**Open field system**

Definition: **open-field** from *Collins English Dictionary*

**adj**

1 *(prenominal) medieval history of or denoting the system in which an arable area was divided into unenclosed strips, esp cultivated by different tenants*

Summary Article: **open-field system**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

System of agriculture in lowland areas of England during the Middle Ages. A medieval village would normally have three large fields throughout which each farmer's land was distributed in scattered strips (theoretically of good and bad land), separated by raised ridges of land called balks, while another area was set aside for common grazing. By the early 19th century, enclosure meant that most farmland had been consolidated into individual holdings, allowing greater efficiency and the isolation of animal disease. A form of the open-field system survives at Laxton in Nottinghamshire.

Farming activity in each village or manor was coordinated by the landowner's steward, or reeve. Two fields would be cultivated (usually with corn) each year, the third being left fallow to recover its fertility.

**Extent of open-field farming** The open-field system was unsuited to the hill farms of Scotland, Wales, and the northwest and west of England. By 1700 it was rare also in Kent, Middlesex, Essex, and Suffolk, where the pull of London encouraged farmers to produce for the market. The main areas of open-field farming stretched from Dorset and Hampshire in the south, through the midlands, to Yorkshire and Norfolk in the east.

**Advantages** The system had many social advantages. Its small scattered strips were theoretically intended to share good and bad land fairly. The system was a community system, involving a social hierarchy based on land. In the medieval village, the lord of the manor and the church ranked over the villeins (who held land in return for services under feudalism). However, as feudal services were commuted to landlord–tenant agreements, and with the sale of land, a variety of landholding emerged, from the landed gentry (large landowners), through to the freeholders (small landowners of free land), copyholders (owners of land recorded in the lord's court), and smallholders (tenants). The system gave land to almost all the villagers, and allowed others (the cottars or 'squatters') to use the commons and waste ground. The villagers had to work together as a community, and the system allowed equipment and expertise to be shared. It gave support to the old and the simple, and provided adequate food to the village community.

**Disadvantages** Although it had social merits, open-field farming had economic disadvantages. Custom tended to be conservative, and the system was prone to disputes about individual rights and boundaries. Farmers wasted time trudging from one strip to another, and the strips were too small to permit technical improvements such as drainage or machinery. The practice of leaving one-third of the land fallow was wasteful, and did not provide enough winter fodder to keep all the animals alive through the winter. The common grazing tended to be overstocked and made it easy for disease to spread quickly among livestock. The open-field system, therefore, made efficient farming difficult, and did not provide a surplus production that ambitious farmers could sell. Because of this, the system became
out-of-date during the 18th century and by the end of the 19th century most farmers had consolidated their land into individual holdings.
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