

A NOTE ON COMMON FIELDS IN NORTH LANCASHIRE

AMONG the documents at Castle Howard, Yorkshire, is a field-book containing surveys of the lands of William, third Lord Dacre of Gilsland (d. 1563). The volume contains details of more than fifty properties, which vary in size from an acre or so to an entire township and in character from a single house to several hundred acres of agricultural land. Most of the places covered by the survey lie within the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, but the volume also contains descriptions of Halton, Bare and Caton, near Lancaster. The Caton survey is brief, but the others, which are longer and more informative, contain many interesting details about the contemporary landscape and economy of this part of Lancashire. Local historians do not appear to have used the survey, and I am grateful to George Howard, Esq., for permission to communicate this note about its contents.¹

Thomas Ansell, the surveyor, visited most of Dacre's Yorkshire estate during the summer and autumn of 1563. The Lancashire surveys were carried out in September and October 1563, following the completion of Ansell's work in Yorkshire. Although he was able to draw on the knowledge of tenants and survey juries for much of his information, the surveyor was faced with a formidable task. The Dacre estate in Yorkshire alone was very substantial and extended into many townships. Moreover, both in that county and in Lancashire, some of it consisted of tiny, fragmented parcels of land within common fields and cannot have been easy to measure. Even so, the work bears every sign of a close and conscientious attention to detail.

Not the least of Ansell's problems was to reduce a great body of local information to a series of measurements. As a rule, he is careful to explain his method. In Scagglethorpe (and several other Yorkshire villages), the area of 'Generall Closes Croftes and pastures' was determined 'after the Rate by the Statute of Magn. Carta which is viij^{xx} poole to the acre after xvj fote di. to the pole'. Common fields were surveyed 'after the Rate of ffilede measor as it is used in the Southe Contre and in all other places

¹ It is not mentioned in *V.C.H. Lancs.*, VIII, pp. 67, 118-26; Chetham Society, Vol. 102, New Series, *Hornby Castle Survey*; or *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 50, pp. 65-76, all of which deal with at least one of the places covered by the Castle Howard survey.

(excepte the northe), that is to saye the Land that will take 1 b[ushell] of barley to Sow it is accompted a Rode and iiij b[ushells] 1 acre'. In north Lancashire, however, local custom appears to have been too strong for Ansell, who there adopted the pole of 21 feet as the basis of his survey.²

All the places mentioned in the Lancashire part of the volume had access to extensive commons. The Common Moor of Halton, which Ansell did not measure but which was believed to occupy about 200 acres, was used 'aswell [by] the Tenantes of Hawlton as also the Tenantes of all the hamletts belonging to the same'. In Bare the tenants had the use of unstinted mossland near the hamlet, while in Caton a piece of land called Whitmore yielded peat and bracken as well as unstinted grazing.

Not all places had common arable fields however. Bare had two, West and Bank, which together occupied about 40 acres. Four of the five Dacre tenants in Bare held more land in these fields than in closes. If their farms were typical of those in the settlement, arable land must have played an important part in the local economy, for all of them had arable land in closes in addition to their field land. There were four common arable fields in Halton, ranging in size from 30 acres to 78 acres and occupying together a little over 220 acres, and two small common closes in which lands were intermixed.³ Three of Halton's fields were divided between the farmers of oxgangs and half-oxgangs, of whom there were eighteen in the township. Each oxgang (a part of which lay in closes elsewhere), commanded 9 acres 2 roods of land in the common arable fields, or twice as much as each half-oxgang. On most Halton farms common-field arable represented rather more than one third of the entire holding, exclusive of grazing rights. The fourth arable field, known as the Intake, differed from the others in important respects. Not only was it the largest of the fields in Halton (78 acres), but it was said to have been 'newly Impind owte off the Common More'. Like the others, it was divided by oxgangs and half-oxgangs, each of the former enjoying twice as much land (4 acres 3 roods) as the latter, but in addition a small allotment of an acre was available to certain cottagers. The common closes (10 acres) contained the lands of ten farmers and one cottager.

In some of the outlying hamlets of Halton (Green, Highfield, Sidegarth), all the land was enclosed in 1563. The hamlets of

² See *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. Ches.* Vol. 110, pp. 1-14 for local measures. Ansell also estimated some areas.

³ Many closes, in Halton and elsewhere, were shared by more than one proprietor, but these were not regarded as being common. The acreages quoted are in local measure.

Park End and Aughton, however, had common arable fields. Aughton Holme, a field of some 50 acres, was divided into *furshotts*, or furlongs, which contained numerous dispersed *lands*. Many of the *lands* are described in the survey as being either broad or narrow. Inspection of the acreage and disposition of these suggests that the difference cannot be ascribed to the needs of drainage, for broads and narrows frequently occur together.⁴ There is little information in the survey about the use of the arable fields, although it is worth recording that one furlong in Aughton field consisted entirely of 'stripes' of pasture.

The survey reveals the existence of several common meadows. In Bare the 'pieces' of grassland in the meadow called High Bare were measured in 'breadths' and in Park End by the pole. A tiny piece of meadow 'common to all the Towne' occupied part of a furlong in one of the arable fields of Bare. Although none of the common meadows mentioned in the survey was very large, there is evidence (*e.g.* in Halton) that many closes were devoted to meadow at this period.

Although this note has been concerned only with the Dacre survey as a source of information on common fields, these were but one of many elements in the local scene to come under Ansell's careful scrutiny. His remarks on such matters as manorial customs, woodland and the use of closes, together with his methodical habit of describing the dwellings within each settlement by reference to their position in the street, 'To thintent every Straunger maye with this boke appoynt owte every house and tell whos it is without Serching', combine to make this a document of unusual interest and importance.

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⁴ *c.f.* *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. Ches.* Vol. 113, p. 12 and A. Harris, 'A Note on the Ridge-and-Furrow Controversy', *Amateur Historian*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1966, pp. 95-98.

