Common Field and Enclosure in England 1450—1850

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Preface

In only eight years between 1907 and 1915 five major works were published that have dominated our studies of common field and enclosure: Slater's *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields*, Gonner's *Common Land and Inclosure*, Tawney's *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, the Hammonds' *The Village Labourer 1760–1832* and Gray's *English Field Systems*. There were other works, too, which occupied a respectable place in a great outburst of writing. It would be too much to expect that it would ever be repeated; none the less the output of general works on enclosure has since been very disappointing. This is not because the problems have all been solved, in many cases they have seemed to become more complex. Instead, a vast amount of work has appeared in more limited local and regional studies. The result is that students and researchers have found it increasingly difficult to bridge the gap between the classic works and the modern specialist periodical literature. This book has therefore been written in the belief that a new general treatment of the subject is now required.

No one book can hope to include the entire range of problems and methods of approach that might be covered. I have made no attempt to present a detailed account of the politics or administration of the enclosure process. I have followed Slater rather than Gonner in omitting consideration of the enclosure of common wastes, other than those tracts that were an integral part of common-field husbandry. This is because I wish to avoid certain additional problems, such as the technical aspects of the drainage of fenlands, while at the same time, like Slater, I wish to give greater attention to the varied character of common-field farming and organisation and its links with enclosure. The main core of the book lies in its attempt to classify enclosures of common field according to their method, and to relate this to the incidence of enclosure in time and space. From this basis the second part of the book examines the interconnections of enclosure and land-holding, changing production, and the nature of local communities. The book covers the main period of enclosure in England since the middle of the fifteenth century.

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Note on References

References within the text within square brackets relate to the alphabetical listing in the Bibliography of Works Cited, followed where necessary by distinguishing publication date (especially in the case of authors with more than one work cited) and by page number in italics; for example [Hoskins, 1957, 216]. Source references to unpublished theses give the page number in roman type; for example [Parker, 1948, f. 65].

Other references in the text, numbered consecutively within each chapter, relate to annotations or to sources not given in Works Cited, and are itemised in the Notes and References section.