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Rowland Edmund Prothero
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THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

CHAPTER I

THE VILLAGE FARM

THE village farm is the core of the agricultural history of England. As compared with its ancient origin, the threefold division of the agricultural interests into landlord, tenant-farmer and wage-earning labourer, as well as the individual occupation and cultivation of agricultural land, are in many parts of this country mushroom-growths. The change from the one to the other has been a slow but continuous process. Already in progress at least as early as the reign of Henry III., it was not completed until the first half of the nineteenth century. Even then the older system has lingered on in remote country districts. Many of us have seen it in active operation. Though now it has been completely superseded, it has left traces which, to the eyes of all who have studied the subject, are deeply impressed, except perhaps in Kent, Devonshire and Cornwall, on the general aspect of England—on the laying out of roads, on place and field names, and on the formation of country villages.

The substitution of the individual occupation and use of agricultural land for the older system of

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common cultivation was carried out by enclosures. In its effects on the rural population the enclosing movement is an important, and, in some aspects, regrettable development in the social, if not in the economic, history of the country. Its character, causes and conditions have within the last quarter of a century attracted the increasing attention of historical students. Of recent years it has become, for obvious reasons, a favourite battleground of political theorists. For the most part the movement has been exclusively studied in its social and political effects. Emphasis has been rightly laid on the distress caused by the break-up of the agrarian partnerships and on the disastrous consequences of the divorce of the peasantry from the soil. Use has been freely made of a considerable literature of protest and denunciation. The vigorous, picturesque language of sermons, pamphlets and popular verse has been liberally quoted without much discrimination. But very little attention has been paid to the practical questions involved. There is, in fact, a side of the movement which has been unduly ignored by both historians and politicians. It is the agricultural side. So universal has been the reconstruction of the industry on the lines with which we are now familiar, and so completely has the older system disappeared from our midst, that it is necessary to begin with a brief description of the open or common field farms which, two hundred and fifty years ago, still formed half the cultivated area.

The picture must necessarily be a general one. Space allows of nothing else. Wide modifications in the system, due to customary variations or local peculiarities, are so numerous, that in its broad features only is the description universally true. Any examination of the origin of the system would

Division of Manors

be out of place. To discuss it would be to plunge into the mists of antiquity, and enter on a region of acute controversy, legal, historical, political and social.

The land of a manor in the fourteenth century was divided into three unequal areas. The smallest portion was a compact enclosed block, reserved for the private use of the Lord of the Manor, and held in individual occupation. A far larger part was occupied and cultivated on co-operative principles by the villagers in common, as an association of co-partners, both free and unfree, under a rigid regulated system of management which was binding on all the members of the association. The third part was the common pasture, fringed by the waste in its natural wildness. Over this pasture and waste, common rights were exercised by the Lord of the Manor in virtue of his ownership, by the village partners in virtue of their arable holdings, and by the occupiers of certain cottages to which rights were attached. An inquiry into the farming of the lord's demesne land is outside the scope of the present subject. Originally, the land had been thrown into the village farm. Its gradual withdrawal from the area of common cultivation was the first breach in the system; but by the middle of the fourteenth century the enclosure of a compact block in individual occupation for the private use of the lord had become very general.

Whether the land was left in the village farm, or enclosed for private use, it was mainly cultivated by the labour services of the open-field farmers, who paid rent in the form of labour on the demesne for their holdings in the village partnership. The legal and social position of these tenant labourers largely depended on the nature of the services which they

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thus rendered to their lord. The highest in the social scale were those who gave team service; the lowest were the manual workers, and the more certain and determinate their labour, the greater their degree of freedom. Of the demesne land nothing further need be said, except that the frequent recurrence of such farm-names as Court Farm, Hall Farm, Manor Farm, or Grange Farm, illustrates at once the antiquity and prevalence of such a division of the land.

Isolated farmhouses and buildings were so rare that they may be said not to have existed, except on the demesne. Above the tufts of trees which marked the sites of settlements rose the church, the mill, and, at a little distance, the manor house. Gathered in an irregular street were the homes of the villagers who occupied and cultivated the land of the open-field farm. Nearest to the village, if possible along the banks of a stream, lay the meadows. Beyond, stretched the open, hedgeless, unenclosed expanse of arable land. Beyond this, again, ran the common pastures with their fringe of fern or heather, or gorse-clad, bushgrown waste. No part of this area—meadow, ploughland, pasture or waste—was held in individual occupation; all was used in common under regulations as to management by which the whole village community were strictly bound.

The meadowland was annually cut up into lots, and put up for hay. From St. Gregory's Day to Midsummer Day the lots were in this way fenced off for the separate use of individuals. After the hay had been mown and carried, the fences were removed, and the grass became the common pasturage of the live stock of the community until the middle of the following March, when the same process

A Bundle of Strips

was renewed. Sometimes the meadow lots were attached to the arable holdings, so that the same occupier received the same allotment of grass every year. But the more frequent practice seems to have been to distribute them by an annual ballot among the occupiers of the arable land.

Beyond the meadows lay the arable land of the village, divided generally into three great fields. Each of the three fields was subdivided into a number of flats or furlongs, separated from each other by unploughed bushgrown balks of varying widths. These flats were in turn cut up into a number of parallel acre, half-acre, or quarter-acre strips, divided from one another by similar, but narrower, balks, and coinciding with the arrangement of a ploughed field into ridges and furrows.

Year after year, in unvarying succession, the three fields were cropped in a compulsory rotation. One field was under wheat or rye; the second under barley, oats, beans and peas; the third lay fallow. It is scarcely necessary to add that roots, temporary grasses, and potatoes were unknown to the Middle Ages, and did not come into general use on farms until the latter half of the eighteenth century. Each partner in the village farm held a bundle of strips in each of the three fields. Thus, if his arable holding was thirty acres, he would every year have ten acres under wheat or rye, ten acres under the other corn crops, and ten acres fallow. No attempt could be made to improve the quality of the soil and bring it up to a general average. Equality could only be secured by distributing the different qualities evenly among the partners. In order to divide the good, moderate and poor land fairly, the strips which the partner held in each field were widely scattered so that no two were contiguous.

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From seed-time to harvest the strips were held in separate occupation for the private use of the individual holder. After harvest, and until the next season's cultivation, the live stock of the community wandered over the fields under the care of the common herdsman, shepherd and swineherd.

There were, therefore, common grazing rights at certain seasons of the year over the whole of the meadow and arable land of the partnership. There was also the common pasture of the manor and village farms which lay beyond the meadows and the arable fields. It was fringed by the border of waste which provided fern or heather for litter and thatching, hurdle-wood, and tree-loppings for winter browsing, furze and turves for fuel, acorns and mast for swine, as well as large timber for fencing implements or building. For the enjoyment of these lesser common rights to the produce of the waste, small annual payments were usually made by the village farmers to the manorial lord. Still more important were the common pastures. When the aftermath of the meadows was gone, and the fallows and stubbles were ploughed, they supplied the only keep for the live stock, which, at the best, barely survived the winter as skin and bone. They were therefore highly prized and jealously guarded by the partners in the village farm as an essential and integral part of their holdings. The modern and popular idea of a common is inapplicable to medieval commons. The general public had no share in or claim to their use. On the contrary, they were rigidly excluded; the live stock of strangers were driven off; cottages built upon them were pulled down; commoners who turned out more cattle than they were entitled to were "presented" and fined. Those who enjoyed the common rights over

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Variety of Titles

pasture and waste were known and definite individuals. They were, as has been said, the manorial lord in virtue of his ownership, the partners in the village farm, who in theory, were limited in the number of stock which they could turn out, by the size of their arable holdings, and the occupiers of certain cottages to which the rights were attached. To them the pastures were common, and to no one else. The rest of the world were trespassers.

Some of the partners in the village farm were freemen, some were serfs; between the two ends of the scale were men who socially, if not legally, held intermediate positions. Their arable holdings were of different sizes, and were held by a great variety of titles and tenures. A few of the occupiers of land or cottages were freeholders; the great majority were tenants, holding their title from the landowner by widely diversified tenures. Some were copyholders for lives and, later, of inheritance; others were leaseholders for lives or for terms of years; others were tenants from year to year or at will. Equally varied were their rents. Some were held by military service; others by team labour on the lord's demesne; others by manual labour, more or less fixed or uncertain; others paid fixed money rents; others produce rents; others a combination of the two. But the great point was that practically the whole of the inhabitants of the village, as freeholders, or tenants, or squatters who had made good their title to encroachments by length of occupation, had some interest in the soil other than that of wages. Few, if any, were landless wage-earners. Even the serfs had some stake in the community, though in the eye of the law they were propertyless.

The open-field farm was, in many ways, well

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suited to the times in which it flourished. In the early Middle Ages, each agricultural community, with its graduated degrees of dependence and its collective responsibility, was organized, like a trade guild, for mutual help and protection. The organization supplemented the weakness of the law, which was often powerless to safeguard the rights of individuals; the manorial courts, for many years, to some extent supplied the place of assizes, quarter sessions, and county courts. Socially and agriculturally, the system was also adapted to a disturbed and unsettled period. Communities grouped in villages were safer from attack than if the individuals were isolated in detached farm-houses. Their co-operative principle enabled them to maintain, in spite of the frequent absences of able-bodied men on military service, some degree of continuity of cultivation. Their rigid rules of management may have hindered improvement; but they certainly, as long as the soil remained productive, checked wholesale deterioration. Economically they had not yet become detrimental to the national interest. Towns were few and sparsely inhabited. Except in their immediate neighbourhood, there was little or no demand for agricultural produce beyond the needs of the producers themselves. If the land fed those who farmed it, it might be said to have done its national duty. No distant markets needed supplies of food. Each village community was self-supporting and self-sufficing. Nothing was expected of the soil except that it should meet the want of the necessaries of life in the locality where it was situated. The inhabitants held little intercourse with their neighbours. Except along the main thoroughfares they had few means of communication. Such local roads as existed were mere drift ways,

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Unprogressive Farming

often impassable in the winter except on foot or on horseback. Little was either sold or bought. Every group of village farmers grew its own bread supply; its land or its live stock provided its wants of meat, drink, fuel or clothing.

Agriculture, still in its comparative infancy, was unprogressive. No improved methods or increased resources were offered to farmers, which could only be introduced on open-fields with the unanimous consent of a timid and ignorant body of partners, any one of whom could refuse to have them adopted on the farm. The system fostered stagnation, and starved enterprise; but so long as population and farming remained stationary, no definite economic loss counterbalanced its many social advantages. Obviously, however, occasions might arise when the economic loss might be so great as to outweigh the social gain. When such occasions arose, the reconciliation of the two divergent claims presented a very difficult and complex problem. It cannot honestly be said that the wisdom of our legislators found any satisfactory solution. The variety of interests involved, and of rights enjoyed, some capable of legal proof, others originating in encroachments, others existing only by sufferance, required, if they were to be fairly adjusted, most careful discrimination. They sometimes received scant attention, and, under the pressure of economic necessity, the social advantages were unduly sacrificed.

Even in the infancy of farming the agricultural defects inherent in the common cultivation of land by the open-field system are many and obvious. As farming skill advanced, the objections to it became more and more serious. At first, and so long as the virgin soil retained its natural fertility, these

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defects were mitigated. But their existence was very early recognized by practical men. The waste of arable land was considerable, owing to the innumerable balks and footpaths. Still more serious was the waste of time and labour. The buildings were sometimes as much as two miles from the holdings. A holder spent hours in visiting his scattered strips, and the toil of minor tillage operations was enormously increased by the distances between the different parts of his arable land. The distinction between grass and arable was permanent, though both might profit by conversion.

All the occupiers were bound by rigid customary rules, compelled to treat all kinds of soil alike, unable to differentiate in their cultivation, bound to the unvarying triennial succession, obliged to keep exact time with one another in sowing and reaping their crops. Each man was at the mercy of his neighbours. The idleness of one might destroy the industry of twenty. If one partner cleaned his strip, his labours might be wasted by the foul condition of the next. Drainage was practically impossible. If one man water-furrowed his land, or scoured his courses, his outfalls might be choked by the apathy or slovenliness of his neighbour. The supply of manure was inadequate. It need scarcely be said that there were no artificials. Natural fertilizers only existed. The value of town refuse, and other substances, were known to the Middle Ages. So also were the uses of marl and lime and chalk. But such fertilizers, if procurable, were often too costly for small open-field farmers. The dung of their live stock was generally their only resource, and it was wasted over the wide expanse of pasture which the cattle traversed in pursuit of food. Unable to supply adequate winter