Inclosure in Gloucestershire

Land which before was only valued for a few miserable sheep depastured upon it, and often subject to rot, is now in a state of profitable cultivation.

General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester T Rudge 1807

Gloucestershire was transformed from the late 18th century onwards from a county with open expanses of field to a county with individual partitioned pieces of land, hedged and walled, spread out like a patchwork quilt. New roads were often built as a result of inclosure, as well as farm-buildings and houses. The Gloucestershire countryside has never looked back – we are still living in an inclosure landscape today.

When you next walk in the Gloucestershire countryside, or drive down country roads take a look at the hedges and Cotswold stonewalls. You are tracing the changes made by our ancestors over two hundred years ago.

Gloucestershire before Inclosure

The county was characterised by very large open fields from the Saxon period up to inclosure. Livestock such as sheep and cows were grazed on common land and crops were grown on common arable fields. The common fields, like elsewhere in Britain were divided into strips. Extensive ploughing of strips often left its mark on the landscape. It is sometimes still possible to detect the pre-inclosure landscape of narrow strips, known as ridge and furrow. Look out for a corrugated pattern on a dry, bright day.

Example of ridge and furrow at the Gloucestershire/Welsh border.

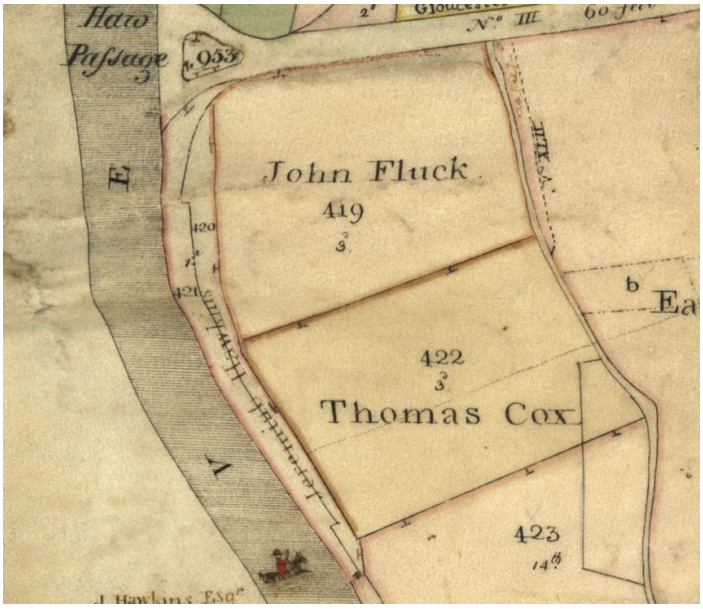
The Gloucestershire Inclosure Awards

- Gloucestershire Archives holds just over 160 official inclosure awards for individual Gloucestershire parishes
- There are 148 inclosure maps in the archives
- The awards date from 1727 to 1918
- The maps date from 1708 – 1918
- The majority of the Gloucestershire inclosures were organised during the late eighteenth and early to mid nineteenth centuries
- The peak for inclosure in Gloucestershire, similarly to elsewhere in England and Wales was during the reign of George III (1738 – 1820)
- The final formal inclosure in Britain was in Gloucestershire, at Elmstone Hardwicke in 1913 and 1918
- Gloucestershire also has two of the earliest inclosure maps in the country: Farmington, 1708 and 1714

The broad stretch of time between the first and the last inclosure in Gloucestershire means that it is difficult to highlight specific patterns and pick out a typical inclosure. Every award and map is different and the commissioner and surveyor for each area would have met with a diverse set of circumstances. However in general the process for inclosing land was the same throughout the county, as it was in the rest of England and Wales. The Inclosure Act of 1801 would have been a catalyst for many of the inclosures in the county.

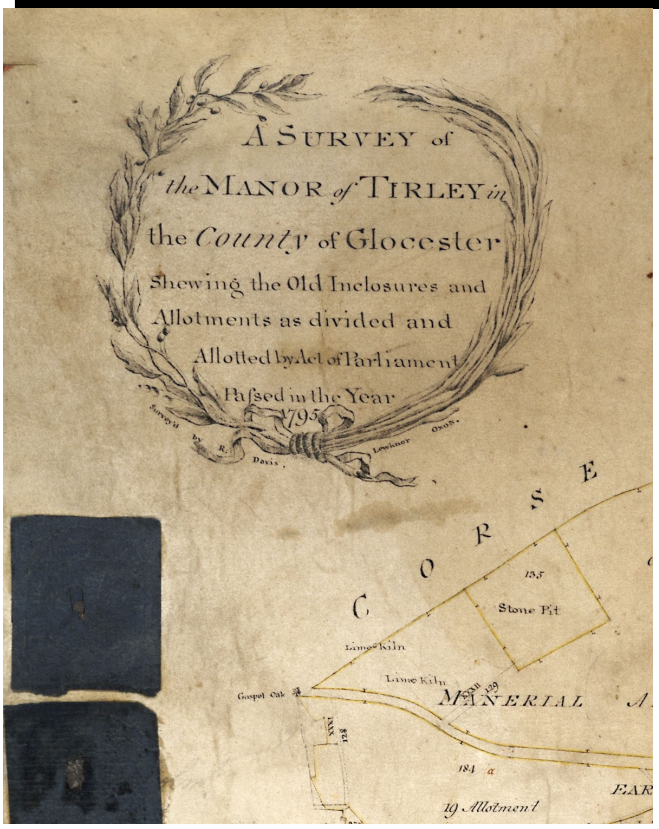
Section from inclosure map of Cheltenham, showing St Mary's church and what is now The Promenade

Section of Gloucester inclosure map showing London Road and Wotton Pitch area, including St Mary Magdalen's Chapel (Plot No.122)



Section of Deerhurst inclosure map, 1815

Note the drawing of the huntsman riding across the River Severn



Map cartouche for Tirley inclosure map, 1795.

Issues

There is some evidence to suggest there were problems with the inclosure process in some areas of Gloucestershire. For example in 1796 the inhabitants of Cosse (Corse, near Hartbury) Chase objected to inclosure, and in 1819/20 in the Parish of Woolaston there was a court case to establish the legal ownership of land. The latter case concerns a family called Davis. A document dated January 1820 written on behalf of the Lord of The Manor, the Duke of Beaufort, by his Agent Zouch Turton, points to a particularly lengthy spat.

Case Study: The Davis Family, Woolaston

The Davis family lived in *encroachments*: homes, which had been built on the common land. An encroachment was technically a structure built without permission, although before inclosure this situation was tolerated and was not unusual.

When inclosure happened in Woolaston, similarly to elsewhere in the country, the rights of common land were removed. In Woolaston the common land was given to the Lord of the Manor, the Duke of Beaufort.

In a document in Gloucestershire Archives from Zouch Turton, Agent for the Duke of Beaufort, he writes that the Duke has allowed the cottages to '*be let out to the … cottagers on leases for three lives.*' Basically the Duke was allowing the people who lived in the encroachments to stay, but only if they paid him more rent. Turton goes on to say that there were '*about 160*

different persons within the two parishes of Tid. [Tidenham] & Woolastone, about one hundred of whom have agreed to take their leases on the terms held out to them.' In other words sixty refused to pay the Duke of Beaufort additional rent. This is a significant rebellion and the Duke would have been extremely nervous about this scale of defiance. In Turton's words: '*The remainder positively refuse, claiming the places as their own absolute property*.'

Such a rumpus would have caused the Duke of Beaufort embarrassment and could have led to further refusals to pay him money elsewhere in the county. The Duke, who lived on the Badminton Estate in Badminton owned land all over Gloucestershire. He would have wanted the situation resolved speedily and definitively.

The document makes reference to a large family called Davis, and mentions two specifically by name: Betty Davis and William Davis, who lived in separate properties. The document describes how these two individuals had been ejected from their homes. The main motivation for ejecting these two in particular is described by Turton as being: '*because their cottages & gardens were rather better than the others*.'

It appears that Betty and William possessed a fighting spirit. In the end Betty and William ended up being tried at the Gloucester Assizes in September 1819.

Why the Gloucester Assizes? The Assize courts typically dealt with more serious crimes, for example theft and murder. It appears strange that a property case should be tried here. However it can be suggested that the Duke wanted to make an example of the Woolaston cottagers. It is also probable that the case of William and Betty Davis was a 'test case.' For example if the Duke won this case any refusal to pay him rent elsewhere in the county could be swiftly dealt with.

Perhaps predictably the Duke of Beaufort won the case. It is reported in the Gloucester Journal in September 1819. Both parties paid their own costs. However the document written by Turton in early 1820 suggests that the Davis family had not given up. He writes: 'In addition to this, several others of the violent ones, have found money & procured a Bristol Attorney.' Quite where the Davis family found money from to employ a Bristol Attorney is a mystery. As is the result of this stage in the dispute: there does not appear to be anything in the Archives to tell us what eventually happened.

Divided Opinions

In *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester* by T Rudge published in 1807, it is clear that the cottager class did not always welcome inclosure in the county. Rudge makes reference to the cottagers' attitudes, for example:

'If it could be proved, that some cottagers were deprived of a few trifling advantages, yet the small losses of individuals ought not to stand in the way of certain improvements on a large scale. Besides the augmentation in demand for the cottager's labour, will much overplay his loss by this trifling privation.'

The loss for the cottager would include all their previously held common rights. If the common land was taken from them where would they graze their pigs, sheep and geese? Not to mention the encroachments where they lived.

Rudge feels that the cottager must not stand in the way of progress, he should know his place. However, even Rudge grudgingly admits that the cost of inclosure often priced the less wealthy classes out of the market. He describes how fencing to inclose fields was relatively more expensive for the '*small holder*.' Nevetheless such a problem was '*frequently overcome by the superior influence of the great landholders*.' In Gloucestershire fencing was generally made from whitethorn. However in the Forest of Dean holly was often used, and in the Cotswolds stonewalling was the most used method. Rudge was critical of dry stonewalling as it was '*continually in need of repair*.'

The Benefits of Inclosure in Gloucestershire

In his book Rudge puts a lot of emphasis on how beneficial inclosure is for Gloucestershire, for example highlighting how 1350 acres of '*wet and rushy waste'* had been enclosed in the Vale and made into profitable farming land. Another inclosure supporter was William Marshall, who wrote in *The Rural Economy of Gloucestershire* in 1796 that inclosure in the Cotswold Hills has been 'very beneficial.' Rudge is more detailed in his analysis commenting that much of the waste land in Gloucestershire used for grazing sheep is in poor condition and unsuitable, giving the sheep 'rot'. He clearly has no time for the objectors:

'The supposing advantages derived by cottagers, in having food for a few sheep and geese on a neighbouring common, have usually been brought forward as objections to the inclosing system.'

Where statistics are available it appears that inclosure did create a more productive agricultural economy. In general cereal crop production rose by a fifth and more animals were kept. The quality of the crops grown also improved, including those grown to feed animals, which in turn meant better livestock.

Rudge highlights the economic benefits of inclosure by including information about the hamlet of Eastington, Northleach and the parish of Aldsworth. In both places production of crops and wool almost doubled after inclosure. The downside was that land rental was increased. For example at Eastington the annual rent to the landlord tripled. This rise in rent would presumably be balanced against the increase in productivity.

Much of the land in Gloucestershire was converted from pasture for grazing animals to arable for growing crops. Before inclosure crops such as wheat, barley and beans were traditionally grown. However when inclosure happened more experimental crops on rotation were introduced, for example, turnips, barley, grass, wheat, oats, peas, vetch and sainfoin. Such a mixture of crops would provide livestock feed and also supply nitrogen for the soil.

Independence and autonomy for the individual farmer also resulted in experiments with livestock. Different breeds were crossed to produce quality farm animals. Marshall highlights livestock improvements in his comment: '*In the open state, sheep were only bred: now the Cotswold sheep may rank among the first in Smithfield market.'*

Experimentation meant more work, and more work meant that additional labourers were employed on the land. It can be suggested that inclosure ushered in a new prosperity for the Gloucestershire farm labourer. Rudge makes an interesting comment when he writes:

'*It is remarked, that labourers, who formerly were under the necessity of seeking employment in London and other places, now find it in sufficient quantity at home in their respective parishes*.'

Was inclosure a good thing for Gloucestershire and the country as a whole? Possibly. Inevitably there were winners and losers. The evidence paints a complicated picture.

Undeniably inclosure had a far-reaching and significant impact on both the landscape and the inhabitants of Gloucestershire, during and after inclosure.