

Changing Landscapes, Changing Environments:  
enclosure and culture in Northamptonshire, 1700-1900

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Based at the University of Hertfordshire, the *Changing Landscapes, Changing Environments* project was one of only eleven projects to receive a Larger Research Grant under the AHRC's highly competitive Landscape and Environment Research Programme. This interdisciplinary project draws together historians, historical geographers and art historians from the Universities of Hertfordshire and Lincoln in order to examine the role played by parliamentary enclosure in the long-term evolution of the English landscape.

Between 1750 and 1836, over 5000 Acts of Parliament were passed, transferring the ownership of previously open fields, commons and wastes into private hands. A great deal of scholarly ink has been spilt debating the consequences of enclosure's severe rationalisation of the landscape for contemporaries, as well as its impact on agricultural productivity, land-holding structures and the economic well-being of the poor. Yet one aspect of the problem – crucial to any historical assessment of enclosure – remains untouched: its long-term impact. At present, parliamentary enclosure is frequently assessed in isolation, and its consequences sought within a time-frame encompassing perhaps ten years. However if the effects were as severe as some have stated – one scholar recently calculated that an average of 49% of those with access to common rights in Northamptonshire were dispossessed at enclosure – the history of these communities must have been affected for several generations.

Focusing on the county of Northamptonshire – where levels of parliamentary enclosure were particular high – the project seeks to understand how communities traumatised by the experience of enclosure healed themselves in the decades and centuries that followed. To this end, the project approaches the Northamptonshire landscape from four distinct but overlapping thematic perspectives: historical, literary, architectural and aesthetic. The project investigates both aristocratic and popular reactions to agricultural change, as well as examines artistic and literary representations of the landscape during and after enclosure, drawing attention to the work of regional artists such as George Clarke of Scaldwell (Northamptonshire) as well as to more well-known commentators on enclosure like the poet John Clare of Helpstone (Northamptonshire, now Cambridgeshire).

The three-year project got underway in the summer of 2007 with the appointment of new two research staff, Briony McDonagh and Sarah Webster (both previously of the University of Nottingham), and two PhD students. Research to date has centred on the impact of parliamentary and associated informal enclosure on estate landscapes, as well as on the place of the church in these newly enclosed and rationalised landscapes. Two examples will suffice here.

**Wicken**

At Wicken, in the south-east of the county, the local landowner Thomas Prowse enclosed the open fields in 1757 without need for an Act of Parliament. Wicken had belonged to the Spencer family of Althorp until the estate was sold to a London merchant, Charles Hosier, in 1716. Hosier built a new mansion in the former deer park 1.3km south of the church and medieval manor house. Either he or Prowse (who inherited the estate from Hosier in 1747)

removed the hedgerows planted in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and re-established the park around the new house.<sup>1</sup>

Hosier and Prowse between them bought up many of the freeholds in the parish, including property sold off by the Spencer family in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. By 1757, Prowse owned almost all of Wicken and in that year he enclosed the open fields by means of an agreement with the rector of Wicken and the Bishop of Peterborough. In place of glebe land which had previously been scattered through the open fields, the rector was allotted 126 acres in a consolidated block close to the parsonage house and £130 per annum in lieu of tithes and common rights. The three men undertook to obtain an Act of Parliament to confirm their agreement, but apparently never did so.<sup>2</sup>

The year after the enclosure of the open fields, Prowse began work on the church at Wicken, which he had already partly demolished after the building was declared unsafe in 1753. An amateur architect who also drew up plans for extensions to his house in the park, Prowse rebuilt the church to his own designs and entirely at his own cost. The new church was constructed in a late 13<sup>th</sup>-century style on the old foundations, and the medieval nave piers were replaced with slim neo-gothic ones so as to fit more seats into the building.<sup>3</sup>

Prowse died in 1767 and his daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Prowse, took over management of the estate. Her estate ledgers for the period 1768-1784 survive, and provide good evidence that she was financing numerous agricultural improvements, some of which she agreed to as an incentive for her tenants to convert from yearly tenancies to longer-term leases. For example, Elizabeth paid to install water-pumps in at least three of her tenants' farms, glazed and repaired their houses and barns, dug a pond on one tenant's holding and contributed towards their hedging and fencing costs, as well as installed stone drains and cleared part of the estate of anthills, the latter at a cost of £70.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth Prowse took an active interest in the local community and its welfare. She oversaw the completion of the church, supported a day school for boys and girls, and suppressed all signs of Nonconformity. In the sermon delivered at her funeral, Reverend John Owen described how Elizabeth had employed pensioners and other "victims of infirmity" on her estate, so that:

"her lawns were mown, her fields were cultivated, her garden was dressed, by those whom time had superannuated, or misfortune had crippled; and who, but for such provident kindness, must have hung upon society as pensioners, or infested it as beggars."

She also held a harvest festival for her tenants and their families, entertaining them with music, bread, cheese and ale, thereby ensuring she was mistress of the "happiest set of peasants in England", as one visitor remarked in 1777.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> VCH Nhants V, 421 and 418.

<sup>2</sup> VCH Nhants V, 426; NRO, 364p/14.

<sup>3</sup> NRO, 364p/28; VCH Nhants V, 416-7 and 434.

<sup>4</sup> NRO, 364p/67-69.

<sup>5</sup> NRO, 364p/30 and NRS pamphlet 616; VCH Nhants V, 435 and 426.



Figure 1: St John Evangelist, Wicken: the nave and the chancel were rebuilt between 1758 and 1770.



Figure 2: Manor Farm and the tower of St John Evangelist, Wicken.

### **Lilford**

But if the farmers and labourers at Wicken fared relatively well under an enclosing landlord, the inhabitants of other Northamptonshire villages had very different experiences of the enclosure process. For example, the excellent run of estate rentals and other documents from Lilford in the north-east of the county shed considerable light on the enclosure of the open fields and the accompanying reorganisation of landholding and settlement which occurred there in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Lilford manor was purchased in 1711 by Sir Thomas Powys, a Shropshire MP who had risen to prominence as Attorney General to James II. The Powys family settled in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Lilford Hall and bought up several of the neighbouring estates over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1740s, Lilford was a small village of 12 houses, a church, a vicarage

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<sup>6</sup> NRO family and estate collections description; R. Turner, 'Powys, Sir Thomas (1649–1719)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22679>, accessed 29 Oct 2007].

and a mill, all lying on the banks of the river Nene close to the mansion. Yet less than 40 years later, the village had disappeared, the open fields had been enclosed and the Hall stood isolated within a wooded park.

More than 400 acres in Lilford had been enclosed by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the majority of the parish was still said to lie in open fields as late as 1767. Attempts to enclose the remaining open fields began in earnest around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, under the direction of the third Thomas Powys, grandson of Sir Thomas. Common rights belonging to inhabitants of Wigsthorpe, a hamlet in Lilford parish, were extinguished in the autumn of 1749 and the vicar's common rights were mentioned for the final time in 1752. Open arable land at Lilford was recorded for the last time in the Michaelmas 1772 rental, and the open fields and common meadows had been replaced by hedged closes by Michaelmas 1773.<sup>7</sup>

With the exception of the vicarage and a 1 acre close of glebe in Wigsthorpe, Powys owned the whole parish. As a result, neither a Parliamentary Act nor an informal enclosure agreement was necessary for him to enclose the open fields and reorganise his tenants' farms. The final enclosure of Lilford was accomplished at the same time as other Powys estates were enclosed by parliamentary means. For example, the neighbouring parishes of Thorpe Achurch and Aldwinkle were enclosed in the autumn of 1772 under Parliamentary Acts of that year, as was Moulton near Northampton.<sup>8</sup>

The enclosure of the open fields at Lilford was accompanied by other major changes in the landscape. Between 1747 and 1752 Powys demolished six houses at Lilford, as well as pulled down the mill and a shop. He re-housed his tenants on other parts of his estate, mainly in the neighbouring hamlet of Wigsthorpe. By the autumn of 1752, only one house and three cottages remained alongside the hall, church and vicarage. The last two tenants clung on at Lilford for another 5 years, but by 1757 the estate rental referred to site of the village as "Ground whereon Houses stood in Lilford, Now the Slope & Approach [to Lilford Hall]". Some of the sites of former houses and cottages were apparently put down to arable cultivation, like those leased by John Ford, which were referred to in the Lady Day 1762 rental as "Two Pieces of till'd Land call'd Cottages", and later simply as "Arable Land".<sup>9</sup>

But Powys did not stop there. In 1754 he applied to divert the Oundle – Thrapston road away from his enclosed lands in Lilford, and two years later he landscaped his grounds, amalgamating nine closes to form a park which was mentioned for the first time in the Lady Day 1756 rental. In the same year, Powys obtained permission to demolish the vicarage house at Lilford and incorporate the site of the house into his own gardens. Just twenty years later, the fourth Thomas Powys was granted a faculty to unite the vicarage of Lilford with the neighbouring rectory of Achurch, which he had acquired with that manor in 1773. After gaining the necessary Act of Parliament, Powys demolished the church at Lilford and took the churchyard into his own lands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> NRO, Lilford glebe terriers; Pow/3 and /5; Powys Group 10, 1767 petition.

<sup>8</sup> NRO, JW Anscomb *Inclosure: notes on the parliamentary acts and awards for Northamptonshire 1727-1844*, 62-4.

<sup>9</sup> NRO, Pow/3-5.

<sup>10</sup> NRO, Pow/4; Powys Group 2, 1754 articles of agreement; Powys Group 10, 1756 licence of the Bishop of Peterborough and 1767 indenture; ZB587/3.



Figure 3: The remains of St Peter's church Lilford, rebuilt as folly near Achurch.

A 1791 map of Lord Lilford's gardens shows that by that date nothing of the village remained. The hall stood lonely and isolated within its gardens and wooded park, and was approached through hedged closes laid out over the former open fields and the sites of abandoned cottages. The churchyard had been planted with woodland which screened the house from view, and all that remained of St Peter's church was an extravagant folly the fourth Thomas Powys had constructed at Achurch using parts of the demolished building's south aisle.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, Wicken was still a thriving village in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its population was estimated at 273 in 1765 and had reached 367 by the time of the first census.<sup>12</sup> Like her father-in-law before her, Mrs Prowse showed great concern for her tenants' physical and moral wellbeing. As well as supervising the completion of the church and suppressing nonconformity, she made considerable improvements to her farmers' houses, entertained her labourers at harvest festivals and saw to the education of their children. In this sense, Wicken and Lilford provide striking evidence of the contrasting ways enclosure might impact upon rural communities in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Northamptonshire, a theme that the project team intend to follow up further over the coming months.

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<sup>11</sup> NRO, Map 3760.

<sup>12</sup> NRO, 364p/501.



Figure 4: Gravestones at Pilton commemorating members of the Prentice family, who were tenants in the Lilford area in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 5: The last vestiges of the pre-enclosure landscape: ridge and furrow at Achurch.

Forthcoming events include a day conference on landscape and enclosure to be held at Rewley House in Oxford on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2008 and a major conference planned for winter 2008. For more information about these events or any aspect of the research, check out the project website at [www.landscapeandenclosure.com](http://www.landscapeandenclosure.com) or email the team at [info@landscapeandenclosure.com](mailto:info@landscapeandenclosure.com).