



Laxton, Nottinghamshire

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Village of Laxton

Open field system

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Ploughing up history

Laxton, in Nottinghamshire, has a unique national inheritance. Now it is under threat as the Government plans to overturn a centuries-old way of life. Richard Muir explains why it should be preserved. Richard Muir is the author of *The English Village* published by Thames and Hudson, £8.50.

The entry in Domesday Book of 1086 is typically terse and to the point: 'In Laxintune ... there is land for six ploughs. There are five male slaves and one female slave ... the value in time of King Edward the Confessor was £9; it is now worth £6.'

Nine centuries later, in the time of Mrs Thatcher's contracting empire, Laxton is worth around £2 million; there are no slaves, but the number of village tenants and smallholders is almost the same as in 1086. For several months the tenant families have been troubled by the uncertainties surrounding an attempt to sell of the

Nottinghamshire estate where they live and work. This might not be a matter for wider concern were it not for the simple fact that Laxton has the sole survivor of a system of open field farming which supported the majority of our ancestors (and those of millions of emigrants to the New World) for a millennium.

The vendor is neither impoverished landlord nor artful speculator by the Ministry of Agriculture, which has held Laxton for almost three decades.

Last November the tenants gathered for their annual rent dinner, traditionally the occasion for the payment of rents but, since the Ministry took over the estate and rent demands have arrived in the post, a social occasion at which the villagers met the Minister, their Lord of the Manor. This time the Minister did not appear and it was left to Lord Ferrers, the Minister of State in the House of Lords, to announce to a shocked and suddenly fearful assembly that Laxton was to be sold.

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The result of the last election sent shivers down the spines of many conservationists. There were never grounds for suspecting that the hard men in the Cabinet might regard the nebulous and costly concepts of heritage and conservation as the preoccupations of 'wets' and 'softies'. The fears were soon confirmed with the axing of a number of harmless little archæological quangoes, and even the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments had to lobby in the highest corridors of power in order to survive. Even so, nobody imagined that the unique open fields of Laxton could be at risk.

As a result of various accidents of history, Laxton escaped the Parliamentary Enclosures of the C18 and C19 which converted other open-field strip-farming parishes into areas of compact land holdings. In 1951 the sixth Lord Manvers died and death duties necessitated the sale of Laxton part of his Thoresby estate. Although a higher price could have been gained by dismantling the open fields and selling the lands to private owners, the estates were sold to the Ministry of Agriculture for around £250,000 and handed over to the Agricultural Land Commission with the instruction to 'preserve the open fields (and) to help tenants meet the demands of the future'. And so it seemed that the last village open fields would be preserved in perpetuity.

But Laxton fell foul of an asset-shedding policy by which the Ministry is disposing of various parcels of land. When challenged, the Ministry replied that it was no longer its policy to own land. In February of this year a delegation representing Laxton tenants and Nottinghamshire local government met the Minister's Parliamentary Secretary, Jerry Wiggin. The members were left in no doubt that the sell-off would go ahead.

Meanwhile, clouds of protest had gathered. Historians from many parts of the world condemned the sale, which the Oxford agricultural historian Dr Joan Thirsk compared to the dismantling of Stonehenge to grab its building materials. Mr Edmund Rose, the Laxton bailiff, received letters of sympathy from a host of non-academics. Faced with such opposition, the delegation was assured that the lands would not be auctioned, but sold to a buyer who was prepared to preserve the open fields.

Even the mildest of cynics will realise that a purchaser would have little difficulty in disposing of Laxton, whatever strings might be attached to the sale. It is doubtful whether a covenant could

bind the heir of the buyer, while tenants could be got rid of for raising their rents in stages to current market levels. Only a few holdings need to fall vacant for the whole system to collapse. The ancient practices could then be declared unviable, and Laxton would disintegrate into consolidated farm holdings and high-priced commuter cottages.

Open field farming was a feature of most of mediæval lowland England. It seems to have developed late in the Saxon era as an ingenious response to problems of population pressure. The intensive farming of plough strips in the arable fields released other lands for pasture, a scarce resource and an essential component of village self-sufficiency. Each member of the various grades of peasant tenants held a number of strips which were dispersed among arable fields, while other village lands were set aside as hay meadow or common pasture. The dispersal of the strips was necessary for a number of reasons, the most important being a result of the system of land rotation which allowed cropped land to recover under fallow every third season. No peasant could afford to have his strips all lying idle in a fallow field during any particular year. Each strip consisted of a variable number of plough ridges and intervening furrows. These ridges produce the corrugated appearance that is frequently preserved today in former open field lands which are now under permanent pasture. The strips were generally grouped together in rectangular packages of 'furlongs' and a group of furlong blocks made of one of the vast open fields.

Agricultural reformers, pursuing a variety of motives gave open field farming a very bad press during the centuries which followed the decay of feudalism. Even so, the system was not inherently inefficient. It supported the populations of countless parishes for a millennium, until the remaining unenclosed parishes surrendered piecemeal to Acts of Parliamentary Enclosure during the century leading up to 1850. Open field farming was, however, extremely complicated and demanded an enormous measure of peasant co-operation and authoritative control. At Laxton alone it survived, along with communal will to make the system work.

Strip-like fields can still be seen around a handful of English villages like SOHAM in Cambridgeshire and BRAUNTON in Devon. What makes Laxton so special is the survival not only of the strip patterns and fragmented tenancies, but also the mediæval

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institutions which regulate their use. There is a complex system of local democracy which produces a 12-man jury, three foremen, each responsible for a particular field, and an overall bailiff with onerous administrative responsibilities. The present bailiff, Mr Edmund Rose, succeeded his father, who had held the office for 30 years, in 1964. It is in keeping with Laxton's ever-present air of antiquity that Mr Rose is descended from one John Roos who, in 1408, married into the family of Everingham which had held the manor since 1230. Each year the jury and a foreman inspect each of the village fields, and fines are levied against those residents who have transgressed the code of conduct. A local joiner is appointed to provide stakes which are needed to define the unhedged roads and holdings. Although these practices may seem quaint and archaic, they are essential to the operation of open field farming. They curb the greedier tenants who might act like the mediæval peasant in *Piers Plowman* who admitted, 'If I went to the plough I pinched so narrowly that I would steal a foot of land or a furrow'.



*The bailiff and his son. Edmund Rose, who farms 120 acres with his son Richard, took over the job from his father who retired in 1964*

Other complex arrangements are needed to control the movement of grazing animals and the driving of livestock on and off the temporary pasture which is grown on the following field, for the maintenance of field tracks and the growing and disposal of the hay crop raised on the 'sykes' or permanent grass strips.

Visitors to this attractive village of C18 and early C19 cottages of mellowed red brick should not expect to find feudal ploughmen trudging barefoot behind six-ox ploughs. All open field systems evolved considerably before they disappeared, strips were periodically amalgamated and in many parishes enclosures by private agreement had dismantled the open fields long before the years of parliamentary enclosure.

There were a number of amalgamations at Laxton in 1904-7 and a few more recently, but farming has evolved within the general framework of the surviving open field regulations. In 1968 the old rotation, which involved a year of bare fallow for the rested field, was replaced by one involving the undersowing of the spring corn crop with grass, which grows through the produce a heavy hay harvest in the following year.

Despite the minor squabbles which are an authentic part of open field farming, the Laxton tenants respect the antiquity of their environment. Apart from the difficulties associated with time-consuming travel to far-flung strips, there is a general problem which derives from the cramped farmyard conditions of the village-based farmsteads which are hemmed in by the surrounding fields.

To the relief of the local farmers, the complexities of Laxton farming were sufficient to scare off the property companies which showered an initial interest on the estate. The tenants would have welcomed the National Trust as their landlord, but such a body could not afford the purchase price and would need assistance to undertake the necessary costs of improving properties. Ministry plans to have Laxton sold off by February this year did not succeed, and outsiders have suggested that a farming co-operative might be created.

There are many good reasons why Laxton should be preserved by a public body. The first is educational, for last year an estimated 10,000 schoolchildren visited the village and its lands to participate in unique lessons in living history. A second reason is academic and scientific:

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historians and geographers know that open field farming was highly complex, but only Laxton can demonstrate the detailed intricacy of local arrangements which are necessary to make the system work.

The remaining reasons involve the entire ethic of conservation. Despite the wholesale obliteration of so many facets of our heritage, members of the public still rely on the Government as the protector of their historical birthright and monuments. If Government is ready to renege on its trusts at Laxton – for no better cause than to make a fast buck – what other survivors from antiquity are safe? The only profit-making parts of our heritage are the Tower of London and Stonehenge (the annual profits from the latter, amounting to well over half the monetary value of Laxton, go not towards conservation but into the coffers of the Treasury).

The villagers produce their own pamphlet, appropriately named *Open Field*. It contains an optimistic poem on the Laxton Sale by Mr Miller from nearby Moorhouse; the closing lines contain the following plea:

'And may the broken ploughshares, that rest in the soil remain a memory to ploughmen for their long hours of toil'.

It is hoped that the Laxton lands too may remain as the last monument to 40 generations of English

peasant ancestors for, if Laxton goes, it can never be re-created.

*Richard Muir, The Observer Colour Magazine  
22/06/1980*

### The Farmers' Tale

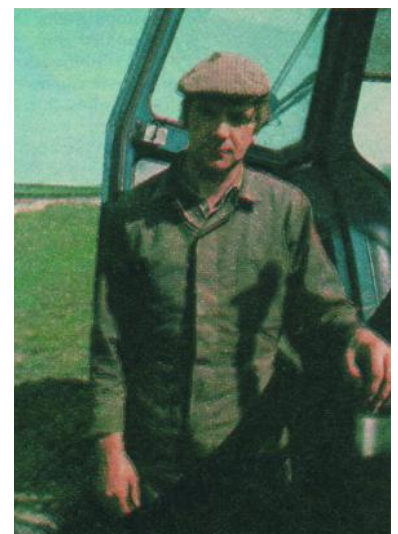
Michael Osborne talks to the men who work Laxton's strip fields about the problems of modern farming in a living museum.

If it had been raining heavily on the clay lands of Laxton. A day or two of sunshine had dried the surface to a fine dust blowing like a veil behind the harrow, but the tractor wheels bucked and slithered in sodden muck underneath, leaving strips of standing water in the ruts. Four tractors manned by four farmers were at work in one field of 150 acres. It was a unique sight, holding within it the key to Laxton's fame. There are 14 farmers in the village, plus half a dozen small-holders, and all but a few hold some strips in the open fields.

When a system of land use has endured for a millennium it is not surprising that the whole village should be organised about it. Edmund Rose, 58, is what would be called village headman in Africa; in Laxton he is the bailiff, responsible for the court leet of three foremen and 12 jurymen which runs the system. He is also the villagers' link with their landlords at the Ministry of Agriculture. About a third of his 120 acres are in strips in the open fields; he has 10 in all, scattered from field to field in a way which ensures that he, as others, share



*'It's a lovely life. This sort of farming's not difficult', says Albert Rayner (right). His brother Alec (left) is foreman of Laxton's 150-acre West Field*



*Kenneth Woolhouse is, at 38, one of the youngest on the Laxton jury*

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equally in the good land and the bad. Crops are rotated. 'There's always one field sown with barley,' he explained, 'and one with wheat undersown with grass. The third used to lie fallow one year in three, but we changed the rule in 1986 to allow for the undersowing. Now we can get a crop of hay off it. It's a godsend to us cow farmers.'

Mr Rose admits that it is not the most economical method of farming. The land cannot be drained – 'You can't get water off without it going on your neighbour's' – and it is time-wasting to plough two acres at one end of the village and then move to another two acres at the far end. 'But we're born and bred to it. While they let us we're determined to continue it. Laxton may be a living example of the Middle Ages, but it's an old place with modern ideas. We try where we can to make it more efficient, as you have to or go the wall.'

The average Laxton farm is about 130 acres, with usually a third in strips in the open fields. The strips are not as one might expect, long and narrow, but often almost square with sides of several hundred yards and covering up to 10 acres. The average is probably three or four acres, some are as small as an acre and one of the jurymen, 68-year-old Ron Cree, (*pictured opposite*) until recently used to plough, harrow, sow and reap a pocket handkerchief of half an acre. The great fields are bounded by grass verges, locally called sykes (pronounced sics or seeks), never ploughed and used to raise a hay crop which is auctioned standing every year among the jurymen, to provide some of the cash used to finance the system.

Another source of income comes from fines levied on erring strip-holders at the court leet which follows an annual inspection of the fields by the foreman and jurymen. 'If a plough should drop some earth on a syke as it turns', says Mr Cree, 'that's a misdemeanour and a fine is imposed. It used to be sixpence on a shilling, maybe half a crown, but now it's gone up to 50p or a pound. There have been £5 fines, but not many, mainly for dumping a manure heap on a syke.'

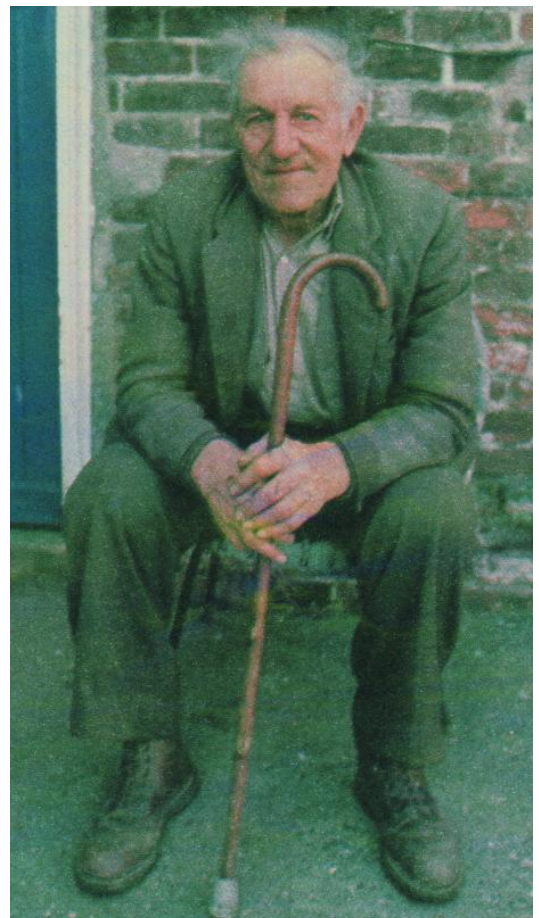
On the 150-acre West Field, curving hedgeless over the blue horizon, Albert Rayner and his brother Alec were on their knees in the mud mending a seed drill to the airy strains of a skylark opera. 'It's a lovely life,' says Albert, banging a chain link with a hammer. 'This sort of farming's not difficult if you're bred to it, but someone moving in would have a job in the open fields, knowing how far he could go before he was on his

neighbour's land.' Knowing where to stop certainly needs a skilled eye: a mere furrow separates the strips, yet the farmers have an instinct for it.

But there are advantages. There are no hedges to be cut, and no dykes to be cleaned. And there is, of course, the low rent. Laxton's farmers, although they might not put it in these terms, are to some extent subsidised as a living museum. Ken Woolhouse, who holds 12 strips and is at 38 one of the youngest jurymen, says, 'We've got used to people coming to see us. It's part of our life now. There are three or four busloads a day in the summer and schoolkids come from all over the country.'

Ron Cree agrees. Now stricken by arthritis, he has given up most of his holdings in the open fields but still farms about 40 acres. 'For today's farming the system's not really good,' he said, 'but to keep history going it must be carried on. It is part of a museum. It's been going for all my time and for quite a few generations besides. It would be a pity to destroy it.'

*Michael Osborne*



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... One of the problems involved in writing about a national phenomenon such as the village is that local and regional differences are so marked that the generalisation is often invalid. Nevertheless if we are right in linking open-field agriculture with village nucleation, it can now be demonstrated as a widespread agrarian feature of the Middle Ages. Writers such as H L Gray in his book *English Field Systems* (1915) limited the distribution of open-field arable primarily to the Midlands. Later scholars using a wide variety of sources, however, have come to the conclusion that open-field agriculture was to be found in every English county, and even in the lowland areas of central and southern Wales. Even in central and western Wales open-field strip farming was introduced when circumstances were favourable, and in the south-west, areas such as north-western Somerset and Devon indicate evidence of open-field agriculture in the lower, flatter, more fertile coastal plains. This requires a rejection of the traditional concept of open-field agriculture being a feature of the Anglo-Saxon settlement, which it quite clearly was not. Gray's map of the Midland field system more accurately represents the areas of open-field survival into the post mediæval period than its original distribution. The most commonly cited case of open-field farming is that at Laxton (Northants), where a form of common agriculture survives today. ... It is ironic that Laxton, which is

the most commonly quoted example of a typical mediæval village, appears originally to have lain on a different axis running northwards from the church to the castle and was probably replanned in its present form in the early Middle Ages.

... Thus open-field agriculture with its associated system of strip farming was apparently a short-lived feature of the landscape, surviving for less than two of three centuries in some parts of the country. It follows that the archæological record in the form of ridge-and-furrow in these areas will be correspondingly slight compared to areas such as the Midlands where the system survived for nearly a thousand years.

It also follows that once the open-field system decayed, nucleation was no longer so necessary and in some cases became a positive disadvantage. It is therefore hardly surprising that it was precisely in those areas where open-field agriculture was abandoned first that the village fabric crumbled earliest of all. We then see a reversion to a mixed pattern of scattered farmsteads and hamlets. Conversely the nucleated village survived best in those areas – namely the Midland counties – where regulated open-field agriculture continued to operate into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

*From: Trevor Rowley: Villages in the Landscape: JM Dent & Sons Ltd, 1978. ISBN 0-460-04166-5*