argues that historic landscape classifications, and the conventional distinction between ancient and planned landscapes, do not take sufficient account of the instability of irregular fields and their tendency to be remodelled.

Historians have long recognized the wide regional variety of field systems in Britain, and have gradually developed a greater understanding of the flexibility of such systems and their capacity to change over time.¹ The evolution of the classic common field system of 'Midland' England has attracted particular attention, from its emergence in the late Anglo-Saxon period to its gradual disappearance through parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² The historical literature on fields is voluminous, but our knowledge of the layout, the operation and the evolution of irregular field systems is relatively limited. 'Irregular' systems comprised innumerable fields, over which few common regulations applied, in contrast to the two, three or four fields of the 'regular' Midland system, which were subject to strict communal cropping and pasturing arrangements. Our ignorance of irregular systems is especially true for the medieval period, where the difficulties posed by the paucity of surviving documentation

* My thanks to David Dymond and Audrey McLaughlin for allowing me to use their transcripts of court rolls from Norton, and Walsham and South Elmham, respectively, and to the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

¹ The landmark studies in this regard are H. L. Gray, *English field systems* (1915); A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin (eds), *Studies of field systems in the British Isles* (1973); and R. A. Dodgshon, *The origins of British field systems. An interpretation* (1980).

² C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The open fields* (1938); J. Thirsk, 'The common fields', *Past and Present* 29 (1964),

pp. 3–25; ead., 'The origin of the common fields', *Past and Present* 33 (1966), pp. 142–7; T. Rowley (ed.), *The origins of open-field agriculture* (1981); D. Hall, *The open fields of Northamptonshire* (1995); and, for a recent survey, see S. Oosthuizen, 'The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and the origins and distribution of common fields', *AgHR* 55 (2007), pp. 153–80.

are compounded by the tendency for such systems to undergo post-medieval changes to their layout and function.³

Despite these difficulties and the disproportionate historical attention lavished upon the regular Midland system, the irregular field systems of medieval England are worthy of detailed study. First, before c.1700 the majority of arable land in England lay within an irregular system of some sort, and even large tracts of central and southern England – the stronghold of the regular Midland system – contained irregular fields.⁴ Second, irregular systems are arguably the most interesting and revealing categories of field system, because of their capacity for varying subtly in both form and function over short distances, and also because they were characteristic of some of the most enterprising and agriculturally productive regions of medieval England.⁵ Finally, they tended to be the most flexible, and therefore least stable, form of field system, liable to change form and function over time: there is clear evidence of significant adaptation and change between c.1400 and c.1700 in a variety of irregular systems, often involving creeping, piecemeal, enclosures.⁶ Studies of such dynamic systems are likely to be more revealing about the causal forces behind the evolution of fields than are those of more stable (i.e. regular) systems, which were less prone to change.⁷

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct and compare the evolution of three different types of irregular field systems, situated in close geographical proximity, in the two and a half centuries after 1300. The dramatic shift in the demographic context – from a very high-pressure regime in the early fourteenth century, which collapsed suddenly in the Black Death of 1348–9 and then remained at that lower level for another century and a half – makes this a particularly interesting period for such a study. The demographic collapse reduced the profitability of grain cultivation markedly, although pastoral activities fared better. The swing from grain to livestock created pressure to convert arable land to pasture, and placed a premium on controlling the movement of animals with the minimum of human supervision.

Agrarian conditions in the fifteenth century differed greatly from those that had prevailed in c.1300 and, according to Bruce Campbell, they were more conducive to structural changes to fields. He contends that major changes to the layout and operation of open fields were most likely to occur during periods of demographic decline or stagnation, when the risks of,

³ Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, p. 627.

⁴ See R. A. Donkin, 'Changes in the early Middle Ages', in H. C. Darby (ed.), *New historical geography of England before 1600* (1973), p. 82 for the broad geographical distribution of the Midland system in c.1300. The evidence for irregular systems within the 'Midland zone' is documented in Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, pp. 145–279.

⁵ A. R. H. Baker, 'Field systems of south-east England', in Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, p. 383; B. M. S. Campbell, 'Commonfield origins: the regional dimension', in Rowley (ed.), *Origins*, pp. 112–3, 121–3; B. M. S. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death. An atlas of lay lordship, land and wealth, 1300–49* (2006), p. 343.

⁶ For some examples of changes to irregular systems

in this period, see B. K. Roberts, 'Field systems of the west Midlands', in Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, pp. 211–21; Baker, 'South-east England', pp. 391, 403; H. S. A. Fox, 'The chronology of enclosure and economic development in medieval Devon', *EcHR* 28 (1975), pp. 192–8; M. Reed, 'Enclosure in north Buckinghamshire, 1500–1750', *AgHR* 32 (1984), pp. 133–44; M. Bailey, 'Sand into gold: the evolution of the foldcourse system in west Suffolk, 1200–1600', *AgHR* 38 (1990), pp. 40–57.

⁷ For helpful summaries of the forces influencing the development of field systems, see Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field Systems*, pp. 629–35; R. Dodgson, 'The interpretation of subdivided fields: a study in private or communal interest?' in Rowley (ed.), *Origins*, pp. 137–43; and T. Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes. Settlement, society, environment* (2003), pp. 5–27.

and obstacles to, change were diminished: in contrast, periods of high demographic pressure were more likely to result in technical innovation in the choice of crops or the extent of soil preparation.⁸ This important contention has not received the attention it deserves, not least because it challenges an assumption implicit in some treatments of the subject that population growth was the main force behind the restructuring of irregular fields into regular systems.⁹ The time frame selected for this study enables Campbell's hypothesis to be tested. Suffolk represents a good choice for a comparative study, because in c.1300 it contained three different categories of irregular field system within its boundaries.¹⁰

A study focusing upon documenting and describing the changes to three different field systems, rather than explaining them, is justified on the grounds that detailed historical reconstructions of such changes over time are rare, and that the comparative approach adopted here is even rarer. It embraces Baker and Butlin's call for a disciplined 'systems' approach to the subject, which recognizes the primary importance of form, function and evolution over time in categorizing and assessing field systems.¹¹ As we shall demonstrate, the capacity for irregular field systems to change their form and function dramatically over relatively short periods of time was considerable.

I

In c.1300 perhaps one half of the land surface of Suffolk was under the plough, and this arable land was organized into a mixture of irregular open and enclosed fields: the classic Midland system did not exist here. The presence of open fields is revealed by the record of field names containing prefixes such as *campus*, *precinct* and *quarentena*, and suffixes such as *-furlong*, *-wong*, *-shott*, *-flatt*, *-lond* and *-feld*, in conjunction with evidence for communal regulations operating over the arable land, organized folding arrangements for sheep, and regular reports of damage to standing field crops by wandering livestock.¹² Such evidence is widely distributed

⁸ Campbell, 'Commonfield origins', pp. 119–24.

⁹ See, for example, Thirsk, 'Common fields', pp. 7–11; Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, pp. 648–9, 653–5.

¹⁰ Our understanding of East Anglian fields in general, and those of Suffolk in particular, has improved greatly since Barbara Dodwell's pioneering study of over forty years ago: B. Dodwell, 'Holdings and inheritance in medieval East Anglia', *EcHR* 20 (1967), pp. 53–66; B. M. S. Campbell, 'Population change and the genesis of commonfields on a Norfolk manor' *EcHR*, 33 (1980), pp. 174–92; B. M. S. Campbell, 'The regional uniqueness of English field systems? Some evidence from eastern Norfolk', *AgHR* 29 (1981), pp. 1–18; Bailey, 'Sand into gold', pp. 40–57; M. Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk. An economic and social history, 1200 to 1500* (2007), pp. 102–14; E. Martin and M. Satchell, 'Wheare most inclosures be'. *East Anglian fields: history, morphology and management* (East Anglian Archaeology, 124, 2008).

¹¹ Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, pp. 627–8.

¹² The link between open fields and these field names is rehearsed in, for example, D. C. Douglas, *The social structure of medieval East Anglia* (1927), pp. 18–9; Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, p. 623; J. Field, *English field names* (1989), pp. xii, xxi; Fox, 'Chronology of enclosure', p. 186; A. H. Denney (ed.), *The estates of Sibton abbey* (Suffolk Records Soc., 2, 1960), p. 14; H. S. A. Fox, 'Approaches to the adoption of the Midland system', in Rowley (ed.), *Origins*, pp. 65, 89–90. Hence at Ixworth Thorpe the description of 'one *pecia* of land in the *quarentena* called Passewong', and the existence of a '*campus*' called Stonhaugh in Laxfield, indicate the presence of open fields: S. D. Church (ed.), *The Pakenham cartulary for the manor of Ixworth Thorpe, Suffolk, c.1250 to c.1320* (Suffolk Charter Ser. 17, 2001), pp. 48, 97; Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL), Vanneck Ms, box 7, court held October 1436. Such references do not, however, indicate how those open fields worked.

throughout Suffolk.¹³ All open fields were subdivided into manifold individual parcels in separate ownership, each called *pecia*, which were comparable to the Midland 'selion'. However, the size of *peciae* could vary markedly: although many were around half an acre, some were significantly larger, especially those belonging to a manorial demesne. For example, a single parcel of arable land (called Karledon, and described as a *campus*), belonging to the demesne of Fornham All Saints, comprised 106 acres. The widely varied size of the basic land parcel contributed to the irregularity of these open fields, a characteristic that was exacerbated by the variety in the size and number of fields within a single vill, which might contain anything from 1 to 40 fields.¹⁴

Alongside the irregular open fields, and often interspersed within them, were large tracts of enclosures surrounded by hedges, ditches and (occasionally) fences, which are identifiable from the use of nouns such as *clausum* and *pightle*, and suffixes such as *-croft* and *-close*. Enclosures held by peasants, or those lying interspersed among predominantly open fields, were usually the smallest, often comprising a couple of acres.¹⁵ Common rights over the arable are unusual, communal folding of sheep over the fallows was unknown, and damage to corn by wandering animals was exceptional in enclosed field systems. Some enclosures were subject to joint ownership, such as the two tenants who in 1304 held five acres of arable called 'Longcroft' in Hadleigh. Other enclosures were split internally into identifiable sub-divisions or separate strips of land: for example, different tenants held at least three individual parcels in 'Peletecroft' in Holbrook, one of two roods, one of four roods and another of two roods called 'le Shortwente'.¹⁶

Hence the layout of fields in Suffolk on the eve of the Black Death was highly complex and irregular. In many places, both subdivided open fields and arable enclosures co-existed in close proximity, and were intimately intermingled. This was the case in fields that were predominantly open, as well as in those that were predominantly enclosed: an area of open field at Culford was known as 'the *quarentena* lying under the Croft called Wodecroft'; in Gislingham a 20-acre 'close with ditching and hedges' was situated within the open 'Rushfeld'; and a single strip of land containing one acre in 'Coulesfeld' in Cookley lay alongside another called 'Deysecroft'.¹⁷ The existence of large, unenclosed, blocks of demesne land under single ownership challenges the conventional understanding of an open field, just as the existence of enclosures with distinct sub-divisions within them, or held in joint ownership and therefore containing land segregated within them, challenges the conventional notion of an enclosed field.

¹³ Campbell and Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death*, maps 5.2 and 5.3.

¹⁴ M. Bailey, *A marginal economy? East Anglian Breckland in the later Middle Ages* (1989), pp. 44–5; BL, Add. Ms 34689, fo. 6.

¹⁵ Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 108–9, 112–3; N. R. Amor, 'Late medieval enclosure: a study of Thorney, near Stowmarket, Suffolk', *Proc. Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 41 (2006), p. 178.

¹⁶ J. Hervey (ed.), 'Extent of Hadleigh manor, 1305', *Proc. Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 11 (1903), p. 158; Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch

(hereafter SROI), S1/10/9.1 (Holbrook). For other evidence of subdivided closes, see M. R. Postgate, 'The field systems of East Anglia' in Baker and Butlin (eds), *Field systems*, p. 287; D. Stone, 'Medieval farm management and technological mentalities: Hinderclay before the Black Death', *ECHR* 54 (2001), p. 619; Gray, *English Field Systems*, p. 310; D. P. Dymond, 'The parish of Walsham-le-Willows: two Elizabethan surveys and their medieval background', *Proc. of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 33 (1974), p. 206.

¹⁷ BL, Add. Ms 42055, fo. 29 (Culford); SROI, HD1538/237/9 (Gislingham); SROI, HA30/314/8 (Yoxford).

While these physical characteristics of fields were evident to some degree across the whole county in the early fourteenth century, three distinct categories of field system are identifiable: an irregular common field system with partially regulated cropping, which dominated the light soils on the western and eastern extremities of the county; an irregular common field system with non-regulated cropping, which ranged across the western, central and some southern areas; and a predominantly enclosed field system in the north-east and parts of south Suffolk (Map 1).¹⁸ The form and function of each of these three categories in c.1300 are described, followed by an assessment of the ways in which each system changed during the next two centuries.

II

Irregular common field system with partially regulated cropping

a) Form and function in c.1300

The irregular common field system with partially regulated cropping was found on the poorest and lightest soils on the fringes of the county, particularly in the Breckland, on the chalk clays of the southwest, and in the Sandlings on the coastal fringe (Map 1). In c.1300 the main crops in these areas were barley, rye and oats, and sheep were the predominant livestock, cultivated to a high level of intensity by the standards of light soil regions elsewhere in medieval England.¹⁹ The overwhelming majority of arable land lay in open fields, with enclosures comprising less than 10 per cent of the arable; the size of an individual parcel averaged around half an acre; the arable holding of each tenant, and of the demesne, tended to be scattered; and fields themselves tended to be enumerated more formally. Communal rights to graze animals over the fallow arable usually extended for the whole year, while some partial communal control was exercised over cropping patterns to ensure that the fallows were organized into compact blocks.

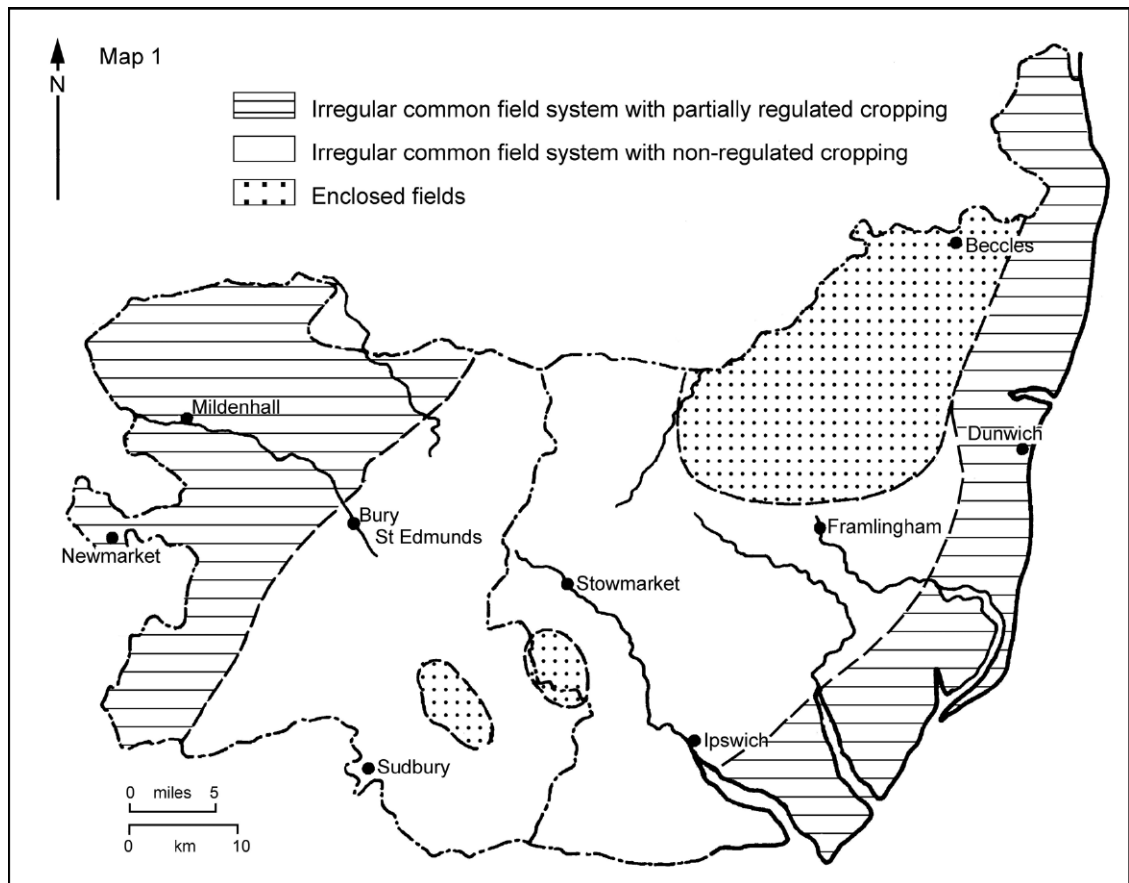
Each year, all tenants possessed the right to pasture their animals over the stubble in the immediate aftermath of the harvest (known as the 'shack'), and they also enjoyed daytime access to any arable that remained fallow until 2 February.²⁰ However, night-time access to the fallow arable after the shack was more carefully regulated, so that all sheep had to be placed within

¹⁸ Campbell, 'Commonfield origins', pp. 113–15. The following summary draws on Bailey, *Marginal economy?* pp. 57–63; Bailey, 'Sand into gold'; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 102–114; and Martin and Satchell, *East Anglian fields*, pp. 22–3, 95–102, 117–23. Campbell, whose lead I have followed, adopts a different system for categorizing fields from Martin and Satchell. Martin and Satchell focus primarily upon the form of fields, and draw heavily upon post-medieval evidence. Campbell's scheme is based primarily upon the function of fields, and I have drawn upon exclusively medieval documents, including manor court and account rolls. These differences in approach, perspective and source material explain most of the differences between Maps 1 and 2, and Martin and

Satchell, *East Anglian fields*, fig. 35. However, our views on the physical structure and layout of fields in medieval Suffolk are broadly similar. The only area of disagreement is the precise extent of enclosures in south Suffolk before 1500.

¹⁹ Campbell and Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death*, map 12.2; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 111.

²⁰ Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds branch (hereafter SROB), E18/451/6, and see also E18/451/3, court held 6 Sept. 1404 (Mildenhall); SROB, E3/11/1.4 m. 2 (Lidgate); SROB, E3/15.12/1.13, courts held Nov. 1390 and Oct. 1409 (Lackford); SROB, E7/24/5.1 (Herring-swell).



MAP 1. Approximate distribution of main categories of field system in Suffolk, c.1300.

a small number of authorized private or collective folds, which served to pen them tightly on patches of fallow arable each night. After 2 February all livestock were placed in a communal herd with the exception of sheep, which were required to run within a designated foldcourse. Each fold was gradually moved across allotted areas of fallow during the course of the year to ensure that their manure was targeted effectively.

This foldcourse system was a complex and relatively formal system of organizing and regulating the use of the fallow arable, whose primary purpose was to ensure that the light soils, whose nutrients were very prone to leach during arable cultivation, received as much replenishing manure as possible. This objective was best achieved by the formal folding of all sheep each night on compact areas of fallow arable. This in turn required some formal and communal organization of sowing patterns to ensure that large blocks of fallow were available to the foldcourse. Hence certain parcels within the open fields were grouped together and organized into 'shifts', onto which a communal cropping and fallowing pattern was imposed for perhaps two or three years. A shift was a short-term arrangement, a grouping of land for cropping purposes with no permanence beyond its cycle, whereas regular common field systems – and

the cropping/fallowing patterns imposed upon them – were more regular and permanent. The flexibility of this system enabled sheepfolds to be concentrated upon the better soils lying in the river valleys, which consequently could sustain more demanding crop rotations than the poorer arable on the higher land. Hence the better land was cultivated regularly, and known as ‘infield’, while the poorer arable was cropped for, say, two or three years and then left as a ley to recuperate for a number of years (‘outfield’). The unploughed outfield soon reverted to scrub pasture.

This type of field system depended upon the close proximity of expanses of permanent pasture, usually heath, where livestock could graze during the day. Sheep were the dominant form of livestock in this system, because they grazed low on the heathland plants and grasses, and were good walkers on the rough pasture. The poor soil meant that half of the arable was usually left unsown each year, although c.60 per cent of crops were spring-sown to optimize the time available between the slack and seeding to apply manure to the arable. Manure, supplied either by carts or direct from animals, was highly valued. The foldcourse was a remarkably complex institution, well adapted to local needs, and it enabled the light soils of East Anglia to be cultivated intensively by contemporary standards.

The workings of this system can be usefully illustrated by the example of Brandon. Four of the vill’s dozen fields (Drovefeld, Brightfeld, Womanlodefeld, and Fourhowefeld) comprised infield, because they were exploited on a demanding four-course rotation, which required all landholders to follow a communal pattern of cropping. The fallow arable on these fields was deemed ‘several to the lord of the manor between 2 February and 1 August each year’, meaning that it was reserved for the use of the seigneurial foldcourse. The demesne meadows were also incorporated into this system, unusually for Suffolk where most meadows were held in severalty. The organization of cropping on Brandon’s other fields was less fixed and ordered, incorporating rotations that were a good deal less demanding. For example, Oxwickfeld abutted Brandon heath, implying that its soils were very poor, and consequently it was cultivated very infrequently. The cropping sequence on Middlefeld often lasted for two years and was then followed by a recuperative ley of two or three years before the land was cropped again. Significantly, this two-year cropping sequence regularly coincided with the second and third years of the cropping sequence on either Brightfeld or Womanlodefeld, both of which abutted Middlefeld. Hence in some years Middlefeld formed part of a shift that included Brightfeld, and, in other years, part of a different shift based on cropping in Womanlodefeld. By concentrating the sown crops into large and compact areas of land stretching across two fields, the crops could be better cordoned off from folding animals.²¹

b) Evolution between 1300 and c.1550

After c.1350 the physical layout of these open fields changed little, although there were discernible changes to their function. The contraction in arable farming was marked on these poor soils, although it did not collapse, while the relative importance of sheep rearing increased. The single most important development was the tightening of communal arrangements for the

²¹ CUL, EDR G3/27, fo.189; University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library, Bacon Mss. 645 to 657; TNA, SC6/1304/31 to 35.

grazing of sheep, particularly in villages dominated by a lord with an active interest in flock management. The result was the strengthening and maturation of the foldcourse system in north-west Suffolk.

Before c.1350 the main objective of this system had been to raise the area under cultivation by targeting the manure of sheep as effectively as possible upon the arable land, which in turn required complicated but temporary adjustments to local cropping and fallowing arrangements each year. After c.1350 sheep became more important for their wool and meat than for their dung, and so the main objective shifted to accommodating seigneurial flocks as cost-efficiently as possible. This shift in emphasis is reflected in the disappearance from manorial court rolls of amercements for the failure of tenants to manure land properly, and in a reduction in the number of tenant applications to erect temporary sheepfolds on their own arable land. Landlords were also less enthusiastic about acceding to such requests, which reflects their determination to increase their own control over sheep rearing. They also gradually absorbed or bought out permanent fold rights attached to peasant holdings, and began to enforce formal stints (the right of 'cullet') on the number of peasant-owned sheep that could be placed in the demesne foldcourses. Consequently, during the fifteenth century the number of folds operating within a single village declined, and the number of peasant-owned sheep dropped significantly in many parts of west Suffolk.²²

This reduction in the number of operational foldcourses in each vill enabled cropping arrangements to be simplified. Before c.1350, cropping shifts had to be highly flexible and ephemeral in order to accommodate the numerous permanent and temporary foldcourses with rights over the fallow, and they were also highly labour-intensive because of the constant supervision of livestock and the carriage of hurdles around the fallow arable each night. After c.1350 such labour-intensive practices were unnecessary and undesirable, and a smaller number of larger foldcourses made for a simpler and more predictable system. Consequently, the imposition of communal cropping patterns through shifts became more settled, repetitive and permanent, and all livestock were placed in communally organized and supervised herds.²³ The tighter regulation of both cropping and pasturing arrangements was better suited to the management of large flocks of sheep in single ownership. Hence many of the attributes associated with the classic foldcourse system of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries emerged during the century after the Black Death. By c.1550, the system operating in the Breckland is best categorized as an irregular common field system with fully, rather than partially, regulated cropping.²⁴

These changes to the management of fields in the Breckland and the furthest extremities of west Suffolk were not as widespread, however, on the light soils of the Sandlings in east Suffolk. The prevalence of extensive open fields in the Sandlings in the fourteenth century

²² Bailey, 'Sand into gold', pp. 46–7; Bailey, *Marginal economy*, pp. 46–8.

²³ The formal and rigorous organization of communal herds in the fifteenth century is evident at, for example, Icklingham, West Stow and Lackford, SROB, E3/15.12/1.14.

²⁴ Bailey, *Marginal economy*, pp. 48–9; id. 'Sand into gold', pp. 48–50. The mature foldcourse system is documented in K. J. Allison, 'Sheep-corn husbandry of Norfolk', *AgHR* 5 (1957), pp. 12–31, and M. R. Postgate, 'The field systems of Breckland', *AgHR* 10 (1962), pp. 80–101.

is abundantly evident from field names, fold rights and the management of fields in places such as Dunningworth, Holbrook, Iken, Staverton and Walton.²⁵ By c.1550 open fields and foldcourses continued to exist on the poorest soils within the Sandlings, but in other places they were replaced by piecemeal enclosures (see below, pp. 26–9).²⁶ For example, in the 1530s around one half of tenant land was now enclosed in Snape, and by c.1600 the fields of Trimley, Falkenham and Walton were entirely enclosed.²⁷ Hence changes to the field systems of the Sandlings in the later Middle Ages were more complex and diverse than in the Breckland, and foldcourses were strengthened in some places but disappeared from others. Foldcourses had been less formally organized in the first place on the Sandlings, partly because the soils composed more outcrops of clay and alluvium, which made them less hungry than those of the Breckland. Furthermore, the structure of lordship was markedly weaker than in the Breckland, which made formal and communal agricultural arrangements more difficult to impose.²⁸

Two other, relatively minor, developments during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are discernible in the Breckland. First, falling profits and labour shortages reduced the incentive and ability of farmers to maintain the physical divisions between the sown and fallow arable. Court rolls contain a greater number of presentments against farmers for a lack of care over maintaining fences and wattle hurdles in the open fields, thus allowing animals to wander. The incidence of these presentments at Mildenhall was greatest in the mid-fifteenth century, when large numbers of tenants were regularly amerced for not ensuring sufficient closure between pasture, commons and the seeded arable.²⁹ Second, some tenants sought to consolidate their holdings into more manageable and efficient units by small-scale acts of engrossment and consolidation of holdings in certain areas of the open fields. Some of the small strips within the open fields were engrossed to form larger parcels through piecemeal exchanges between tenants, and farmers sought to acquire parcels of land in localized areas of the open fields to reduce the extent to which they had to shifting their farm equipment around the fields. Hence by the early sixteenth century individual farms still comprised a number of detached land parcels, but some display a greater tendency to be consolidated and concentrated in certain areas of the open fields, which better suited a system operating more repetitive cropping shifts.³⁰

²⁵ Oosthuizen's map of the putative extent of open fields in England does not include the Sandlings, 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia', p.155, but this is incorrect for the fourteenth century. All the hallmarks of irregular open fields, albeit littered with small enclosures, are evident in, for example, SROI, S1/10/9.1 (Holbrook); HD1538/207/3 and 4 (Dunningworth); HD32/293/395 (Iken); HD1538/357/1 (Staverton); HA119/50/3/17 (Walton).

²⁶ D. MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors* (1986), pp. 28–30; M. Bailey (ed.), *The bailiffs' minute book of*

Dunwich, 1404–1430 (Suffolk Records Soc., 34, 1992), pp. 123–4.

²⁷ Postgate, 'East Anglia', pp. 289, 309; W. Filmer-Sankey, 'The dissolution survey of Snape priory', *Proc. of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 35 (1983), p. 214.

²⁸ Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes*, p. 138; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 29.

²⁹ SROB, E18/451/5 and 6, see, for example, court held July 1471.

³⁰ Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 310.

III

*Irregular common field system with non-regulated cropping**a) Form and function in c.1300*

In c.1300 an irregular common field system with non-regulated cropping was widespread in Suffolk, dominating arable land on the loams and clays of its western, central and some southern parts. Sheep were less, and cattle more, important than on the lighter soils, and a wider range of crops (especially wheat and legumes) was grown in a more intensive manner.³¹ Most arable land lay in highly irregular open fields, which were liberally interspersed with small arable enclosures: between 10 per cent and 50 per cent of the arable was thus enclosed. Individual parcels of land tended to be larger than two roods, while individual holdings were usually clustered within certain areas of the fields rather than widely dispersed. Demesne land, in particular, tended to be organized into large and concentrated blocks of land: at Cretingham, for example, 'one field called Wodefild' contained 120 acres of demesne.³² Communal rights were limited, usually confined to pasturing over the fallow for six months after the harvest to 2 February (known as the 'open time'), and there were no communal cropping patterns. The subsequent shortage of large areas of permanent pasture placed a premium on grazing rights over numerous small greens and tyes, whose edges became heavily colonized during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

There was no requirement for tenants to leave particular parcels of arable land fallow during the open time, and after 2 February access to remaining fallows was restricted to the tenant of the land. Any winter crops sown during the open time were protected from wandering animals during the day by the close supervision of herds and during the night by penning any animals on the fallows with wattle hurdles. Fold rights were unusual, and sheep were less important than horses and cattle. The absence of any organized pasturing arrangements removed the need for communal cropping patterns, and consequently individuals could sow their land parcels as they pleased.

This system presented individual agriculturalists with considerable freedom and flexibility to vary the nature and intensity of their crops according to personal preference. This flexibility is reflected in the various combinations of crops sown within this field system and also in the relatively small area left fallow (usually around 20 per cent) each year.³³ The disadvantage with the system was its high supervision cost, because the intermingling of livestock and crops – segregated only by flimsy fences or the watchfulness of those tending the herds – increased the risks of trampling and damage. Yet the advantages outweighed the disadvantages before the middle of the fourteenth century, when the price of grain was high relative to labour.

The court rolls of fourteenth-century Aldham provide a glimpse of this category of field system in operation. The demesne land lay in medium-sized parcels scattered across irregular open fields: for example, a six-acre parcel in 'Tespynfeld', a nine-acre parcel in 'Reesfeld', and a further 20 acres 2 roods in two parcels in unnamed locations. Areas of consolidated tenements,

³¹ Campbell and Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death*, map 12.3; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 111–2.

³² SROI, HA10/50/18/5.1 (1).

³³ Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 84, 111–2.

block demense and enclosures also existed, such as one land parcel bounded by hedges called 'le Bromhel', and others in 'Dancroft' and 'Gasdyncroft'. One area of open field, called 'Peryefeld', had a hedge around part of its boundary lined with oak, ash and maple. Tenants enjoyed some communal grazing rights over the fields for an unspecified period after the harvest, as evidenced by the manorial court's enforcement of access to fallows at the 'right' (*congruo*) time of year. The court also regulated the illegal exploitation of fallows by outsiders, amercing John Lyon of Hadleigh for illegally pasturing 60 sheep in 'Danefeld'. Its proceedings are also full of ameracements for the damage to corn caused by wandering animals, a consequence of the close proximity of livestock and crops on the open fields and the difficulties of segregating them.³⁴

b) Evolution between 1300 and c.1550

From the late fourteenth century, the irregular common field system with non-regulated cropping underwent dramatic changes in both layout and operation. Thousands of small parcels of open field were informally and gradually enclosed with hedges and sometimes ditches, and the communal rights over them extinguished, and much arable was converted to pasture as the area swung to dairying farming and stock rearing.

Piecemeal enclosure of parcels of open field had certainly occurred before c.1350, but its scale was limited. The process of enclosure usually involved a formal agreement between neighbours and it probably also required the support of the main lord in the vill. For example, in 1319, two parties in Ixworth Thorpe agreed to settle a dispute over common rights by enclosing four pieces of land (three of which were arable) to their mutual convenience, and they had the agreement formally recorded.³⁵ However, such activity was not widespread at this time for two main reasons. First, enclosure would have prevented communal access to the half-year fallows, yet these provided many smallholders with a valuable source of pasture (the 'bite' was important in sustaining sheep throughout the winter) and of manure (for their land) in a period when both were scarce. Secondly, most holdings comprised a number of separate and scattered parcels of land, seldom larger than two roods in size, but the enclosure of such small, detached parcels made little economic or operational sense.

Agrarian change after the Black Death reduced the size of these obstacles in a number of ways. The declining importance of arable farming, the swing to cattle rearing, and the relative abundance of livestock reduced the importance of communal grazing rights over the fallow arable as a system of supplying organic matter for the soil, especially when those rights had not been extensive in the first place. The use of temporary and mobile wattle fences to segregate fallows from sown land, the frequent tethering of larger livestock on verges, and the attentive supervision of livestock by herdsman and children were now regarded as expensive tasks in a period of labour shortages and low grain prices: they were also less effective than permanent hedging at segregating animals from crops. Finally, the relative shortage of tenants and the sluggish demand for land made it much easier for tenants to acquire contiguous land parcels

³⁴ CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 1. Martin and Satchell, *East Anglian fields*, pp. 197–8, 225–6, assume that consolidated tenements and block demesnes were enclosed and several. Many undoubtedly were, but some might be subject

to communal grazing rights, and others were open along their bounds.

³⁵ Church, *Pakenham*, p. 103.

within the open fields, which could then be engrossed into a larger, single parcel. A land parcel of two to three acres was more likely to be enclosed than one of half an acre, because it represented a more manageable and viable unit.³⁶

The recognition that engrossment was an important precursor to enclosure heightens the significance of numerous exchanges of small parcels of land recorded in some manorial court rolls in the fifteenth century. Over one hundred such exchanges are recorded at Walsham, such as when in 1441 George Hawes and his two brothers exchanged 11 acres, in six strips of land in 'Northfeld', with another tenant, for 11 acres, in nine strips.³⁷ There is little doubt that these were primarily undertaken with engrossment in mind, and that cumulatively they altered the physical layout of individual holdings. The structure of John Chapman's 25-acre holding in Rickingham in 1433 was subtly different from the typical tenant holding there a century or so earlier. In the 1280s most holdings were under 10 acres and comprised perhaps two dozen small and scattered parcels, whereas Chapman held 29 parcels of land totalling 25 acres, 15 of which abutted on one another in engrossed parcels of between two and four acres.³⁸ Engrossing tenants acquired land parcels on the basis of their geographical location and convenience, not necessarily their tenurial status, and consequently these enlarged parcels could contain a mixture of free and customary tenures. Hence in 1474 a single enclosure of ten acres held by a resident of Westhorpe contained seven acres of free land belonging to the manor of Bricett and three acres of villein land belonging to the manor of Walsham.³⁹

Enclosing a parcel within the open field was a surprisingly uncomplicated step and, in most cases, a quiet and piecemeal process, which merely required the tacit agreement of neighbours and the absence of any committed opposition. There is no evidence that formal permission had to be sought from the manorial lord, nor that landlords agreed among themselves to allow piecemeal enclosure.⁴⁰ Indeed, some landlords were active enclosers of their own demesne land in a piecemeal fashion. In 1450 the lord of Monks Eleigh decided to enclose a large block of open demesne arable called 'Little Highfield', spending £7 on planting 2,400 staked shrubs and digging 1,840 yards of ditching, while in 1406–7 the manor of Walsham used 190 winter labour services to cut thorn and dig ditches around a new close: in the early fourteenth century around 16 per cent of the demesne land in Walsham was enclosed, compared with c.34 per cent in 1437–8, and 75 per cent in 1577.⁴¹

³⁶ The importance of consolidation prior to enclosure was, in fact, noted by Fitzherbert in the sixteenth century, see Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 288; Fox, 'Chronology of enclosure', pp. 189–91.

³⁷ S. West and A. McLaughlin, *Towards a landscape history of Walsham-le-Willows* (East Anglian Archaeology 89, 1998), p. 108; SROB, HA504/1/12.23.

³⁸ Compare R. M. Smith, 'English peasant life-cycles and socio-economic networks' (Cambridge University PhD thesis, 1974), pp. 181–2 with the evidence in *Victoria County History of Suffolk*, I, p. 656.

³⁹ SROB, HA504/1/15.5, court held July 1474.

⁴⁰ J. A. Yelling, *Common field and enclosure in England*

1450–1850 (1977), p. 80.

⁴¹ J. B. Weller, 'A fifteenth-century enclosure: the Little Highfield in Monk's Eleigh of 1450', *Suffolk Review* 40 (2003), pp. 30–2 (Monks Eleigh). The Walsham calculations are based on fieldname evidence contained in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century extents, and on the survey of 1577, SROB, HA504/3/5b, HA504/5/1, Dymond, 'Walsham-le-Willows', pp. 204–7. For other examples at Ixworth and Rickingham, see N. Amor, 'Riding out recession: Ixworth and Woolpit in the late Middle Ages', *Proc. Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 41 (2002), p. 132; and A. Simpson, *The wealth of the gentry. East Anglian studies, 1540–1660* (1961), p. 208.

Yet the overwhelming majority of enclosures were the result of piecemeal initiatives by yeomen and husbandmen. Some of their initiatives are documented unequivocally in manorial court rolls. For example, in 1431 Thomas Smyth 'newly enclosed certain land and pasture [in Norton] ... when he ought not to enclose ... the same Thomas obstructs certain common land with hedging'; in 1501 John Box was amerced 6*d.* for 'newly enclosing one parcel of land containing three acres in Fitchmerefeld' in Great Barton; and Thomas Knight had acquired four acres in 'Machonsfield' in Walsham, which in 1461 'now lie in two enclosed pightles'.⁴² Most references to piecemeal enclosure are, however, more oblique, appearing as presentments against tenants for either the planting of illegal hedges, or the frustration of common rights over the arable, or blockages of pathways. These occur frequently in fifteenth-century court rolls. For example, in 1420 John Monk obstructed 'with plants one footpath leading from Buxhall to Finborough'; in 1457 John Hill of Woolpit 'unjustly raised a hedge on the lord's demesne in Lennellefield'; in 1479 John Bettys of Haughley was reported for planting a hedge at the north end of 'Fourteenacres' in Harleston; in 1505 Robert Brette enclosed land in Fornham St Martin and prevented tenants from exercising their rights over the fallow arable; in 1407 a wooden gate was made for 'a new close' in Walsham, where also in 1446 Thomas Lacy 'obstructed a way with a ditch and a hedge placed upon it'.⁴³ Likewise, the obstruction of paths and lanes with gates and ditches occurred persistently around 1400 in Walton and Debach.⁴⁴ The small amercements levied in such cases served as *de facto* licences to enclose.

A good series of court rolls reveals the cumulative scale of such activity over time. Between 1422 and 1501, 190 cases of enclosure and encroachment are recorded in the courts of Littlehaugh manor in Norton, with activity peaking in the 1430s and 1440s. Similar activity in Thorney peaked in the 1450s and 1460s, and accelerated after the 1440s in Walsham.⁴⁵ Much of this activity was petty and piecemeal, although occasionally one detects either an especially energetic or aggressive individual, or coordinated action by a group of tenants. In the mid-fifteenth century, John Collet was actively enclosing his lands in Withersfield, and the Kebbels – upwardly mobile yeomen farmers – were aggressive enclosers in Stowmarket. In the 1520s a spate of small enclosures by various people is evident in just one area of Great Barton. Given the informality of this process, we might reckon that some enclosing activity attracted no comment at all in contemporary sources.⁴⁶

Evidence of attempts to prevent or to destroy new enclosures is rare, indicating that opposition to the process was muted. At Stowmarket in 1471, however, John Markes led an assault on the lessee of the demesne, who was an active encloser, and in 1443 an attempt to

⁴² SROB, 553/1, court held Sept. 1431 (Norton); E18/151/3, court held 16 July 1501 (Great Barton); and HA504/1/14.1 (Walsham). See also E3/15.9/1.8 (Fornham), where in 1494 David Humfrey created 'a several enclosure [on land] which used to be common to all the tenants of Fornham St Martin'.

⁴³ SROB, E3/15.17/1.1, m. 17 (Buxhall); E3/15.17/1.1, mm. 1 and 9 (Woolpit); SROB, E3/15.17/1.1 (Harleston); E3/15.9/1.8 (Fornham); HA504/3/5b and HA504/1/13.8 (Walsham).

⁴⁴ SROI, HA119:50/3/17 (Walton); HD230/1/1 (Debach).

⁴⁵ D. Dymond and P. Northeast, *A history of Suffolk* (1995) p. 50, using SROB, 553/1 to 553/5 (Norton); N. Scarfe, *The Suffolk landscape* (1972), p. 180; Amor, 'Thorney', pp. 179–81; Dymond, 'Walsham-le-Willows', p. 207.

⁴⁶ SROB, E3/15.16/1.2 (Withersfield); Amor, 'Thorney', pp. 179–81; Bailey, 'Sand into gold', p. 52.

enclose the glebe at Sutton resulted in the pulling down of hedges. In general, landlords appear to have been indifferent to enclosure, and, in one remarkable case, the prioress of Flixton provided her local tenants with saplings to encourage and facilitate their efforts.⁴⁷ Manorial courts sometimes extended protection to recent acts of piecemeal enclosure, a sure sign of their acquired legitimacy and a lack of opposition. For example, in 1414 the Walsham court had ordered Robert Margery to remove an 'obstruction' creating an enclosure at Cocks Dirt, but then in 1432 his son John Margery was amerced for not maintaining a gate properly there: almost certainly on his father's 'illegal' enclosure.⁴⁸ The lack of opposition is partly explicable by the limited range of communal rights that existed over these fields in the first place, and the relative unimportance of foldcourses, which meant that enclosure was not a major step. Yet it also owed something to the growing importance after c.1350 of dairying, stock fattening and pig rearing in these districts, activities that benefited from enclosure. In contrast, opposition to any form of piecemeal enclosure appears to have been greater in the arable heartlands of east Norfolk: in the early sixteenth century the modest attempts of two tenants to enclose parcels in the open fields of Heveningham (Norfolk) provoked vehement opposition from local lords and tenants.⁴⁹

Much of this piecemeal activity created enclosed parcels of between one and five acres. At Snape in 1530 the average size of a tenant enclosure was five acres and, in 1474, a recent enclosure in 'Downefeld' in Drinkstone contained 4 acres 1 rood. Enclosures at Ickworth were closer to one acre, and those at Stowmarket were mainly between two and six acres. Dead wood was often employed to create an enclosure quickly, or to plug gaps in a living hedge, but hawthorn and blackthorn (and furze on the lighter soils of the Sandlings) were the most commonly planted species, because of their fast growth and effectiveness in constraining cattle. The botanical evidence from existing hedgerows in Walsham indicates a significant rise in hedge plantation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which corresponds closely with the documentary evidence for enclosure there.⁵⁰ Some enclosures were associated with the conversion of arable to pasture. In 1348 'Calfcroft' in Fornham All Saints was sown with grain, but by 1431 it had been converted to pasture: grain production was widely established in fourteenth-century Walsham but, by 1577, 85 per cent of the parish was down to pasture.⁵¹

This piecemeal enclosure movement within the irregular open fields was slow and drawn out, and its pace and timing varied from place to place, but its cumulative impact was immense. Between c.1400 and c.1550 the irregular open fields in many parts of western and central Suffolk, and on the fringes of the Sandlings, effectively disappeared, transforming the local landscape. Open fields in places such as Ickworth, Ixworth, Norton, Trimley, Walsham and Walton were

⁴⁷ Amor, 'Thorney', p. 182; V. B. Redstone, 'The Sandlings', *Proc. of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 10 (1900), p. 66; John Ridgard, personal communication drawing upon SROI, Adair Mss.

⁴⁸ SROB, HA504/1/11.1 (court held May 1414), HA504/1/12.11 (1432), HA504/1/14.3, and for other examples see HA504/1/15.5, HA504/1/15.6.

⁴⁹ J. Whittle, *The development of agrarian capitalism. Land and labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (2000), pp. 59–62.

⁵⁰ Filmer-Sankey, 'Dissolution survey', p. 214 (Snape); SROB, E7/10/1.4 (Drinkstone); Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 289; West and McLaughlin, *Towards a landscape history*, p. 14.

⁵¹ BL, Add. Ms 34689, fos 6, 28–9; R. Lock (ed.), *The court rolls of Walsham-le-Willows, I, 1303–1350* (Suffolk Records Soc., 41, 1998); K. M. Dodds (ed.), *The field book of Walsham-le-Willows, 1577* (Suffolk Records Soc., 17, 1974), pp. 38–9; Dymond, 'Walsham-le-Willows', pp. 204–5.

enclosed during this period. Lawshall had contained some open fields in the 1390s but, by 1612, it was heavily enclosed.⁵² In other parishes, the physical contrasts created by these changes became dramatically drawn: by c.1600 the northern parts of Barrow and Rougham, which lay on sandy soil on the fringes of the Breckland, were characterized by open fields and foldcourses, while their southern parts – on heavier soils – were entirely enclosed.⁵³ Over the course of two centuries, large tracts of irregular open fields were slowly, almost silently, enclosed.

V

Enclosed fields

a) Form and function in c.1300

Enclosed fields of both arable and pasture dominated the landscape of the heavy clay uplands in north-east Suffolk, and parts of the clay interfluves south of the river Gipping were also mainly enclosed. The agrarian regime in these parts was mixed and intensive, based on cattle rearing and dairy farming, and on the production of wheat, oats and some legumes.⁵⁴ More than half of the arable land was organized in manifold enclosures, usually surrounded by hedging and ditching rather than fencing or walls. Demesne enclosures often lay in large, consolidated blocks of land around the manorial complex. In contrast, tenant enclosures seldom exceeded ten acres, although their holdings, too, tended to be relatively compact and close to their messuage. Few, if any, common rights existed over these enclosures. A few patches of arable were arranged in irregular open fields in the river valleys, over which basic rights of common pasture pertained: they probably extended no longer than a short period after the harvest. Although some parcels in the open fields were small, around an acre, many were much larger: for example, in 1325 a single block of 'common' arable land in Cookley contained 36 acres.⁵⁵

Extensive greens, often located high on the clay interfluves, and pockets of enclosed woodland, were also prominent in this field system. A communal green on the parish boundary between Henham and Wrentham was more than a mile wide and two miles long, while, in 1325, an arable enclosure in Rendham, called 'Bendmondspittell', contained 21 acres 1 rood, of which three and a half acres were still wooded.⁵⁶ The greens were a vital source of pasture for smallholders in a system where communal access to the fallow arable or other pastures and meadows were minimal or non-existent, and they attracted secondary settlement around their edges during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as resources became increasingly scarce.⁵⁷ This

⁵² Early piecemeal enclosures of open fields are summarised in Yelling, *Common field and enclosure*, pp. 20–6. These local examples are drawn from Postgate, 'East Anglia', pp. 288–90; Amor, 'Riding out recession', p. 132; Bailey, 'Sand into gold', pp. 51–3; H. W. Saunders, 'Bailiff's roll of the manor of Lawshall', *Proc. Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 14 (1910), pp. 123, 125.

⁵³ Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 309; O. Rackham, *The history of the countryside* (1986), pp. 198–9.

⁵⁴ Campbell and Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death*, pp. 235–6; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ Denney (ed.), *Sibton abbey*, p. 59.

⁵⁶ P. Warner, *Greens, commons and clayland colonisation. The origins and development of greenside settlement in east Suffolk* (University of Leicester Department of English Local History, Occasional Papers, Fourth Ser., 2, 1987), fig. 5; Denney (ed.), *Sibton abbey*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ D. P. Dymond and E. Martin (eds), *An historical atlas of Suffolk* (1989), p. 62; Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, pp. 67–8, 94–101; Warner, *Greens, commons and clayland*, p. 6, and ch. 2.

field system provided a good deal of flexibility to individual agriculturalists over the crops and rotations they deployed.

Cratfield and South Elmham All Saints provide good examples of villis operating within a predominantly enclosed field system. Their court rolls imply the existence of odd patches of open fields (e.g. '*in campo vocatur Stubbyng*' at Cratfield, and perhaps one tenth of the arable in Elmham), but most references to fields indicate that closes of various sizes had been long established. For example, at South Elmham no abuttals are given in land descriptions, while references to crofts and pightles are frequent; many Cratfield court entries demand the proper maintenance of gates, ditches and hedges, or seek to prevent piecemeal encroachments of live and dead hedging onto footpaths and greens. References to field crop damage caused by wandering animals are rare, although there are regular complaints about the overstocking of the greens with livestock.⁵⁸

b) Evolution between 1300 and c.1550

Changes to the enclosed field system after c.1350 were subtle rather than dramatic: the diminution of the small patches of irregular open fields through piecemeal enclosure, including the conversion of some arable to pasture; and the extension through encroachment of existing closes over communal greens and lanes.

By the sixteenth century, hardly any open fields survived in these areas, and the amount of arable was significantly reduced. Again, these were gradual processes, because, even in the early fifteenth century, grain production was still commonplace in these districts, as evidenced by the record of open fields and arable farming in places such as Wickham Skeith, Thelnetham and Wortham. Similarly, the early fifteenth-century court rolls of Huntingfield contain widespread evidence of crop damage by wandering animals, and in 1416 an inventory of the goods of a thief seized in Cratfield illustrates admirably the mixed farming regime of this area: he had six cows, 66 sheep, six horses, two calves, a pig, three ploughs, and wheat, barley, peas and hay valued at £6 13s. 4d.⁵⁹ Thereafter, however, the evidence for open fields and arable farming in north-east Suffolk diminishes, and the area greatly strengthened its reputation for dairy and stock farming. Hence, by c.1500, the staple agrarian activities in Cratfield were dairy farming and pig rearing, while pasture and meadow dominated land use in Sibton, Yoxford and Westhall. In the 1530s, two-thirds of the demesne land of Mettingham College was laid down to pasture, with a further 10 per cent as meadow and marsh, by which date only 14 per cent of the demesne land at Ilketshall St John was arable.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ L. A. Botelho (ed.) *Churchwardens' accounts of Cratfield, 1640–1660* (Suffolk Records Soc., 42, 1999), pp. x–xi; CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3; Suffolk Record Office, Lowestoft, HA 12-C2-6 to 12; Martin and Satchell, *East Anglian fields*, pp. 49, 95–103.

⁵⁹ P. Northeast (ed.), *The wills of the archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439–1474* (Suffolk Records Soc., 44, 2001), pp. 315–6, 411, 343, 418, 194, 469; CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3 and box 5 (Cratfield and Huntingfield).

⁶⁰ CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3, court held May 1417 (Cratfield), box 5 (Huntingfield), and box 7 (Laxfield); C. Richmond, *John Hopton. A fifteenth-century Suffolk gentleman* (1981), pp. 69–70, 72, 74; Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 287; Simpson, *Wealth of the gentry*, pp. 203–5; Botelho, *Churchwardens' accounts*, pp. 2–4; N. Evans, 'Farming and landholding in wood-pasture East Anglia, 1550–1650', *Proc. of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 35 (1984), pp. 304–8.

The shift to pasture, and the growing relative importance of cattle rearing and dairying, encouraged the further spread of enclosures over the small patches of open field. By c.1500 Yoxford and South Elmham were mostly enclosed and, in the 1530s, only a few small outcrops of open field remained around Mettingham, Bungay and Ilketshall. However, not every act of enclosure was associated with a switch to pastoral farming, for some enclosed land in Ilketshall in the 1560s was still used as arable: the value of enclosed arable was a third higher than arable lying in the remaining open fields.⁶¹ References in fifteenth-century court rolls to new hedging are dominated by thorn, which is fast growing and highly effective at restraining livestock. In the thirteenth century, hedging in this region had been dominated by species edible to cattle, such as oak, dogwood and spindle. But the priorities of farmers had changed in the late middle ages, when the pressure for fodder had eased considerably and when hedges had to be robust and quickly established: consequently, thorn became the preferred choice of hedging plant in the later middle ages.

The spread of piecemeal enclosures also involved the extension of existing closes over neighbouring lanes and pathways. Numerous references to the obstruction of pathways and lanes are found in the fifteenth-century court rolls of Cratfield, some of which were deliberate attempts to absorb little-used paths that lay adjacent to their land. In 1405 Nicholas Stowe encroached 'on le Hundredmeere [in Cratfield] at le Ronewaye by placing a hedge there, one perch in length', and 'John Roop does the same with one ditch, twelve feet by three feet', and the next year he 'obstructed a certain path with hawthorn at Tunmere'. Many of these extensions to closes were created with either dead wood, fast-growing hawthorn, ditching, or a combination: hence in 1439 John Dawnald 'obstructed a way used by diverse tenants ... with a hedge and a ditch'. In other cases, the blocking of lanes by hedges was simply the result of negligence: hedges and bushes were allowed to overgrow to the extent that they prohibited access down narrow paths and lanes that were not often used by a reduced population. The land on which these hedges lay may have been untenanted, or the tenant saw little point in expending energy or money on such tasks when labour was scarce and expensive. This explains why, in 1402, Robert Howe of Cratfield permitted 'hawthorn to grow beyond le Tounmere at Colshaugh', for which he paid a paltry 2*d.* amercement, and, in 1482, Geoffrey Blynde allowed boughs and 'les pollyngs' from his land to extend over the main road between Laxfield and Stradbroke.⁶²

Overgrown and neglected hedging has been a symptom of agrarian recession down the centuries, and, similarly, some of the gates providing access to enclosed fields were allowed to fall into disrepair and neglected ditches became choked with sediment and plants. The late fifteenth-century court rolls from Cratfield record a number of amercements levied on tenants who failed to maintain the gates to their enclosures properly, and in the late 1450s John Kervylle was repeatedly amerced for not maintaining a two-bar gate at 'Kattisclose' in Huntingfield.

⁶¹ CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 5, court held Feb. 1379 (Huntingfield); Warner, *Greens, commons and clayland*, pp. 35–8, 49; CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3, court held May 1469 (Cratfield); Richmond, *Hopton*, pp. 69, 75; Evans, 'Farming and landholding', p. 304; Simpson, *Wealth of*

the gentry, pp. 203, 205.

⁶² CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3, courts held May 1402, May 1405, May 1406, and May 1439 (Cratfield), and box 7, court held Apr. 1482 (Laxfield).

Ditches were especially important in draining the heavy clay lands of north central Suffolk, yet throughout the 1460s and 1470s the court rolls of Laxfield are full of amercements on tenants who had not scoured ditches around their land properly: for example, in 1471, a ditch lying between William Dalston's land and the highway had not been scoured, was 'defective in diverse ways', and consequently caused some localized flooding.⁶³

The large communal greens were also subject to piecemeal enclosure during the later middle ages, supporting Warner's view that Suffolk's medieval greens had been substantially enclosed long before parliamentary enclosure. Much of this encroachment passed without comment in fifteenth-century court rolls, because the general shortage of tenants meant a lack of opposition, but some activity attracted attention. For example, the Cratfield court amerced John Walhawe for raising a hedge on Millgreen in Cratfield, Henry Spink for encroaching on Westwoodgreen with a ditch, and Geoffrey Baret for planting trees (presumably hedging) on an unspecified common. In 1379, a minor encroachment is recorded on Denesgrene in Huntingfield. The cumulative impact of such activity was significant. Cranmer green in Walsham suffered considerable attrition during the fifteenth century and the vast greens of South Elmham had suffered severe encroachment by the sixteenth century. The north-east corner of the county probably suffered considerable depopulation, judging by the severe falls in assessable wealth in the fifteenth century, which would have reduced the opposition to such piecemeal encroachments.⁶⁴

V

In c.1300 around one half of the land surface of Suffolk was ploughed for arable, a very high proportion by the standards of any age. Of this, no more than perhaps two thirds lay in irregular open fields and no less than one third in enclosures. There were no Midland-type fields here. The irregular field systems had three distinctive qualities. First, their layout and operation were varied and complex. Second, they were well adapted to local farming needs: indeed, the integration of arable and sheep farming in the Breckland through the device of the foldcourse is an extraordinary example of the adaptability and fitness for purpose of an irregular field system. Third, they provided local farmers with considerable choice and flexibility in the types of crops grown, and the extent to which fallows were reduced, although they had to absorb relatively high operational costs of either supervising wandering livestock or sustaining crop damage from it, in return for such flexibility. These qualities conditioned the local response to rising agrarian demand and growing commercial opportunities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and then to lower levels of aggregate demand and the swing to pastoralism during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁶³ CUL, Vanneck Ms, box 3, courts held Oct. 1458 and Jan. 1479 (Cratfield) and box 5, courts held June 1459 and Jan. 1460 (Huntingfield); and box 7 (Laxfield).

⁶⁴ Warner, *Greens, commons and clayland*, pp. 7–8; West and McLaughlin, *Towards a landscape history*, p. 109; Evans, 'Farming and landholding', p. 304; CUL,

Vanneck Ms, box 3, courts held May 1413, Oct. 1425 and May 1441 (Cratfield) and box 5, court held June 1379 (Huntingfield). D. Dymond and R. Virgoe, 'The reduced population and wealth of early fifteenth-century Suffolk', *Proc. of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 36 (1986), pp. 75–7.

All three categories of irregular field system in Suffolk experienced notable changes in either their form or function during the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The physical layout of the open fields of the Breckland hardly changed, but their operation became more formal as communal cropping and pasturing arrangements were strengthened in order to accommodate fewer but larger sheep flocks run mainly by landlords: this maturation of the foldcourse system increased the degree of interdependence between grain farming and sheep rearing. The eradication of small patches of open field from the enclosed system of north-east Suffolk, and the encroachment upon communal greens, represent modest changes in its form, while the widespread shift from arable to pasture here constitutes a significant change in function. Elsewhere in Suffolk, the gradual disappearance of irregular common fields through piecemeal enclosing activity, and the conversion of much of that enclosed land to pasture, represented major changes in both form and function. This enclosure movement was silent compared with contemporaneous enclosures in the Midlands, and it was led, not by lords, but by hundreds of small-scale farmers, yeomen and lesser gentlemen. The history of enclosure in England has often been the history of social displacement and violence from above, but the history of enclosure in medieval Suffolk is a clear example of socially acceptable enclosure driven mainly from below.

The process of piecemeal enclosure was facilitated by the weak manorial structure in central and eastern Suffolk, which diminished the power of landlords to influence or prevent enclosure. It was not merely a coincidence that enclosures made least headway in the Breckland, where lordship was relatively strong. It was also aided by the tendency for holdings to be concentrated rather than dispersed around the fields, and of many demesnes to lie in large blocks, which increased the viability of enclosure and restricted the amount of preparatory engrossment required. The high supervision costs associated with the running of irregular open field systems also made them prone to enclosure during a period of demographic decline and high wage rates. Finally, common rights over the arable were limited, which meant that commoners had less to lose through enclosure. Of course, all of these permissive institutional factors were already in existence in c.1300 but, at this date, they were outweighed by the risks associated with enclosure in the prevailing agrarian conditions. This situation changed after c.1350, when conditions generally favourable to pastoralism led to the further growth of commercialized dairy farming and stock fattening in most central, southern and eastern parts of Suffolk. The combination of this particular form of livestock farming with a marked increase in the degree of specialization of agrarian production proved a powerful incentive for the development of enclosures. A similar shift to closes also appears to have occurred in southern Norfolk during this same period.⁶⁵ In contrast, those areas that retained a serious interest in grain cultivation as part of a mixed farming regime were more likely to retain their open fields. The production of malting barley retained its importance throughout the later middle ages in north-west Suffolk, but its success depended upon the manure of sheep to maintain the fertility of the soil: hence the open fields survived and, indeed, communal controls strengthened. As Carl Dahlman has argued, open fields made most economic sense within the context of certain

⁶⁵ F. G. Davenport, *The economic development of a Norfolk manor, 1086–1565* (1906), pp. 80–1.

types of mixed farming, but they provide fewer benefits when agriculture is more specialized, especially when the importance of grain production was diminished.⁶⁶

These extensive changes in the form and function of three different categories of field system provide strong support for Campbell's argument that a sustained release of population pressure and declining profitability in grain production could reduce the risks of restructuring field systems, and therefore increase the opportunities for it. Yet it is also evident that these changes were reinforced and refined when population increased again during the sixteenth century, when the foldcourse system reached full maturity, and when piecemeal enclosures continued until the final remnants of open field had disappeared. So, if periods of demographic decline or, more accurately, periods when the pressure on arable farming was less intense, were the likely occasion for remodelling and restructuring in the layout and operation of fields, the evident success of such initiatives would encourage their continued and wider adoption during subsequent periods of demographic growth. This might have been simply a matter of fashionable contagion or, more likely, a consequence of increasing specialization in agrarian production, which further reduced the incentives to retain open fields.

The discovery that irregular field systems changed markedly in both their layout and operation during a period of demographic decline may also provide a useful pointer for narrowing the periods in which regular common fields emerged in England. These are assumed to have evolved at various times during the five centuries of demographic expansion after c.800, through the reorganization of existing irregular open fields. Yet this long period of growth was punctuated by shorter periods of demographic slow-down, stagnation and even retrenchment, such as the late eighth, late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁶⁷ There were certainly other such periods, and it is plausible that regular common fields were created during such times. Given the dominance of regular fields in the literature, it is refreshing to contemplate that our understanding of them might be enhanced by research into the less heralded, but more varied and enigmatic, irregular field systems.

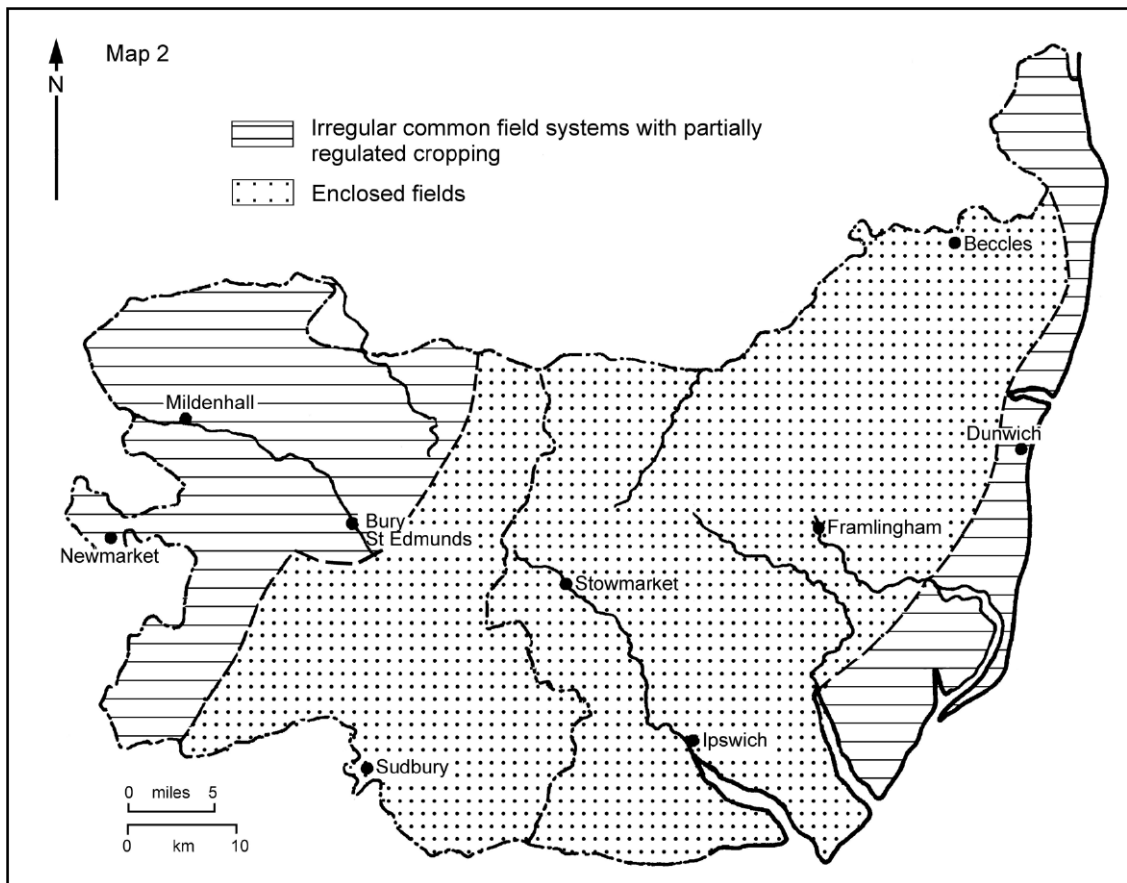
The scale of the structural changes to field systems in some parts of late medieval Suffolk was sufficient to transform many parts of its countryside from a largely open and arable landscape in c.1300 into one that was largely enclosed and pastoral in c.1550 (Map 2). The statement that Suffolk was predominantly enclosed by this date is neither contentious nor original, because in 1573 Thomas Tusser famously described the hedged and enclosed landscape of 'several' Suffolk. However, the discovery that elements of the landscape described by Tusser had only emerged in the recent past is novel: for example, Postgate reckoned that most piecemeal enclosure in East Anglia occurred in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while Suffolk does not register at all in Baker's survey of late medieval enclosure in England.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ C. J. Dahlman, *The open field system and beyond. A property rights analysis of an economic institution* (1980), pp. 105–6 and ch. five. There is little sense in which variations in the relative extent of depopulation across the county correlated with changes to field systems.

⁶⁷ J. Langdon and J. Masschaele, 'Commercial activity and population growth in medieval England', *Past*

and Present, 190 (2006), p. 63; Campbell, 'Commonfield origins', pp. 122–5.

⁶⁸ T. Tusser, *Five hundred points of good husbandry* (1984), p. 134–5; Postgate, 'East Anglia', p. 287; A. R. H. Baker, 'Changes in the later middle ages', in Darby (ed.), *New historical geography*, p. 212.



MAP 2. Approximate distribution of main categories of field system in Suffolk, c.1550.

This local discovery carries wider implications for the classification of historic landscapes. The English landscape is usefully and conventionally divided into ‘ancient’ and ‘planned’ countryside, which distinguishes the enclosed, irregular, wooded and older types of landscape (Tusser’s ‘several’ countryside) from the open, planned and more recent types (‘champion’). Not surprisingly, the main characteristics of such different landscapes are strongly influenced by the physical appearance of local fields: open fields contribute to an undifferentiated, prairie-type, landscape, whereas small hedged and ditched closes create a broken, wooded and hidden landscape. Of course, this division cannot be, and is not, applied simplistically, because considerable variations existed within the broad categories of champion and several landscapes: Williamson warns of ‘the “fuzziness” of regional landscape boundaries, and the dangers of posing too hard a dichotomy between woodland and champion districts.’⁶⁹

As irregular field systems possessed the capability to alter their form and function over time, it follows that the historic landscape classification of a particular locality may also change

⁶⁹ Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes*, pp. 62–122, 138.

over time. When Oliver Rackham labelled much of Suffolk as 'Ancient Countryside', he did so (correctly) on the basis of its known landscape features in the seventeenth century.⁷⁰ Yet we now know that some of this 'ancient' landscape was comprised of genuinely ancient closes, while some was the product of much later, fifteenth-century, piecemeal enclosures of open fields. Put another way, large tracts of central Suffolk were several and enclosed in c.1600 but, in c.1300, these same areas had been open and therefore decidedly 'champion' in their layout and appearance. The areas classified as 'Ancient Countryside' in Suffolk contained sub-landscapes varying in their appearance and antiquity, which thus warns against deploying such a concept in a facile or generalized manner.⁷¹ Rackham implicitly acknowledged this warning when identifying that 'modern' and 'historical' differences are apparent between ancient and planned countryside, without teasing out its implications in any detail.⁷² Yet the dynamic and unstable qualities of irregular field systems meant that some landscape boundaries possessed a temporal, as well as a spatial 'fuzziness', especially before the seventeenth century. This adds a complicating, but important, variable, which has not been properly captured, represented or acknowledged in many of the recent attempts to categorize the English landscape according to particular Historic Landscape Classifications.⁷³

⁷⁰ Rackham, *History of the countryside*, pp. 2–4.

⁷¹ Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes*, pp. 1–5.

⁷² Rackham, *History of the countryside*, pp. 4–5.

⁷³ T. Williamson, 'Historic Landscape Classifications: some queries', *Landscapes* 8 (2007), pp. 66–8.