

Enclosure Maps

Under the traditional Open Field System of farming the agricultural land of a village was divided into three great fields (without fences and hedge-rows). The fields were sub-divided into strips (long and wide enough for a team of ox and plough). Each of the parish inhabitants owned one or more strips scattered throughout the fields – some had more than others. There were also communal wastes, pastures and woodlands.

Enclosure was the process whereby the agricultural fields and shared lands of a village were reorganised into separate land-holdings with their own boundaries (usually hawthorn or a similar hedging plant). Often the communal lands and wastes were swallowed up in individual holdings and many poorer folk lost their homes and livelihoods.

Although much farming land was enclosed by agreement or by the owners of large estates, most parishes required an Act of Parliament. Earlier 'parliamentary enclosures' prior to 1836 tended to be private and local. Many of these do not include accompanying maps. The increasing demand for enclosure legislation led to General Enclosure Acts in 1836 & 1845 which standardised procedures and required copies of maps and awards to be deposited with the clerk of the peace of the county and church wardens of the parish; the original was kept by the Commissioners in London (now in TNA)

In all cases, the Acts were promoted by local sponsors. If a Bill was supported by 80% of land-owners it was passed into law. In each parish, a group of commissioners was nominated to oversee the process and surveyors appointed to draw up detailed plans. The end result was an Enclosure Award with a detailed schedule and accompanying map.

Just over half of the pre-1974 County (54%) was reorganised through parliamentary enclosure awards between 1760 and 1860. For these parishes the enclosure documents represent the first real survey of land use and ownership.

Where are these records?

Copies of Enclosure Awards deposited with Oxfordshire Clerks of the Peace are held at Oxfordshire History Centre. In addition we hold many parish copies and others that fell into private hands. Sometimes, parish and private copies are accompanied by additional papers, including pre-enclosure maps, not found with the deposited 'official' copies.

Awards enrolled in the Courts at Westminster, as well as originals retained by the Commissioners are held at The National Archives.

Awards deposited with the Berkshire Clerk of the Peace relating to North Berkshire parishes transferred to Oxfordshire in 1974 are available at the Berkshire Record Office.

Where is the catalogue?

There is a place-name index of Enclosure Awards in Oxfordshire and parts of Berkshire transferred in 1974; this is available only in the searchroom and cannot be searched online.

[Visiting and contacting the Oxfordshire History Centre.](#)