

# WORKING THE LAND

*In the preceding essay, 'Intro to Peasant Life', I followed the life of the average Elizabethan in a Midlands village from childhood to marriage, to death. I left out a big chunk of what went on in the middle. Before we can die, we must work - a lot.*

Six days a week, our day began at third cock's crow just before dawn and continued until dusk (with a short nap after lunch, of course). While the seasonal nature of farming meant we peasants would experience periods of long intense work days and some less so, it's doubtful that we would ever have much idle time.

The crops we tend are split between those grown on a massive scale out in the fields and those we grow in our rather large back yards (1/2 acre to several acres) called **crofts**. In the fields, we grow grains, legumes and hay, stuff that can be dried and stored for long periods (we and our beasts both eat a lot of starch). In the croft, we grow everything else. Fruit (including trees), vegetables, herbs for flavoring, healing and keeping away pests (and witches), dye plants, flax (for linen shirts, undergarments and sheets), hemp (for canvas sack cloth and rope) and more. Even if your family has no land in the fields everyone who has a house has a croft. Nobody grows a single type of crop. There are no "cabbage farmers" or "wheat farmers". We all grow cabbages, wheat and carrots, and raise chickens and sheep, etc. If your family primarily eats what it grows, you wouldn't want to only grow cabbages. It is also a hedge against a poor year for specific crops (i.e. a cabbage blight) completely wiping a family out. Even so, crop failures were a serious concern. Bad harvests seem to have occurred on average about every four years (Pound, p.15).

The fieldwork falls primarily on the men, with the women being called on at times to help. During Harvest (July to October) everyone who could be spared from other tasks, are in the fields. This includes women, children, local craftsmen, laborers from outside the village; sometimes even the local landlord would pitch in.

*'The best sort of women-shearers[sickle-wielders]' says ( a ) Yorkshire farming book... should have ' mower's wages'; 'we do them an injury if we should take them from their company and not make them equal to those in wages whom they can equalize in work ' (Lasslett 126).*

The croft is under the daily care of the Goodwife and her staff (i.e. the women and small children) with the men called on to help with occasional heavy tasks, like hoeing. Likewise, the males are usually in charge of the beasts out grazing in the fields, while the womenfolk care for animals stabled around the cot. Note; in our modern lives we tend to be segregated by age groups: in school classrooms, circles of friends, even in many work places. Our ancestors seem to have spent more of their time intermingling between generations, but away from the opposite sex.

During our period, the majority of the English South and Midlands are still under

**open field** agriculture. By this tradition, farmers did not have separate fields fenced off from each other's (i.e., **enclosed**) like modern farms. Instead each farmer owned a number of individual strips of land scattered about the village's fields. This tradition ensured that no single landholder got all the good fertile land, or was stuck with all the poor land. The cottager's few strips could be intermingled amongst those of his yeoman and husbandman neighbors. In some villages, even the local lord of the manor's land was still mixed together with the peasant's in the fields as it had been in the Middle Ages (if the landlord still farmed his own land; by our period most had leased it all out). Decisions as to what, where and when we sow and harvest are made and acted on communally. Perhaps 75-80% of the village land would have been **arable** (i.e., farmable; suitable for growing crops) (Hoskins, p.152). The village would also have one or more community pastures called the **commons**. Here even the most land-poor peasant family could graze a few beasts. **Meadows** were areas set aside for growing grass to be cut and dried as hay for winter fodder. Most villages would also be connected to **wastes** - marginal areas that might offer meager grazing or were otherwise of some use.

The problems inherent in the open field system are many. First everyone has to agree on what to sow in which fields and when, and when to harvest them, etc. There are frequent complaints about plowmen encroaching on each other's strips. There are disputes about who was cramming too many animals onto the commons and overgrazing. These, along with landlord greed, led to a movement to break up the open fields. The **enclosure movement** began over a hundred years before our period and will climax in the 18th and 19th centuries. Where it occurred, it sometimes helped the richer peasants, if they didn't get cheated in the process. It usually ruined the poorer families who were more dependent on grazing the commons (and less able to defend their rights in court). More sinister were forced enclosure and depopulation by the landlord. He could use means both legal and illegal to drive some or all of his tenants from the land, turn the farmland into sheep pasture and keep only a few low-paid shepherds to maintain his huge, lucrative flocks. Most of us Elizabethan peasants wouldn't personally go through forced expulsion as rising grain prices in relation to wool prices have slowed this trend down for now. We would hear of other villages where it was going on, perhaps providing a popular topic of alehouse discussion. Homeless families might wander into the village looking for employment, and scare us with their stories. Some of them may even be allowed to settle here, if there is room and enough work to go around.

In truth, many villages by our period were neither fully open or enclosed, but a mixture of the two. At very least, our crofts would be enclosed (or 'closes' as they were called). In the Midlands, closes were separated from the surrounding land by a rough hedge of trees and shrubs and a drainage ditch dug on the outside. Willows were often the first trees planted around a close, as they grew fast and could be planted by simply shoving a cut branch into moist soil. Thornier trees and shrubs (gorse, hawthorn, briars) were preferred as added trespass protection, especially around the croft encircling one's home.

Both for sale and home consumption, wheat and barley are the most desired field crops. Second are rye (which can be grown on poorer sandy or shallow-hill soils) and

oats. Grains are "peelers"; they deplete the soil of nitrogen. For this reason, **crop rotation** was a vital aspect of period agriculture and each village having its own traditional system. In a typical **three-field system**, one third of the tilled fields would be sown in fall with wheat and rye. The next would be sown in spring with barley, oats, peas, beans and vetches. These last three are legumes. They draw nitrogen from the air by way of a symbiotic relationship between the plants and bacteria living in their roots, thus replenishing the soil when they decompose. Of course, Elizabethans didn't know why, but they knew that plowing under old bean stalks "put heart" back in the land. The third field is **fallow**, allowed to rest for a year without being planted. This field was not unproductive. Beasts could be grazed on it until around March, when they were removed so the grass would grow high enough to be cut and dried as hay in July. Then the animals would be allowed back to graze the stubble. The fallow was plowed once or twice during the year to keep tough weeds from getting established. In doing so, the weeds and animal dung are incorporated in the soil. Next year, the fallow becomes the wheat field, the wheat field becomes the bean field, etc. Even with this elegant system for maintaining soil fertility, the average yield was four seeds of grain returned for each one planted (and one of those seeds had to be saved for next year's planting).

*"An husband(man) cannot well thrive by his corne(i.e. grain crops) without he have other cattle nor by his cattle without corne.... sheep in my opinion is the most profitable cattle any man can have" -The Book of Husbandry, Fitzherbert, 1523.*

Just as we would all have croft gardens we would all raise animals. This was true even in London; householders tried to keep beasts wherever they could (remember the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was thought to have been started by a cow). In the open-field village, a thrifty cottager family, lacking land in the fields, would try to make as much use of the free grazing on the commons as they could. The village community meeting in the manor court would try to set a limit or "stint" on how many animals one family could stuff on the commons based on the size of their land holding. Still, that wouldn't stop us from seeing what we could get away with and doing considerable damage by overgrazing. Wool was, far and away, England's largest export. There were four times as many sheep as people in Elizabethan England (Singman, p. 29). Some of these were in enormous flocks owned by wealthy investors and watched over by full-time shepherds, often on hilly, marshy or otherwise non-arable land. Possibly the majority of English sheep, though, were in the many smaller flocks kept by mixed-farming peasants on village land. In addition to wool sheep provided tallow for candles and rush lights, grease for axles, hinges, and leather dressing, tasty mutton and not so tasty milk that was usually mixed with cow's milk to improve the flavor. Perhaps just as important was the dung they, and the other beasts, left behind on the fields. Thus the beasts fed the land and the land fed the beasts, partly on free agricultural waste such as weeds and stubble. In addition to sheep, most families kept cows, with milk products such as butter and cheese providing important protein and fat to meat-poor peasant diets. Goats seem to have been rare in much of England, either not kept at all or kept only by the poorest families that couldn't support a cow. Chickens, geese and ducks were also kept around the croft. Pigs were very economical. They could scavenge the local woodlands for "mast": acorns, nuts, grass shoots, roots, bark and fungi, and could be fattened on household waste such

as buttermilk and table scraps.

In addition to animals for food and clothing, peasants would need beasts to pull their plows, carts, harrows and other farm implements. In the early Middle Ages, they would have used oxen (castrated bulls, a.k.a. bullocks); but well before our period, horses had begun to replace them on most farms. Up to the 20th century, some farmers would still favor oxen, which were considered stronger than horses, and good to eat when they grew too old. Horses work faster, though.

*I feel that to delve deeper into peasant farming than I already have is beyond the scope of this present essay. More details can be found in Tom Spittler's essay "Commoner's Knowledge", and my essay "Wigston Digested". Also, I highly recommend our mutual source, Lost Country Life by Dorothy Hartley.*

## "Taking in " work

Well-established yeomen could handsomely support their families by farming alone. Most farming families, and, of course, all land-poor cotters would look for additional work. While most of the odd jobs around the village would be agricultural in nature, there were other ways peasant families supplemented their income. Activities such as fishing (along the coasts), mining and iron smelting (where mining went on, mostly in the far West and North) were often scheduled around the agricultural calendar so they could be performed by a labor base who were farm workers first. Many types of small-scale manufacturing went on in village cottages and crofts, such as brick making and nail forging. By far the most common manufacturing jobs were in textiles. Carding, spinning and weaving flax and especially wool were carried out in cottages across England. Typically carding and spinning were done part time by peasant housewives while weaving, dyeing, and fulling were done by full-time (usually male) professionals and their families (who in turn often become agricultural laborers during Harvest). Entrepreneurs called "woolmen" would buy the raw wool from one household, transport it to another cottage (perhaps in another village) to have it carded and spun, and then to another to be woven (it took around 9 spinsters to keep one weaver busy). The spinsters and weaver would often be working on wheels and looms rented to them by the woolman. By running his business in the countryside away from towns, the woolman avoided guild restrictions on his trade. This cottage industry, carried out largely by peasant's wives working around their primary jobs of farming and running a household, provided the vital export on which the Elizabethan economy relied.

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