

Enclosure Acts—Great Britain 1700–1801

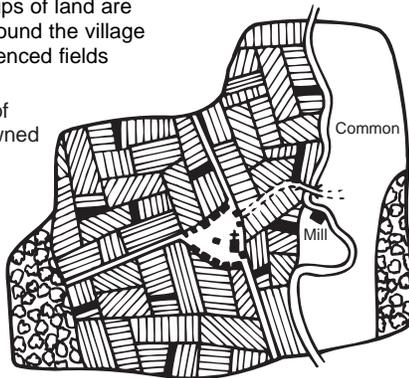
Enclosure of land through the mutual agreement of landowners began during the 16th century. During the 18th century, enclosures were regulated by Parliament; a separate Act of Enclosure was required for each village that wished to enclose its land. In 1801, Parliament passed a General Enclosure Act, which enabled any village, where three-quarters of the landowners agreed, to enclose its land.

ENCLOSURE OF A VILLAGE

Before enclosure (Open field system)

Farmer's strips of land are scattered around the village in large, unfenced fields

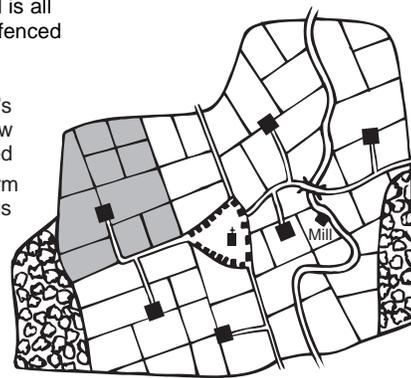
- Strips of land owned by one farmer
- ⊠ Church



After enclosure

Farmer's land is all together and fenced

- Farmer's land now enclosed
- New farm buildings
- Road
- Hedge



STAGES OF THE ENCLOSURE PROCESS (BEFORE 1801)

Stage 1

- Owners of at least three-quarters of the village land agree to enclosure
- Petition is drawn up asking parliament to pass an Enclosure Act for village
- Notice is posted on church door informing villagers of intention to enclose

Stage 2

- Small committee of members of Parliament consider the petition and hear objections
- Parliament passes an Enclosure Act or rejects the petition, depending on the recommendation of the committee
- Commissioners (usually three) are appointed to supervise the enclosure

Stage 3

- Commissioners draw detailed map of village marking out all individual strips
- Landowners have to prove their legal entitlement to the land they farm
- New map is drawn up allocating plots to legally entitled landowners
- Landowners enclose their plots with hedges, fences, or walls, and build access roads and farmhouses on their new land

CAUSES OF INCREASE IN ENCLOSURES

- Increase in food and wool prices encouraged the search for more productive farming methods
- Political power of the new, landowning middle class ensured that enclosure applications succeeded

NUMBER OF ENCLOSURE ACTS

1730–1740	39
1740–1750	36
1750–1760	137
1760–1770	385
1770–1780	660

IMPACT OF THE ENCLOSURE ACTS

Positive Effects

- Less land wastage—boundaries between strips could now be farmed
- Land of a good farmer no longer suffered from neglect of neighboring strips
- Machinery such as the seed drill could be used on the larger plots of land
- Farmers were encouraged to experiment (e.g., with crop rotation).
- Animal diseases were less likely to spread to all village animals. Separate fields for animals made selective breeding possible
- Less labor was needed to tend crops and animals on more compact farms

Negative Effects

- Eviction of farmers (known as customary tenants) who failed to prove legal entitlement to land their families had worked for generations
- Eviction of villagers who owned no land and had kept animals on common pasture (common land was allocated to other farmers through enclosure)
- Poor farmers, allocated small plots of land, were unable to compete with large landowners. Many lost their land when their businesses failed
- Migration of poor, evicted peasants to industrial cities to find work. Having lost their means of self-sufficiency they were forced to accept low wages and poor conditions. Casual agricultural laborers suffered similar poverty

MAIN AREAS OF ENCLOSURE IN BRITAIN 1700–1870

