

THE INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMON FIELDS OF LANCASHIRE

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IT is clear from monastic charters and the researches of local historians that during the Middle Ages and later Lancashire had open fields communally farmed. But the evidence suggests that the system of farming differed from that of the Midlands. Instead of two or three large open fields, each with its year of fallow and its winter and spring crops, there were in Lancashire, grouped around each vill a number of smaller fields or furlongs (often collectively called the townfield or townfields) growing mainly oats and other spring-sown crops and lying fallow in winter—what Mr. Youd has called “half year lands”.⁽¹⁾ This system of farming has often been attributed to Celtic influence,⁽²⁾ but there is little in its characteristic features which cannot be explained by what the Orwins called “the common sense of farming practice”.⁽³⁾ It would seem that the evolution of the Lancashire common fields depended to a large extent on geographical factors, especially climate and surface conditions, which controlled and limited the husbandry of the various racial groups—Celtic, Anglian and Norse—and resulted in a system, which by the thirteenth century was different in many ways from that of the Midlands.

In Lancashire all the evidence points to the fact that spring-sown crops, particularly oats, were predominant from the earliest times to the eighteenth century. The chief reason for this would seem to be that oats are more suited to the climate than either of the winter corns, wheat and rye. According to Professor Stamp the economic limit for wheat in the British Isles (apart from a few specially favoured patches) corresponds roughly with the 30" rainfall line and the 60° July isotherm. “On this basis,” he says, “the southern and eastern counties of England and the Midlands are the only areas where wheat cultivation should be encouraged. The whole of Ireland is excluded, the whole of Wales, much of Western England and

⁽¹⁾ G. Youd, *TRANSACTIONS*, Vol. 113 (1961), p. 21.

⁽²⁾ H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (1915), Chap. 5; R. C. Shaw, *Royal Forest of Lancashire*, Chap. XVII.

⁽³⁾ C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, p. 14.

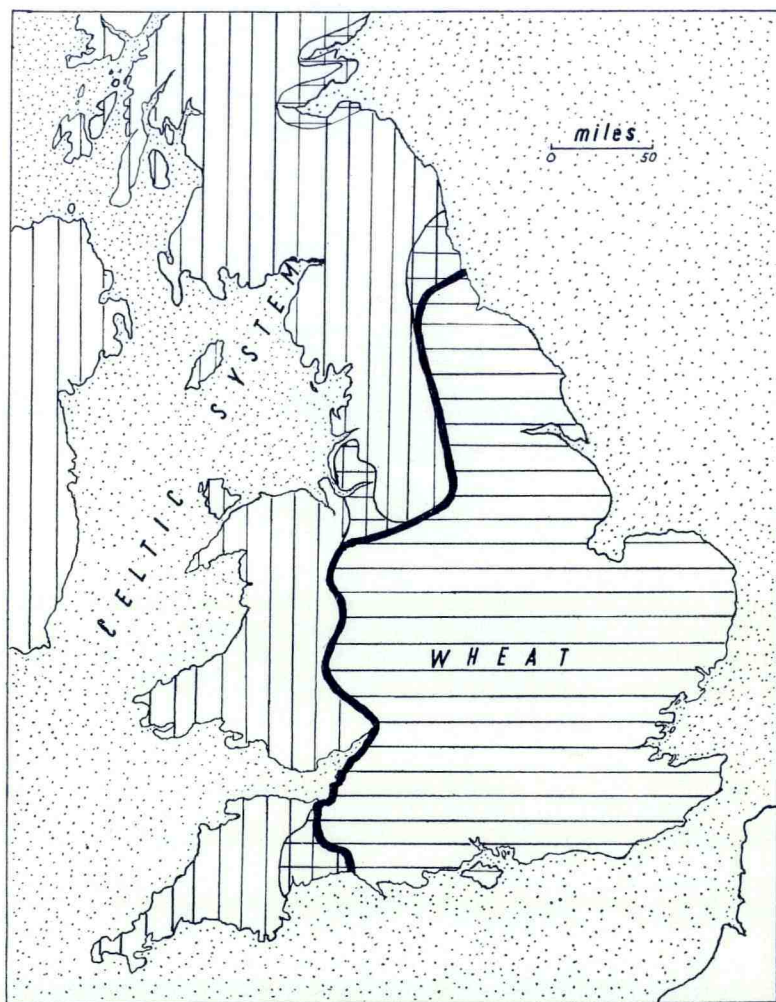


Figure 1.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WHEAT-GROWING AREAS AND
THE CELTIC SYSTEM

The boundary of the Celtic System is taken from the map in Gray's *English Field Systems*, and the wheat-growing area from Stamp and Beaver, *The British Isles*.

the greater part of Scotland.”⁽⁴⁾ These are precisely the areas of the so called “Celtic system”, and a comparison of Stamp’s maps showing the distribution of wheat in 1931 with Gray’s map of the field systems is instructive (Fig. 1).

The Lancashire plain may, on the whole, be regarded as marginal for wheat. Apart from the mosslands most of its soils, especially the boulder clay loams, are suitable but its rainfall is generally above 30" per annum rising to over 40" on the eastern margin while its July temperatures barely average 60°. ⁽⁵⁾ In addition many areas were, at least until the eighteenth century or later, badly drained and subject to extensive floods. “You may see,” wrote a correspondent to Arthur Young in 1792, “half acres, whole acres and many acres together in land under tillage as well as grazing grounds, lying a whole season under dead chilly water.”⁽⁶⁾ Manorial records show that drainage was a very real problem and a large percentage of the fines in the manorial courts were for “not scouring the watercourse”, “not bottoming the ditch” and the like. These conditions are not ideal for wheat which likes a well-drained soil with plenty of sunshine for ripening, and, before the improved methods of draining and developments in quicker-ripening varieties of wheat in the nineteenth century, wheat growing must have been precarious on many parts of the Lancashire plain. It is true, as Mr. R. C. Shaw has recently pointed out, that wheat has been grown in Lancashire since the Middle Ages.⁽⁷⁾ Indeed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the pressure of a rapidly increasing population required it, large quantities were grown in such areas as the Fylde, which was styled the granary of the county. But normally the cereal best suited to the climate and surface conditions is oats, and there can be no doubt that the overwhelmingly predominant Lancashire crop from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century was oats (Fig. 2). Even as late as 1779, the Bower survey which Mr. Shaw quotes in favour of wheat, shows that the acreage under spring-sown crops in the main part of the Kirkham Rectory was more than double that under wheat, while further east in the outlying districts of Goosnargh and Newsham, wheat was almost absent. During the Middle Ages what little wheat or rye was grown seems to have been in small enclosed areas—typical

⁽⁴⁾ Stamp and Beaver, *The British Isles*, p. 165.

⁽⁵⁾ See W. Smith, *Land Utilisation Survey of Great Britain*, Part 4, Lancashire, p. 52.

⁽⁶⁾ J. H. Campbell, *Annals of Agriculture* (1793), Vol. 20, p. 124.

⁽⁷⁾ *TRANSACTIONS*, Vol. 114 (1962), p. 34. Yet on pp. 68-9 of the same volume, the Whalley Abbey Bursars’ Account for 1520 shows that large quantities of wheat were purchased from outside the area.

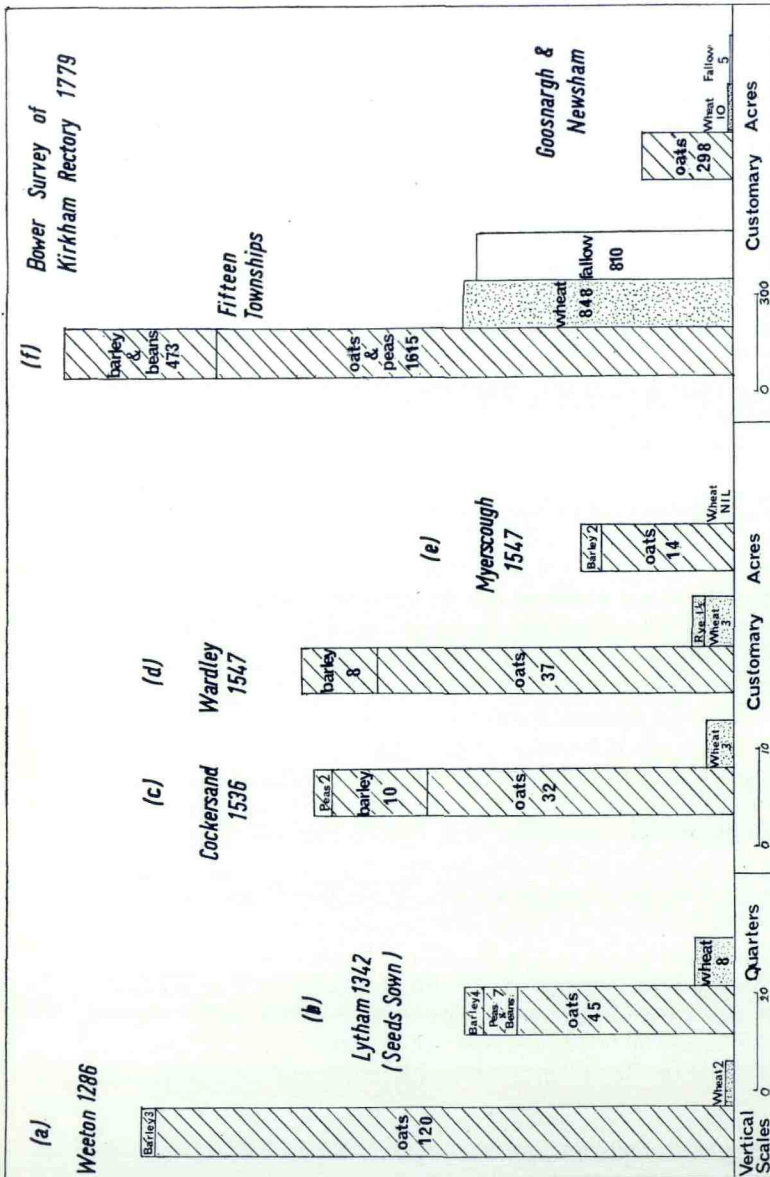


Figure 2.

EXAMPLES OF THE PREDOMINANCE OF SPRING-SOWN CROPS IN LANCASHIRE BEFORE 1800

For Weeton see Lancs. & Ches. Rec. Soc., Vol. 48; for Lytham, Cockersand, Wardley and Myerscough, Chetham Soc., N.S., Vols. 60 and 64, O.S. Vols. 33 and 51. Bower Survey, L.R.O., DDCL 521a.

names were *wheatcroft*, *wheathey*, *ryecrofts*—probably after a fallow or the breaking up of lay. The bulk of the common fields were devoted to spring-sown crops, chiefly oats with small quantities of barley, beans and peas, and this resulted in a system of farming different from that of the Midlands where roughly equal quantities of spring and winter crops were grown.

THE FALLOWS

Because of the predominance of spring-sown crops on the open fields of Lancashire a regular summer fallow every second or third year on the Midland pattern was unnecessary. The purpose of a fallow is not only to rest and resuscitate the land but to clean it. Before the introduction of the new farming with its drilled roots and potatoes, after-culture was impossible and the ground became "chokingly foul" with weeds and twitch.⁽⁸⁾ These could be checked in the case of spring-sown land by the grazing, ploughing and frosts of the winter fallow, but where wheat was sown in October there was insufficient time after the last harvest to get the land clean and in good heart. Thus in the open fields of the Midlands a summer fallow preceded the sowing of wheat, and in the enclosed lands of eighteenth-century Lancashire whenever there was a wheat break, it was almost always preceded by a summer fallow. In fact John Holt says "Fallowing is here understood as preparatory for wheat," and the Fylde farmers told R. W. Dickson, "We cannot get our lands clean without fallowing."⁽⁹⁾ Therefore, in the common fields of Lancashire where spring-sown crops were the rule, there was no need for a summer fallow except on the small patches intended for wheat.⁽¹⁰⁾ Mr. Youd has quoted regulations regarding the times when some Lancashire fields were fenced for crops and when they were open for grazing, which make it certain that there could have been no regular summer fallow on these fields, and there is no evidence of it elsewhere except in preparation for wheat. It has been suggested that the absence of the fallow year would have exhausted the land, but the length of time the land was fallow in a three-year cycle was about the same in Lancashire as in the Midlands; in the former three winters, and in the latter two winters and one summer. On the other hand in Lancashire

⁽⁸⁾ For an account of the condition of the land in the Fylde, see J. H. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-124.

⁽⁹⁾ *General View of Agriculture* (1795), p. 49, and (1815), p. 243.

⁽¹⁰⁾ In many parts of the Midlands the summer fallow was dispensed with before spring-sown crops making possible the transition from a two- to a three-field system.

any given field or furlong would usually produce three consecutive harvests as against two in the Midlands, and, as Mr. Shaw has observed, the increasing corn production from the thirteenth century onwards could not have occurred without some means of resuscitating the land. Even allowing for the fact that some of the increased production came from the virgin soil of new assarts and reclamations, it is obvious that the older lands could not have withstood repeated croppings without exhaustion. The answer seems to be, as Mr. Youd suggests, that the arable lands were dunged and marled to maintain fertility, and where, owing to over-cropping or neglect they had become exhausted, they reverted to self-sown lay or even meadow until they recovered. These practices were certainly used in the eighteenth century,⁽¹¹⁾ and it is probable that they were continuous from the Middle Ages. In the monastic charters there are some suggestive expressions such as "if the said Abbot and Convent should at any time wish to cultivate the said pasture", or "if Cockersand should at any time hereafter make meadow of arable land", or again "as well now cultivated as to be brought back into cultivation hereafter",⁽¹²⁾ which show, at any rate, that the land was convertible.

THE FIELDS

Because of the predominance of spring-sown crops and the consequent absence of a large area of summer fallow there was no need in Lancashire, as there was in the Midlands, to group the furlongs into two or three extensive fields. In the Midlands, according to Gray, "the easy utilisation of the fallow for pasture was what lay behind a system of two or three comprehensive fields".⁽¹³⁾ Where large areas of winter corn were grown it was obviously convenient to sow it in furlongs grouped together into one large field both to enable the previous summer fallow to be pastured and manured as a whole and to facilitate the fencing. In Lancashire except for small enclosures where wheat and rye were grown the whole of the common fields were fallow together in winter and were evidently pastured after harvest *post blada et fena asportate*.⁽¹⁴⁾ There were, of course, no pasturage rights in the common fields during the growing season but animals were sometimes tethered on the

⁽¹¹⁾ J. H. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁽¹²⁾ Chetham Soc., N.S., Vol. 38, p. 86; Vol. 40, p. 407; Vol. 26, pp. 59 and 71.

⁽¹³⁾ Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Historically it would seem more correct to regard these large fields (or in Lancashire the townfields) as groups of furlongs, rather than to speak of fields divided into furlongs.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Chetham Soc. N.S., Vol. 74, p. 261; Vol. 39, p. 272.

lays. These rights were not so valuable in Lancashire as in the Midlands, because there was usually plenty of rough grazing on the common, wastes and mosses.⁽¹⁵⁾

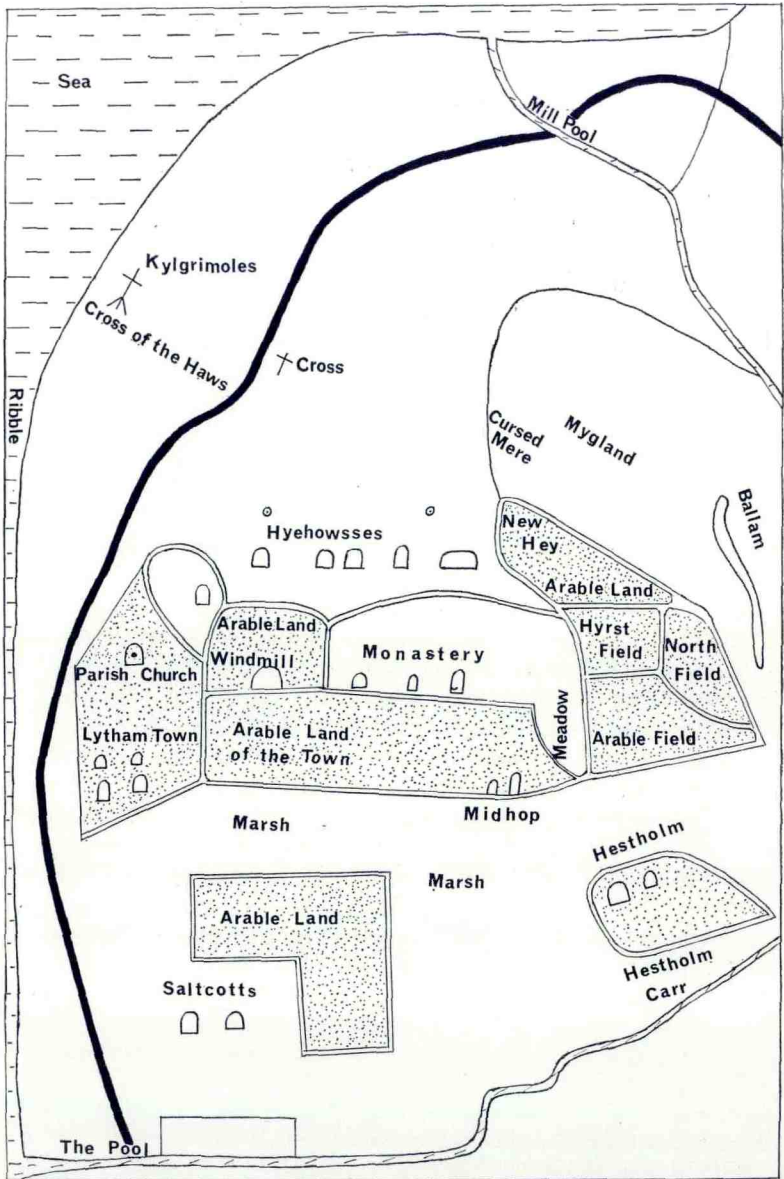
In Amounderness, whatever the form and extent of Celtic husbandry may have been, the pioneers of farming were probably the Northumbrian Angles who came about the seventh century and gave their names to roughly two-thirds of the Domesday villis. Their settlements were mostly on the clay slopes above the 25' contour, clear of marsh and moss, and the earliest cultivated areas must have been close to the villis. In many mediaeval hamlets we find names like Holderthe and Aldfeld which, as Mr. Shaw has rightly observed, probably represent the oldest cultivated land of the settlement. As population grew and there were more mouths to feed an extension of the cultivated area would be necessary. In Amounderness the new intakes were often called furlongs, representing additional increments of land, and the terms *furlong* and *field* appear often to be interchangeable. Thus we have Yarsmoor field and Yarsmoor furlong (Stalmine), Bankfield and Bankfurlong (Staynall), Milnefield and Milnefurlong (Lea). It is possible of course that these furlongs could have been part of fields of the same name, but when we find expressions like *in campo de Longfurlong* (Staynall), *in campo de Dicfurlong* (Stalmine), and *in campo de Landirgopan furlong* (Marton) the inference is that in these cases furlong and field were the same. The term *culture* is also widely used. It could apparently refer to any distinctive piece of cultivated land—furlong, field or even croft.⁽¹⁶⁾ There were usually a number of these cultures, fields or furlongs attached to each vill or hamlet. There is little to suggest that they were grouped into two or three large organised units as in the Midlands,⁽¹⁷⁾ although *campus* is sometimes used for the whole of the common arable (in the sense of townfield) as well as for one or more of the smaller fields which were equivalent to furlongs or cultures. Thus *in campo de Stalmine*⁽¹⁸⁾ seems to refer to the townfield of Stalmine, but this included several

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Cum pastura xx vaccis . . . tam in mussis, quam mariscis, in karris et in omnibus aliis communibus pasturis. Ibid.*, Vol. 38, p. 69.

⁽¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, Vol. 38, pp. 90, 95, 97, 98, 107, 125, 129, 153; Vol. 39, pp. 209, 210; Vol. 74, pp. 236, 237, 238, 242, 244, 252. There are other examples in Hoole (Merefurlong-Merefield, Middlefurlong-Middlefield, Waldsmoorfurlong-Waldsmoorfield), Vol. 40, pp. 449, 450, 456, 457.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Mr. Youd (*op. cit.*, p. 27) quotes seventeenth-century evidence from Speke which suggests a three-field system, not only because of the crop sequence, but because the furlongs, *sutes*, were definitely grouped into larger fields. As he says the possibility of other field systems in Lancashire should not be excluded.

⁽¹⁸⁾ *In campis* and *in territorio* are used in a similar sense. There is no uniformity in the field terminology. *Ibid.*, Vol. 74, pp. 242, 243, 238, and 252.



By Courtesy of Lancashire Record Office.

Figure 3.

EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PLAN OF LYTHAM
BASED UPON AN ORIGINAL DOCUMENT

fields, *campi*, such as Scalingsteads and Stodholme as well as a number of furlongs and some areas like Yarsmoor and Harecarr which were called both fields and furlongs. *Campus* could evidently mean the whole of the arable, or merely a unit of it—a culture or furlong.⁽¹⁹⁾ In view of this, Mr. Youd's distinction between villages with one common field and those with several may need further investigation. There is some evidence that where a manor contained several hamlets it might well contain several common fields. Mr. Tyrer has observed that there were two common fields in Little Crosby, but he suggests that one was for Moorhouses.⁽²⁰⁾ The same may be true of Lytham (Fig. 3) where the rents and tithes for Lytham town, Mythop (Midehop) and Eastham (Estholme) are entered separately in the *compoti* of the priors.⁽²¹⁾ Here, however, as in other low lying parts of the Lancashire plain, the isolation of some of the arable areas was obviously due to the intervening marsh and it would be unsafe to conclude that these were, or had been, separately organised common fields.

Another feature resulting from the predominance of spring-sown crops in Lancashire was the irregular apportionment of the scattered strips in the cultures or furlongs of the townfield. In the Midlands the strips of any holding had to be apportioned with rough equality between the three great fields. Gray called this the "fundamental trait" of the Midland system. As he says, "any departure from an equal division of the acres of a holding between the fields involved shortage for the tenant during the year in which his largest group of acres lay fallow."⁽²²⁾ In Lancashire the holdings were usually in scattered strips variously called lands, selions, riggs and the like, but with a harvest every year from the half-year lands and no regular summer fallow, the equal division of strips between the furlongs or cultures of the townfield was of much less importance. Apart from the quality of the land it would not matter if all the strips of a holding were in one or two furlongs. Indeed Mr. Youd has quoted evidence that this was sometimes the case. As Mr. Shaw has shown in the last volume of the *TRANSACTIONS*, there was not always in Lancashire as in the Midlands "an organised husbandry based on a coherent village community

⁽¹⁹⁾ The units of the common fields were given a variety of names. In S.-W. Lancashire *shot* or *shoot* is often used.

⁽²⁰⁾ *TRANSACTIONS*, Vol. 114, p. 41.

⁽²¹⁾ Chetham Soc. N.S., Vol. 60, pp. 84-93. The names are interesting. According to Ekwall *mythop* means "the land in the middle of the fens" and the *holmes* (Ballam Eastham) are islands in the marsh or moss. These names are eloquent of the surface conditions in some parts of the Lancashire plain.

⁽²²⁾ Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

with balanced allotment of arable and pasture". In some cases tenants might even be extrinsic to a township. This more loosely-knit system allowed a flexibility which must have been one of the reasons for the early enclosure of the townfields. From the thirteenth century onwards there was a tendency among monastic lords and freeholders, by grant, purchase, or exchange, to consolidate and enclose their holdings or to permit their tenants to do so. In Lancashire, unlike the Midlands, this could be done piecemeal without serious disturbance to the rest of the commonfield system.

To summarise, it would seem that the climate and surface conditions restricted the growing of winter-sown crops on the Lancashire plain and that from this the characteristic features of its common-field system derive. There was no necessity, as there was in the Midlands, for the grouping of the furlongs into two or three large comprehensive fields with winter and spring crops and a regular summer fallow. Instead each vill or hamlet had a number of small fields, furlongs or cultures, each characterised by some distinctive feature and often collectively called the townfield or townfields, which were farmed on the half year principle of spring-sown crops and winter fallow.⁽²³⁾ Strips could be apportioned unevenly between the cultures and even consolidated in one area; and as there was usually plenty of rough grazing on the commons, wastes and mosses, piecemeal enclosure became possible at an early date. It may well be true, as Mr. Shaw has suggested, that Celtic laws and customs influenced the early division of land between co-heirs into quarterlands and sixteenths, and that the Anglians or later immigrants introduced a field terminology similar to that of the Midlands. But the main features of the common field system in Lancashire would seem to be the result, not of racial or cultural influences, but of geographical controls.

⁽²³⁾ For examples of the make-up of a Lancashire townfield see Farrer's note on Hoole in *Chetham Soc. N.S.*, Vol. 40, p. 449; and R. Stewart-Brown's reconstruction of the Liverpool Townfield in *TRANSACTIONS*, Vol. 68, p. 24.