

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

by

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The Enclosure Acts 1804–1812

Arguably the greatest transformation in land ownership in England since William the Conqueror occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Parliament passed a series of Enclosure Acts by which common land, pasture and allotments were allowed to be legally purchased by interested parties. The Enclosure maps and the related documents reveal in stark detail the radical changes that were wrought in the field patterns in Great Staughton. There was, naturally, an economic and agricultural argument put forward to justify this change. Small and often widely separated parcels of land were not only inconvenient to till but economically inefficient and less productive, particularly with the revolution in farming technology. The tradition of leaving one field fallow was replaced with a more efficient crop rotation system, resulting in significantly greater yields. More food became available and the traditional bread and vegetable diet of the British public began to be enhanced with meat and fish. This was the engine that drove the big landowners to press for legislation to allow them to combine small parcels of land into bigger and more efficient units. Thus came about the Acts that were to transform rural England forever.

The process of enclosure was usually initiated by the major landowners of the area, who negotiated with their tenants on the proposal. If they failed to reach agreement, the landowner could apply unilaterally to parliament for permission to enforce the enclosures. One typical application to enclose the open fields that lay north of Staughton Highway was submitted on 9 February 1807 by the principal landowners of Great Staughton. They petitioned:

“... the Honorable [*sic*] the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland ... being owners of or otherwise interested in the Open Fields, Commons and other Commonable Lands in the parishes of Great Staughton and Graffham ... that the lands and estates ... are incapable of any considerable improvement but if the same were divided and inclosed and specific Allotments thereof to and for the several proprietors in proportion to their respective rights and Interests, the Estates ... would be considerably improved which cannot be effected without the Act of Parliament. Your petitioners humbly pray that leave may be given to bring in a Bill for Dividing, Inclosing and otherwise improving the said Open Fields Commons and other Commonable Lands in such manner, and subject to such negotiations as this Honorable House shall think proper.”

The document was signed by, amongst others, James Duberly, Robert Hurst, Hugh Wade-Gery and Buswell Hensman. The latter was described in the document as a woolstapler, a trader who purchased stocks of raw wool, to sort it and then sell it on to manufacturers.

Landowners who already held substantial tracts of land may have felt that their application would receive an approving nod from George III, whose interest in agriculture had earned him the nickname of 'Farmer George'.

The process of assessing the land and recommending enclosure was the responsibility of Commissioners appointed for the purpose by the Crown. In 1804, two Commissioners came to Great Staughton to oversee the process: Abraham Driver of Surrey and John Burcham of Lincoln. Detailed maps were drawn up showing the parcels of land in the village and their respective

owners. The official description was as follows: *Plan of the township of Gt Staughton in the county of Huntingdon as awarded and inclosed under an Act of Parliament passed in the year 1804.*

The Commissioners were instructed to 'inclose one thousand six hundred and fifty-one acres and thirty-eight perches'. As the application by the major landowners to enclose parish fields gathered pace, meetings were held with the relevant parties and in due course a detailed 'Awards' document was drawn up, signed and sealed, and this gave a complete description of the land, its acreage and its owners. The participants of one meeting testify to the status of the interested parties: Sir JA Duberly; William, Duke of Manchester; Arthur Walter and wife Ann of the city of Bristol; James Garth of Surrey and Denzil Onslow of Staughton House.

The awards were finally determined and the land duly allocated: the principal beneficiary was Sir JA Duberly who was awarded 1,070 acres. Other significant holdings went to Rev. Hugh Wade-Gery (499 acres), Arthur Walter (361 acres) and James Garth (197 acres). The Staughton Poor Estates were awarded 3 acres, made up of an allotment on Agden Green, a tenement (a dwelling with land) and pightle (a small field or enclosure). Many awards were for smaller plots: Benjamin Archer was awarded 2 acres; Thomas Beetles received a tenement and garden of thirteen perches (16 ½ feet). Henry Child was awarded an allotment, tenement and yard comprising 1 acre. The Shadbolts, whose family donated a bell to the church and made an educational bequest in 1806, were also awarded several acres.

James Duberly, who had purchased the 'large and magnificent mansion' of Gaynes Hall in 1797 was the biggest beneficiary in Great Staughton of the Enclosure Acts. Around the town and the manor and north to Agden Green and Dillington, the land was principally owned by the Crown who leased it to tenants such as George Parker and Arthur Walter.

A consequence of the Enclosure Acts was that tithes, formerly payable to the incumbent of the parish, were now abolished. The official document recording the status of tithes is: *A plan of parts of the Parishes of Great Staughton and Graffham [sic] in the County of Hunts divided, inclosed and exonerated from TYTHES under an Act of Parliament passed in the year 1807.*

After the Enclosures, these landowners would often consolidate their holdings by exchanging or selling land. Bird's Meadow for example, still known by that name today, was sold by George Parker to Arthur Walter. Other field names have not survived: Lady Pasture, Long Empty, Great Empty, Hovel Close, and the Pightle. Further enclosures took place in 1809, as another document makes clear: *Particular of Estates in the Parish of Great Staughton in the County of Hunts, as valued by the Commissioners for the INCLOSURE of the Highway, dated 21 June 1809.* The two Commissioners, Charles Bloodworth and John Burcham, together with Edward Platt, undertook the task of valuing the land, and this gives us valuable details of the landowners (often absentee), the occupiers, together with a description of the property, its acreage and finally its taxable value.

Amongst the assets of John Marshall was a windmill and a parcel of land called Manor Close, a name that is preserved in the modern village. Harry Woodward owned his own tenement together with a blacksmith's shop. His eighteenth-century house is still to be seen in the Town. William Murfin Snr rented 161 acres from George Parker. It included a farm and homestead and five acres of land in Brick Kiln Close. A brick works had existed in Staughton for many years, exploiting the ample deposits of clay that surround the village.

The Gaines [sic] estate is unsurprisingly the bailiwick of Sir James Duberly and his holding confirmed his status as the most prominent landowner of Staughton. In West Perry the principal landowners were Rev. James Pope, with 95 acres and James Garth, 125 acres. Buswell Hensman owned the *White Hart* public house and yard.

The enclosures did not entirely go without problems. There were many requests to the Commissioners to rationalise the distribution of land awarded to several of the landowners. Numerous petitions were sent to the Commissioners complaining of a tenant's late or non-payment of rent. In October 1806, F. Cumming made an application to the Commissioners to request Mr William Brickenoe, his tenant on an allotment in Dillington, which had been awarded to Mr Cumming under the Enclosure Acts, to pay him the rent that was due. In the whole of Great Staughton, including the Town, Moor, Highway, Dillington, Gaines and West Perry, the Commissioners assessed the total taxable value at £7,299 17s 11d, the 'valuation given under our hands this 21st day of June 1809, (signed) Charles Bloodworth, John Burchall, and Edward Platt, Commissioners appointed for this Inclosure'.

An interesting sale by auction was advertised in April 1821. The particulars of sale were given in extensive detail of the Manor and Estate at Great Staughton, property of the late Arthur Walter, comprising the Manor of Beachampstead extending over 900 acres and an ancient family mansion called *The Place House* with a spacious garden, coach house, stables and other appurtenances. In addition to living room, dining room, library and seven bedrooms 'with appropriate dressing rooms and closets', the mansion featured a back staircase leading to the laundry and the servants' rooms, cellars, dairy and a brew-house (detached). In all, there were sixteen lots, consisting both of land and properties were to be sold at auction by Mr Abbott at the Falcon Hotel St Neots on 24 April 1821. Lot IV consisted of Hill Farm and Prior's pasture on the former site of Stonely Priory. Between the Highway and Dillington three plots of land were to be sold, including the 8-acre Moorey [*sic*] Croft. Lot VII gave particulars of a corn windmill, 'advantageously situated for trade near the Turnpike Road and the populous town and hamlet of Great Staughton, in an enclosed pightle containing one acre, three roods and two poles now in the occupation of John Marshall'.

With the exception of three lots, the manor, estate and 900 acres of land were purchased by James Duberly.

There is a darker aspect to the picture: whilst the consolidation of small landholding into a more efficient system undoubtedly increased farming efficiency and crop yields, the Inclosure awards omitted mention of the many who were dispossessed of their often modest landholding, and, as a result, ended up in poverty, or, even worse, found themselves in the workhouse. Many of the now landless citizens were persuaded that their future lay in joining the massive migration to the cities to swell the ranks of the landless poor desperately seeking work in the many factories. Rural poverty increased, as is shown by the number of paupers revealed by the censuses, a situation that the government was forced to address by the introduction of the new Poor Law Acts of 1834 and later, the workhouse.

The start of the nineteenth century was marked by another innovation that was to have a profound effect on the governance of the nation; the first, albeit rudimentary census in 1801, the first such survey of ordinary citizens since the Protestation Returns of 1641. The 1801 census contained only the barest information of the lives and occupations of those surveyed, but it did record the population of the parish: in 1801 it was 805 inhabitants. Subsequent censuses, taken every ten years, showed the population of Great Staughton growing markedly over a period of fifty years, from 805 in 1801, rising to 1,315 in 1851.