

The Common Fields of the Coastlands of Gwent

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THE development of agriculture in the coastlands of Gwent, between the mouths of the Usk and the Wye, is of interest on account of its striking response to two controls—those of geography and history. On the one hand are the distinctive and limiting factors of a physical environment which consists of a belt of reclaimed coastal fen flanked on one side by the saltings of the Severn estuary and on the other by the rolling country of the old shoreland known locally as ‘the upland’ or the ‘dry ground’. Against the constant control of this geographical background, the course of history has played a varied rôle, but as the many scenes have been enacted and the series of invading peoples have entered this corner of what is now Monmouthshire, two constant factors have been operative: its location on the routeway into south Wales, and the proximity to a boundary of major significance.

The physical controls have ensured the continued operation of certain inescapable factors such as the unsuitability of the Levels or coastal fen for the plough, and the interdependence of the Levels and the uplands. But historical developments have resulted in the westward extension of English-type open fields in this and other parts of the Welsh area, where for centuries they lay side by side with the traditional patterns of Welsh agronomy.¹

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The Caldicot Levels form the flat skirtland of the old Welsh kingdom of Gwent—naturally marshy coastal fen bounded on the landward side by a shallow step which divides these ‘moors’ from the uplands or dry ground. The present land surface of the Levels represents a stage in the oscillatory movements which succeeded the major uplifts of the Tertiary, traceable *inter alia* by a succession of submerged forests and peat beds. After a long period of emergence from Neolithic times to the early Iron Age, a period of marine transgression in Romano-British times is believed to have brought the land

¹ See, *inter alia*, Margaret Davies, ‘The Open Fields of Laugharne’, *Geography*, XL, 3, 1955; and ‘Rhosili Open Field and related S. Wales field patterns’, *Agricultural History Review*, IV, 1956, pp. 80–96; and Dorothy Sylvester, ‘Settlement Patterns in Rural Flintshire’, *Trans. Flintshire Hist. Soc.*, 1954–5; and ‘The Rural Landscape of Eastern Montgomeryshire’, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, LIV, 1, 1955.

to approximately its present stage.¹ A natural fen, its soils consist of a mixture of marine, estuarine, and riverine alluvia inter-bedded with peats. The predominant soils are heavy blue clays, acid without drainage and tending to be

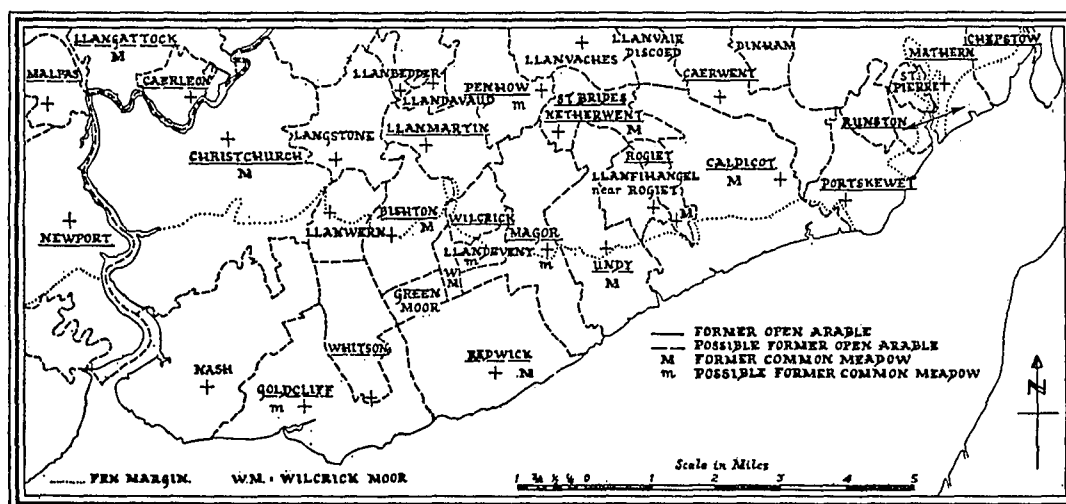


FIG. I. The Coastlands of Gwent: Townships and Parishes (1833).

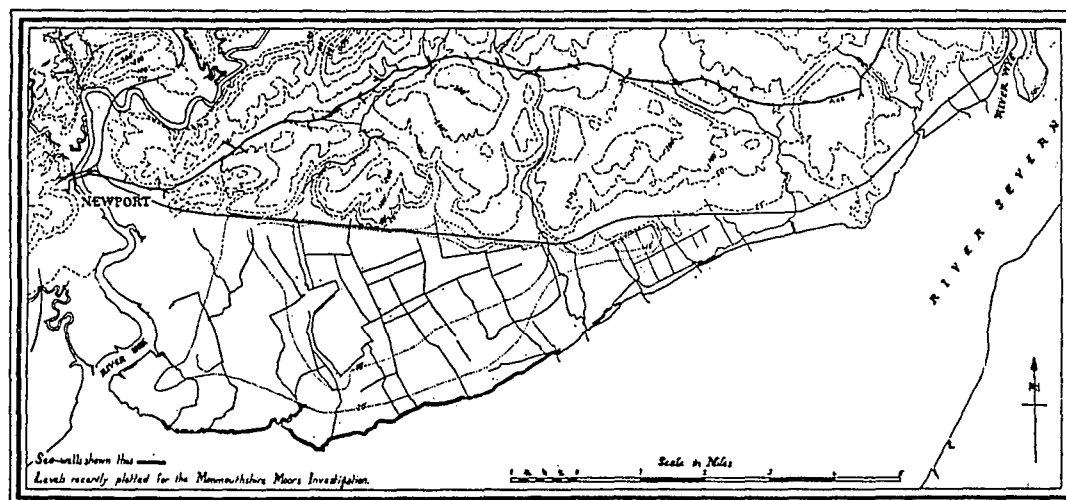


FIG. II. The Coastlands of Gwent: Relief and Drainage.

sour and moderately deficient in lime. In detail they are more varied, and Avery estimates that, in the Wentloog and Caldicot Levels as a whole, silty

¹ H. Godwin, 'A Boreal Transgression in Swansea Bay', *New Phytologist*, xxxix, 1940; and 'Coastal Peat Beds of the British Isles', *Journ. of Geology*, 1943.

loams and clays on alluvium over peat are found on 900 acres, and mixed bottom-land soils on stream alluvium on 300 acres.¹ The last group is characteristic of the back swamps of the Caldicot Levels, an area of depression lying near to the upland edge and generally less than 16 feet above O.D., as contrasted with the average altitude of the rest of the Levels of 20–25 feet. To the south, a broad belt of relatively elevated fen offers some defence against tidal inundations.

As in all coastal fens, water control is of supreme importance. The great range of the Bristol Channel tides increases up-estuary. Rises of 23 and 24 feet at the H.W. level of spring tides are quite common near the mouth of the Wye, and of 21 feet off Nash and Goldcliff, east of the Usk. To prevent the inundation of the entire area at high springs, thirty to forty miles of sea-wall, of varying age and structure, protects the Monmouthshire coastline. Above the wall the land tends to become consolidated where drainage is adequate, but below it the tendency is for land to be lost to the sea, and for the tidal saltings to diminish. That this problem has occupied the inhabitants for centuries is evidenced by a note of 1590–1 in the proceedings of the Court of Augmentations which says: "Note that the manor of Rompney [Rumney in the Wentloog Levels] lies adjoining upon the sea. There is a wall between the sea and the lordship for the defence of the same, which wall being about two years past in great decay, was by commission new made and placed more in to the land than before it was, by reason whereof there was cut out and left betwixt the sea and the wall, 28 acres most part meadow and pasture of parcel of the said demesnes of the manor besides divers other lands of the customary tenants there. . ."² Similarly, a new sea-wall was built in 1900 near Collister Pill some 400 feet behind the old one as a result of which much of the former saltings was lost.

On the other hand, land can be gained from the saltings, and from time to time artificial planting should be undertaken to hasten this process. During the present century *Spartina Townsendii* or spartina grass has appeared, and the colonization of the saltings, which average 250 feet in width, could be further hastened by human agency, and so avert the maximum effect of marine erosion. It is a fair assumption that the Levels themselves were consolidated in part in this way. The salt flats, known also as the Welsh Grounds, long served as rough pasture, but now their only importance in the economy of the coastlands lies in the channels which drain land water to the sea and

¹ B. W. Avery, Appendix on Soils in the *Monmouthshire Moors Draft Report*, published by the Welsh Agricultural Land Sub-Commission, Aberystwyth, 1954.

² E. A. Lewis and J. Conway Davies, *Records of the Court of Augmentations relating to Wales and Monmouth*, Cardiff, 1954, pp. 455–6, –/12 (1590–1).

which must be kept clear of spartina to avoid flooding back up the reens.

The control of land drainage offers a more constant problem. Drainage in the moors is now almost entirely artificial and works on the following plan:

rain water and ground water → grips → ditches → reens → pills → estuary.

Grips and ditches drain the fields and the occupier is responsible for cleaning and maintaining them. They lead into the reens which are the main artificial drainage lines of the Levels, discharging their water direct to the estuary through the sea-wall, or into the pills. The pills are embanked water-courses which carry the upland streams across the moors to the sea and, with one exception, also receive water from the reens. Many of the pills flow in courses embanked 10–16 feet above the general ground level. At the seaward outlet of the reens and pills are 'penstocks' or sluices which are closed by a rising tide and opened by a rise in the outflow of fresh water, and on the reens themselves the level is similarly maintained by boards slipped into stone piers to act as sluices, and so keeping the water level high above or below the board as required.

The annual average rainfall of the Levels is 35–40 inches *per annum*. But in a year such as 1954 the contrasted effects of excessive and of deficient rainfall were both demonstrated. In May, when the Levels reached the forty-ninth successive rainless day, the clay pastures were baked hard and dry, and the hay crop lay negligible and late on the parched, cracked meadows. Yet in September, after weeks of rain, cattle sank 6–12 inches into the sodden grasslands at every step, the reens were full to ground level, and the pills swelled rapidly and dangerously after every fresh rainstorm.

In their natural state, the moors are rough pasture. Drained, they make excellent meadow land. Ploughing is all but impossible over the greater part of the Levels and could never be remunerative, as is recognized in farm leases: for example, in an 1831 lease of Pillhouse Farm, Goldcliff, it was stated that the tenant "was not to plough more than five acres in one piece and not in parcels."¹ Now, farmers relate with relish the story of ill-fated attempts to enforce the ploughing-up policy in the last war. Hence, this fen country is agriculturally interdependent with the so-called uplands which lie to the north. Above the distinct step which is in part at least an old shore line, the land rises behind the Caldicot Levels to low, rolling hills and then more sharply to the forested ridge of Wentwood, extending like a lovely backcloth from the Usk to the less dramatic heights through which the Wye

¹ Newport Borough Collection (Monmouth Co. Record Office), M 432,4512. These and other records in this office were consulted and are here quoted by permission of the Monmouthshire Record Committee.

gorge is incised. The lower ground of the uplands is a region of normal soils and drainage, and although its relief is hardly ideal for arable farming, it has of necessity in the past been the crop-raising area, and its farming has been complementary to that of the Levels. The upland soils are everywhere loams of varying quality. The best lie over sandstones between Sudbrook and Blackrock and near Willcrick and Portskewett, or develop on drifts where they vary in quality according to drainage and depth. Large stretches, however, of the uplands have deep soils, easily worked and suitable for a wide range of crops. The complementary character of the two belts, and the rigid limitations to which farming must submit in the moors, lie behind the whole history of agriculture in this part of southern Gwent.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE LEVELS

The first attempt to drain and use the Levels is attributed to the Romans. Stones found three miles west of a Roman site at Redwick, and the site itself, support the late Dr Nash-Williams's suggestion that the Second Augustan Legion stationed at Caerleon attempted an occupation of some part of the moors,¹ and in addition there was the lesser settlement of Caerwent near the edge of the Caldicot Levels. If, as seems probable, the considerable Romano-British population of Caerleon left the town after the fall of Rome, the occupation and drainage of the moors may have been hastened.² We also know that prior to the fifth century, migrants from the Glastonbury cultural area constructed Iron Age B camps at Sudbrook and Llanmelin,³ and that Celtic saints founded churches here in the sixth and seventh centuries. Further, the kingdom of Gwent established itself in the country between the lower Wye and the lower Usk and continued in existence until the coming of the Normans.

The extent of Anglo-Saxon penetration into Gwent is part of the darkest and least known phase of Gwentian history. It is believed that there were constant raids both by Welsh and English from the seventh century into each other's territory, but eventually Gwent became subject to Anglo-Saxon overlordship. Mercia built Offa's Dyke, however, on the east bank of the Wye, and this and other considerations make the degree and effectiveness of Anglo-Saxon influence highly conjectural.

¹ V. E. Nash-Williams, 'Note on a new Roman Site at Redwick, near Magor, Mon.', *Bulletin of Celtic Studies*, xiv, 1951, pp. 254-5.

² In conversation with the writer in April 1955, Dr Nash-Williams said that he estimated the peak population at Caerleon during the Roman period to have been *circa* 18,000.

³ V. E. Nash-Williams, 'Fortified Hill Settlement at Llanmelin', *Bull. Celtic Studies*, vi, 1932, p. 288; and 'An Early Iron Age Coastal Camp at Sudbrook, Portskewett, Mon.', *Arch. Camb.*, xc, 1935, pp. 159-61.

The Normans are believed to have built the castle of Strigoil or Chepstow in or about 1067, and from that base their invasion pressed along the coastal route into south Wales like a rapier thrust. Gwent and Gwynllwg were occupied during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, and by the thirteenth most of the old Welsh commotes had been absorbed into Anglo-Norman lordships. Of these, Strigoil, which occupied a large part of Gwent Iscoed (=Gwent below Wentwood), was strongly Normanized. Caerleon lordship to the west and north-west was less extensively affected, notably in the commote of Lebenydd which covered the western end of the Levels. But in all the Marcher lordships in Wales, Anglo-Norman manors, with their Englishries and Welshries, were for centuries to lie cheek by jowl with Welsh tribal lands.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries Welsh rural society was still largely based on agnatic groups; community rights rather than individual ownership; the division into princely families, free tribesmen, and bondsmen; the payment of tribal dues and renders; and its own codes of law, of which the Gwentian was in force over much of south Wales. The economy was rooted in pastoralism, and semi-nomadism long persisted, but cultivation was practised on a small scale, and it is very possible that co-aration goes back well into the Celtic period. The rural landscape in the tribal areas was largely open pasture or common woodland, but enclosures round the *tyddynod* or tribal homesteads gradually increased in number, and ploughing might be carried on in small bundles of ploughing strips scattered over the *tref* or township, or in open strips in crofts or a small field usually called *maes* or *maes y dre* (i.e. the open field or town field), with strips called *erwau*, *lleiniau*, *accrau*, etc. In the bond *tref*, larger open fields not dissimilar from the English type might be worked. The *maerdref*, in its turn, was the *tref* of a chieftain and resembled the Norman manor in some respects.

It is difficult to estimate the importance and number of Norman settlers, but by the early seventeenth century, in the manors held by the Duchy of Lancaster in Gwent Iscoed, tenants with English surnames were rather fewer than those with Welsh.¹ It seems, therefore, a fair assumption that during the middle ages and until the Union, Welshmen maintained a numerical superiority throughout the area of south Monmouthshire, but

¹ In large parts of Wales, surnames only replaced patronymics at a very late date, e.g. surnames go back only some four generations or so in many Anglesey families. The existence of surnames in the seventeenth century among Welsh tenants in Gwent may be due to the record having been made by English clerks, or may be a reflection of anglicization. The data referred to come from *A Survey of the Duchy of Lancaster Lordships in Wales, 1069-1613*, transcribed and edited by William Rees, Cardiff, 1953.

that this was relatively small in the manors and probably overwhelming outside them. Place-names were freely anglicized, but nearly every place in southern Gwent had an old Welsh name. Field-names were similarly affected, with English ones prevailing in the manors, and Welsh in the townships of the old tribal areas, but even in the manors Welsh names can in some cases be traced from the fourteenth century to the present day.

UNDY

A number of the typical features of the land-use and agriculture of the period between the Norman conquest and the late enclosure phase in southern Monmouthshire can be illustrated from the parish and former manor of Undy. It lies across the fen margin, extending from low hills of 250 feet in the north to the coastline in the south and so stretches across two miles of upland and one mile of moors. Within its boundaries there were at some time included most of the types of land associated with a Norman manor in this part of the world: demesne, open arable fields, common meadow, common woods, and open common pasture. The small Coed y Mynydd on the northern fringe may once have been part of a continuous area of common woodland, represented at the time of the Tithe Survey by the small Common y Coed, while Knollbury Common immediately to the south may have functioned as either open common or common woodland. A group of closes in this belt most probably date from the late enclosure phase, and apart from a few other closes of irregular shape in the middle and south-east of the parish, the wide distribution of open-field boundaries and of strip-shaped enclosures at the tithe map period (1840) make it evident that practically the entire area had been farmed on a communal pattern, i.e. in common fields and in open common pasture and woodland. Six vestigial open arable fields survived in 1840: Undy Great Field, West Field, Benches Field, Little Benches Field, Upper Gernhill Field, and Lower Gernhill Field; and it is clear that they were at one time all adjoining in such a way as to occupy all the dry ground except the belt of the commons in the north and the area occupied by the houses and closes of the village in the south, together with the small Mill Common.

On the Levels, the northerly belt consisting of the ill-drained back fen appears at one time to have been entirely rough fen or moor pasture, and two considerable remnants still survived in 1840, known as Bridewell and Undy Commons. With the exception perhaps of the extreme south-eastern area, the rest of the moors formed a belt of irrigated water meadows held in common. These too were represented only by small vestigial fields in 1840, but there were seven of them: South Mead and Sour Mead (adjacent and

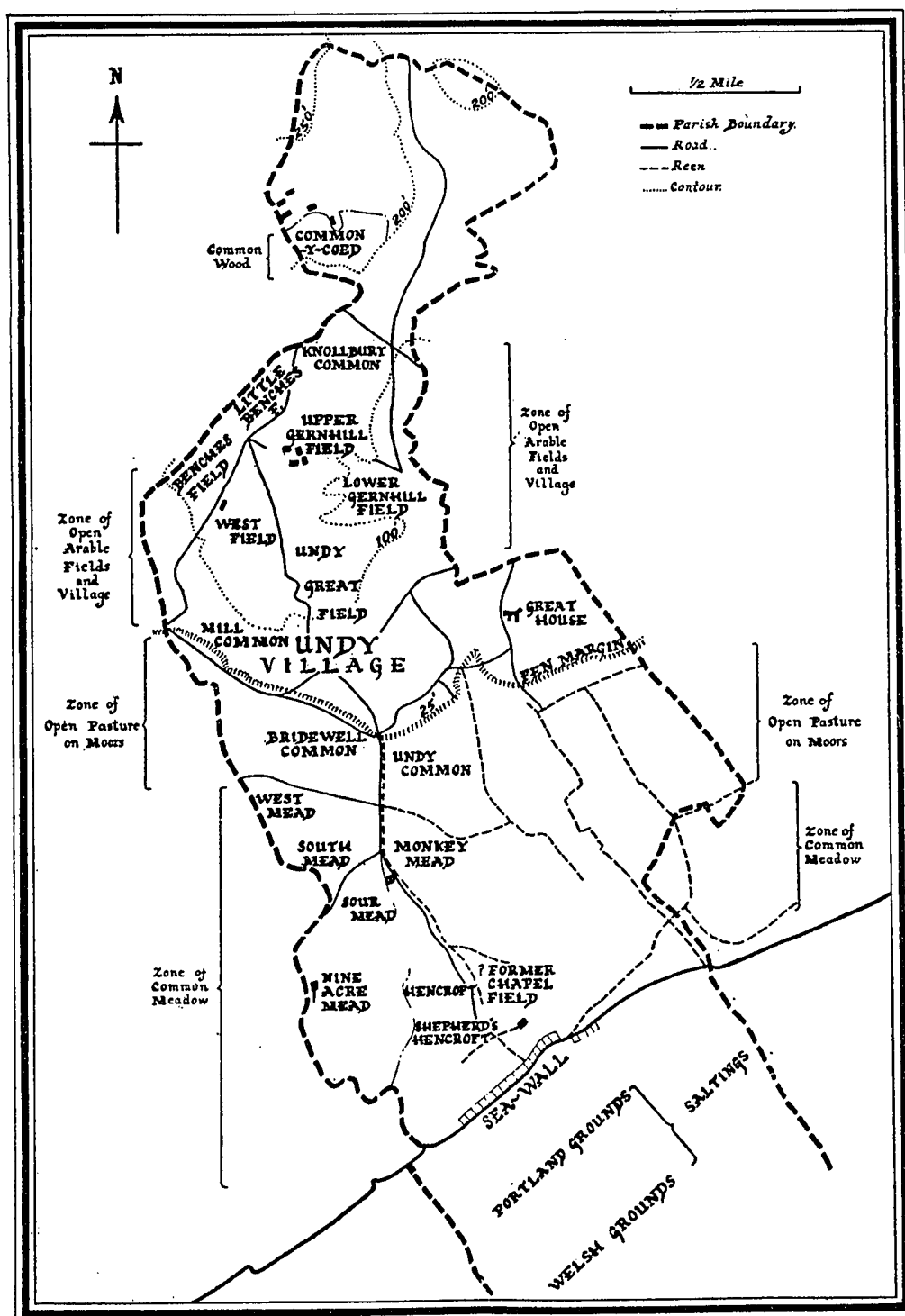


FIG. III. Sketch Map of the Parish of Undy at the Tithe Survey (1840).

perhaps originally a single field), Nine Acre Mead, Hencroft and Shepherd's Hencroft (also perhaps one originally), West Mead, and Monkey Mead. Near to Chapel Tump Farm, marked as a chapel on the tithe map, there may have been the former Chapel Field.¹

In the sixteenth century Undy had a number of common fields,² both arable and meadow, but by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most of them went by different names, with the exception of West Field, West Mead, and South Mead. Names which had disappeared from the map by the nineteenth century included Little Field and Upper Field,³ Brym Field and Brym Mead, the last two lying in a now vanished manor known as Brym or Brymhold.⁴ Changes in open-field names here as elsewhere increase the difficulty of trying to determine on what course the arable fields were run.

Undy became Crown property after 1595, from which date there was no resident lord of the manor. Many former copyholds became leaseholds or freeholds and in the time of James I it was recorded that there were nine copyholders, eight freeholders, and "seven leaseholders and at rack rents."⁵ Demesne land diminished and although the name Great House survived, there was no park attached to it at the tithe survey. It is therefore the more surprising that disparate holdings and open strips survived so long, and that in 1840 open strip arable fields and meadows formed so striking an element in the field plan.

THE COMMON FIELDS OF THE COASTLANDS OF GWENT

In an area which offers so much of interest to the student of agricultural history, one feature in particular is selected as of outstanding significance. It is the common or open fields which developed only in certain parts of Monmouthshire in recognizably English form,⁶ for the history of Gwent was basically Celtic, and much of it has remained in many ways distinctly Welsh.

These open fields, which are particularly numerous in the coastlands of

¹ So named in a deed of sale of 1541 of 17 acres of "mede ground and pasture" of which 4 acres were "in Chapell felde in divers parcels together." The chapel was formerly attached to Tintern Abbey.

² E. A. Lewis and J. Conway Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 452, -/10 (1573). ³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Newport Borough Collection, Monmouth County Record Office, 5679 (1554), 5689 (1571), and 5690 (1582).

⁵ Sir Joseph Bradney, *History of Monmouthshire*, IV, ii, p. 262. This work is the standard history of the county and was published between 1904 and 1933.

⁶ The wider distribution of open fields in Monmouthshire and in other Border counties will form part of a study of the rural landscape of the Welsh Borderland in a volume now in preparation.

Gwent, are interesting for a number of reasons. First, they are known to have occurred in almost every parish which lies across the fen margin at some period of its history, and in a number of others besides. Secondly, the fields are of two types, common arable and common meadow, the two types being of comparable importance wherever the land was suitable. Thirdly, open arable fields of the English type dominate the map, but Welsh ploughing strips and Welsh open crofts and small open fields are also to be found in some of the 'upland' parishes, their relative adjacency underlining the fact that invaders along the coastal route were responsible for introducing the English type of field. Fourthly, open or common meadows, located in the ideal *milieu* of the Levels, were both numerous and large, and their plan resembled that of the open arable fields. In most parts of inland Britain, common meadows were small and restricted to narrow alluvial flood plains. Fifthly, and by no means of least interest, the location here of a not inconsiderable group of open-field townships is of significance in reconstructing the wider picture of open field in Britain which we now know to need so much in the way of additions, and therefore corrections.

THE COMMON MEADOWS

The common meadows of the Gwent coastlands were developed on the Levels, on land ideally suited for this purpose, and because of their unusual size and importance in the economy of this sub-region, they are given first place. The value of water meadows was high: for example at Bishton, in a 1788 Survey, moors were valued at 10s. per acre as compared with 4s. for hill land.¹ Not only the richness of the pasture, but the importance of the hay for winter feed, contributed to their value, especially before the use of roots and cake became general for this purpose.

Water meadows organized on lines similar to the open arable fields reached their major development in the part of the Levels which was formerly included in the lordship of Strigoil, i.e. from Redwick eastwards, and Redwick itself had the most remarkable common meadows in any part of the Welsh Borderland.

In 1844, 1,994 acres in Redwick were meadow or pasture out of a total acreage of 2,113, and there are indications that formerly well over half of the meadow acreage was held in common meadows. The meadows were divided into strips approximating to an acre or a subdivision of the acre as in the open arable fields. Broadmead, the largest of the Redwick meadows, was still held at the time of the tithe survey in over 130 separate doles or strips, and all of these were still open. Documentation in the case of Redwick meadows goes

¹ Newport Coll., M 431,3637. Survey and schedule numbered to a missing map.

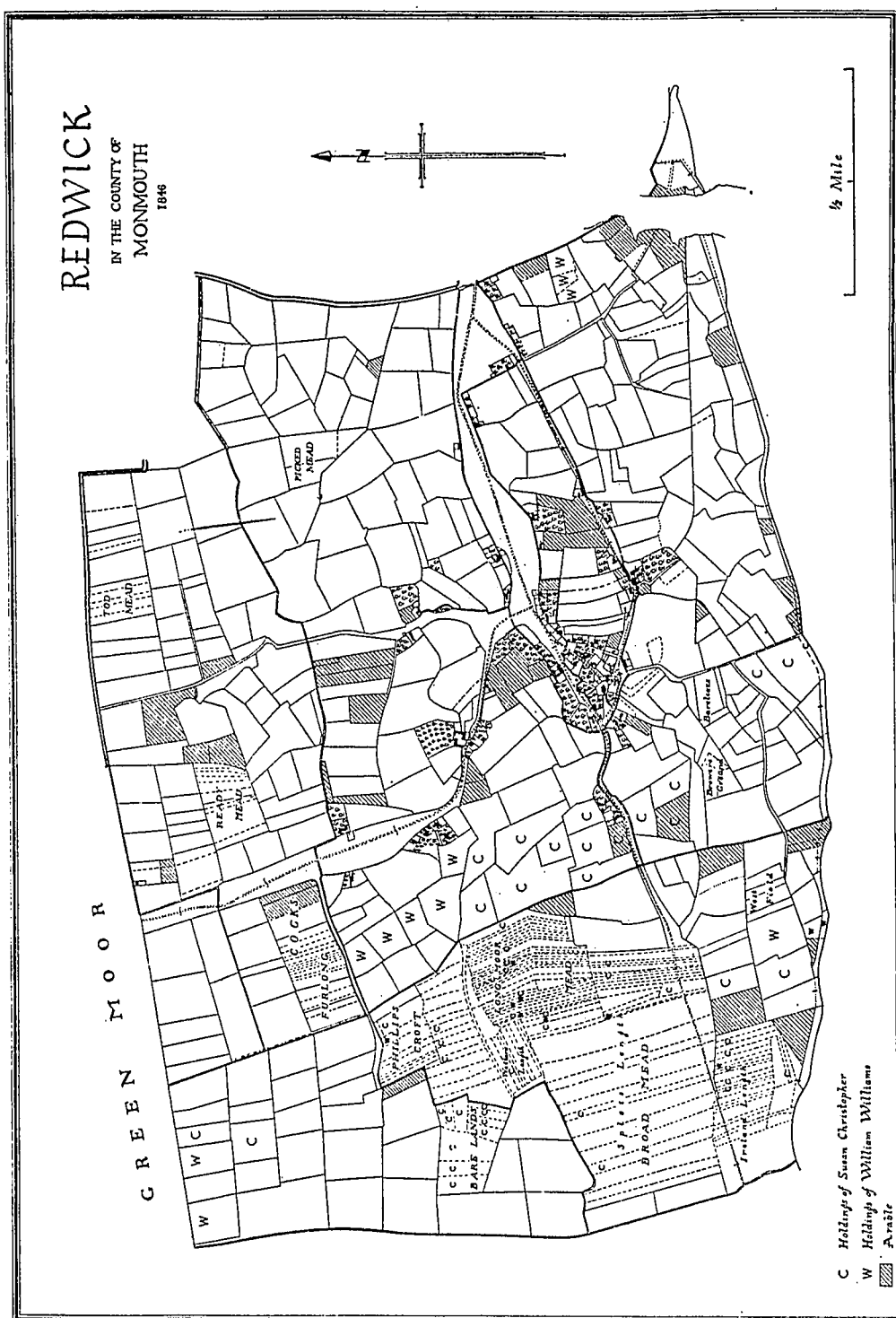


FIG. IV. The Parish of Redwick at the Tithe Survey (1844).

back to 1430, when dispersed acres in Chainesmeade were referred to in a feoffment.¹ A 1655-6 deed mentions three acres of meadow and pasture in a meadow called Broadmead in separate parcels of one acre and two acres.² An eighteenth-century deed refers to a piece of land in "the common meadow called Ready Mead" and another "in the common meadow called Broad Mead."³ A release of 1802 mentions "land called Changeable Acres in the Common Mead called Broadmead in Redwick,"⁴ and a draft release of 1832 referred *inter alia* to a parcel in Long Moor Mead (2 r. 25 p.), a parcel in Broad Mead called the Harp Acre (2 r. 33 p.), and a piece in Collywalter (1 a. 3 r. 5 p.).⁵

The tithe map shows that the greater part of the area to the north and west of Redwick village had once been divided into open strip fields, and several shrunken remnants remained in 1844. But Broad Mead was still of enormous size. Hence, like many arable fields, it was divided into furlongs or 'lengths' still named Phillips Croft, Wetters Length, Long Moor Mead, Splots Length, and Ireland Length on the tithe plan. Unless a small amount of enclosure had taken place on its eastern fringe this large meadow apparently retained its original size and shape. In addition, Cocks Furlong, Ready Mead, Tod Mead, and Picked Mead—this last almost disappeared—were remnants of once larger common meadows, as was Barelands. But it is possible that Barelands West Field and Cocks Furlong had at one time been small open arable fields, prior to the merging of Redwick with Magor in a single manor. Although in 1844 the rest of the parish formed closes, there were strip shapes among them which suggest a once more extensive open-field system or scattered Welsh ploughing strips. Those adjacent to Green Moor in the north-west are clearly recent allotments from the open moor.

Documentary evidence lends support to the suggestion that before they were merged Redwick strove to maintain open arable fields and that Magor had open meadow. But from the early seventeenth century, references to the common meadow called Avenellesmeade⁶ in Magor cease, and Redwick men held arable strips in Magor open fields and Magor men had reciprocal rights and holdings in Redwick's common meadows.

Of twenty-three known cases of townships which had common meadows in Monmouthshire, ten were in southern Gwent with their meadows on the

¹ *Ibid.*, M 437.3, 4002.

² Evans and Evill Collection, Monmouthshire Record Office, 0183.

³ Newport Coll., M 437.3, 2714 (1780).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1163.

⁵ Evans and Evill Coll., 0332.

⁶ It was mentioned in the Badminton Deeds and Documents, I, no. 1038 (1504) and other sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century documents. The Badminton Collection deposited in the National Library of Wales was consulted by permission of the duke of Beaufort.

Caldicot Levels. In addition to Undy, Redwick, and Magor already described, Christchurch, Bishton, Willcrick, Roggiett, Caldicot, Portskewett, and Mounton had their common meadows there. In fact, the greater part of the Levels within the old lordship of Strigoil were given over either to common meadows or to open moors used as common pasture.

The common meadows of Caldicot were also large. During the period of the Marcher lordships Caldicot became one of the most important manors in this district, eventually forming part of the Duchy of Lancaster estates. In the seventeenth century, at the time of the great Survey,¹ the lordship of Caldicot included St Pierre, Portskewett, Caerwent, Crick, part of Roggiett, and Shire Newton which was its detached Welshry. Since the tenants of all of them might hold land in any part of the lordship and share its commons and common rights, both types of common field were large and their working complex. The open commons included the poorest, most ill-drained stretches of Caldicot Moor, which in the middle ages extended to Undy and Roggiett as a single great common "for all manner of cattle commonable appurtenant to the said manor of Caldicot and Newton sawnce number," the tenants clearing the watercourses from Pool Rough to the sea.²

The remainder of the moors made good meadow land, and much of it was held in open dole meadows. Records of the Caldicot meadows go back to the late thirteenth century, when a grant referred to pasture in Biestediche,³ suggesting the original meaning of the nineteenth-century Bees Ditch. A grant of approximately the same date referred to two and three-quarter acres of meadow lying in Wlputtes,⁴ a name found on the tithe map, though no longer common meadow. The 1609 Survey also listed holdings in Smyth or Semyth Moor, Wellmore, Wellrink, Newemead, and Lord's Mead, all common meadows, or furlongs within larger meadows. Only Bees Ditch and Little Bees Ditch remained as open meadow at the time of the tithe survey of Caldicot.

The great Duchy of Lancaster Survey sheds less light on the Caldicot meadows than one could wish, but we learn that there was a yearly payment of 4s. hay money to the king for grazing Bees Ditch and that towards this "the Baylie ought so soone as the same meadowe called the Bisditch is open and Comon, to requier or distrayne one penny of every person which shall have any manner of Cattell grasinge in the saide meadowe," and that a customary tenant might "put out" his customary land from five years to five years for a total period of three score years.⁵ We also learn that a woman could only hold

¹ Rees, *op. cit.* ² Rees, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

³ Newport Coll., M 421.3, 5559 (n. d., late thirteenth century).

⁴ *Ibid.*, similar dating, 5557. ⁵ Rees, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

customary land during her lifetime, that the youngest son normally inherited customary land, but that if a man had sons he could, by surrendering his land first in court, then have it transferred to his eldest or any of his middle sons.¹ This suggests that something between Welsh tribal law and English law operated here. There is reference too to an enclosed meadow near Caerwent bridge, among the extensive lists of customary holdings,² whereas in nearly every other case strips were described as "lying separately" or "in divers parcels." The number of Caldicot men recorded as holding in Bees Ditch was not large, but, as in the case of the commons, men from the other places in the lordship held land in the Caldicot meadows.

What is known about these remarkably large common meadows of the Caldicot Levels can soon be summarized. They occupied at their greatest extent a large part of the better and sweeter soils of the moors, avoiding the ill-drained back fen at the lower altitudes, and it is possible that in the early middle ages severally held closes were rare or absent unless in the three most westerly parishes of Nash, Goldcliff, and Whitson in the commote of Lebenydd. The holdings in them were in the main in the early period those of customary or copyhold tenants and therefore, it may be assumed, they were lords' meadows. They were divided into strips, in some cases by ditches which it was the tenants' joint duty to keep clear, and the larger meadows at least were arranged in 'lengths' or groups of doles which were the equivalent of the furlongs in the common arable fields. In the first instance, all holdings within the meadows were disparate, and although some consolidation took place eventually, this system of intermixed strips still held good in many of the meadows up to the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Caldicot account in the Duchy Survey does no more than indicate the manner of working the common meadows, but the description of the meadow called Chippenham under the town of Monmouth gives a very fair and much fuller account, and it was probably similar in other manors. "... there is a certayne meade called Cheppinhome wherein theise men whose names are hereafter mencioned have severall parcells, knowne by usuall meares and boundes there, and helde as free Customary landes to them and their heires for ever, accordinge to the custome of the Mannor, for which they paie yerelie to his Majestie after the Rate of xx^d per annum for every acre, of which saide severall parcells every tennante hath accordinge to the quantitie he holdeth, the cropp and hay there yerelie to his use. And after the hay is mowed and carried awaie it is and remaynes in Comon for pasture to the inhabitantes and tennantes of the saide Towne, Burrowe and liberties thereof until the ffeaste of the purification of the Virgin Mary from which tyme until

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

the hay be cutt agayne, it remayns all inclosed. . .” There follows a list of tenants holding the 43½ acres in the meadow including “one acre there called the Butt acre, which is given to the Towne for maynteyninge of the Buttes there, without rent.”¹

The principal physical differences between the Monmouth meadows and those of the Caldicot Levels were clearly that the last faced a far greater drainage problem, and were of greater size. The Bailiff collected rent for Caldicot meadows. A hayward was appointed for the Undy meadows.² The tenants had their duties in maintaining and cleansing the reens and ditches and maintaining the gowts or sluices. The sea-walls also had to be maintained to prevent flooding at exceptionally high tides and in an account of expenses for the Redwick portion of the Tredegar estates, Sir Charles Morgan in 1838 was still responsible for one-third the cost of its repair.³

THE OPEN ARABLE FIELDS

It has already been shown that Undy had six vestigial open arable fields in 1842-4. Bishton, Magor, Roggiett, Caldicot, Chepstow and its hamlets Moun-ton and Hardwick, all had fields of the English rather than the Welsh type, and on the far bank of the Wye in Gloucestershire were other open-field parishes, including Tidenham with its beautiful series of strip fields including the two great fields called Down Field and Treacle Field.⁴ These too lay in the old lordship of Strigoil.

A remarkably perfect three-field plan is revealed by the tithe map of Magor, and although changing names make difficult the task of tracing these fields back individually, it seems unlikely that they were not old-established. In this respect Magor is most unusual in that at the time of the tithe survey the total number of holdings was almost exactly equal in Lower Field (37), Middle Field (39), and Upper Field together with a small ‘annexe’ called Maes Bach (38). The fields were still open, and there was little to suggest that they had been diminished by enclosure at that date. The holdings were also still largely intermixed, but there was no longer any system in the way in which the eighteen tenants held their strips either as regards total holdings or the distribution of the strips in the three fields.

The open arable fields of Magor can be traced back to 1392 when reference was made in a will to three acres of arable land in the field of Magor,⁵ and

¹ Rees, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

² Badminton Manorial Records, II, no. 508 (1661). Returns of the hayward of the parish giving list of tenants summoned.

³ Newport Coll., M 437.3, 4705.

⁴ St Peer Atlas, 1765, Monmouth County Record Office. Treacle Field = St Tecla's Field.

⁵ Newport Coll., M 436,5808.

Bradney quotes a deed of 1448 which mentions a dispersed holding including *duas acras terre arabilis . . . in campo de Magor*.¹ From the middle fifteenth century to the late sixteenth, five open fields were mentioned by name in references to Magor, but none of these names has survived and almost nothing is known of them apart from their names. By the eighteenth century the open arable was again referred to as Magor Common Field,² but at the tithe survey the three fields were clearly defined, and it is difficult to suppose that there had ever been only one field within the period of documentation, though there may at one time have been more than three.

The open arable fields of Caldicot were far more numerous than those of Magor or Undy, clearly because of the intercommoning arrangements with its dependent manors already referred to. In 1609-13 the position was complex in the extreme and dispersed arable acres were listed in over thirty different fields and closes,³ including some which one suspects may have been part of an original Welsh arable system. Five of the largest of the seventeenth-century fields were still in existence at the tithe survey.⁴

In some of the smaller parishes such as Bishton there were two, and possibly three open fields, but on the whole irregularity in size, number, and arrangement was characteristic, especially by the nineteenth century. A further difficulty is the paucity of early cartographical evidence. Plans only become abundant by the eighteenth century with the estate maps and atlases, for example the Badminton Estate Surveys,⁵ the Lockwood Atlas, and the St Peer Atlas.

What is, however, one of the most extraordinary features of this area is the late survival of its common fields—so late, that they are still present on the tithe maps. Occasional examples of late survival can be quoted from some other parts of the Borderland,⁶ but there is nothing elsewhere to compare with the almost continuous line of parishes with open arable and open meadow which survived in the Caldicot Levels and their immediate hinterland until the middle of the nineteenth century. Caldicot was enclosed in 1850 and 1858, Magor in 1852, and Undy in 1852-3.⁷ The recency of this

¹ *Op. cit.*, IV, ii, p. 229.

² Lockwood Atlas, a 1751 MS. atlas ('Plans of Estates in the Co. of Monmouth') in the Lockwood Collection deposited in the National Library of Wales by J. C. Lockwood, Esq., of Bishop's Hall, near Romford.

³ Rees, *op. cit.*

⁴ These were West Field, Upper Field, North Field, Mill Field, and Sherfield.

⁵ 1763-79, in the Badminton Coll.

⁶ e.g. in Montgomeryshire. See Dorothy Sylvester, *op. cit.*, *Mont. Coll.*, pp. 19-20.

⁷ Annual Inclosure Act, 13 Vict., c. viii; do. 21 Vict., c. viii; (Magor) Second Inclosure Act, 1852, 16 Vict., c. iii; (Undy) *ibid.*, and Second Annual Inclosure Act, 1853, 16-17 Vict., c. cxx.

was brought home to me by the late Mr E. C. Dutfield, a retired surveyor of Penhow, whose grandfather remembered the enclosure of Magor common fields by Peachey Williams—and its unpopularity.

The extent and persistence of the system of open fields and of intermixed holdings are still reflected in the modern pattern of farm holdings in this area, which are fragmented perhaps to a unique degree. In the Monmouthshire Moors Draft Report it is stated that of 201 "economic units" in the Levels, only twenty-seven farms were, at the time of the inquiry, "compact and in one ownership." To quote further: "Some idea of the magnitude of this excessive subdivision of farms into separate parcels can be realized by the fact that the 450 agricultural units are split up into 1,208 blocks of land, consisting of a field, part of a field or a number of fields in one ownership and one occupation, being separate from other land in the same ownership and occupation. . . There is little stability in the units, changes in the occupation of one unit lead to changes in the make-up of other units . . . [a] farm more often than not consists of portions of land scattered over a wide area, the furthest fields being two or three miles from the homestead."¹ It is evident that centuries of intermixed holding in an open-field system are reflected in modern fragmentation, but it is equally important to recognize other underlying factors. One of these is the interdependence of the Levels and the dry ground which natural conditions have imposed and economic practice made customary. The Moors have long been the traditional grazing ground for cattle and colts from early summer to October or November according to the season and, apart from occasional years when ploughing up has been tried, they have remained under grass.² Maintained arable farming is only possible on the better drained uplands or dry ground behind the Levels, and the early example of Redwick's and Magor's reciprocity with regard to meadow and ploughland is reflected in the fact that so few farms in this area are without some land in both parts of the coastlands. The other reason which has contributed to the continuance of intermixed holdings in modern times is undoubtedly the fact that, like all regions where irrigation and drainage are of fundamental importance to the entire community, the communal habit is necessarily and deeply impressed into the economic, social, and administrative structure alike. No doubt this last point in its turn fostered the late survival of the open fields.

As to the problem of origins, it is less easy to evoke acceptable arguments, for the Dark Ages have not yet yielded their secrets in this part of the Border,

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

² The arable acreage in certain parishes on the Levels has occasionally been high, but a series of wet years or bad flooding always tends to recur and so cause a reversion to pasture.

and the extent, or indeed the reality, of a genuine Mercian settlement is a matter for speculation. The Domesday record is slight and unspecific, and beyond the significance of the fact that this was a carucated and not a hidated area, it has little to contribute as to the nature of arable farming here except to make evident that there was a not inconsiderable number of ploughlands somewhere in this region. What is clear, however, is that an intrusive pattern overlies the older Celtic system of inter-aration, and that the manorial organization associated with the Marcher lordships most successfully kept alive a common-field system which it developed if it did not in large part originate.

Notes and Comments

THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The winter conference was held jointly with the Association of Agriculture at the London University Institute of Education on Saturday, 7 December, 1957. The chair was taken at the morning session by the President, Sir James Scott Watson, and at the afternoon session by the General Secretary of the Association of Agriculture, Mr Alexander Hay. The conference was attended by about fifty-five people.

In the morning a paper was read by Mr George Ordish, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Society, on the history of the control of crop pests and diseases. After lunch there were two short papers with a joint discussion. The first was by Dr L. G. Bennett, of the University of Reading Department of Agricultural Economics, on the development of market gardening, and the second by Mr Eric Hobbis, of the University of Bristol Long Ashton Research Station, on the history of soft-fruit growing.

THE CONFERENCE AT NANCY

The first international meeting of scholars interested in the growth and character of agrarian structures was held at Nancy in the

first week of September 1957. It was called on the initiative of the Faculté des Lettres of the University of Nancy, and, in spite of some difficulties, more than seventy individuals attended and some forty papers were presented. Field excursions to study existing (mostly open-field) systems and village morphology in Lorraine, the Vosges, and the Plain of Alsace occupied a day and a half of the conference's work. The members of the conference were mostly historical geographers, and the emphasis was on field layout, rotation systems, collective arrangements, and other matters connected with agricultural practice, rather than on social relations, tenures, and economy. However, these wider aspects of agrarian history were not neglected and there were some outstanding contributions from well-known French historians. The French representation at the conference was naturally the greatest, but there were also members from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and Yugoslavia, as well as from England and Wales.

On the occasion of the conference, the *Annales de l'Est* devoted a volume to an important bibliography of French research

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