

## **Medieval open field systems in Broadwoodwidge Parish: the 1844 tithe map**

The intention of this paper is to explore the evidence for medieval open field systems in the south east of the Devon parish of Broadwoodwidge and to describe their character. Unlike open field systems in the Midlands which occupy almost all the land in a parish, those in Devon tend to be on a much smaller scale, covering just 10 to 20 percent of its cultivated land.<sup>1</sup> In an essay on 'The Open Field in Devon' published in 1969 Finberg suggested 'that open fields were at one time by no means rare in Devonshire.'<sup>2</sup> The extent of open field systems and their management remains controversial.

This study has examined 871 fields out of the 2287 recorded in the 1844 tithe apportionment record. There are three settlements which seem to exhibit some of the characteristics of open fields enclosed by agreement, that is Rexton, Kellacott and Cross. They contain 99, 133 and 44 fields respectively which makes a total of 276 and amounts to 509 acres. The enclosed open fields represent about 31 percent of the fields in the study area and 12 percent of the fields of the parish. The study area contains about 2568 acres. Further work will be required to establish whether the other half of the parish also shows evidence of medieval open field systems. The settlements of Beckett and Frankaborough are possible candidates. It is also clear from a cursory glance at other local parishes that there were medieval open field systems in Lydford, Lifton and Stowford.

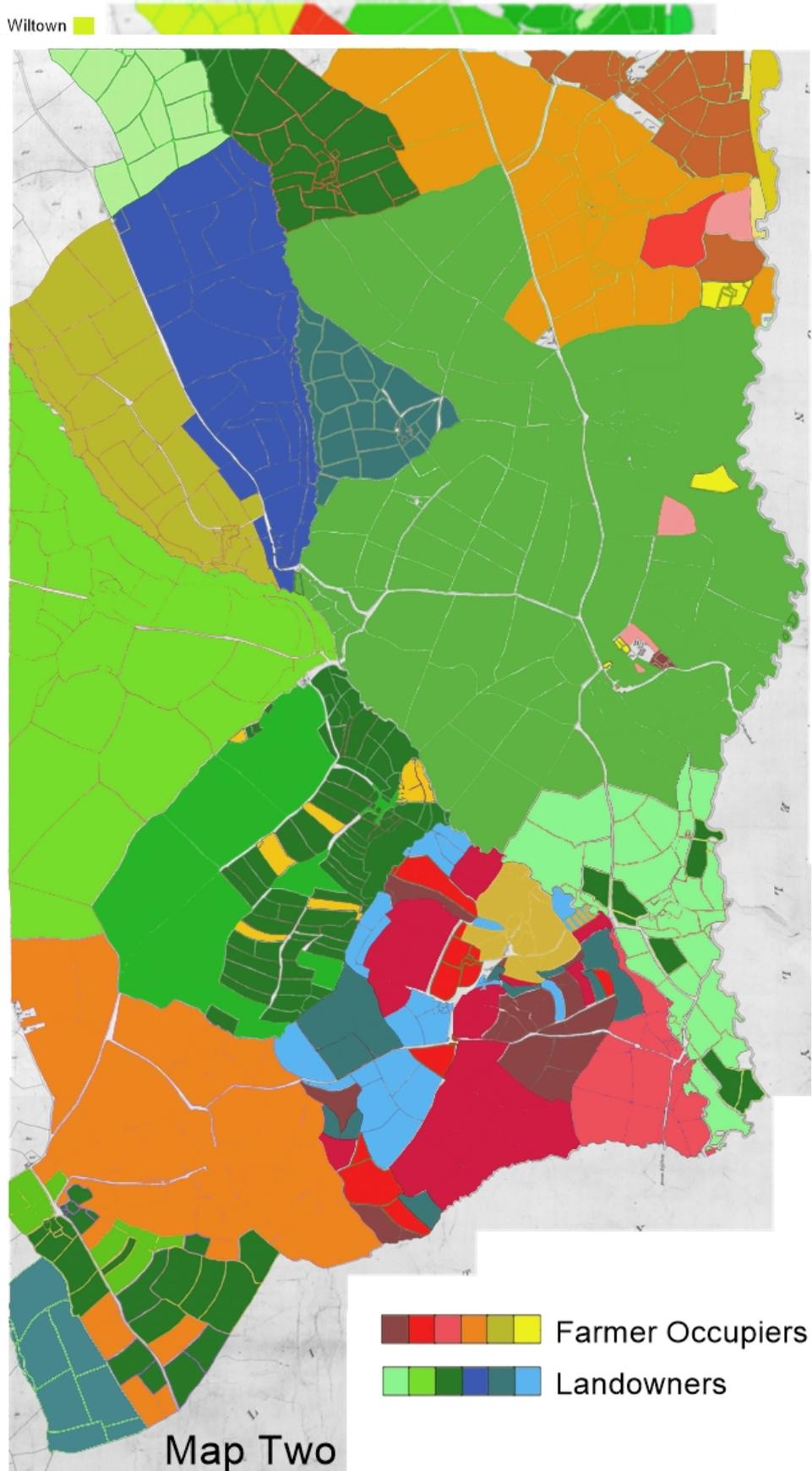
Each of the three settlements in Broadwoodwidge has a different ownership and occupation pattern. Two of the settlements share a common boundary. The origins of this ownership and occupancy pattern are obscure and will require further work to throw light upon them. The fields in the study area are shown on Map One where each colour represents an individual occupant. Some farms are owner occupied but many are occupied by tenants. This map therefore shows the occupation of fields, not their ownership. Map Two shows the ownership of the fields. Some owners possess little more than a single dwelling but most of the map is divided between landowners and farmer owner occupiers.

The three settlements that are the focus for this study can be seen against the background of the other farms and settlements where, in general, a single farmer controls a block of contiguous fields. The exception to this general condition is along the wooded western bank of the river Wolf where a few small blocks of woodland or meadow are controlled by farmers from nearby locations. Again as a general rule

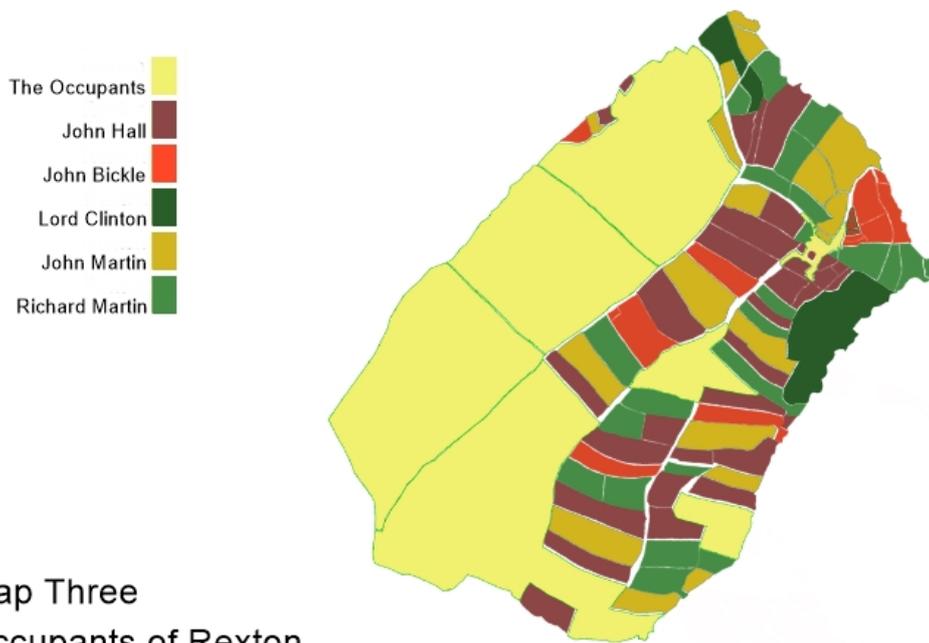
---

1 Rippon, Stephen *Beyond the Medieval Village: The Diversification of Landscape Character in Southern Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014 (p. 130)

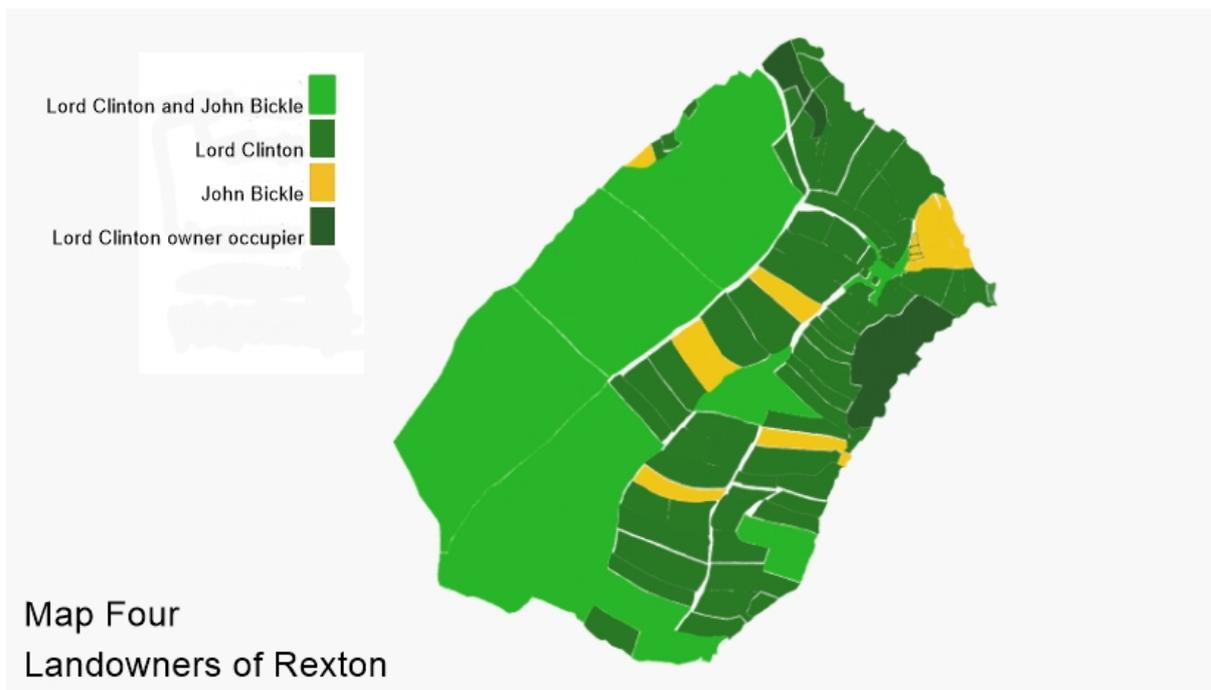
2 Finberg, H. P. R. *West-Country Historical Studies*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot, 1969 ( p.131)



Landowners and Farmer occupiers



Map Three  
Occupants of Rexton



Map Four  
Landowners of Rexton

woodland is controlled by its owner and is not let to tenants. It is not clear why the Wolf valley exhibits some fragmentation in its occupation.

### Rexton

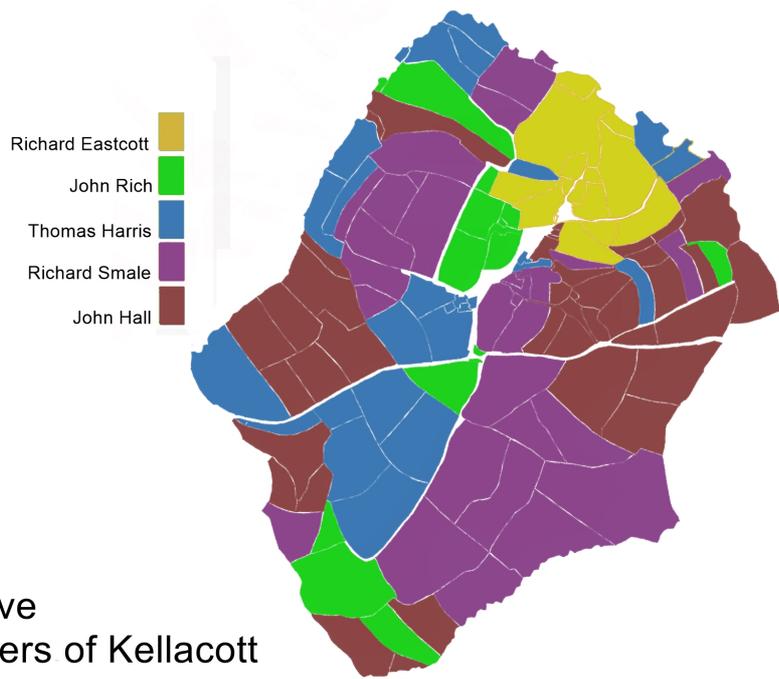
Maps Three and Four show the pattern of occupation and ownership of the settlement of Rexton. There are five occupants who appear to share the tenancy and management of fields that were presumably used as common grazing before

enclosure. There are many long fields some of which have the characteristic curve of open field ploughing. The fields occupied by the farmers are scattered across the settlement. There is in the centre of the settlement a small area shared by the Villagers. The land is owned mostly by Lord Clinton with a little held by John Bickle. Lord Clinton has retained control of the woodland. John Martin and Richard Martin each have a farm of about 21 acres while John Hall farms about 30 acres and John Bickle just 9 acres, although his holding includes a small building at the edge of a field that he owns, called Windmill. The shared land on Rexton Down amounts to 103 acres. The relationship of this settlement in 1844 to its time as a medieval open field system seems very clear and suggests perhaps that its enclosure was a relatively recent event. Further research using documentary sources will be necessary to establish the history of the settlement.

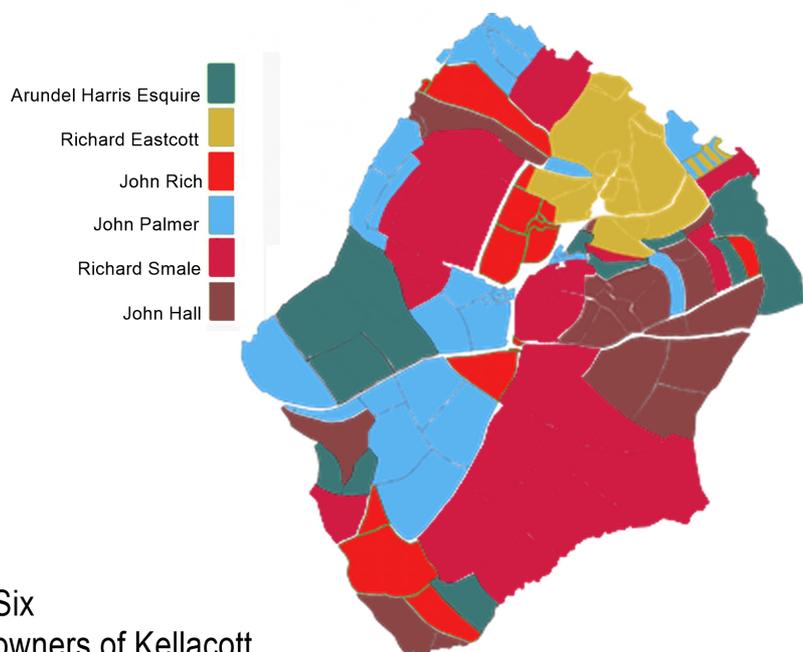
### **Kellacott**

Map Five and Map Six show the occupation and ownership respectively of the settlement at Kellacott. Of the six landowners four occupy their own farms while John Palmer has Thomas Harris as his sole tenant and Arundel Harris lets all of his land to one of the owner occupiers, John Hall. This settlement clearly has a very different ownership and tenancy pattern compared to Rexton. There is no dominant landowner and only a very small proportion of the land has shared occupancy. There is much less evidence of the long, narrow slightly curved fields that are the signature of a formerly open field system. In Rexton there was no relationship between the occupancy of the fields and the residential property of the settlement which seem to be farm cottages rather than farm houses whereas in Kellacott the centre of the settlement contains at least four substantial farm houses, some cottages and a fifth farmhouse set just back from the centre. Each farm house has a small collection of fields directly associated with it that generally include a garden, an orchard, a meadow and an arable field or two. Beyond these domestic fields are the remaining farmland some of which appears to be enclosed medieval open fields or enclosed down pasture together with some woodland and meadows adjacent to the streams. It would seem that Kellacott is a settlement of yeomen.

Richard Eastcott and John Rich each have similar sized farms at twenty-one and twenty-two acres respectively. (John Rich is also a tenant of Cross Tenament.) Thomas Harris farms forty-four acres and John Hall sixty-five. John Hall owns thirty-five acres and is a tenant of Arundel Harris Esquire for the remaining thirty. (He also is a tenant in Rexton of a further thirty acres.) The largest farm belongs to Richard Smale at seventy-eight acres. Richard Eastcott's farm differs from the others in being a contiguous collection of fields.



Map Five  
Occupiers of Kellacott



Map Six  
Landowners of Kellacott

## **Cross**

Map Seven and Map Eight show the occupiers and the landowners respectively of the settlement at Cross. There are only three occupiers; John Rich, William Palmer and James Smale. John Rich farms Cross Tenement which seems to be a section of enclosed former down or moor and has no clear relationship with the two farms in Cross. These two farms seem to exhibit some of the field characteristics of enclosed former medieval open field cultivation. The land ownership shows a more complicated pattern. James Lay Esquire owns Cross Tenement. William Palmer farms two collections of fields, one owned by Lord Clinton and the other by William Northey. Unusually William Northey's fields are described in the tithe assessment as being located at Jane's Place despite being distributed within Cross and this suggests that they were formerly farmed as a separate entity. James Smale, who farms the adjacent Thorne farm, owns some fields in Cross and is also a tenant for a collection of Lord Clinton's fields.

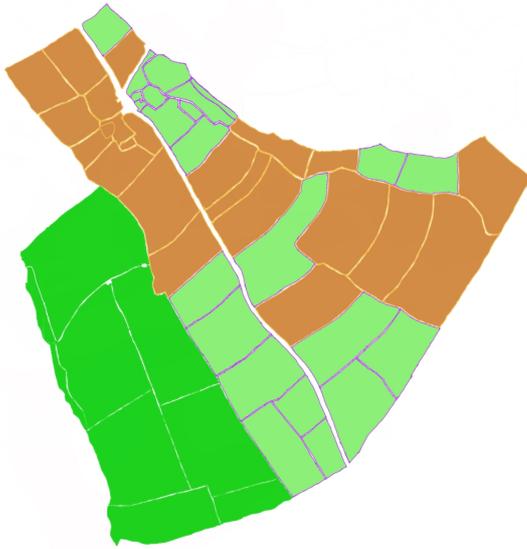
The ownership suggests that there might have been as many as four separate farms at Cross when it was a settlement organised as a medieval open field system. The former open fields are arranged in two blocks on either side of the road leading south out of the settlement. Cross Green has been divided between James Smale and William Northey. There is a narrow strip of land along the stream that forms the north east boundary of the Cross settlement. The two farms occupied by James Smale and William Palmer exhibit a similar collection of domestic fields as those found at Kellacott but the enclosed medieval open fields more closely follow the pattern of those at Rexton.

## **Land Use**

Maps Nine, Ten and Eleven show the land use in 1844 at the three settlements. The majority of the land is given over to arable cultivation in all the settlements and they all show the importance of orchards, gardens and some meadow close to housing. Cross has no woodland. Stream sides are a favoured location for pasture and meadow but not exclusively so. The most startling aspect of the land use is the extent of arable cultivation given the mild and wet climate of Devon. However, Devon and Cornwall are also known for a distinctive form of cultivation known as 'Ley Farming'. It has been described in a seminal work on the husbandry of Devon and Cornwall.

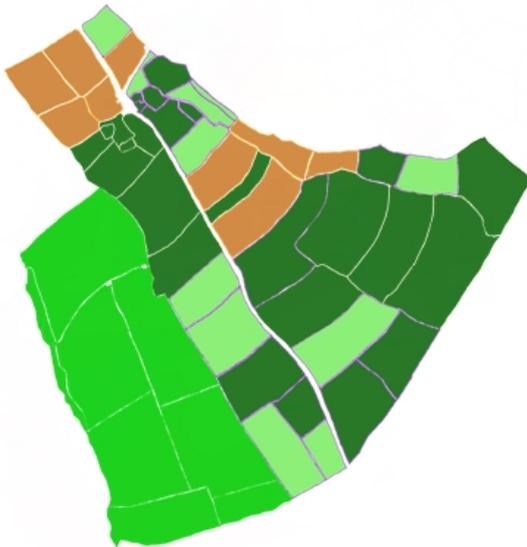
'Land was first heavily manured with dung or lime or sand or marl, then Devonshired or beaten - beat burnt - then ploughed and cropped for corn for three or four years, and then sown to grass and clover, or just grass, in the third or fourth year, and then kept under grass until it was its turn to be tilled again. .... This grass was the 'ley' of Ley Farming or 'alternate husbandry'. It could be cut or grazed ..... The fertility of the land was

William Palmer  
James Smale  
John Rich



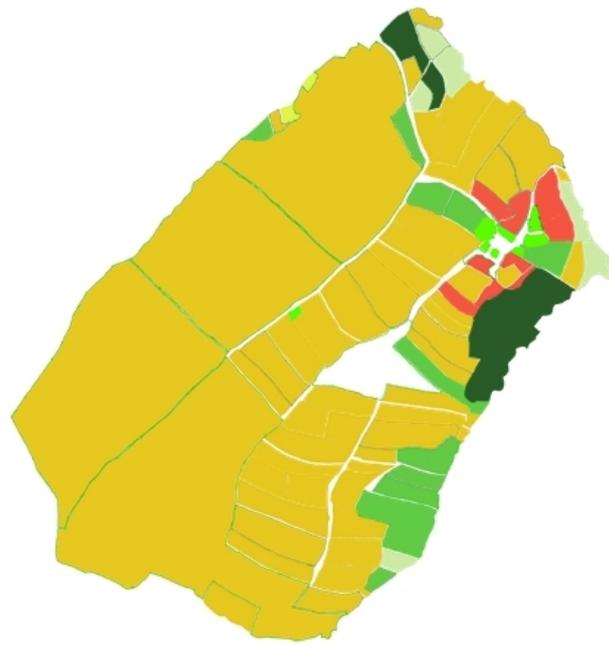
Map Seven  
Occupiers of Cross

Lord Clinton  
James Smale  
James Lay Esquire  
William Northey



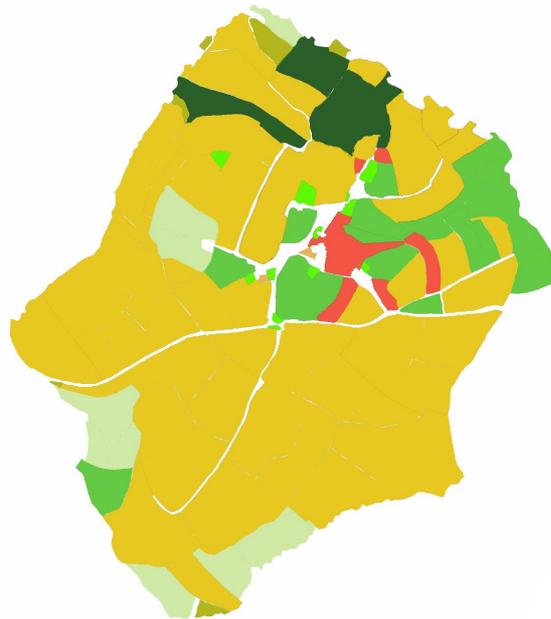
Map Eight  
Landowners of Cross

- Gardens
- Orchards
- Meadows
- Pasture
- Arable
- Woods
- Willow



Map Nine  
Land Use in Rexton

- Gardens
- Orchards
- Meadows
- Pasture
- Arable
- Woods
- Willow
- Mowhay
- Marsh
- Plantation



Map Ten  
Land Use in Kellacott



Map Eleven  
Land Use in Cross

maintained by the sowing of nitrogen fixing clovers, and other leguminous plants, with the grass seeds of the ley.<sup>3</sup>

Husbandry covenants in tenant leases give an insight into how landlords protected the fertility of their land.

‘No more than three or four corn crops in succession to be taken after ploughing grass, was commonplace, and the ploughing had to be preceded by applications of lime, or dung, or marl, or calcareous sea sand. Likewise, with the same end, the landlord insisted that not more than a quarter or a third of all the arable (ploughable/tillable) land was to be in corn. Fallow is never mentioned; there was no fallow break with this system.’<sup>4</sup>

The length of the ley could be seven or eight years. It is also clear from this account that Devon farmers would describe all the land that could be ploughed as being arable rather than using arable to describe the acres actually under corn. In our three settlements we might therefore expect that about a quarter or a third of the arable land would be growing grain and the rest would be pasture. The small amount of land in the three settlements given over to permanent pasture can also be understood in this context. Such pasture must have been unsuited to arable cultivation either because it was too wet or too steep.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Stanes, Andrew Jewell and Richard Bass ‘The Husbandry of Devon and Cornwall, Stanes, Exeter, 2008, p14

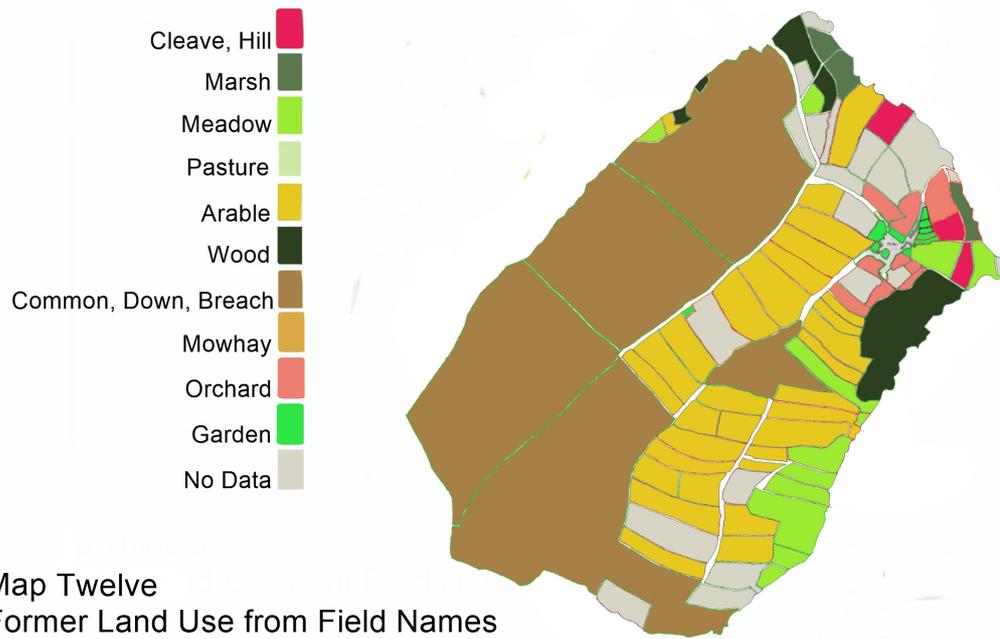
<sup>4</sup> Robin Stanes, p16-17

## **Field Names**

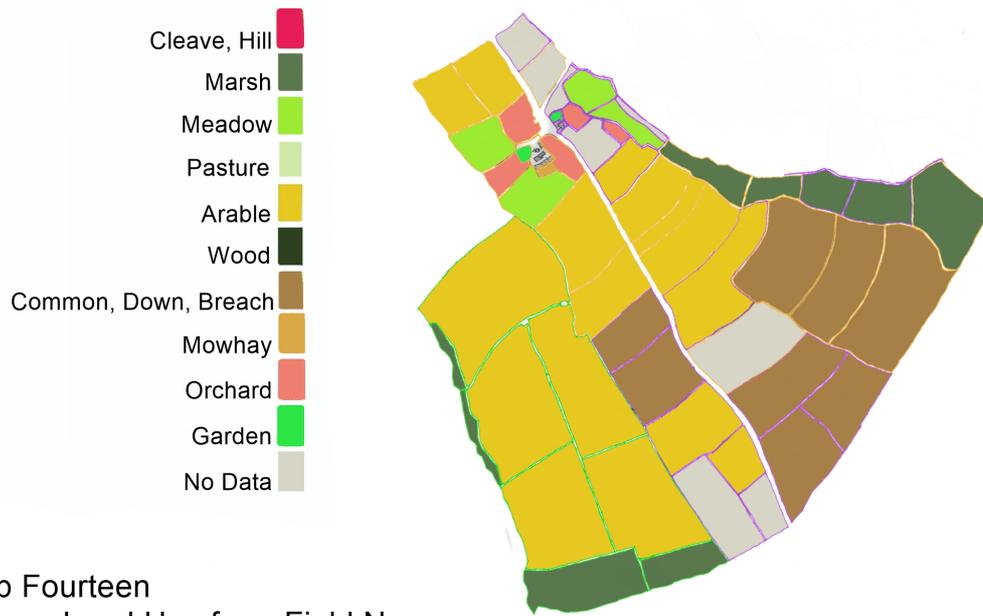
The names given to fields in the tithe apportionment documentation in 1844 can give us some insight into land use in the past. No one knows quite how long a field name persists but the names of the fields in the three settlements could well have been given at the time that the settlements were enclosed. Some of the names relate to personal names of the farmers, some are locational but some also describe their current or recent land use. In our sample we have 'Higher Jane's Field' which is both personal and locational, 'Jane's Meadow' which is personal and descriptive, 'Higher Down' which is locational and descriptive and 'Meadow' or 'Orchard' which are simply descriptive. Maps Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen have been constructed to show the land use implied by the field names. The name 'Breach' is interpreted as meaning formerly uncultivated land and 'Cleave' to be a steep hillside. Where the maps indicate 'no data' the field names do not give any clue as to their use or the name is difficult to interpret. A 'Farthing' is generally understood to be a field that has been divided into quarters and there are five adjacent fields with this name in Kellacott but it is unclear whether they were farmed as arable or meadow. On the other hand a field name of 'Gratton', also found at Kellercott, is generally interpreted as meaning stubble and understood to be arable in origin.

As we might expect the central area of each settlement seems to have contained gardens, meadows and orchards as well as some arable land whilst those places that were formerly moor or downland have provided the space for arable expansion after enclosure. In all three cases the field names show where the rough grazing for animals used to be and where extra arable land could be found to support a system of ley husbandry. That each settlement has a different pattern of ownership makes any simple conclusions difficult to draw and cautions against assuming that all open field systems were alike. It is also impossible to discern from the mapping and tithe data alone how long these field systems have been in place. The settlement at Kellacott with its lack of a principal landowner is, perhaps, the most intriguing discovery of the study.

Whilst we may guess that these settlements used ley husbandry it is by no means certain and at Rexton, at least, it is possible to imagine a two or three field system of crop rotation and fallow. What these three settlements demonstrate is the existence of a complex and sophisticated farming community well established in the nineteenth century with roots embedded in medieval society.



Map Twelve  
Former Land Use from Field Names



Map Fourteen  
Former Land Use from Field Names