

## Enclosures

Some had been introduced early, especially in areas where cattle were extensively farmed. New methods in the 18<sup>th</sup> century encouraged more. Procedure simplified by introduction of General Enclosure Acts in early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Definition** – enclosures are fields enclosed by (surrounded by) hedges, etc. The word can also be used to describe the procedure by which the fields were redistributed at end of old system or it can be used to describe the field itself.

**How they happened** – there could be general agreement. In which case enclosures would go ahead very simply.

Otherwise, owners of 80 % (four-fifths) of the land had to agree (could be just a few people in number), sign a petition to be taken before Parliament so that an Act (Law) could be passed saying enclosures should happen. Commissioners were appointed by parliament (usually well-respected land-owners from neighbouring villages) and they oversaw the procedure. Surveyors were employed to take account of who owned what under the old system, then to draw up maps which redistributed the land. Local farmers had to prove that they owned what they did.

### Effects:

- Local gentry tended to do well out of the process, influencing the Commissioners who may well have been friends. They received the better plots.
- Poor farmers often could not afford the costs of enclosures (all land owners had to share cost of surveyors, new hedges, new lanes, etc).
- Commoners lost their place in the village. Although they had no legal rights they had usually been accepted as squatters on the common land, useful as extra labour at harvest time, etc, but the common land was enclosed with the rest.
- Tenants sometimes found new, higher rents difficult.