

Community Farming

Early Farming

Though farming in Britain is known to have existed in Neolithic times, there are few traces left of early agriculture. Aerial photographs from the 1940s show various possible Later Prehistoric, Iron Age or Roman enclosures in and around Hook Norton, but many of them have been ploughed over since then.

Early man was a nomadic hunter-gatherer, subsisting on meat from wild animals, fish, and the grains and fruits he found around him. Given the primitive nature of his weapons, it was a precarious life. Domestication of animals for husbandry and the first attempts to raise crops of grain were a great advance.

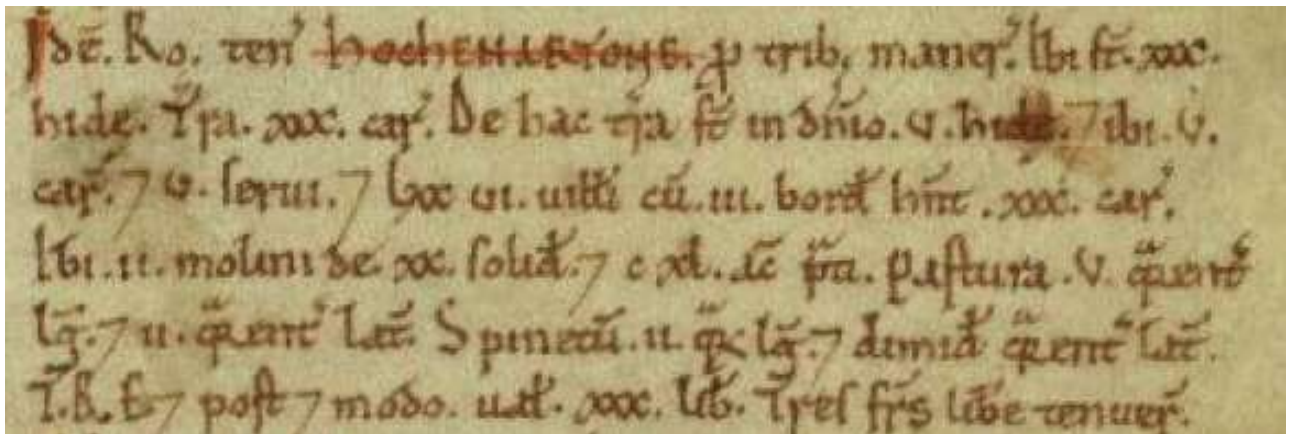
Iron Age fields survive in some areas of England as small, square outlines. This is possibly because the earliest form of the plough made only a light impact on the surface of the soil so that early farmers had to plough twice: the second ploughing at right angles would cross the original shallow lines to create a workable field. Later heavier ploughs dragged by domestic animals required more effort to lift to change direction so fields became rectangular rather than square. It is thought that early man had cleared much of the forest covering England before the arrival of the Romans and that, moreover, farming even in what is thought to be a relatively primitive society was organised communally.

Under the Romans, both husbandry and agriculture flourished, and England exported grain to Europe. But the departure of the legions and the fragmentation of administrative control led to a fall in arable production.

Early Anglo-Saxon settlements were based on pastoral requirements for woodland and grazing land for pigs, cattle and sheep. Agriculture continued to be less productive than in Roman times. Villages were less static then, and the early Anglo-Saxons did not build in stone. It is likely that the small settlements of wooden thatched houses were simply abandoned as living conditions deteriorated or resources failed, and the occupants moved to build on new land within the same area. Land-use at local levels was a matter of kinship. A traditional land unit, a hide (approximately 120 acres), was defined as the land of one family.

Over time, heads of families became leaders of people within greater areas. As the Saxon kingdoms like Wessex and Mercia became more organized and powerful, land became not simply a means of subsistence but was also subject to obligations and taxes. Open fields were held in common by the community: a few higher ranking people possessed enclosed land for farming or hunting. Below them in the hierarchy came free tenants and several levels of dependents including slaves or bondsmen.

The Norman conquerors of 1066 came to a united England with an efficient centralised administration. They recorded land holdings in 1086. The Domesday Book entry for Hook Norton among the holdings of Robert d'Oilly was:



The same Robert holds Hook Norton as 3 manors. There are 30 hides [3,600 acres]. (There is) land for 30 ploughs. Of this land 5 hides are in demesne [reserved to the lord of the manor] and there (are) 5 ploughs and 5 serfs [unfree peasants]; and 76 villeins [unfree tenants] with 3 bordars [small-holders] have 30 ploughs. There (are) 2 mills rendering 20 s. and 140 acres of meadow. Pasture, 5 furlongs in length and 2 furlongs in breadth. Spinney 2 furlongs in length and half a furlong in breadth. In King Edward's time and afterwards it was worth 30 pounds and (it is worth the same) now. Three brothers held it freely.¹

¹ See the essay on "Domesday Book" in the [The Middle Ages](#) section of this website.

The Medieval Common Field System

So by the eleventh century a stabilised agricultural system was in operation in Hook Norton parish. There were three extensive fields, North, West and East, with some separately identified smaller fields. Thirteen twelfth-century and over sixty thirteenth-century field names are now known, with about twenty identified (such as Priestfield, Butterhulle, Ledehall and Cuham), some of them still in use. By the sixteenth century the main fields had become Westbury field and Eastbury field, and the name the Heath came into use for the exposed land on the south of the parish. The common fields later became known as Southside and Northside fields.

These open or common fields held small scattered strips or parcels of land owned or farmed by one person or family, with access to waste (unused) land and woodland. A village committee would organize the crop-rotation system: determining the times of sowing as well as the crops to be grown. Normally some grain would be planted in the autumn, some in the spring, and these cereals would be alternated with pulses. One field would be left fallow, with animals turned out onto it to fertilise it ready for the next crop. Similarly, animals would be turned onto cropped fields as directed by the committee: pigs were efficient weeders as well as providers of manure.

Some people held land in their own right, but under the feudal system the tenant farmers or unfree peasants would also owe services to the lord of the manor – which meant they would have to work on his land and property as well as their own. There could be obligations to take corn to the lord of the manor's mill for grinding. Sale or exchange or inheritance of land would be administered by the lord of the manor's village court, and a fine or charge for this would be levied. In addition, everyone in the village would pay taxes to the king and tithes – ten per cent of their produce or income – to the church.

Apart from a share in the common fields, a family might have room for an animal, a pig or cow, or chickens by their house in the village and might have various common rights such as the right to graze animals on common land, for a pig to feed on acorns in the woods, to fish, or to gather wood for building or furze for firing.

Under this system even a poor peasant should have been able to feed himself and his family and have a little surplus to buy or barter for goods he could not produce himself. Some villagers prospered and bought more land, and were sometimes able to consolidate their holdings by agreement with their neighbours and the village court. Matrimony was another way of acquiring land: widows were in great demand.

Grass land was about sixteen times more valuable than arable land and would have been permanent in low-lying areas such as the marsh at the foot of Oatley Hill. Some of those places would have flooded in the winter and, come the spring, would be the first areas to start growing. There is no evidence that these areas were deliberately flooded as in some other parishes.

The records of Oseney Abbey, which over four hundred years came to own a third of the land in Hook Norton, refer (if incompletely) to the tithes and crops from Hook Norton from the 13th to the 18th centuries. An early 14th century record lists 25 quarters of wheat seed, 265 quarters of wheat and rye; another 100 quarters of wheat and 106 quarters of pulses held in two granges. In 1477 the Abbey's flock here consisted of 171 wethers, presumably kept for their wool. It seems Hook Norton was a productive village.

Domesday Book records water mills for grinding grain at Temple Mill on the Stour and Hook Norton mill (later owned by Oseney Abbey) on the Swere.



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Disputes with the lord of Swerford manor led by the 13th century to a third water mill at Kerswell on the boundary between Manor farm and Grounds farm.

Few traces of these mills survive. At Kerswell (on the left) courses of stonework are thought to be part of the mill race.

On the Swere, at the double bend coming out of Swerford, there are clues behind the ornate wrought iron gates of Oseney Mill (now a private dwelling). What appears to be a water feature would have been part of the mill stream.



Outflow of mill leet
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Even more interestingly, from the public footpath that leads from the road towards the motte and bailey castle and the church, what looks like a simple outbuilding suggests its real age.



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At Temple Mill, on the road from Scotland End to Sibford Gower, a mill leet is visible but the present mill is to the north of the Stour (which marks the parish boundary of Hook Norton) and presumably always served Sibford.

In Hook Norton the common field system survived into the seventeenth century. In 1672 Cowpeny was enclosed, possibly because of the expanding cattle market at Banbury; a group of landowners got together and enclosed about two hundred acres between what is now Upper and Lower Berryfield farms. The hedges round that area can be dated to about that date. The fields system by then had changed to Northside and Southside fields with quarters only in the North part. All was to be overturned in 1774 when the common field system was destroyed in the Enclosure Act of 1774. [See the essay on "Enclosure" in this section.]

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Some of this article is based on unpublished articles by Perce Hackling held in the village museum

Further Reading

John Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Oxford, 1994)

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928)

Nigel Harvey, *Fields, Hedges and Ditches* (Oxford, 2011)

Richard and Nina Muir, *Fields* (London, 1989)

Peter J. Reynolds, *Ancient Farming* (Oxford, 1987)

Tom Williamson and Liz Bellamy, *Property and Landscape* (London, 1987)