The Enclosure and Redistribution of Our Land

Curtler William Henry
THE ENCLOSURE AND REDISTRIBUTION OF OUR LAND

BY

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PREFACE

I have ventured to write this book in the interest of the general reader, since, as far as I am aware, there is no history of Enclosure from the earliest until the latest times.

In the early part I have, in order to present a consecutive story, trodden well-worn ground, and where Vinogradoff, Maitland, Ashley, Seebohm, Slater, Gonner, Tawney, Gray, and others have worked, there is little that is fresh to be discovered. I have, therefore, relied largely on their guidance, which is freely acknowledged in the text.

In the latter portion of the book I have relied mainly on my own research, and hope that I have been able to throw fresh light on several points; for instance, the expense of enclosing; the renting of commons; the overwhelming evidence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that commons did more harm than good; the exaggerated statements so often made as to the ‘robbery’ of ‘the poor’ on enclosure; the many concessions made in enclosure Acts to the small holder; and the fact that it was the great landowners who were the first to try and remedy the hardships, undoubtedly wrought on many of the poor through the loss of their commons, by granting allotments. It is but tardy justice to this fast vanishing class that their efforts in this direction should be set forth.

W. H. R. CURTLER.

Eaton Lodge,
Malvern Wells.
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CHAPTER I

THE COMMON-FIELD SYSTEM.—THE ACCOUNT OF TACITUS.—
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The term 'enclosure' in its technical sense—the sense in which, too, it is generally used—means the conversion of estates composed of separate strips in the old open arable fields, and of the commons or wastes, into separate compact properties; the complete abandonment, in fact, of the method of cultivation practised by the ancient village on which the manorial system was imposed.

In order, therefore, to understand the great movement which is known by the name of 'enclosure', it is necessary first of all to understand the common-field system of farming, and the growth and decline of the manor.

A communal system of farming is of immense, perhaps of prehistoric, antiquity; it was by no means confined to the Aryan peoples, and it survives to-day in various parts of the world, including our own country.

The common-field system has been much more enduring than the manor, for while the latter as a practical working method of estate management by means of labour services had nearly disappeared by the end of the fifteenth century, the former was prevalent in the greater part of England in the middle of the eighteenth century, and instances of it are still to be found.

One of these is noticed in the Report of the Tithe Copyhold and Inclosure Acts for 1913 ¹ at Elmstone Hardwicke in Gloucestershire. In that village the fields had become in the course of time divided into fifteen, of varying size, instead of the three fields usual under the system. But each field was still divided into strips which were in separate ownership,² although in some cases one or more adjoining strips

¹ Cd. 7333.
² There were twelve owners at the time of my visit, June 1914, of whom three occupied their land; none of them could be described as smallholders.