

The 'Inclosure' of Willoughby on the Wolds.

From 1616 to the late 1790s, the usual common pasture and strip-farming system of open field's agriculture continued, but to the increasing dissatisfaction of those who owned large amounts of land in scattered strips. Progress in agricultural techniques and animal breeding was not possible. Then Parliament began to approve of schemes to enclose land in fields, as we still know them, bringing owners' land into larger independent blocks. The land owners of Willoughby, or any other Parish, had to discuss and vote on a petition to Parliament proposing 'Inclosure'. The voting system was weighted according to the acreage owned - not a 'one-man-one-vote' democratic method - so the few large farm owners could easily out-vote and prevail over the more numerous cottagers.

In any case, in Willoughby, by the 1790s, changes in ownership meant that only 13 families out of 70 in the village were owners or occupiers - a reduction from 25 out of 40 in 1616. These figures illustrate clearly the increased population. By 1790, also, there was a huge increase in the number of absentee landlords – from 6 to 47. Of the 70 families, 13 farmed their own land; 38 rented their holdings; and 19 or so were either craftsmen or landless labourers. The larger owners felt restricted by the strip system: changes in crops or the introduction of new techniques had to be agreed by all who worked the long-established rotation scheme.

So, on 18th February 1793, a petition for Inclosure, signed by "Thomas Bryans and others, owners of land" was drawn-up. On 8th March owners and occupiers met at 'The Blackamoors Head' in Nottingham for a reading of the Bill, which was presented to Parliament on 22nd April by two Members for the County, Lord Cavendish-Bentinck and Mr. Pierrepont. After successful readings of the Bill in the House of Commons, the Lords assented on 3rd May, and it received the Royal Assent on 7th June 1793.

The Commissioners appointed to carry-out the Inclosure were too busy to start work before 1799. Then, their first task, after the survey, was to "set-out and appoint" all the public and private roads and the footpaths, most remaining to this day. Then the Awards of land could be made. One of the main Awards was to the Duke of Portland, 348 acres, as the proprietor of the Rectory and to compensate for the loss of tithes and glebeland. The Vicar received 74 acres in lieu of tithes. After Portland, the largest Awards were made to John Plumtre, the Church, Robert Clarke, John Clarke, Samuel Bryans and Cornelius Launder. Together, these received 855 acres - nearly half of the total acreage awarded: in contrast, 18 other awardees shared 90 acres, all this according to the acreage owned prior to enclosure.

The total cost of the 'Inclosure' was just over £3,169. John Plumtre paid £374 - 18s - 4d; James Bryans paid £1 - 1s - 6d; 50 others paid amounts between these figures in proportion to the size of their Awards. Then they had to fence their new fields. The Awards document (to be seen in the Nottinghamshire Archives Office) specified exactly who was responsible for which sides of the fields allotted. Who supplied the wood for fences or the quickthorn plants for hedges? Who knows?! But most of these features of the parish landscape are still in place today.