

The Structure of Land-Ownership at Stoke
Orchard, 1750-1890

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My study of the structure of land-ownership in the hamlet of Stoke Orchard in the years 1750 to 1890 has shown that developments there followed the general pattern for the country as a whole. My particular conclusions fit into the national pattern as summarised by E.J. Hobsbawm:

'The fundamental structure of landownership was firmly established by the mid-eighteenth century ... large landlords whose land was cultivated by tenant farmers working the land with hired labourers ... By 1791 landlords owned perhaps 75% of the cultivated land ... occupying freeholders 15-20%. The peasantry no longer existed.' (Industry and Empire' P.98)

In 1751 the Rogers family of Dowdeswell owned 941 acres out of a total of 1378 acres. The remaining 436 acres belonged to five or six freeholders. The Rogers' estate was leased to five chief tenants whose farms ranged from 127 to 205 acres in size.

All but 31 of these 941 acres were unenclosed. Half of the area as arable land and half as pasture. The tenant farmers each had a quota of strips in each of the four main open arable fields. A study of the Survey Map of 1751 (G.R.O. D627/23) shows how many of the holdings had already been rationalised by grouping together a particular farmer's strips within the fields.

The above statistics are taken from the Survey of 1751 (G.R.O. D627/24). The suplicate copy of this is very useful for our purposes because it has figures for 1799 written in by a later hand, and these illustrate the process of change in the structure of land ownership we are tracing. This has been missed by the writer in the Victoria County History (Vol. 8., page 17) who has failed to differentiate between the figures for 1751 and those for 1799.

By 1799 the Rogers' estate had increased to 1022 acres. The freeholders, one of whom had sold out his 62 acres, retained only 374 acres. The number of chief tenants had been reduced from five to four. One now farmed a 386 acre combination of two previously independent farms. The other three farms had also increased in size.

These trends accelerated with the turn of the century and in 1837, according to the Commutation of Tithes Act (P 46 SD 2/2), we find that the Rogers' estate had increased to 1237 acres. There was only one substantial freeholder left - with 110 acres - one other with 25 acres, the new railway with 11 acres, and the remaining few acres were distributed amongst twenty-five cottagers each of whom held substantially less than an acre each.

The largest tenant farm remained very large at 373 acres, but there had been a sub-division of one of the other farms and there were five tenant farmers again.

145 acres had been enclosed since 1751, and so the final enclosure which took place at this time affected only a little more than half the land.

The Enclosure Award of 1840 made no dramatic difference to the structure of land ownership. This was already clearly established. Stoke Orchard fits into the pattern for the nation as a whole:

'Enclosures were merely the most dramatic and, as it were, official and political aspect of a general process by which farms grew larger, farmers relatively fewer, and the villagers more landless.' (Hobsbawn Page 102).

There were no dramatic changes after the enclosures. The Rogers estate remained at around the 1200 acre mark until they sold it off at the end of the century. The number and size of tenant farms fluctuated, but there was a general tendency for them to become larger in size and smaller in number.

The following table summarises the trend we have been discussing:

	Rogers' Est.	Freeholders	No. of chief tenant farmers	Largest tenant farm	Unencl. land
1751	941 acres	436 acres	5	205 acres	910 acres
1797	1022 "	374 "	4	386 "	893 "
1837	1237 "	150 "	5	373 "	795 "
1867	1187 "	200 "	4	395 "	-
1887	1207 "	180 "	3	472 "	-

(The figures for 1867 and 1887 are from G.R.O. D269a/E38 and SL493)

This study of the structure of land ownership at Stoke Orchard shows how the pattern of the landlord owning nearly all of the land which he leased to tenants as a few large farms, was fully established in the mid eighteenth century, and complete at the time of the enclosures in 1840.

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