

Chapter 1

Working the Soil – the Generation of Wealth 1086 to 1800

Ian Ryder

The earliest survey of Rutland was that ordered by William the Conqueror in 1086, part of the Domesday Survey of England. The aim of the survey was to list feudal holdings and detail their value and assets. Though the individual village entries were highly condensed, they provide a wealth of information on land and, how it was used and populated. A typical entry is that for Whitwell. A man called Herbert held the manor as a sub-tenant of the Countess Judith (William's niece). The entry informs us of the amounts of tax the village paid, the extent of land that could be used, and how much was worked. All three of these are expressed in numbers of ploughs. Three ploughs worked the village fields, one held by Herbert and the others by the villagers. The use of ploughs, or more correctly plough teams, for taxation and land measure, informs us that these were the main generators of wealth and that agriculture was primarily arable.

Whitwell in the Domesday Survey of 1086

In Witewelle Besi had 1 carucate of land taxable. Land for 3 ploughs. Herbert has from Countess Judith 1 plough and 6 villeins [bondmen or villagers] and 4 bordars [cottagers or smallholders] who have 2 ploughs. A church and a priest; meadow, 20 acres; 1 mill 12d; woodland, pasture in places, 6 furlongs and 6 perches in length and 3 furlongs and 13 perches in width. Value before 1066, 20s now 40s.

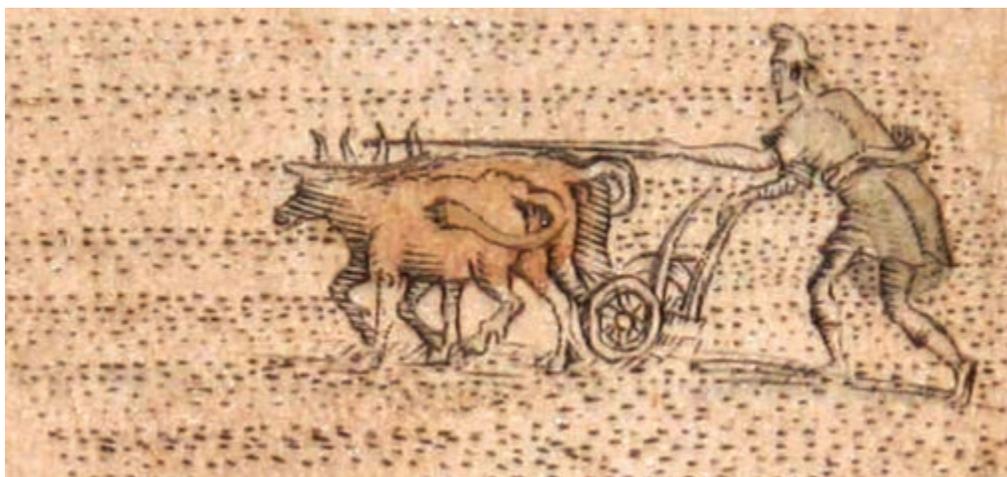
So why did Domesday use the seemingly strange assessment of plough teams for measuring the arable land, and what did they constitute? At the time of Domesday measures such as acres were not standardised and the number of plough teams provided a simply-determined and standardised alternative. The standard was the amount of land ploughed by a team of eight oxen (the plough beast of the time) in a year and was known as a carucate or hide. Sub-divisions of this standard were also named: a quarter was called a virgate or yardland, while an eighth was a bovate. These terms had a long life. The yardland continued in common agricultural usage until the nineteenth century. At Ridlington yardlands varied from 22 to 32 acres (Ryder 2006, 13); this variation is perhaps not surprising as the amount of land that could be ploughed by a team depended on the nature of the soil. Whitwell, like most of the villages that surround Rutland Water, has two very different types of soil. In the area below the village, now covered in water, there are heavy clay soils which are difficult to plough and which influenced the choice of reservoir site, and in the area above the village there are

limestone tilths which are easier to plough. In reality the number of animals actually used in a plough team varied considerably. Sometimes Domesday gives specific information – at Thistleton two villagers had three oxen in a team and at Oakham one villager had a team of five oxen.

While the importance given by Domesday to plough teams reflects the importance of arable agriculture, this does not mean that there was no pasturing of animals. In fact some pasture was needed simply to feed the plough beasts. The pastoral components of village agriculture are reflected in Domesday's recording of meadow, pasture and woodland. Meadow was the most productive and therefore most valuable pasture land, and even small quantities of it are listed. Besides plough beasts, these lands could also be used to support cattle and sheep, while woodland was sometimes measured by its capacity to support pigs. At a time when wood was the main fuel, maintenance of productive woodland was essential for the community, as was a mill to grind the corn produced by the villagers. This would have been a watermill, as windmills were not introduced until the twelfth century.

Ploughing with a team of four oxen (Luttrell Psalter, AD 1335-40)

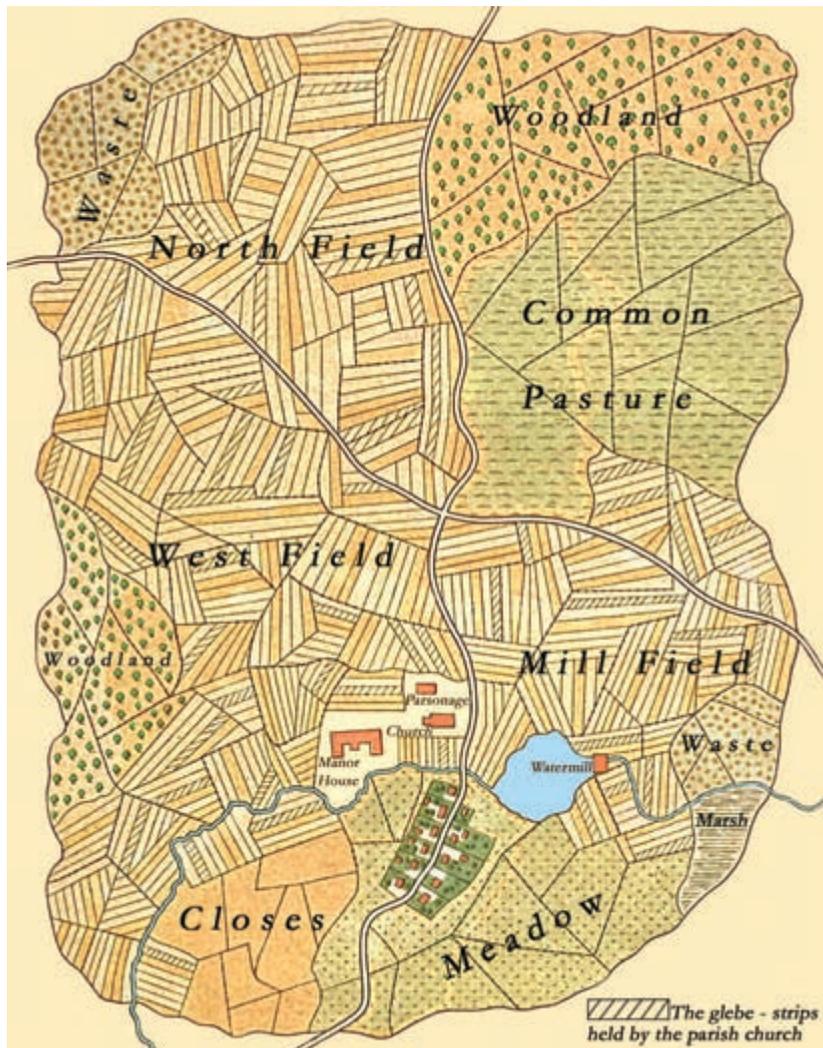
A careful reading of Domesday therefore paints a picture of most Rutland village fields dedicated to growing arable crops, while on the remaining parts animals were pastured to provide dairy produce, wool and meat. Along Rutland's river and stream banks were water meadows and mills, and carefully managed woodlands nearby.



A medieval ploughman with two oxen (Speed's map of Rutland c1610)

Besides giving details of the agricultural assets of each village or manor, Domesday also groups its villagers by status. At Whitwell it records six villeins (bondmen) and four bordars (cottagers), but generally provides little information about individual holdings. However, this is provided in considerable detail in the 1305 survey of Oakham Lordshold (Chinnery 1988). What is clear from this survey is the regularity of land-holding for bondmen, generally either a full or half yardland, while the cottagers had little land. The 1305 survey also gives extensive detail about the onerous labour services that bondmen and cottagers provided to the lord. An indicator of how great these were for a bondman is that while his rental for his house and a yardland was 2s 4d per annum, the value of his services, should someone else be paid to undertake them, was almost nine times higher, at 20s 2d.

While Domesday and the 1305 survey reveal a highly structured society, they give few insights into the working of medieval agriculture, but the 1305 survey does mention the presence of three fields in Oakham: the North, South and West. What is their significance?



Schematic plan representing a typical medieval manor (RO)

A system of agriculture had developed in the Saxon period that divided land into strips. These strips were grouped into furlongs and the furlongs combined into great fields, such as the North, South and West Fields mentioned in the Oakham 1305 survey. Originally the land of the village had been divided into two great fields, with one used to grow arable crops while the other was left fallow to recuperate. Another feature of the system was that while the land was producing crops each strip was the sole right of an individual, but for a short period after harvest and during the fallow it was open to common use by others in the community. Hence the name ‘common field system’ or ‘open field system’ from the open appearance of the landscape it created.

The period between the Domesday and 1305 surveys was a period of almost continuous population growth that created increased demand for land. For a period this had been achieved by bringing excess pasture, woodland or waste under the plough, and by reorganising from two to three great fields. The creation of a third great field allowed for two crop years followed by a fallow year. This rotation reduced the amount of land fallowed each year from a half to a third. The common field system had a great longevity, lasting in some Rutland villages into the late nineteenth century. Its existence affected how Rutland’s villages developed, and the vestigial remains of its old strips are still seen in many modern fields as ridge and furrow. A recent publication has examined the common fields of Rutland in detail (Ryder 2006).

So how did the common field system impact both on the bondmen working their yardlands and on the community? Unlike today, where individual fields usually have a single owner, the bondmen and their successors, working the common field system into the nineteenth century, had their strips scattered throughout the great fields, with equal shares of good and poor lands. There was also regularity in the sequence of neighbouring owners of strips, indicating that the distribution of strips was planned rather than random (Hall 1995, 120). A consequence of the villagers’ land being scattered in strips was that a villager did not have a large block of contiguous land on which to build a homestead. Village farms and cottages were therefore drawn together, near a source of fresh water. As the common field system lasted in most villages for at least 700 years, this pattern persisted and created the Rutland village with its farms, houses and cottages clustered around the church. This is not to say there was no movement out of the village when the common fields were enclosed, but the inertia generated by an unwillingness to abandon existing buildings was too great for the majority. Only in recent years has the high value of older farm properties for conversion to homes, together with the need for larger farm buildings, propelled most farms out of the centre of villages.

The bondmen and their successors travelled out from the village each day to plough, tend and harvest their remote strips, but even these simple actions created the need for arbitration and regulation. The scattering of land in strips created a huge number of boundaries between neighbours that could be encroached upon. Similarly, they created a need for community agreement on, amongst other matters, what crops to plant and when, and how

many beasts an individual could pasture on the commons and when. This was the province of the Manor Court, held under the authority of the Lord of the Manor. While the court was usually presided over by one of the lord's officials the villagers formed the court jury that met to amend old or create new regulations. The jury also decided the merits of cases brought before them. These were important duties and the requirement to attend court was an obligation imposed by the manor in the 1305 survey.

Westminster Abbey's Gross Income from its Oakham [Deanshold] Manor, 1275-1535

The relative importance of the various income sources generated from a medieval manor is illustrated by this table of income (in pounds) from Westminster Abbey's Oakham [Deanshold] Manor accounts (Donnelly 1985, 167):

<i>Source of Income:</i>	1275-76	1300-01	1317-18	1362-63	1399-1400	1499-1500	1516-17
Rents	21	22	21	24	30	29	30
Manor court profits	15	7	6	2	-	1	1
Sale of crops & grain tithes	73	94	1	90	78	48	57
Sale of livestock	3	4	-	-	-	7	-
Other income	4	1	36	3	-	-	-
Total	116	128	64	119	108	85	88
Rent arrears	5	9	13	-	83	52	-
Total with arrears	121	137	77	119	191	137	88

The accounts for the period nearest to the Oakham 1305 survey show that income for Westminster Abbey from its manor in the parish, known as Deanshold, peaked at this time. In fact this was the high water mark for the feudal economy as a whole. By far the largest income source at that time was sales of grain (73 per cent). This was generated both from the manorial demesne (land kept by the Abbey and not rented to villagers, but on which the villagers had to provide labour services) and from the tithe (a tenth of all the produce of the manor provided for the upkeep of the church). The dominance of this source of revenue compared to sales of livestock further illustrates the importance of arable farming at that period. Of secondary importance were the villagers' rents (17 per cent), with the manor court providing the bulk of the balance (5 per cent) through grants of licences, fines, and other feudal requirements. Compared to later years arrears were relatively low. This is not perhaps surprising as the period around 1300 saw the population of England reach a peak, a level that was not reached again until the eighteenth century. Demand for land was consequently at its highest, making it very easy for a lord of the manor to replace any defaulting tenant. However, within fifteen years manorial income had collapsed to half of its peak level in the face of a widespread famine caused by high population and a climatic change to cooler conditions that decreased crop production. This climate change was to last several centuries. The collapse in income is even greater if the exceptional £36 of other income is removed, as this comprised overdue rents from previous years that the monks had included as a way of massaging the income figure. In the period immediately after the famine, the

Abbey's income recovered quickly, but it never returned to the levels seen at the opening years of the fourteenth century. Within 30 years another more devastating calamity hit the community with the arrival of the Black Death. Its immediate effect was to kill about a third of the population. The effect of this catastrophe was recorded at Hambleton, where '11 tofts and 11 virgates of land [were] in the lord's hands for want of tenants, which paid £11 yearly before the pestilence' (Ryder 2006, 22). As the plague became endemic, continually revisiting communities, the population was kept at a low level. The effect of this dramatic change was seen both in the sales value of the Abbey's crops and in the large rent arrears in the century and a half following the onslaught of the Black Death. These figures demonstrate that the classic feudal economy was in serious trouble and new economic methods were needed to face the challenge.

When the Rector received tithes he needed a barn to store them in. This tithe barn at Empingham is one of the few surviving in Rutland (RO)



The massive decline in population brought on by the plague created problems for some, such as the Westminster Abbey monks, but for others it provided opportunities. The feudal world described by the 1305 survey was gradually changed by the new reality of excess of land and shortage of labour, and by 1485 bondage had virtually disappeared in the Midlands. In its place had evolved the capitalist system. However, because of the nature of evolution the new system contained many of the characteristics of the old one. Leasing land had been extensively practised in the medieval period. By the sixteenth century many tenancies were held on long leases for up to 99 years or three lives (mother, father and child), for which an entry fee was required. In addition, a new form of tenure had developed called copyhold. Copyhold still required a change in tenancy to be registered at the manor court and the tenants to pay an entry fine to the lord of the manor; the tenant was given a copy of the entry as proof of title (hence the name). Many of the new copyholders and leaseholders held yardlands as had the feudal bondmen, but the burdensome labour services had virtually disappeared.

Also, from the sixteenth century, the royal courts increasingly intervened to protect the rights of both leasehold and copyhold tenants from undue demands of landowners. These gave the copyholder an almost freehold right to pass or sell on his tenancy. Copyhold tenancies continued until 1925 when an Act of Parliament converted them into freeholds.

If the structure of landowner-tenant relations had dramatically altered in the centuries following the Black Death, the method of working the land survived almost intact in most Rutland villages. The tenant farmers and their agricultural labourers still worked the common field system to the old three-fold rotation of two crops and a fallow, while their beasts were still pastured together in common herds and flocks. However, the reduction in population had allowed an expansion of pasture, and these animals now represented a significant proportion of a farmer's wealth. Hoskins (1965, 236) showed, for Wigston, Leicestershire, that the livestock provided as much value as the crops, despite about 80 per cent of a seventeenth century farmer's land being in arable production. However, a few villages had seen dramatic change which presaged the eventual change in the agricultural system from common to enclosed fields.



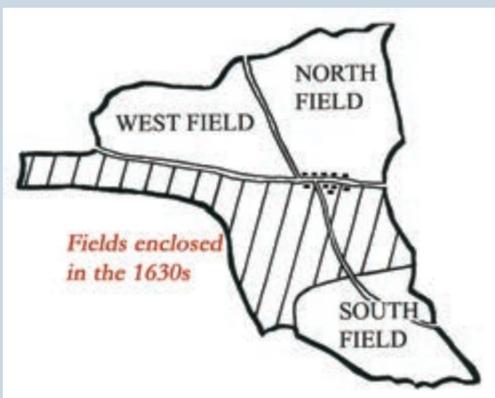
An aerial view of Martinthorpe in the 1950s, looking west. This settlement had been depopulated by 1550 as a result of the introduction of sheep farming. However, evidence of the medieval community survives in the form of house platforms, close boundaries, and ridge and furrow (Cambridge Museum of Air Photography)

Landowners were not passive in the face of the changed circumstances following the Black Death. The value of livestock noted by Hoskins created a significant opportunity for landowners, one that could be achieved by clearing away tenants and turning the land over to sheep. Such action led to depopulation, and both Gunthorpe and Martinthorpe were deserted and enclosed by the early sixteenth century (Cornwall 1980, 7 & 86). This kind of action also created great fear of and antagonism towards enclosure amongst the tenantry, and provoked sixteenth century governments into making it difficult to enclose and depopulate. Nevertheless, the economic pressure to convert to pasture was ever-present, and attempts to enclose usually small areas of land continued into the seventeenth century, together with consequent legal disputes. Even though Gunthorpe had been deserted and enclosed by 1520, challenges for the recovery of common right continued later into the century (*VCH I*, 222). Essentially these disputes were about competing rights, the right of the landowner to alter land use to whatever he saw fit, and the tenant's right to common over the land. If the latter was allowed to continue, this eliminated much of the benefit of enclosure; if common right was removed, it took away a major means of self-support. An observer in 1780 wrote, 'Strip the small farms of the benefit of the commons and they are at one stroke levelled to the ground' (Ryder 2006, 13).

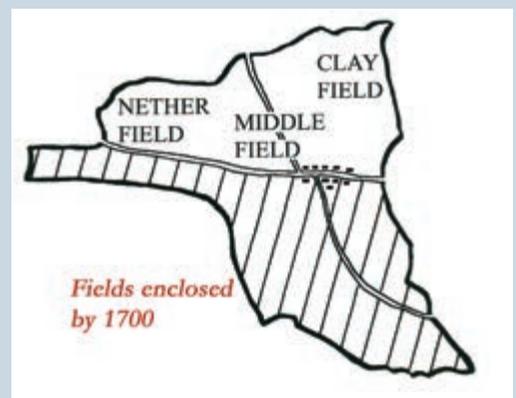
With legal challenges to forced enclosure increasingly common, if land was to be enclosed this had to be achieved by agreement. An agreement appears to have been made between the major landowners at Burley, including Alsthorpe, for the enclosure of the majority of the fields and the creation of the park. However, disputes occurred later as not all the commoners had been party to the agreement (Ryder 2006, 39). Such legal difficulties

The Enclosure of Whitwell

Whitwell's West and North Fields were originally cultivated in strips according to the medieval system. In the 1630s parts were enclosed into smaller units of land when the lord of the manor decided to increase the efficiency of these great open fields. There were further enclosures later in the century, when the South Field was enclosed and the remaining parts of the West and North Fields were reorganised into three new fields, Nether, Middle and Clay (Ryder 2006, 8).



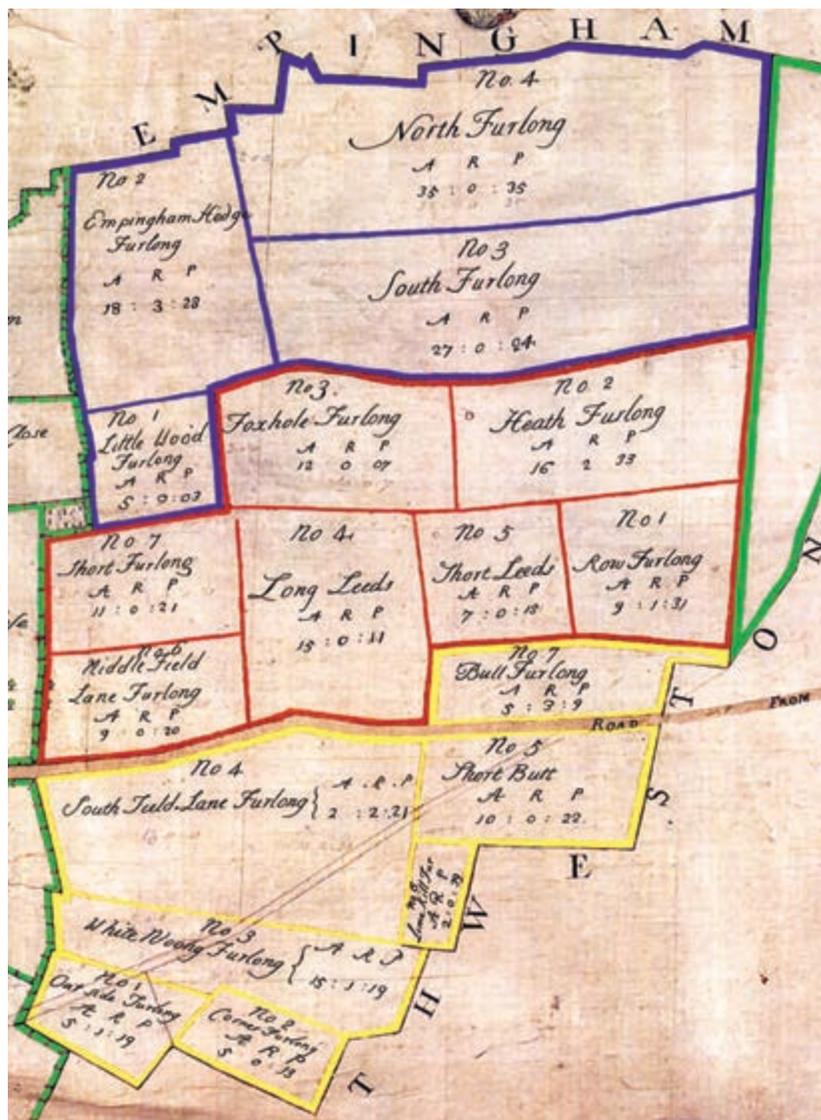
Map of Whitwell circa 1630 showing earlier enclosures (ROLLR, DE 3214/601)



Map of Whitwell circa 1700 (ROLLR, DE 3214/M51)

and the presence of multiple landowners in many villages limited the number of complete enclosures up to the eighteenth century, although some partial enclosures were made; for example, one third of Whitwell was enclosed early in the sixteenth century (Ryder 2006, 10).

The rate of enclosure in any period was highly variable, being dependent on economic conditions. The periods prior to 1640 and after 1750 were economically generally good and both were marked by an increase in enclosure, while the period in between saw difficult times and there were relatively few enclosures. The most contentious enclosure of the seventeenth century was the forced enclosure of Hambleton during the Commonwealth (Ryder 2006, 39), the legal ramifications of which were to last another 40 years. In an attempt to deal with the complex situation he found after the Restoration, the Duke of Buckingham contrived a legal case before the Court of Chancery to confirm the enclosure. Although the court concurred, such



Left: From An Exact Survey of all Normanton and Part of Hambleton Lordships in the County of Rutland belonging to Charles Tryon Esq. Measured and Mapp'd in the year 1726 by Tycho Wing. By this date most of Normanton had been enclosed, leaving only the open fields shown on this extract (Lincolnshire Archives, 3 ANC 5/104/1)

verdicts were potentially open to challenge if all those who had interests in the fields were not involved, and often the commoners were left out. Eventually, to resolve the continuing legal uncertainty, resort had to be made to a specific Act of Parliament to confirm the enclosure, one of the first in the country. This set the pattern for the future. The landowners had found a legal method of enforcing an enclosure. Although Parliament usually required 80 per cent of the landowners to agree, no longer could a small minority of landowners or the commoners prevent an enclosure, and by 1806 only eight common fields remained in the county (Parkinson 1808, 5).

The explanation cartouche from Tycho Wing's map of 1726 (Lincolnshire Archives, 3 ANC 5/104/1)



A recent study (Ryder 2006, 54) has shown that the majority of Rutland enclosures that occurred before the middle of the eighteenth century were in villages towards the south and west of the county, in the clay lands best suited to pasture. In the light limestone soils to the north and east of the county, best suited to growing grain, the peak period for enclosure was the time of very high grain prices caused by the Napoleonic wars (1793-1815). Enclosure gave two benefits to the farmer compared to the common field system. It consolidated an individual's scattered strip holdings into more manageable blocks of land, and removed others' right of common over the land. In short it provided a farmer with complete control over his land. Initially this enabled conversion to pasture, and permitted the county to become a fattening area for servicing the increasingly important London market. Later, it also enabled an individual to take advantage of innovations in stockbreeding that were not possible in the common herds and flocks. Similarly, as the agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century developed, even in the grain areas, innovations such as the use of turnips and clover

could be adopted in enclosed fields without needing the agreement of fellow commoners (Ryder 2006, 32).

Besides the benefits of new agricultural methods, and probably of more direct importance to the large landowner, was the ability to increase rents on enclosure. This also provided a good return on the high costs associated with obtaining an Act of Parliament. Generally rents in Rutland could be doubled on enclosure. In Lyndon in the mid seventeenth century it was recorded, 'Before the said lands were improved the rent of them was three score and ten pounds. Since the improvement [by enclosure] . . . the rent is a hundred and four score pounds' (Ryder 2006, 31). Similarly of the Oakham common fields it was recorded that enclosing 'would certainly double its present value' (Parkinson 1808, 40). While enclosure provided the large landowners with increased income from their tenants, its benefit to the small landowners was less tangible. On enclosure these individuals were usually left with significantly less land, as the tithe holders were allocated land in compensation for loss of their rights. In addition they had to fund their share of the cost of the enclosure and, if enclosure prompted a change to pasture, pay for extra animals. It is not surprising then that the process of enclosure saw a reduction in the number of landowners. During the period of the Uppingham, Caldecott and Lyddington enclosure (1802 to 1804) the number of proprietors decreased from 192 to 179 (Ryder 2006, 50). An attrition of leaseholds had also been happening. While the average size of tenancy in the mid seventeenth century (15-30 acres) was similar to those described in the 1305 survey, by 1806 the average had increased to 200 acres (Ryder 2006, 36 & 38). Efficiency was the guiding principle of eighteenth-century farming gentry. One way in which it could be increased was through the consolidation of farms, whether common or enclosed, when long leases ran out. By the end of the eighteenth century there were very few long tenancies left in Rutland, and most tenancies were let from year to year at a rack rent.

A great deal of evidence of the early open field system of agriculture can still be found in Rutland. Here, ridge and furrow is exposed on the south side of Hambleton peninsula when Rutland Water was at low level in October 2006 (RO)





This aerial view of the area just south of Nether Hambleton was taken in 1968. It shows the extent of the then surviving ridge and furrow. Much of this area is now under Rutland Water (Anglian Water)

This has been a rapid journey through 700 years of agricultural and social change, one that started with the medieval bondsman required to work his own and his lord's land. However, the calamity of the Black Death created a shortage of labour that enabled him to break these feudal demands. By the sixteenth century the bondsman had evolved into a peasant farmer, still working the common fields of his predecessors to essentially the same rotations. The disaster of the plague had also forced the economic system to evolve from feudal to capitalist. Initially this caused some forced depopulations and village desertions, but by the late sixteenth and seventeenth century government and legal actions had left the peasant farmers in 'quiet enjoyment' of their holdings. Nevertheless by the eighteenth century a combination of increased wealth together with Acts of Parliament provided the gentry with the power to extract increased revenue from their estates. This they achieved through a combination of consolidating farms, enclosure, and the introduction of agricultural innovations, and the most tangible expression was in increased rents. The larger more efficient farms did not need as many workers, and at the end of our journey unwanted agricultural workers were left destitute or were compelled to migrate to expanding manufacturing cities.