

# On Open Town-fields

By E. R. R. GREEN

CHARLES VARLEY or Varlo, the author of the following account of the open fields, was born in Yorkshire about 1725 and began life as a farm labourer in England and Scotland. About 1748 he went to Ireland, where he was able to put his farming experience to good account, first as steward to the bishop of Elphin and then as an instructor in flax-growing for the Linen Board. Varley also engaged in the linen and cattle trade and became a fairly prosperous merchant and grazier. He finally left Ireland in 1767, the year after the publication of his first book, and apparently supported himself for the rest of his life by his writing and as a farming expert. In 1784 he went off to America to lay claim to the governorship of New Jersey and vast tracts of the state on the strength of an old charter which he had acquired, an enterprise which proved "a rock for him to split upon." On his return to England, he settled in London where he was still living as late as 1795.<sup>1</sup>

Varley was the author of eight books on agriculture, but his writings were not so extensive as this might seem to indicate, for the material was more or less duplicated in each succeeding volume.<sup>2</sup> Most of his work is characterized by the straightforward description of farming practice and eccentricity of opinion apparent in his account of the open-field system. Varley deserves to be better known if only for his practical approach to farming, while his autobiography is well worth reprinting.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is little need for comment on the following extract, some explanation should perhaps be offered for Varley's championship of the open

<sup>1</sup> The only available account of Varley's life is in the *D.N.B.*, xx, pp. 153-4. Mr Desmond Clarke, Librarian of the Royal Dublin Society, has recently identified Varley as the 'Real Farmer' whose autobiography prefaces *The Modern Farmer's Guide* (1768). I am most grateful to Mr Clarke for his kindness in permitting me to read his MS. on Varley.

<sup>2</sup> *A Treatise on Agriculture, entitled the Yorkshire Farmer*, 1766; *The Modern Farmer's Guide*, 1768; *A New System of Husbandry* (four English and one American editions, 1770-85); *Schemes offered for the Perusal of the Legislature, Freeholders, and Public in General*, 1775; *Essence of Agriculture*, 1786; *Nature display'd*, 1793; *The Floating Ideas of Nature*, 1796; *Guide to Reason*, 1798. The British Museum lacks his first two books and also the *Essence of Agriculture* and the *Guide to Reason*.

<sup>3</sup> Mr G. E. Fussell has written enthusiastically of the 'Real Farmer', comparing his narrative to the contemporary picaresque novel, but not realizing that Varley was the author. See G. E. Fussell, 'A "Real Farmer" of eighteenth-century England and his book, the *Modern Farmer's Guide*', *Agricultural History*, xvii, pp. 211-15, and *More Old English Farming Books*, London, 1950, pp. 80-3.

fields. His attitude towards enclosure was by this time a somewhat old-fashioned one, for he thought of it as primarily intended to turn land into pasture rather than as a means to improved farming. This hostility towards extension of grazing at the expense of tillage was drawn from his experience of Ireland, and he feared that a similar development might take place in England. This was why he constantly advocated a general enclosure act to bring waste land under the plough and a statutory limit to the size of farms to check consolidation.

*On the good effect and explanation on open Town-fields, as in England<sup>1</sup>*

A Town-field consists of several hundred acres, without hedges, ditches, or other fences, to divide one man's land from another, tho' a hundred farmers may have land in said field, yet none will have perhaps above one or two ridges lying together in one place, but alternately mixed or interspersed thro' the field, insomuch, that a farmer has no way to know his own ridges; but by cutting the first letter of his name or some figure, in a bit of grass at the end of his ridge, and in order that one shall not incroach or steal from another with the plough, they measure the breadth, as every man's ridge is of the same size, whether they be rood, half acre, or acre ridges, they being generally laid down with some proportion of measurement; the reason they are thus laid out in small parcels, and intermingled, was that each person should have his chance of good or bad land, as it might vary in one of those large fields.<sup>2</sup>

Most towns have five of these fields, of which one will be fallow, another wheat, another barley, another beans, or peas, and another oats. Every year the farmers takes care, never to sow one sort of grain twice together on the same field, but keeps alternately changing, so that one is a preparative for another, and each field gets its regular fallow, every five years, and thus they are kept in tillage, from generation to generation.

Each farmer is obliged to concur with his neighbour, in this regular course of tillage, particularly in the fallow and winter crop, as the fallow field is common for the cattle, all the fallow year;<sup>3</sup> likewise the wheat field is fenced in at Michaelmas: whereas the fields that is to be sown with spring corn, may be kept open till April.

<sup>1</sup> The extract is chapter xxxi of *The Yorkshire Farmer*, 2 vols., Dublin, 1766, I, pp. 198-206. It appears in substance in all Varley's subsequent books which I have seen.

<sup>2</sup> *A New System of Husbandry*, 3 vols., York, 1770, I, p. 285, adds: "therefore an equality was very necessary in dividing the lands of England when it was first peopled, and happy it has been for her inhabitants that it has continued so long."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 286 adds: "on which a great number of sheep are kept, that, I may say, weed the fallows, for they pick up scutch grass and other wild roots every time it is ploughed."

A farmer may substitute in the place of any crop, one of his own chusing, provided it stand on the ground no longer than his neighbours, as they keep a regular time of laying their fields common to the cattle, and fencing them in.

There are some towns, that may have only three or four of these fields; if this be the case, they fallow the oftener, and is confined to fewer sorts of crops: but of late years, they have found a good method of sowing turnips in the fallow year; in this case they begin to plow the stubble under, as soon as harvest is in, and keeps ploughing for a winter fallow, till midsummer following; then sow turnips, and eats them off by April; then sows barley, after barley beans or peas, after these, wheat, after wheat oats, and again begin with turnips: thus they get a valuable crop, and fallow the same year.<sup>1</sup>

My Irish, and indeed some of my English readers, may think it a sort of a hardship for these farmers to have three small parcels of land, thus intermixed, and not at liberty (altogether) to occupy them as they please: nay, in short some of the farmers who hold said field lands, is so much dissatisfied with their lot, that they have applied, and obtained acts of parliament, to enclose their said fields.

However, I see this quite in another light, and should consider it, rather as a misfortune, were all the town-fields in England inclosed; for if we consider tillage in its most truly deserved light, we shall find in the countries where it most flourishes, to be the most rich, happy, and independant.

In short, a corn country gives bread for people of all denominations around it, and work and bread enough for all the poor within it; it is from these open field countries in England where most of the corn is raised, that supplies London and other great and foreign markets; but were those fields inclosed, instead of corn, the land would be engrossed by rich farmers, and turned into grass; then consequently corn would be scarce and dear, and the poor would want both bread and work. I know this to be already the consequence where some fields has been inclosed of late years.

If the said lands be kept for tillage, it is plain they are in a better state than if inclosed in small fields, as corn never grows better than in an open exposure, not to speak of the loss of ground taken up in the ditches, &c. But while the land is kept in the open town-fields, the farmers are obliged to keep them in a regular course or succession of tillage. Again let me remark, that I believe these open or town-fields to be a great spur to improvement in husbandry.

How often have I heard farmers make their remarks in passing the ends of

<sup>1</sup> *A New System of Husbandry*, I, p. 292, adds: "This is a great improvement in husbandry, to such towns as have adopted it; but I find this is far from being so general as it ought in England."

perhaps two or three hundred ridges of corn belonging to as many people, and say John Such-a-one's corn is good, he has a good ploughman, and has managed well; when perhaps the next ridge belongs to a worse manager, therefore immediately censures him thus: Thomas has managed bad, his ploughman is bad, or he had not plowed it often enough, or he has not sown it right, or rolled, or weeded; or wherever the fault is, it is sure to be found out, and condemned by the sharp-eyed neighbours, and the owner shamed into a better manager, so that (in short) it fires every one with an emulation to out-do each other, and even extends itself to the very servants.

With what pleasure have I beheld two or three hundred teams, plowing in a field, every one striving to show the best work after him: how often do they make wagers (of perhaps a few quarts of ale, or the like,) which is the best plowed ridge, their masters to be the judge. Thus they strive to excel each other thro' the whole branch, as who keeps their teams in best order, and best geared, who sows best, so that the corn come up evenest after them, who mows best by leaving the stubble even cut, &c. who makes handsomest sheaves, who makes handsomest stooks, or has the fewest sheaves blown down after a high wind, who makes the handsomest loads of corn upon a waggon; for if a load fall from the waggon before it arrives at home, the loader forfeits something at the harvest-supper; also if a driver overturns a waggon, he forfeits a goose at the harvest supper. They often make wagers likewise, which team will draw the largest weight, also which is the most dexterous driver. To prove this they will lay a tenpenny nail in a turn in the road, and those that drive the waggon-wheel the truest over it is proved the best driver, and then the ricks of corn in the haggard are a standing witness who is the best stacker.

Again if a farmer (more curious than common,) introduce a strange crop on one of the ridges in this town-field, there is immediately a jury of farmers over it, and if in the end it prove of utility, it becomes general, as their land is all alike.

In short, I know not whether these town-fields may not inflame the spirit of improvement equal to a premium, since there may be the same ambition of excelling in one as another, as well in the little as the great world; so that in short, I believe these town-fields is the greatest spur to improvement of any thing that could be invented, which every judicious observer must admit.

---

The chapter was lengthened in *A New System of Husbandry* by a discussion of the evil of consolidation of farms for grazing, stressing the example of Ireland. Varley continued from the point where the extract ends: "For my part, I should think it a blessing to Ireland, if all or most of the land in it were

divided in these town-fields, as it would certainly put a stop to these monopolizers of land." After describing what had happened in Ireland, he concluded: "Then ought not England to take the alarm, and enact a law, to put a stop to the growing evil, by limiting the size of farms, to at most four hundred acres," but "the legislature, instead of putting a stop, is adding to the evil, by consenting to so many acts of parliament for inclosing open town-fields, and omitting to make such laws as would redress his Majesty's poor subjects."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *A New System of Husbandry*, I, pp. 292-7.

## Notes and Comments

### MEMORIAL TO JETHRO TULL

A memorial stone commemorating the baptism and burial of Jethro Tull at Basildon Church, Berkshire, has recently been erected in the churchyard. The stone is the gift of the Child-Beale Trust and was formally dedicated at a service held at the church on Sunday, 25 June 1961.

### THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The annual conference of the British Agricultural History Society was held from 5-7 April at Seale-Hayne Agricultural College. On the first evening papers were given by Mr Peter Holmes, the County Agricultural Officer, and Dr W. G. Hoskins. Mr Holmes discussed the farming regions of Devon; Dr Hoskins spoke on recent work on Dartmoor farmhouse types. The following day the conference visited Dartington Hall, and in the afternoon Dr Hoskins led an excursion over Dartmoor, visiting early farmhouses and a deserted village site below Houndtor. In the evening Professor Slicher van Bath, Head of the Department of Agricultural History at Wageningen, gave a paper on the use of farm accounts for the investigation of farm management and agricultural output from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. On the last morning Mr J. Z. Titow gave a paper on 'Some Effects of the Type of Manor on the Condition of the Peasant in the Thirteenth Century'. This was followed by a short paper by Professor M. W. Beresford on settlement

patterns in early fourteenth-century Cornwall.

At the Annual General Meeting on the Friday morning, Sir Keith Murray was elected President, Professor Edgar Thomas Treasurer, and Mr J. W. Y. Higgs Secretary. Three members of the Committee, namely, Dr R. H. Hilton, Mr W. E. Minchinton, and Mr F. G. Payne, retired, and in their place the meeting elected Mr Andrew Jewell, Mr George Ordish, and Mrs Joan Thirsk. Giving the Report of the Executive Committee the Chairman, Mr Harwood Long, revealed that membership of the Society now stood at six hundred and three. He also explained that at the Editor's discretion the size of the REVIEW would from time to time be increased. During the year it had been possible to transfer £300 from current to deposit account, and the balance brought forward was £347 compared with £229 the year before. The year's working showed a surplus of £66.

At a meeting of the Executive Committee held later in the day Mr Harwood Long was re-elected Chairman.

### FUTURE CONFERENCES

The December conference of the Society will be held jointly with the Association of Agriculture in London at the London School of Economics on Saturday, 2 December. The Annual General Meeting and Conference will be held from 11 to 13 April 1962 at Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge.