



*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

## ***The Open Fields of Wantage, Grove and Charlton, Oxfordshire***

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This article will show how the former open-fields of the three parishes of Wantage, Grove and Charlton, Oxfordshire, can be reconstructed at a point just before their enclosure by using maps and documents from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Historically the parish boundaries of the three settlements differ from their modern counterparts. Today Charlton does not exist as a separate entity since during a boundary reshuffle in the 1930's the parish was split between the parishes of Wantage, Grove and West Lockinge. Formerly the parish of Charlton ran adjacent to the parishes of Wantage and Grove in a long narrow finger, extending from the downs in the south to the clay vale in the north. The parishes are situated within the Vale of White Horse which geologically is made up of a number of bands running east to west. Working from south to north, the bands begin with a chalk escarpment, followed by a terrace of upper greensand and, finally, the clays in the vale. Wantage and its neighbours (including the historic parish of Charlton) show the characteristic elongated narrow shape of a 'strip' parish running at right angles to the ridge. Their shape has been determined by the need for a variety of soils for viable settlement. Thus the traditional triple land use of the area became sheep pasture and 'waste' on the higher dry downlands, arable farming on the lower chalk slopes and greensand shelf, and dairy farming on the heavy clay soils of the vale. The townships of Wantage and Charlton were therefore able to benefit from all three types of land use, whereas Grove farmers working the heavy sticky soils of the vale found dairy pasture and meadow more rewarding.

What are open fields? First of all, it is recognized that historically the country was divided into two main forms of agricultural economy, determined mainly by relief and soil conditions. These were the lowland and 'champion' areas in which arable farming largely prevailed and the upland and 'wood-pasture' areas, where pastoral and dairy farming predominated. The latter area is characterized by relatively small and often irregular shaped enclosed fields which have traditionally been held in 'severalty', that is, each field was held by a single tenant and not 'in common' with others. The second form of agriculture, in which the plough predominated, extended over large parts of lowland England, especially in the fertile Midland plain, between the Malverns, the Chilterns and the Fens, but also with many extensions to the north, south, east and west. It is in these areas that the field system, generally known as 'open-field' farming can be found. A simplistic model of the open-field system divides the land into two or three great open fields, often covering several hundred acres, which were in turn subdivided into strips. A tenant's holdings would then consist of a number of strips scattered amongst the great fields. A fully developed system can be characterized as having four or more essential elements: subdivided fields, rights of common grazing or fallow, common waste and a village assembly to control the whole system. The historian H.L. Gray, writing in 1915, termed this 'classic' form of open-field farming the Midland System since he found it to be prevalent over much of the Midlands (1). Although Gray recognized a number of other

types of open-field farming, he attached great importance to the Midland System and it has since tended to dominate the literature on open-field farming. However recent research has shown that the Midland System is far more complex than was once thought, and, indeed, is not so typical over a large part of lowland England but is only one of many variants.

It is important to be clear on what we mean by the term 'openfields', for it is often used as a synonym for 'common' fields, that is, fields subject to common rights or communal management. It is possible for a field to be termed 'open', which although subdivided into strips with no internal permanent fences or hedges, was not necessarily communally farmed. The purpose of the reconstruction map will be not only to define the physical layout of the fields within the three parishes, but also to determine whether the 'open' fields can be called 'common' fields, that is did all the inhabitants, or commoners, of the township hold rights of common over the fallow fields and meadow? It will not be easy to confirm this latter point just by an examination of the physical layout of the fields but if the fields can be shown to be composed of intermixed strips, rights of common were surely necessary to make grazing on the fallow fields feasible. The reconstruction map will also be used to distinguish between 'new' enclosures, that is land that has been taken out of the open fields, and 'old' enclosures or 'closes'; land that has traditionally been farmed as enclosed. The determination of land use will play an important part in our interpretation of the open-field system.

It has already been pointed out above that modern civic parish boundaries can differ from their older ecclesiastical counterparts. However, many hamlets were dependent on a mother church in the nearby town or village and were not to become separate ecclesiastical parishes until a later date; this indeed was the case at Grove where separate ecclesiastical status from Wantage was not received until 1832 (2). Thus for the sake of clarity, the unit of land associated with a community and having its own clearly defined bounds will be called a township. If it is next assumed that a township equals a field system, we should expect to find in the historical records three separate field systems, one each for the townships of Wantage, Grove and Charlton, and not one large field system covering the whole area. Likewise, because the bounds of no one manor were coterminous with those of any of the townships, a pattern of several manorial interests should be found scattered amongst the strips of each township. Although no detailed study has been made of the field systems of the Vale of White Horse, formerly Berkshire, both Gray and another pair of historians, the Orwins, were satisfied through a study of enclosure acts and awards that open-field farming was generally prevalent in the shire(3).

The historical records which have survived on national scale and are detailed enough to make a reconstruction map of this kind, date from the end of the system or are, indeed, concerned with its closure. Therefore the reconstruction will only represent the tail end of the system and cannot be taken as indicative of the medieval fieldscape. Fortunately a good selection of estate, enclosure and tithe maps together with their associated documents have survived for all three parishes and are deposited at the Berkshire Record Office. All three types of map are large scale covering several square feet. The first step therefore is to make working copies, either by tracing the original map section by section or by photographic means, from which the relevant detail can be plotted onto a modern ordnance survey map of a workable size. For a single moderately sized parish a scale of 6" to the mile (or the metric equivalent 1:10,000) might be suitable, but for an area covering three parishes a scale of 2½" to the mile 1:25,000) was found to be far more manageable. When studying manuscript maps, the golden rule is to first test their accuracy and authenticity, not only for scale but also for content, against a more reliable source such as a first edition large scale ordnance survey map. This rule will be applied to the maps and

associated records of estate surveys, enclosure and tithe which form the main body of evidence used in this paper.

Our first map is a large scale plan of the lands of the Manor of Priorshold at Wantage and is dated 1754, which makes it pre-enclosure(4). You might therefore wonder why the need for a reconstruction map when a map already exists showing the open fields. Although the lands of the manor are described thus “*the Ham, the manor of Priorshold, the new broke lands in Grove, the common field and mead in Charlton, with Wantage, Charlton and Lattendowns*”, the map does not cover the total area of all three townships. Only the land belonging to the manor is depicted in full, the remainder of the three townships being only sketched in, leaving the northern limits of Grove including Tulwick to the imagination. When tested for accuracy against an early ordnance survey map, usage of the Priorshold map can be seen to present further difficulties. The scales given on the map are as follows: 5 inches to the mile for the Ham, Priorshold, Grove and Charlton, and 2½ inches to the mile for Lattendowns, Wantage Downs and Charlton Downs. These are incorrect: the true scales being 10 inches to the mile and 5 inches to the mile respectively. A blank area of approximately 8 by 4 inches occurs in the centre of the map created by the complication of joining two different scales. A note refers to a terrier book drawn up by a Mr Edward Smith but unfortunately this is missing.

The open fields for Wantage and Grove are named on the map but their exact limits are difficult to define. The Common Field and Mead of Charlton, on the other hand, are fully detailed showing the pattern of furlongs (a group of strips lying in the same direction) and the individual tenants of each of the strips. The map of the manor of Priorshold therefore identifies the land held by the manor in 1754, shows that a large portion of the land, both arable and meadow, was unenclosed and that further, in Charlton, these ‘open’ fields were made up of furlongs which in turn were composed of strips held by individual tenants and which lay intermixed with one another’s holdings.

Two other mid-eighteenth century plans relevant to this study can be found at the Berkshire Record Office. They cover the lands of the Wantage Town Governors situated in Wantage & Grove (5). The Wantage map dates from 1753 and covers properties in the town and strips in the fields. The Grove map dates from around 1760 and illustrates a number of closes and single or grouped strips in the open fields. Thus both maps do not show the complete townships but are only concerned with property belonging to the Town Governors. The main field division and relevant furlongs are named together with the neighbouring strips and also the directional layout. Although it is difficult to pin-point the exact location of the furlongs within the open-fields these two maps tell us that some of the fields, which were only lightly sketched in on the Priorshold map, were also subdivided into furlongs composed of intermixed strips.

Over the country as a whole the process by which the common arable fields, meadows and waste were enclosed was a long drawn out procedure which lasted over three hundred years. Open-field farming in some form survived in our three townships into the nineteenth century when the fields were enclosed by act of parliament. Wantage and Grove were enclosed together by a Private Act dated 1803 and under an Award of 1806(6). Charlton, however, was not enclosed until 1868, by an Act of 1860 and following the General Enclosure Act of 1845(7). The process of enclosure necessitated many documents, not all of which will have survived, but the two records most useful to us are the Award and its accompanying map, both of which are legal documents and were therefore required by law to be kept. The Award for Wantage and Grove provides much detailed information. After summarizing the main provisions of the Act, it lists and describes the courses of all new public and private roads and footways with their

dimensions, the routes of public and private drains and watercourses are given and instructions for fencing, hedging and drainage set out. Prior to the main body of the award, the special allotments are described: these are lands awarded in lieu of manorial rights, the parson's glebe and common rights, the lands awarded to the parish surveyors of the highways for the digging of chalk, stone, sand and gravel for the maintenance of parish roads. In order to facilitate the future collection of the great and small tithes, Bryant's Fee, a tithing of a hundred acres or so dispersed amongst the open fields, had to be separately allotted.

The main body of the award is taken up with the general allotments: here the ownership, acreage and location is given for each separate plot. The old enclosures are indicated in red on the enclosure map and in the majority of cases these can be located on a modern ordnance survey map. When this is done the remaining area can then be assumed to have been occupied by the open fields. Further definition of the boundaries of the latter can be worked out by a process of cross-reference between the location given for each new allotment in the former open fields, its numbered position on the accompanying map, and finally the corresponding area on the modern Ordnance Survey. However it is not possible to reconstruct the furlong boundaries or seek their names from the enclosure records for Wantage and Grove. The situation is more fortunate at Charlton where the new allotments are shown superimposed onto the pre-enclosure strip pattern.

The Tithe Commutation Acts of 1836-60 provided for a substitution of a money rent, based on the average corn prices for seven years, to be paid by landowners for the commutation of tithes paid to the church. In some areas this process had already been effected at the time of Parliamentary Enclosure removing the need for a full survey by the tithe commissioners after 1836. Fortunately for us this was not the case at Wantage since a detailed tithe award and large scale plan of 1843 covering all three parishes has survived(8). Furthermore, at Charlton, the event took place before enclosure, and so a detailed plan was drawn up of the open fields showing the furlong pattern and individual strips. The tithing of Bryant's Fee was separately awarded in 1841(9).

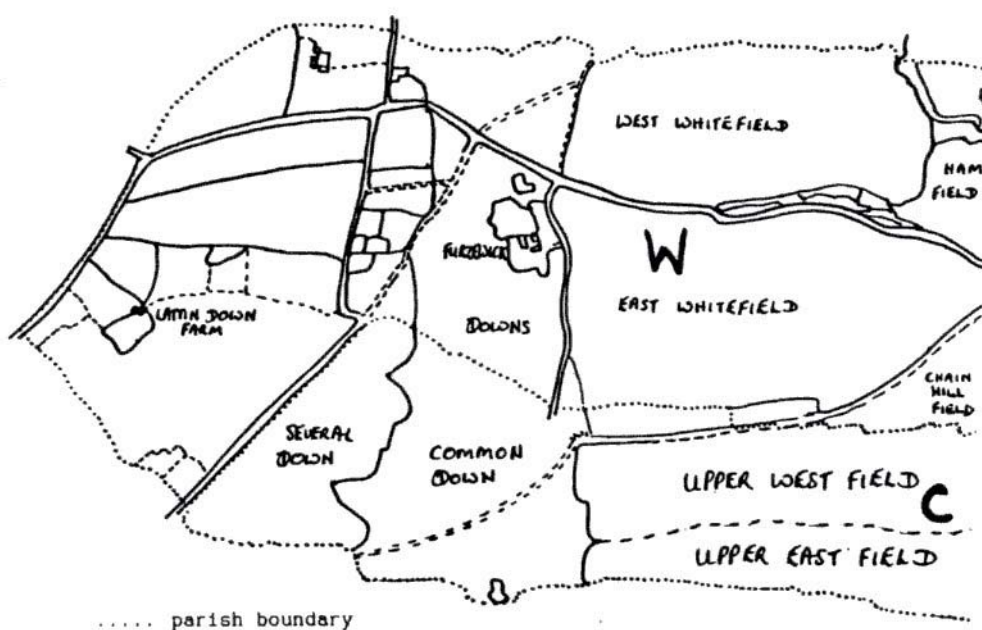
The apportionment schedule (award) is divided into a series of columns giving for each numbered parcel of land, details of ownership, occupancy, its name and location, land use, state of cultivation, acreage and the tithe rent apportioned to it. Most importantly, included in this latter information are the names of the open fields, even though for the townships of Wantage and Grove the parcels of land were held in severalty under the Enclosure Award of 1806. No furlong names are given as divisions of the open fields of Charlton. Not all the lands were subject to the payment of tithe, however, these have still been included in the apportionment schedule and, except for the rent charge value, full details as above are given.

It is thus possible to produce a reconstruction map of the three townships depicting the layout of their fields at the end of the eighteenth century. The map shows that a large proportion of the arable, meadow and pasture (the Downs of Wantage & Charlton) of all three townships can still be termed 'open' at this date\*. The main field boundaries and their names are shown but it is not possible on a map of this scale to reproduce the known internal divisions – the furlong boundaries and strip-pattern- of the arable and meadow of Charlton. We know, however, that these 'open' fields were subdivided into intermixed strips. Both Wantage and Charlton appear to be based on a two-field system whereas Grove seems to have worked a multi-field system at this date.

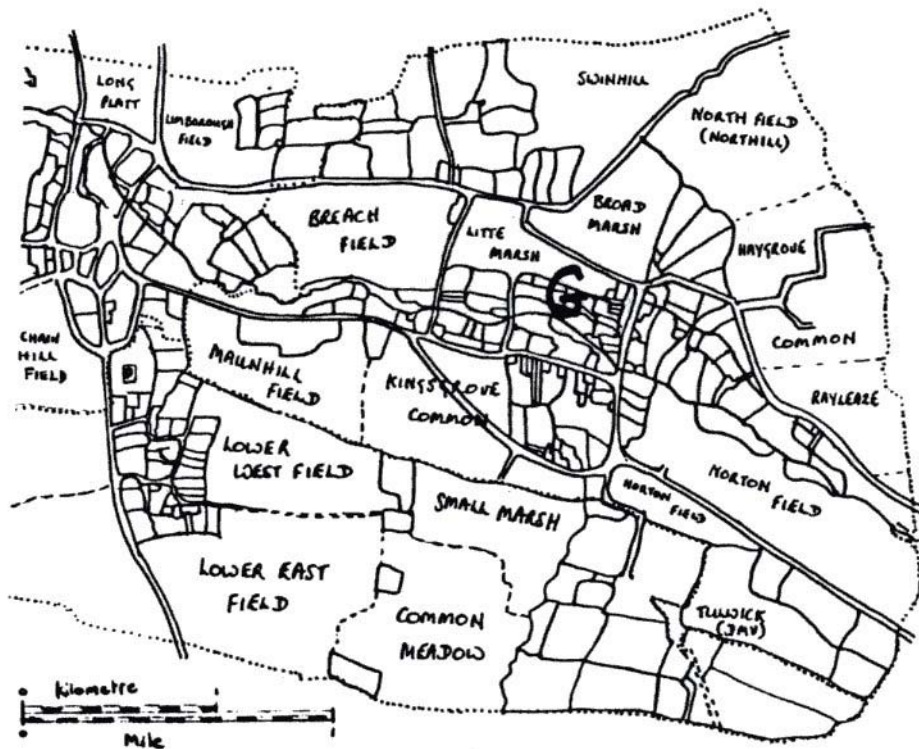
\* Although there are many problems inherent in using the records of enclosure to provide accurate statistical information, it can be calculated that approximately 55% of the arable, meadow, down and waste of Wantage and Grove lay 'open' prior to enclosure in 1806. W.E. Tate estimates that approximately 1280 acres (or two-thirds of the parish) were enclosed by the 1868 Award at Charlton(10).

### References

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3. Gray (1915) and Orwin,C.S., & C.S. Orwin, The Open Fields. 2nd ed. (Oxford,1954)
4. Berks CRO, D/EC0 P1 Wantage, Grove & Charlton 1754. Map of the Ham, the Manor of Priorshold
5. Berks CRO, D/EF P4 Wantage, Lands of the Town Governors, 1753  
D/EF P5 Grove, Lands of the Town Governors, c.1760
6. Berks CRO, Q/RDc:68 Wantage & Grove, 1803
7. Berks CRO, Q/RDc:67 Charlton, 1868
8. Berks CRO, D/D1 143/1 Wantage, Grove & Charlton, 1843
9. Berks CRO, D/D1 143/2 Wantage, Bryant's Fee tithing, 1841
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**Reconstruction map of the fields of Wantage and Charlton**



**Reconstruction map of the fields of Grove**

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