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Joan Thirsk and ‘The common fields’

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Few academic articles can have been as influential as ‘The common fields’, which Joan Thirsk published in the journal *Past and Present* in 1964.¹ It represented a fundamental shift in approach to the study of medieval field systems, and it continues to be a major influence on our thinking. Some aspects of the article’s argument, it is true, were challenged over the succeeding decades, but more recent research has often served to confirm Thirsk’s original views. On other matters she does now appear, in hindsight, to have been mistaken, but even here perhaps because she failed to follow through the logic of her own model. More than half a century on, ‘The Common Fields’ continues to be read, discussed and referenced in the principal literature on medieval agriculture, and continues to inspire fresh insights.

Open fields, which may be defined as areas of arable land containing intermixed properties in the form of narrow unenclosed strips, subject to rights of common grazing and other communal controls, were widespread if not ubiquitous in medieval and early post-medieval England, and took a wide variety of forms. Their character and origins had already been studied by historians for many decades before Thirsk’s seminal article appeared. Most attention had focused on the most rigorously organised variety, which was found in the central areas of England, in a band of territory extending from the north-east of the country, through the Midlands, down to the south coast. In this version, the fields were extensive and continuous, accounting for most or all of the arable land in a township. The narrow strips – selions or ‘lands’ – were grouped into blocks called furlongs or shotts, which were in turn aggregated into larger units called ‘fields’, usually two or three in number, one of which lay fallow each year and was grazed in common by the livestock of the community. In the middle ages, each farm comprised a large number of strips scattered evenly, and sometimes very regularly, across the area of the township. Strong communal controls were exercised over farming routines, including the exploitation of the common ‘waste’ lying beyond the fields. Such an agricultural system, so alien to modern concepts of ownership and land management, understandably attracted historical attention

1. J. Thirsk, ‘The common fields’, *Past and Present*, 29 (1964), pp. 3–29.

from an early date. But, as Thirsk and others were well aware by the 1960s, other forms of open-field farming were practised to either side of the Midland belt, which were first categorised and discussed by Howard Gray in 1915.² In these, holdings were less evenly scattered across the township, the open arable was often accompanied by or interspersed with enclosed parcels of land, and communal controls were often, although not always, less rigorous and pervasive in character. Perhaps not surprisingly, these divergences from Midland practice were associated with significant differences in the character of settlement, which were noted but seldom emphasised by early scholars. The extensive and highly communal field systems of the Midland regions were generally farmed from nucleated villages; the various alternatives were associated with more dispersed forms of settlement, featuring small hamlets and outlying farms in addition to, and sometimes instead of, villages.

Up until the publication of 'The common fields', there was consensus that the various forms of medieval field system had very early, pre-Conquest origins. Seebohm in the 1880s believed that open-field agriculture developed in the Roman period, through the need of peasant cultivators to share plough teams and ploughs.³ Vinogradoff in contrast argued that the intermixture of properties arose from a primitive concept of tribal shareholding.⁴ Both these writers concentrated their attention on the well-developed fields of the Midlands; it was Gray who expanded his interests to embrace the other types of field system. The different agrarian arrangements revealed in medieval documents represented, he believed, the areas settled by particular tribal groups in the post-Roman period. The 'Midland System' – Gray's term for the classic, village-based open fields found in the central districts of the country – had thus been imported fully formed from the Anglo-Saxon homelands in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia, and its concentration in these central districts reflected their 'thorough Germanisation' in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁵ The irregular, patchwork systems found in places like Kent and East Anglia, in contrast, represented existing Romano-British patterns of land holding, in which properties had subsequently fragmented through the effects of partible inheritance, although in East Anglia a subsequent wave of Danish settlement, resulting in a high density of free tenures and complex manorial arrangements, had led to further changes.⁶ Not all explanations advanced in the first half of the twentieth century, however, placed quite such an emphasis on nebulous 'cultural' concepts. In particular, the Orwins, whose book *The Open Fields* appeared in 1938, argued like Seebohm that communal field systems

2. H.L. Gray, *English field systems* (Cambridge, MA, 1915).

3. F. Seebohm, *The English village community* (London, 1883), pp. 120–2 and 409–11.

4. P. Vinogradoff, *Villeinage in England* (Oxford, 1892), p. 236; P. Vinogradoff, *The growth of the manor* (London, 1905), p. 150.

5. Gray, *English field systems*, p. 415.

6. Gray, *English field systems*, pp. 415–17.

arose from the need to share ploughs, although they believed that this had only become important during the post-Roman period, when the heavy mouldboard plough came into widespread use. They noted – as others had done – the intimate connection between the division of land as strips and the use of a large wheeled plough, difficult to manoeuvre in small enclosed parcels.⁷ They also argued, more generally, that villages and open fields reflected the need for cooperation by pioneer farmers in a hostile environment; and they thus placed the origins of Gray's 'Midland System' well before the Norman Conquest.

At the time 'The common fields' was published there was thus general agreement that medieval field systems had early, pre-Conquest origins. Many historians, moreover, also accepted the importance of race and tribal custom in the genesis of regional variations in their character. Thirsk's article challenged such assumptions, for she argued that open fields, at least in their fully developed form, only emerged some time *after* the Norman Conquest. And rather than having been created, or imported, fully formed, the most complex field systems of medieval England had developed gradually over time.

7. C.S. Orwin and C.S. Orwin, *The open fields* (Oxford, 1938).