

### FARMING AT OXENHALL

The late 18th and early 19th Centuries were a time of great changes in farming. Improvements in agricultural practices, machinery, breeding and crops, together with the movement for enclosing the open fields and the encouragement for better farming during the Napoleonic Wars led to immense changes throughout England. In Gloucestershire the extent of the enclosure movement and the topographical changes it caused have already been partly explored. This study was an attempt to find if any comparable changes could be traced in a parish west of the river Severn where enclosure had already taken place centuries earlier.

Oxenhall is a small parish in the north west of the county, at least a quarter of which is dense woodland and much of the remainder was orchard. It is a parish of scattered farms and houses, and the church stands in isolation. Coal was worked at two places on Peters Farm and White House, but by the late 18th Century the ironworks at The Furnace had been closed for some time. Almost the whole parish was part of the estate of the Foley family of Stoke Edith in Herefordshire, and an estate map of 1775 and the Title Apportionment and map of 1842 were the main sources for this study.

The intention was to compare the two maps to see if any changes had been made in the extent of the farms - a cursory glance suggested there were not many - to discover if the farmers had altered their fields much, to work out land-utilisation maps, and to plot field-names. Although some exploration of each of these topics was carried out, the first and basic task of comparing the extent of each farm took up nearly all the time available.

The chief farms in Oxenhall in 1775 were Pound Farm, Greenaways, Pella, Lower Pella, Peters, White House, Oxenhall Court, Old House, Holders, Hilter, Marshalls, Winters and The Furnace. Of these, all were owned by the Foley estate except for Oxenhall Court (Maynard Colchester) and Marshalls (Mr. Clarke). They varied a great deal in size, the largest being Old House, Holders with Hilters (farmed by the same man) and Pella with Greenaway. Each of these was well over 100 acres, but in contrast

there were other smaller and scattered holdings.

The tithe map of 1842 reveals a surprisingly large number of changes. Only the Oxenhall Court and Marshalls farms remained the same size as before. The Foley estate had carried out large scale re-organisation, which had resulted in all their farms being made about the same size of 100 acres, and improving their shape and convenience. For instance, Old House was greatly reduced and some of its lands transferred to Holders - now one of the principal farms with a large house rebuilt about 1800. Hilter farmhouse was also rebuilt about that time, and in 1842 was farmed by William Cummings, who as tenant of Pella as well, was the biggest farmer in the parish. (The family now own Oxenhall Court.) Pella had been completely transformed in shape by exchanges of lands and the inclusion of the old Lower Pella Farm, whose house was demolished. Another farmhouse was destroyed north of Peters Farm and its lands thrown in with the latter, while nearby a similar demolition gave the White House additional land. On the whole estate there were many similar changes revealed by the maps but difficult to express in words. One may safely conclude, however, that the Foleys pursued a policy of consolidating their Oxenhall farms, making them all a similar size, doing away with the smaller ones, and rebuilding the houses.

There is further evidence from the maps of agricultural reformation in Oxenhall. There was a widespread alteration in the shape and size of fields. Although there was no time to investigate this, a preliminary study showed that between 1775 and 1842 field boundaries were completely altered, with the aim of making the minute fields of 1775 larger. (They have been enlarged again greatly since 1842). Two further points were noticed. In the same period commons and roadside waste adjoining the woodlands in the west of the parish were enclosed in small holdings, completing a process already begun in the mid-18th Century, and enclosure of the last traces of the open fields was also carried out.

Oxenhall certainly had open fields in the Middle Ages, but by 1775 the only sign of them was half a dozen long narrow fields called The Common Fields between Peters Farm and Oxenhall Court. One of these "strips" belonged to the latter farm and was retained as an access to Peters Farm lane until it was cut off from the Court when the railway was built in the 1880s.

There is scope for further work on the field changes to see their full extent and whether all the farms made such changes or not. Equally the tithe apportionment and field-names of the 1775 estate map could tell much about the use of the land - there was, for instance, some new planting of orchards at least, - while the field-names themselves call for further work, allied with field-work to trace the origin of some of the names (Moat Field, for example) or vanished buildings. A comparison with the detailed sale particulars of the estate in 1912 would throw some light on 19th Century changes, and an up-to-date survey would show what had happened to the estate farms when they passed into the ownership of the farm tenants.

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Principal sources: estate map, 1775 (Gloucestershire Records Office, D.603) tithe apportionment and map, 1842 (G.R.O., D.645).