



# MEDIÆVAL HEDGES

## IN CORNWALL

(AD450 – 1550)

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*Cornish culture threatened / open - field system / signs of open - fields today / the Norman conquest / burgage plots and stitches / common land / the Black Death (1347-50) / after the Black Death.*

The period from the departure of the Romans to the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII, is often called the mediæval period. It spans the final eleven centuries of the Cornish people's running their own affairs, with an increasing settlement by the English into east Cornwall. During this period, Cornwall still had its own language, legal system, weights and measures and agriculture. The Magna Carta in 1215 confirmed that Cornwall was separate from England. The mediæval maps (up to 1538) show Cornwall as a nation of Britain and not as a county of England.

Tin streaming continued, providing a continual demand for farm products which encouraged intensive agriculture and, thereby, good stockproof hedges. There is a written account, in the 7th century, of a ship from Alexandria that sailed to Britain with corn, and returned with a cargo of tin; local corn prices were obviously good. This would have meant local farming prosperity and well-tended hedges. In the 9th century Cornish tin was being exported to Moscow through Germany and Austria, the traditional route through the Mediterranean having been disrupted by the Arab defeat of Byzantium in 655 AD. Many of the prehistoric gurgoes (relic hedges, pronounced gurjeys) vanished under the continuing mining activities, although some venerable ones have remained where they marked mineral boundaries.



*Giant's Hedge at Varfell.*

Until about the 6th century, hamlets seem not to have been individually defended; many hamlets with *tre* names date from this time and show no traces of defences. With the departure of the Romans, the defence needs of Cornwall changed, and people got together to repel other invaders. This may have been associated with the wider defence of land by huge long hedgebanks. We know of three in Cornwall, the Giant's Hedge across the Lelant/Long Rock isthmus following, roughly, the A30 road and visible today at Varfell; Bolster Bank



*The Giant's Hedge near Lanreath, between Lerryn and Looe.*

across the St Agnes headland; and the ten-mile Giant's Hedge between Lerryn and the West Looe river that was, in Borlase's day, seven feet high and twenty feet wide in places. Tradition says:-

"Jack the giant had nothing to do,  
So he made a hedge from Lerryn to  
Looe."

The first line is sometimes: "The devil one day had nothing to do". Jack, of course, is the traditional nickname for a Cornishman. A 19th century tradition in Looe tells that the Child Jesus and his

uncle landed on Looe Island, and the piskies were so anxious for their safety that they built this enormous hedge. They were huge undertakings, almost certainly they are the three largest hedges built in Cornwall, and may have been part of post-Roman defensive actions against the English armies. Care has to be taken with such attributions; an example of mis-attribution is the great Customs Hedge of India, two thousand miles long and up to 4m high, created by the British in 1869-79. It had nothing to do with native banditry to which it is often attributed, being actually to enable the tax on salt to be collected as people went through the gateways in it.

The Saxons who, with other invaders, became the English, took several hundred years (c.455 - 838 AD) to advance from Kent to Land's End, with serious fighting between the English and the Cornish in 815 AD, and again in 825 and 838. These battles were raids by the English into foreign territory; the last recorded king of Cornwall, Hywel, died in 950. Defensive ramparts that were built before the Norman Conquest, eg Damelsa Castle at St Wenn and Chun Castle at Pendeen, used the same construction methods as a Cornish hedge. After 1066 they tended to be built of lime mortar and stones, eg Launceston Castle. Not all the British moved westwards; St Guthlac encountered Celtic-speaking Britons in the fens in 700 AD. Many others went to Brittany, which came to be known as Little Britain, hence the name Great Britain for the British Isles. The families of some of these, now called Bretons, came back with William the Conqueror, hoping to get back their ancestral lands.

The English brought a new concept to the occupation of land by saying that all the land belonged to the conquerer, now the landowner, to whom the land had been "given" by the king in exchange for military and political support. An example of the re-organisation of the countryside by the English is in a charter drawn up in AD 1049 dealing with a half yardland, or one tenth of a hide, that is 7 acres (about 3 hectares), at Trerice, St Dennis. King Edward was giving this land to one of his ministers Eadulf. The charter describes in detail some of the hedges which make the



*The Giant's Hedge near Lanreath.*

boundaries and makes it clear that the old hamlet of Trerice was split into two roughly equal parts. The concept of common ownership and family allegiance within the tribe was now forbidden. Every villager lived at the whim of the landowner, and had to give farm produce or labour to him, and serve him at home and abroad as a soldier when ordered. At first they were more-or-less servants of different grades and seniority, then gradually the relationship changed and they became tenants of various categories. In fact, for our purpose of looking at hedges and enclosures, it is simpler just to refer to villagers and, later on when farms got quite large, to tenants.

In East Cornwall, many hamlets were converted into villages with open-field systems and grazing commons. In many instances the Cornish name of the hamlet was kept, like Tregurrian, elsewhere English names were used, like Broad Langdon (= the broad long down). This was responsible for the first wholesale removal of field hedges, with many boundaries around small Bronze Age fields being lost. The open-field system in Cornwall more resembled the *runrig* (or *rundale*) characteristic of the British districts than the Anglo-Saxon open-field system most common in the English midlands. Runrig depended on communal ploughing and whereas this died out early in the English districts, it persisted in the Celtic fringes. In runrig, there was *infield* which was cultivated every year and manured to retain its fertility, and *outfield*, a portion of which was cultivated for a period of years, and then allowed to revert to common and rest for an indeterminate period to build up its fertility again. In time the distinction between infield and outfield in Cornwall became blurred.

### OPEN - FIELD SYSTEM

Many history books take the village with its open-field system as the starting point of modern farming in Britain, and it came to be practised in parts, but not all, of Cornwall. The land of a typical anglicised Cornish village consisted of arable land, meadow, and common. The arable land was divided into two or, more usually, three large fields, which were divided up into strips bounded by baulks (uncultivated ridges about 1m wide) and allotted to the villagers in such a way that one holding included several disconnected strips in each field - a measure designed to prevent the whole of the best land falling to one man. The meadow-land was also divided into strips from which the villagers drew their supply of hay. The meadow was usually several enclosed fields in the wetter ground, not much good for winter grazing but giving a good crop of summer hay. Some fine examples still exist on the south side of the stream leading into Mawgan Porth which do not appear to have changed since mediæval times. Only in modern times has the word meadow come erroneously to be equivalent to pasture. The pasture-land was common to all, though the number of beasts which one man might turn into it was sometimes



*Mediæval hay meadows (foreground) still survive near Mawgan Porth. Original drainage ditches divide the mowing stitches, though two ditches appear to have been filled in across the plot at centre, and one to the right. Clearly, parallel hedges have similarly been removed from the row of fields, once narrow stitches, immediately beyond the hay meadows. The straight hedges on the higher land are of much more recent date.*

limited. Rough grazing was often had on the outlying commons.

According to early methods of cropping, which were destined to prevail for centuries, wheat, on the better land, was sown in one autumn, reaped the next summer; oats or barley were sown in the following spring with harvest that summer being followed by one year of fallow. This procedure was followed on each of the three arable fields so that in every year one of them was fallow. In addition to the cereals, pulses (beans, peas and vetches) were grown to some extent, both in gardens and in the fields.

The typical English stitch was supposed to be one furlong, a "furrow-long" (200m) in length, and one chain, four rods (20m), in width making one acre in area. In the right conditions, this was the area that one team of eight oxen would plough in one day. Although they were slower in work, oxen were preferred because their winter keep cost one-quarter that of horses. The Saxon Aelfric wrote of the ploughman: "O my lord, hard do I toil, I go out at dawn with my oxen to the fields and yoke them to the plough. Be it never so severe a winter I dare not hide at home for fear of my lord. All day I shall have to plough, an acre or more." The ox-herd said: "When the ploughman unyokes the oxen I lead them to pasture each night. I stand over them watching for thieves, and again at dawn I take them to the ploughman well fed and watered."

Usually the plough was the property of one villager and the oxen were the property of other villagers, much the same as in the prehistoric days; but there was a difference; the landowner's land had to be ploughed by the villagers unpaid. The landowner often had enclosed land which he farmed himself. This land was made up with some of the stitches in the open-fields which he let out to villagers or kept for himself. The work on the landowner's stitches was done by the villagers instead of a money rent.

In feudal times each villager had to give the landowner about half of his annual production and a further tenth of his crops and new-born livestock was taken as tithes for the upkeep of the parish church and its priests. Added to these were the occasional royal taxes which paid for wars and other exceptional royal expenditure. The landowner, via the manorial court, used some of the villagers for supervising everything that went on, including failure to fence alongside the road, encroachment on the common, altering or removing boundary marks, turning out more livestock than they were entitled to graze, and so on. The common land was an essential part of the village economy and its use was now regulated in line with the requirements of the open-field. The common was hedged off from the open-fields and the landowner used one of the villagers who was the hedge-ward (origin of the name Hayward, Heywood &c.) to be responsible for the hedging of the open-fields along the roadsides, and of the boundaries of the common. Sometimes the hayward was allocated strips next to the open-field boundaries so that, if stock got through the hedge from the common, his own crops were the first to be spoiled. He may have been the origin of Boy Blue in the nursery rhyme: "Little boy blue, come blow up your horn, the sheep are in the meadow [hay] and the cows are in the corn." A horn is louder and not everyone can whistle their dog. There is a 13th century poem about the man-in-the-moon seen carrying his burden of faggots on a fork. It refers to his attempting to steal hedge trimmings and, whilst walking away with this load, being discovered and penalised by the hayward.

Another villager, the pinder, or pounder, had the job of driving stray stock out of the corn field and impounding them in the village pound, whereupon in some manors they became the property of the landowner, more usually they were released on payment of a fine. Remains of some village pounds can still be seen. Villagers had to take on these unpopular jobs, as in the

rules of Calstock manor where each copyhold tenant had to be "Reeve, Bedaland, and Thythingman when chosen, and shall sustain his hedges, ditches, and enclosures at his own costs; and when he shall die shall give to the lord for every tenure a best beast, and ought to draw millstones to the mill if need be, and shall do fealty to the lord." Borlase saw on a 16th century wooden panel at Pengersick:

"Even as the herdsman safely maye,  
And gentilye lye down to sleype,  
That hathe his watchfull doggis always  
His floke in safetie for to keype".

Woods would often be hedged against the common to prevent stock straying into the wood where serious damage could be done by livestock browsing on newly re-growing coppice. A law passed in 1483 authorised the enclosure of woods for seven years after cutting: "with sufficient Hedges able to keep out all manner of Beasts and other Cattle out of the same Ground for the Preservation of their young Spring". As seven years is the usual rotation for cutting hazel coppice, this meant that woods with hazel were enclosed all the time without any direct recompense to the villagers.

#### SIGNS OF OPEN - FIELDS TODAY

Examination of a map showing hedges around towns and villages often discovers hedges which would be compatible with an open-field layout. One needs to look for fields that look like stitches. They have long parallel sides, often curved, and almost invariably one of their narrow ends abuts an ancient track or road that leads to a village less than 1km away. Often only a few remain, spaced irregularly apart, but it is usually easy, taking the width of the smallest, to calculate how many of the hedges or balks have been removed. They are easiest to identify on large scale maps, but examination of the 1:25000 (2½") map reveals the same pattern.

A surviving common-field to look at, now belonging to the National Trust, is in North Cornwall, at Forrabury churchtown near Boscastle. It is easily accessible and well served by footpaths. This is a stitch system covering over 20 ha to the north of St. Symphorians' Church. There are 42 stitches remaining although 50 stitches were shown on the tithe map of 1839. Each stitch was of fairly uniform size, originally 1 furlong x 1 Cornish chain (about 30m) but amalgamations and subdivisions have occurred. Until the 1940s boys used to be employed to keep the livestock on the free range from wandering over the stitches in cultivation. As the field begins to slope steeply into the Boscastle valley, the stitches become bounded by steep lynchets as much as four feet high, some topped by thick hedges. Since



*Open-field system still in use at Forrabury.*

the coming of modern farming, some of the easternmost stitches have been allowed to revert to scrub. The baulks between the cultivated stitches are similar to the modern 'beetle banks' which have become fashionable in arable areas, and may be worthy of wildlife study in that context. Not all the stitches are ploughed in the same year, and to avoid damaging arable crops, the land is grazed only with sheep from November to March.

## THE NORMAN CONQUEST

As most of the world knows, William the Conqueror defeated the English in 1066. What is not widely realised is that about one-third of his army of 6,000 were Bretons, fighting on his left wing at Hastings. Without them, William's invasion would have failed. Probably they were hoping to get back their land in southern Britain which they had lost when their families were driven out by the English. We know, for example, that much of Cornwall was granted to Brian of Brittany as a reward for his help in the invasion of England. Although he then defeated the English sons of King Harold in 1069, he had displeased King William and disappeared soon afterwards, his land going to King William's half-brother Robert who ended up as landlord of 80% of the Cornish manors. Another Breton, Bertrand de Dynant, was given a large property at Lostwithiel. Several Bretons occur as holders of manors in the Domesday Book. For example, the local family of Botterell (and various spellings), with the north Cornwall estate of Bottreaux, were Bretons who came with William. Many ordinary soldiers from Brittany found their way back home to Cornwall and their names, labelled as Bretons, appear in most parish lists from this time on.

Six years later William suppressed a rebellion in the south-west, and arranged for the building of a castle at Exeter. He was clearly not popular, because the following year the Cornish tried to free Exeter from its Norman garrison. One result was that he forced the local inhabitants of Launceston, Restormel and other towns to build castles for him. His problems here were so great that he got twenty-one castles built in Cornwall, more than in Devon which is twice the area. There was another Cornish rebellion in 1140. To make sure that his wishes were being carried out, William employed travelling justices to enforce his laws throughout the land, the forerunners of our Assize Judges still appointed from outside Cornwall. They were responsible for gathering information for the Domesday Book, which contains notes of around 340 manors in Cornwall. The survey was probably only a list of landowners who were paying taxes to the English and not a list of all the landowners. Assuming this to be so, over half the land in Cornwall was owned by Cornish people paying tax to independent local Cornish tribal chiefs, and not to the English. The further west, the greater the omissions from the Domesday Book. Unbelievably West Penwith is shown with less than 3 persons per square mile. There is nothing at all recorded, just a complete blank, along the north coast between Gwithian and St Just, nor for the richer land between the Helford River and the Fal. Many holdings were shown as not having any livestock and one cannot accept that there was only one bull, at Bodardle, in the whole of Cornwall. The recorded inequality of plough-lands to plough teams confirms the existence of the infield-outfield system.

The Normans had no classification for a hamlet and the smaller ones were arbitrarily categorized as manors. Often the Cornish tribal centre was chosen for administration and the suffix "ton" (town) added, eg the old Cornish Hen-lys to Helston, and Cally to Callington. Nomenclature is difficult because sometimes a Cornish name of a hamlet was anglicised when recorded by the Normans, giving the erroneous impression that the hamlet was English. The new landlords were encouraged to enlarge some of the hamlets into towns. The expansion of some

Cornish towns originated in a commercial speculation by the large landowners, and often more than half of their inhabitants were imported people, with land being taken from the locals to provide the space needed.

The Church continued to pressurise local landowners to give it land. Some of the deeds are remarkably frank. In England, Roger de Valognes gave his land to the local Priory writing that he did it being "moved especially by the exhortation, the request, and the counsel of the lord Theobald archbishop of Canterbury ... who showed me by the most reasonable and unanswerable arguments that a noble gentleman should give ... the whole of a knight's land or more than that ... for the soul's health of himself and his kin". A 'knight's land' or 'knight's fee' was 7 hides of land, that is, 490 acres. Undoubtedly, similar transactions took place in Cornwall. The Normans were careful to consolidate their hold over the countryside for the sake of the income they could get from it. In 1173 Earl Reginald addressed both Cornish and English in his charter to the burgesses of Truro. In about 1230, Earl Richard built Tintagel Castle, of which the hedge around his garden still survives. His brother King Henry III had a similar but more elaborate garden at Windsor Castle.

The earliest charter of the Stannaries was in 1197. This confirmed the already ancient privileges of the tanners "of digging tin, and turfs for smelting it, at all times, freely and peaceably and without hindrance of any man, everywhere in moors...just as by ancient usage they have been wont to do." Although the tinner was prohibited from entering into enclosed land unless the owner's consent had been obtained, there were special privileges to take tin from "all inclosed lands that have been anciently bounded and assured for Wastrel by payment of toll-tin before the hedges were made upon the same." This meant that the valley bottoms which had already been streamed for tin, could be legally reworked even if they had been hedged and enclosed into fields. The act of bounding was just the digging up and piling some turfs at each corner of the plot to be streamed. The bounds had to remain in existence or be renewed each year and alleged failure to do this resulted in much litigation. As a result, permanent hedges were frequently built, and many remain today as boundaries of valuable mineral rights. Side-bounds came in later, when a straight line between two corners was extended outwards to make a fifth corner, making an irregular pentagon shape and looking like the outline of an opened envelope. This means that one cannot expect corners of tin-bounding hedges to be always at right angles.



Mediæval strip fields still suggest an ancient landscape at Harrowbarrow.

Finding old hedges in documents from this period can be fascinating. Henderson describes the boundaries of Twelve Men's Moor from an agreement dated 1284 as being: "From *Blackecumb-ford* ascending to the head of the *Water-rytha* with the whole land that belongs to them as far as the *Wythi-broke* and so by the *Withy-broke* to the *Worthadich* [probably Trewortha Hedge] again to the *Withy-brok* and by it to the bounds [*divas*] of Thomas of Kelynstoke [Kestick] and so by the said bounds to the *Clovena-burgh* [cloven-burrow] in the *Sherde* ['sharde', gap] by the *Porte-wey* [ie market town road, now Port Lane] to

the *Milweyis-burgh* [burrow by the mill-way] and thence by the hedges of William Cada to the *Sypstone* [? Sheepstone] and thence to the *Lydheth* [? 'lidgate, 'lydyet, a swing-gate] of Roger Boglewode aforesaid and so by Roger's dike and so to Robert Hegha's [? Le Legha's] dike and so by the same to the *Frundesdich* [? for Hundes-ditch] and again to *Blake-cum-ford*."

## BURGAGE PLOTS AND STITCHES

Week St Mary Churchtown was a typical small mediæval market town which served the surrounding countryside for a half-day's walk away (about five miles). The arrangement of strip fields here is different to the stitches at Forrabury, only ten miles distant, and represents a deliberate estate-owner's layout around the village which is common in England. There was probably an original prehistoric hamlet recorded in the Domesday Book, which was eradicated by this 13th or 14th century development. There were about 40 burgage stitches in this ancient borough, surrounding and radiating out from the church and castle. Generally the stitches were 15-40m wide and 100-200m long, many of them roughly an acre. All of them were sited with the narrow end fronting the road, and about thirty of them had a house at this end. The burgage stitch was used like an allotment, to grow vegetables and keep a few animals such as pigs, sheep, goats and chickens. It is clear from the layout that there was no common cropping and that for the grass to be grazed, either hedges were built or animals were tethered. Some of the hedges, therefore, may have dated from the 13th century; none are likely to be earlier. Probably the villagers also had access to a common, but where it was sited is not known. The holders of certain fields in Week St Mary were, in 1846, still known as burgage-holders.

At Helston, between Meneage Street and Cloggy Lane there were again about thirty stitches of about an acre each, probably the same age as those at Week St Mary. Charles Henderson describes them: "Gweal Hellis [*gwel*=open field], on the north side of the town, was surrounded, after the Anglo-Saxon fashion, by great open fields, in which each burgess had a number of stitches." There are similar clues in the various tithe maps: at Toldish (Indian Queens); and at Tregaswith (St Columb Major) which had a field called Gunns still divided into seven unhedged stitches in 1660. In St Mawgan in Pydar, Fredrick May occupied two "Stitch on Common" plots, Wm Johns owned and occupied sixteen stitches on his 30 ha farm and Nicholas May had eighteen stitches on his 15 ha. Similar divisions were made in part of the Earl of Oxford's manor of Roseworthy (Camborne). The glebe lands at Sancreed included "several stitches of land severed by old banks [*gurgoes*]". Thomas Philips had a "tenement held in stitchmeal without division", ie without hedges. It is noticeable that some parishes show no evidence of common-field or stitches, eg Stithians, Stoke Climsland, Otterham and Probus.



*Hedged mediæval stitch surviving near Newquay in 2007. Typically long and narrow with slight curve at one end.*

There is much confusion in books about burgages and open-fields and little attention has been given to the question of hedging around the stitches. The distinction between stitches in the open-fields and burgage plots is not always clear in the records. One of the difficulties is

that the layout and size of open-fields varied with each hamlet. On the east of Grampound Churchtown, fronting the main road, there are the remains of stiches, but it is not certain whether they were part of an open-field or of several burgage plots which subsequently lost their associated cottages as the churchtown lost its shipping importance with the silting of the river Fal. The burgesses of Truro, in 1403, had stiches in the open-fields of Tregafran, now Kenwyn.

In Lostwithiel in 1194, the burgage included strips in open field, but no mention is made of the rights of common on the three riverside tidal moors called Shire-Hall Moor, Pill Moor and Maddrey Moor. As was usual at that time the town had been given land for its benefit, including for the repair of the church and bridge. In fact this was probably some of the original common land which had been purloined by the Duchy and given back in trust to the town. In 1589 the then trustee's daughter married the tenant and, with the merging of both interests, the townsmen lost control of the land and never regained it. There is some evidence also of Redruth in 1430 and in Camborne and Sitithians that the term "burgage" may have sometimes referred to the cottage of each burgess and not to a stitch in an open-field. An added complication is that often, as at Kilkhampton where the open-fields ran right up to the village, many of the cottages are themselves set each at one end of a stitch, which then looks like a burgage. In the tithes schedule in 1840 at Marazion, John Teague occupied about 0.5 ha in "a stitch in the Gew, a part of Great Down and a Stitch in Eastern Stitches". This is surely a relic from the open-field system where he had a stitch in the best field (gew) and in the east open-field (Eastern Stitches). The "part of Great Down" may have been an area of heathland that he had sole rights of cutting for fuel and grazing, or may have meant that he had unspecified rights on Great Down.

## COMMON LAND

Most of the land that did not fit into stiches was the poorer ground and this remained common, some of it became hay meadows for the landowner and the least valuable sometimes went under the name of *no man's land*. This description also included small areas of disputed land between parishes and sometimes has been attributed to unhedged land (Normans' land) apparently set aside by the Normans to appease their gods. Charles Henderson, in 1929, had a different idea, linking the name Noman's Land with Nine Maidens and Noon Maen. He felt that the various stone circles, each usually having more than nine standing stones, and various heaths that had a standing stone were originally called Noon Maen, meaning the heathland stone(s); and that subsequently this was corrupted into Noman's Land and Nine Maidens.

By 1200, the population of Cornwall was three times what it had been in 1066 and there was need for more food. The fields were bigger and farm implements were much improved. It seems very likely that some of the heathland, which had not been tilled since prehistoric times, nearly two thousand years before, was brought back into cultivation with many of the gurgoes



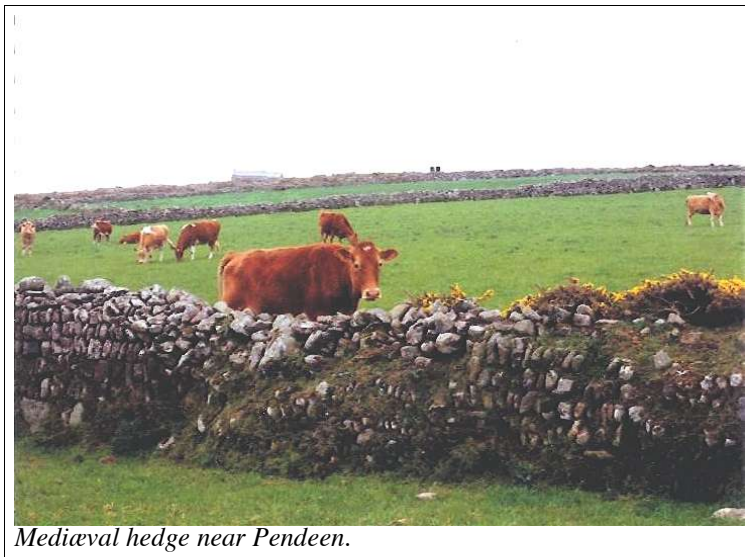
*This row of fields in West Penwith shows where intervening parallel hedges have been taken out. Fourth from left remains as mediæval stitch.*

being rebuilt into stockproof hedges. The chattels of a Cornish villager in 1201 were recorded as being two oxen, one mare, two pigs, nine sheep and eleven goats. Documents relating to Brown Willy started with a tithing dispute in 1239, where hedges were relied upon as legal boundaries. By the 14th century, some exposed parts of Bodmin Moor and other downlands were resettled. There is an early 14th century Duchy reference to the necessity in Helsone-in-Triggshire of digging over by hand those places which could not satisfactorily be ploughed, illustrating the profitability of farming. In 1329, Sir Thomas Lercedeken who was lord of the manor of Elkery (in the parish of Veryan) allowed the vicar to enclose about 70 acres of glebe land "with a foss, and to empark the same."

Edward III recognised the Scottish independence in 1328 and confirmed that Cornwall was a separate territory from England and was to be ruled by his son, and not by himself. This resulted in the setting up of the Duchy of Cornwall in 1337 when many of Cornwall's day-to-day activities became controlled by officials, usually Duchy notables, at Lostwithiel. They discriminated against the local people as in this survey of tenants of the same date: "William, son of Genonnant, native: 3 messuages 80 acres of land. Rent 26s. 8d. The Lord [the Duchy] shall have all the chattels of the said William when he dies because he is a native." Had he been English, his children would have inherited his chattels. This rule survives today in that the possessions of any person dying intestate in Cornwall without dependants is taken by the Duchy.

In a 1337 Duchy record, nine-tenths of the hamlets contained less than six farmsteads, and on the Arundell estate there were very few cottages without land. Villages in Cornwall were still rare and most hamlets were of two to ten houses. The arable land in many villages was divided into three fields, not two, meaning that two-thirds, instead of half, the arable land was producing corn. With fewer years under grass than was traditional, the build-up of arable pests and diseases gradually diminished crop yields.

Records for one Cornish town shed an interesting light on commoners' rights and the fate of the commons. In the Domesday Book the manor of Launceston had four hides of land (1hide = 70 acres). This included parts of the modern Hay Common, Scarne, Windmill, Longlands, and Pennygillam. The commons had been enclosed and let to tenants for cropping, but were still subject to common rights for the freemen of Launceston from harvest to the twelfth of January each year. In 1319, it was accepted that "at the open time, after the corn and meadows are mown



*Mediæval hedge near Pendeen.*

and the produce removed from the land of La Hidlonde [Hide-land] aforesaid, it shall be lawful for everyone of the Comonalty of the borough aforesaid, in the open time aforesaid, to depasture his cattle on the said land, without complaint of the farmers aforesaid, and that the land in the said land of La Hidlonde which is inclosed, may, in the said open time, be opened by a gate without damage to the said enclosure, and may be kept open during the aforesaid open time." In a Royal Survey in 1478, Launceston answered that the burgesses had

common rights of grazing after the hay and corn had been harvested by the tenants, with the Mayor having rights for twelve beasts, the burgesses three and the inhabitants, two. There was another common of furze and heath, called Skardon, which the inhabitants used for grazing during the time that the main commons were growing corn and hay, and where they gathered furze, heather and scrub for fuel. These rights were confirmed in 1499 in a record of the ancient customs of the town. In 1520, the commoners were made liable for any neglect to repair of their hedges.



*Medieval fields at Bosporthennis.*

In 1566, a Mr Monke was taken to court "for that he dothe nott repere hys hege", although this may not have been for the town commons. In 1567, the Law Court at Launceston was again busy with encroachments on Town land and with overstocking of the commons.

Obviously the grazing of the commons, being a free-for-all, continued to be a problem. A supposedly neat solution was devised in 1755 when the Borough petitioned Parliament: "If a Workhouse was erected ... for employing the poor, it would save many of them from Ruin, and make them useful to the public. ... That the Mayor and Commonalty of the said Borough are possessed of an uncultivated Common called Scarne, which they are desirous may be let or sold; and that the Rents and Profits thereof may be applied for the Maintenance of their Poor, if a Workhouse is erected for the Purposes aforesaid." Their Act was not as much of a success as had been hoped because two years later Scarne Common was let for five hundred years at the yearly rent of £25, excepting "all timber then growing or which might thereafter grow." In 1785 another Act of Parliament was passed for the other Commons, Great Pennygillam, Little Pennygillam, Hay, Wind-mill, and Longland. It said that "for want of proper regulations, the said depasturage produces very little benefit or advantage to the several persons entitled thereto." So the Act said that the rights were to be sold and the money received, after compensating the commoners, was to be used "for the ornament of the town or the convenience of the inhabitants." Soon the main part of the common rights were sold, and after compensating the commoners, a sum of £1,800 was invested in government stocks for the town. Not all had been sold because in 1836, fifty years later, rents (£3.17s. and £1.12s.6d per annum) were paid for the aftermath of parts of Longland and Hay Common. Obviously this Act had allowed for the enclosure of the commons and resulted in a big increase in their value. Called the Aftermath Fund, a grant of £600 was made in 1851 from the fund towards the restoration of the Church. What happened since has not been discovered. This story of the commons of Launceston over this period of 800 years may be similar to other town commons in Cornwall, as yet undetected.

One of the earliest legal assertions of the landowner's proprietary interest in commons is contained in the Statute of Merton (1235) which said: "that the great men of England might make their profit of their lands, wastes, woods and pastures" if enough grazing was left for the livestock of his tenants. Note the use of the word "wastes" instead of "commons", and no mention is made of the fuel and other services which the commons provided. Fifty years later, the Statute of Westminster extended the landowner's right of enclosure, not only against his own tenants, but against his neighbours claiming pasture there. There was even a government subsidy in those

days when, by a law of Edward III, tithes payments were excused for landowners who reclaimed barren land for seven years. And so the legal enclosure movement started, which has continued for more than seven hundred years, with the advantage being always with the rich and powerful. As the (unattributed) verse goes:-

"The law imprisoned him as a felon  
That stole the goose from off the common,  
But let the greater felon loose  
That stole the common from the goose.

#### THE BLACK DEATH (1347-50)

The first major event to endanger the village system was the coming of the Black Death in 1337, when about half the population of Cornwall died. The extinguishing of whole families gave landowners the opportunity to grab the holding in the common fields of many of the villagers, and either farming the land themselves or letting out large farms to tenants. The sudden lack of village labour following the plague gave fresh impetus to the enlargement of farms and the keeping of sheep. The landowners argued that widespread grazing of the former open fields would restore their fertility, disregarding the fact that this would ruin the villages. As Bishop Latimer, preaching in the presence of King Edward IV in about 1470, said: "Where have been a great many householders and inhabitants there is now but a shepherd and his dog." This shepherd, with his dogs, now looked after the sheep feeding on the same area of land which used to feed the whole village.

"Sheepe have eate up our meadows and our downes,  
Our corne, our wood, whole villages and townes;  
Yea, they have eate up many wealthy men,  
Besides widdows and orphane children." (from Ernle)

The commons usually carried as much stock as each villager could look after during the winter. Some landowners deliberately overstocked the common so that the villager's livestock failed to survive.



*Remnant hedges near Towednack perhaps show fields abandoned during the Black Death.*

Often within a landowner's cloak of apparent respectability there lurked a mean and ruthless man who did not fear to stoop to forgery and other dishonesties to gain his ends. There are many records showing how much of the land that fell into the hands of the landowners was now let out on tenancies for rent. In 1422, the income of the Saxon manor of Hamatethy, St Breward, included rent paid by sub-

tenants. In a lease, of 1434, for 65 years between Launceston Priory and John Hery and Felicia his wife, of land at Upton, in the manor of Caradon, the leasees covenanted to "repair all the houses buildings, ditches at their own cost". A survey made in 1459 recorded that: "Peter Gerveys, the farmer there, pays for the farm of the demesne land of Carmynov, together with the land of Bronnov [Burnow, in Cury], at the same dates, maintaining all the houses with thatching-straw and all the hedges, and at the end of the term he is to surrender and hand them over in as good a state as he received them." Note that when this tenant took over what may have been a run-down farm, he cautiously did not promise to improve the state of the hedges. Had the hedges been in good order, he would probably have signed to "keep them in good order and condition."

## AFTER THE BLACK DEATH

During the 60 years following the Black Death, the population recovered its numbers. The villagers did not get back their land so there was plenty of labour available for the large new farms. The structure of farms, outside the village open-field system, became similar to that of the twentieth century. In 1491 Wrasford Farm, near Kilkhampton, had 200 acres (80 ha) of land, 100 acres (40 ha) of pasture and 10 acres (4 ha) of wood. A deed of 1505 refers to Aldercombe (1 mile south of Wrasford Farm) as including 100 acres (40 ha) arable, 100 acres pasture, 40 acres (16 ha) meadow and 40 acres furze and heath. Both these farms were then around 300 acres (over 100 ha) and, with Uppacott Farm nearby, had probably been village hamlets with large areas of common which were hedged into three farms by the landowners in the 13th or 14th century. The curved line of some of the hedges on Aldercombe and Uppacott suggest prehistoric origins which, as elsewhere in Cornwall, have survived the later changes in field patterns.

In the tin-streaming areas, by 1466, all the turf available from the commons had been used for smelting the increased production of tin, and there was less common land available. The landowners knew that once they had hedged around and enclosed the commons, legally or otherwise, they could probably charge the miners using the turf for fuel. Wood from coppiced woodland belonged to the landowner who sold it for charcoal, tanning etc. In 1482, although the parishioners of St Agnes parish had to maintain the cemetery hedge, the trees growing on the hedge were the property of the vicar. The shortage of fuel was so bad that the tanners were granted the right to dig turfs on Dartmoor and take them back to Cornwall to smelt their tin. This could not have been popular with the commoners living in east Cornwall because the miners had free pasturage on all the commons for their pack horses journeying to and from Dartmoor.

It is not surprising that the Cornish continued to object to these draconian changes in economic and social conditions. From 1497 to 1549, Bodmin became noted in British history as the chief place of assembly for three Cornish uprisings within fifty years. There was first a protest in 1483 against Richard III. Then the collection of special taxes to pay for the English war against the Scots in 1497 precipitated the Cornish march which was 10,000 strong when it was defeated on the outskirts of London by an army of 25,000 trained soldiers that had been previously enlisted for Scotland. Two thousand Cornishmen were slaughtered and many others taken prisoner. Borlase wrote that "Some of the most ancient and honoured families in the district had joined the rabble ranks. Estates changed hands by wholesale, and there can scarcely be a collection of old Cornish records in the county which does not bear traces of some forced conveyance or compromise effected at this period by a captor on the lands of his captive." Later on in that year Perkin Warbeck landed in West Cornwall and led six thousand Cornishmen as far as Exeter before abandoning them when met by the King's forces.

The Cornish life-style continued to be mis-understood by the English and others. The Spanish ambassador wrote in 1506 from Falmouth: "We are in a very wild place which no human being ever visits, in the midst of a most barbarous race, so different in language and custom from the Londoners and the rest of England that they are as unintelligible to these last as to the Venetians." That there were real differences was clearly understood by Henry VIII at his coronation in 1509, when he described his territories as being: "England, France, Gascony, Guinne, Normandy, Anjou, Cornwall, Wales and Ireland". He continued to hold the same views because in 1546, a year before his death, his historian Polydore Vergil described, with the king's approval: "The whole of Britain is divided into four parts, whereof the one is inhabited of Englishmen, the other of Scots, the third of Welshmen and the fourth of Cornish people." This separateness of Cornwall as distinct from England was emphasised with the term "In Anglea et Cornubia" occurring in many documents of the Middle Ages.

It was recorded in a court roll of 1521 that "Thomas Nantrysak was accused of encroaching land at Trevarno hill and Nanskerres [near Helston], bringing it into his own land at Nancetrisack". In 1530, John Arundell complained to the Star Chamber of Henry VIII that Thomas Trevisuz "with other evil disposed persons with swords, bucklers, bills, bows, and arrows, pike-axes and other implements of war" had entered his farm Inowe at Constantine and "cast down the hedges and trees, and drove out the tenant, James Thomas."

These times of change and unrest, which were bringing to an end the feudal system in England and the Cornish system of family hamlets, were given impetus by the dissolution of the monasteries, thus closing the mediæval period of British history.

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