

Agriculture & the Enclosure Acts

Name _____

Block _____

The Enclosure brought about major changes in the lives of English people living both in the countryside and the city. Enclosure took place in a few villages as early as the 1200's, became more widespread in the 1500's, and then dropped off. Most of the villages in England had their land enclosed between 1760 and 1830. This enclosure movement almost totally ended the old system of open fields in England.

Enclosure changed the English countryside. Before enclosure, farmers raised crops and livestock mainly to provide food for themselves. By 1850 English farmers were able to sell most of their products in the cities – where two thirds of the English population lived by that time.

The Enclosure of Farmlands

Some historians believe that the small landowners and cottagers were victims of the enclosure system. They were powerless against a Parliament whose members were large landowners. Other historians believe that the enclosure procedure in Parliament was fair to both large and small landowners. They argue that small landowners and cottagers did not suffer, but rather increased their holdings.

England's Enclosure Acts divided the common land among the landowners in a village. The more land people owned, the more land they received in enclosure awards. With enclosure, cottagers who had traditional rights to use the common land sometimes received an acre or two of their own.

There had been some enclosures, the fencing of formerly open fields, earlier, chiefly because the owners of large estates found sheep grazing to be an excellent way to make money. Then a new wave of enclosures began around 1760. In a series of laws, Parliament forced the fencing of common lands including about a tenth of the total area of England. The main purpose now was to take advantage of some of the agricultural improvements noted above. "Horse hoeing" demanded relatively large fields, and improved breeds of livestock could not be permitted to mingle with "lesser breeds" in open fields.

An observer had this to say:

"A village tragedy was enacted on two thousand occasions in the last forty years of the century. The church door one Sunday morning would bear a notice that Parliament was about to be petitioned for an enclosure of common lands. The lesser villagers might protest or even riot; but with Squire himself or his friends in Parliament, and with that body composed, anyway, largely of landlords, the bill would ordinarily pass. Soon commissioners would appear to put an end to the immemorial communal life of the village. The common waste land would disappear, and probably the meadow and tilled land also. Each individual who shared in the old common tillage would be allotted a particular piece of land which he was to fence in, or "enclose", for his own use. The Squire and the larger freeholders or tenants, who were losing their free fuel and the pasturage for their livestock, could seldom afford the compulsory cost of enclosing their little allotments and would have to sell out their rights for a song".

The enclosure movement drove many small farmers from the land and promoted creation of large, efficient farms using the new methods. Britain could feed her population by using less labour, and the stage for the Industrial Revolution in Britain was set.

New scientific approaches to agriculture taken by large landowners eventually led to the release of large numbers of people from farming. Under the leadership of a few innovators like Jethro Tull [1674 – 1741] and Viscount Townshend [1674 – 1738], the following improvements were introduced:

Tull introduced [1] planting of grain seed by a horse-drawn machine, more efficient than scattering seed, and [2] cultivation of crops with a horse-drawn hoe. Townshend introduced [3] turnips as winter feed for livestock and [4] the planting of clover to fix nitrogen in the soil and increase its fertility. His four-year crop rotation of turnips, barley, clover, and wheat eliminated the custom of letting fields lie fallow and made English estates more productive.

These great improvements in efficiency were accepted by large British landowners and dramatized the effectiveness of farming large tracts rather than small scattered strips of land. For many years, English farmers had owned [or worked] as permanent tenants on small strips of land in open fields. Special areas were set aside for the use of all. These "common lands" could be used for grazing cattle, gathering firewood, and other purposes. But this system of farming was eliminated by the enclosure movement.

ENCLOSURE AND ITS EFFECTS

The Rich Got Richer

The bill for enclosure in Parliament was probably considered by a committee of large landowners. When small landowners presented petitions against the bill, they could be ignored.

The law itself often gave special preference to the lord of the manor. These lords may have appointed the officials who carried out the enclosure. So, they were usually given the best or largest shares of the land. The small farmers and cottagers did not always make their claims in the proper legal form. Thus, their claims were often rejected or ignored.

The Poor Got Poorer

Enclosure was a clear case of the rich robbing the poor. It was played by the rules of property and law, written by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers.

In village after village enclosure destroyed the poor people's care means of survival – the cow or geese, the fuel from the common land, and the gleanings. If a cottager had no proof of his rights. Then he was not paid for his loss. Sometimes a cottager could prove his claim. Then he was given a piece of land which was not large enough for his survival. And he was forced to pay more than his share of the high enclosure costs.

Some Economic Effects of Enclosure

New Attitudes.

Changes in methods and in the size and organization of farms occurred in this period of enclosure after 1750. But the most important changes were in the farmers' attitudes about their farming methods. Over long periods of time, population, industry, and the cities grew. As a result, the market for farm goods gradually increased. To meet the increased demand, farmers became more willing to try new methods and to combine small farms into larger ones.

Increased agricultural production removed some of the barriers to the further growth of population, the cities, and industry. And this growth, in turn, created new chances for farmers. **Farming had become an industry.** People were the most important element in this process of development and change. The

great changes in farming resulted from the farmers' own willingness to try new methods of farming and organization on a large scale.

Increased Production:

The agricultural industry did supply some of the workers that the Industrial Revolution needed. But it was the supplying food for the growing population from which the labour force was drawn was the most important contribution. Between 1751 and 1821, the population of England and Wales more than doubled. Even so, Great Britain was able to supply most of the grain needed to feed its people.

If the agricultural industry had not risen to the challenge of increased population, the industrial Revolution probably could not have happened. Great Britain is a small area with few natural resources. Without increased agricultural production, it would have had to import food, instead of the raw cotton, iron and wool that the new industries needed. Because British farmers met the challenge, British money stayed home, instead of being spent overseas.

As farmers made more money, they were able to buy more British industrial products. This made it reasonable for industry to produce on a large scale. And it made factories profitable.

More Money. Finally, agriculture provided much of the money to get the Industrial Revolution off the ground. Most of the early ironworks, for example, were built by landowners. And farmers were well-known supporters of plans to improve local communications by road, river, and canal. Many of the new industrialists came from a farming background. They found the money to invest in new industries, either by using their land as a guarantee, or by borrowing money from other farming friends and neighbors.

Review Questions Part 1

1. When did the Enclosure of farmlands take place?

2. a. Why was the Enclosure of farmlands necessary for the Industrial cities?

b. What other benefits to the Industrial Revolution did the Enclosure of farmlands bring?

3. Describe how the Enclosure was carried out.

4. How did the "rich get richer" and the "poor get poorer"?

5. Did the Industrial Revolution cause the Enclosure of farmlands or did the enclosure cause the Industrial Revolution? Explain in detail.
