

THE ANCIENT SYSTEM OF FARMING AT
ASTON.

On the System of Farming which prevails at Aston and Cote, Rights
of Common, etc.

Within the last century, nearly the whole parish of Bampton consisted of immense commons, which were farmed in a most singular manner, such as, I suppose, formerly prevailed, more or less modified, in many other parts of the kingdom. This system as has already been noticed, has for many years ceased in Bampton, Weald and Lew, having been necessarily superceded, at the time of the Inclosure in 1812, by the more simple mode of private occupation which now prevails generally throughout the kingdom: but in the primaeval villages of Aston and Coate, where there are hardly a hundred acres of enclosure, the system of farming in common still prevails, and forms a fatal obstacle to the improvement which the land is capable of receiving. As in the course of twenty or thirty years, the few remaining traces of this system will probably disappear, the following account of it, if its intricacy does not puzzle the reader as much as it has already perplexed the writer, may not be unacceptable.

The whole district of Aston and Cote is divided into three parts, 1. Common Field, 2. Common Meadow, and 3. Common Pasture. The Common Field is ploughed and produces wheat, beans, oats, etc according to the four-course system already described in page 11. The Common Meadow produces grass for hay, and the Common Pasture is used for feeding horses, cows and sheep, but the sheep are fed apart from horses and cows in a portion of the Common Pasture appropriation to them only. The three divisions contain nearly all the land in the parish, but concerning the number of acres containing in each division, I have not been able to obtain very accurate information. From the details which follow it appears that there may be about 2000 acres of Common Field, Common Meadow and Common Pasture combined. The whole of this land is supposed to be divided into 64 yard-lands, each of which, reduced to statute measure, would contain about 30 acres, which very nearly confirms the estimate of the total extent of common land, above mentioned. But it appears that the yard-land is not fixed measure, but was regulated in great part by the nature of the ground, and varies in different places as much as two or three acres.

It is probable that, in the first instance, the number of yardlands, 64, corresponded with the number of persons who enjoyed the rights of common: but this is now no longer the case; for by far the larger part of the farmers of Aston have only half or even a quarter of the yard-land, whilst on the other hand some of the more wealthy have as many as ten or eleven yard-lands in their single occupation.

It is also likely that originally each right of common represented homestead in the "town" of Aston or Coat, and that the right was, in fact, appendant to the homestead. This has however ceased to be the case: for the rights of common are appendant to the person and not the residence of the occupier, and are bought and sold as separate property, by which means it results that persons, resident in Bampton, or even at a greater distance, have rights on Aston and Coat Common.

But the proprietor of a yard-land in Aston and Coat is by no means in the the same independent position, as the owner of 30 acres of enclosed and private property. The 30 acres, which form his yard-land, are divided into three parts. In the first place he has about 20 acres of arable land in the Common Field, from which he obtains wheat, beans, and other similar crops; in the next place he has about 4 or 5 acres in the Common Meadow, which he makes into hay for feeding his cattle in winter; and lastly, on the Common Pasture he has the right of feeding either 8 cows or 4 horses, at discretion, besides feeding 16 sheep on that portion of the Common Pasture which is set apart for them only.

The principle, upon which this three-fold division of the land was founded, is evidently one of great utility in an early state of farming; and I have no doubt that at first every person enjoying a right of common occupied his ratable portion of all the three kinds of common. But at present there are some tenants who have rights in the Common Field, and not in the Common Pasture; and, vice versa, several occupiers have the right of pasturing a certain number of sheep or cows, who do not possess any portion of arable land in the Common Field.

I have been informed that the total number of persons holding rights of common, of every kind, in Aston and Coat, is between one and two hundred.

As so large a proprietary would be sure to disagree, if they all shared in the government of the community to which they belong, they have, from time immemorial, established among themselves a sort of balanced government, which imitates the British constitution, consisting of the Lord of the Manor, who is the king, 4 "grass-stewards" who are a sort of House of Lords and 16 men called the "Sixteens", who may fairly be likened to the British House of Commons. But the similarity is not perfect in all its parts: for the Grass-Stewards are generally the four most influential persons of the "Sixteens" and so - enjoying a privilege, which Lord Brougham would envy, if he knew of its existence - they may be said to have a seat in either House of Parliament. The duties of the grass-stewards are to see that the mounds and fences are in good repair, and to secure the meadow from the incursion of cattle: the Sixteens are bound to provide at their joint expense four two-year-old bulls every season to run on the Common Pasture. At the end of the season they sell them

again for their own benefit, and in the meantime have the privilege of claiming a fee of 1s.6d. for every cow that feeds on the common during that season. The bulls also are allowed to feed on the common, free and irrespective of the rights of pasture which their owners, the Sixteens, may possess.

The right of pasture in Common begins on the 14th of May and ends on the 14th of November.

The Sixteens and grass-stewards are chosen in turn out of these who have the right of common. Four yard-lands furnish one "Sixteen" every year, and thus in four years, every one of the 64 yard-lands has had its turn of sending members to the Aston House of Commons.

The Sixteens used in former times to hold their meetings at Aston Cross, but of late years the assembly has been adjourned to one of the Public Houses, where no doubt the full strong tap of Mine Host's best October is considered far superior to the possibility of a shower, from which even the sanctuary of the Cross would not protect them, in the open air.

It remains to describe the Common Meadow. The principal difference between it and the Common Field, is that in the latter every occupant knows his own land, however small may be the fraction of a yard-land which he possesses. The whole of the Common Field is divided by landmarks, and each strip of ground belongs always to the same farmer, but all the farmers adopt, of necessity, the same mode of cultivation, according to the four-year course, a fourth part is consequently always fallow, unless, as is sometimes done, a portion of it is occasionally planted with vetches to supply feed for the cattle in winter.

In the Common Meadow a more perplexing system prevails, and all the science of the village seems to be necessary to enable the inhabitants to understand and maintain the cumbrous machinery by which this part of their agricultural proceedings is regulated.

The Common Meadow is laid out by boundary-stones into 13 large divisions, technically called "layings-out." These always remain the same, and each laying-out in like manner is divided into four pieces, called "Sets" First Set, Second, Third, and Fourth Set. Now, as the customs of Aston and Coat are based upon the principle of justice and equity between all the commoners, and the Common Meadow is not equally fertile for grass in every part, it becomes desirable to adopt some mode of giving all an equal chance of obtaining the best cuts for their cattle. To effect this, recourse is had to the ballot: and the following mode is practised. From time immemorial

there have been sixteen marks established in the village, each of which corresponds with four yard-lands and the whole sixteen consequently represent the 64 yard-lands, into which the common is divided. A certain number of the tenants, consequently, have the same mark, which they are always keeping, so that every one of them knows his own. The use of these marks is to enable the tenants every year to draw lots for their portions of the Meadow.

When the grass is fit to cut, which will be at different times in different years according to the season; the Grass-Stewards and Sixteens summon the tenants to a general meeting, and the following ceremony takes place. Four of the tenants come forwards, each bearing his mark cut on a piece of wood, as, for example, the "frying-pan," the "hern's foot," the "bow," the "two strokes to the right and one at top," etc. These four marks are thrown into a hat, and a boy, having shaken up the hat, again draws forth the marks. The first-drawn entitles its owner to have his portion of the Common Meadow in "Set One", the second-drawn, in "Set Two", etc, and thus four of the tenants having obtained their allotments, four others come forwards, and the same process is repeated until all the tenants have received their allotments. As the four Sets are always the same in all the thirteen layings-out of the Common Meadow, it is known before-hand where the good land lies, and it is, I believe, generally understood that the Set-One and Set-Four are in all the Layings-out inferior to Sets Two and Three.

The most singular feature of this very intricate system remains to be told. When the lots are all drawn, each man goes, armed with his sythe, and cuts out his mark on the piece of ground which belongs to him, and which, in many cases, lies in so narrow a strip, that he has not width enough to take a full sweep with his sythe, but is obliged to hack down his grass in an inconvenient manner, as he is best able.

Another extraordinary peculiarity of the system is, that a single farmer may have to cut his portion of grass in the Common Meadow from twenty different places, though the tenants frequently accomodate one another by exchanging allotments when it is convenient to do so.

I conclude this long and tedious description of Aston Common-Law with some extracts from an old book, partly of vellum and partly of paper, which contains the proceedings of the Sixteens for the last 200 years, and is still preserved in the custody of Mr. Richard Townsend, tenant of Cote Farm.

On the first vellum-leaf:-

Pretium 6s. - This book given March 24th, 1668, by me Thos. Horde Esqre, Lord of the manor of Aston Bouges and Coat in the parish of Bampton in the county of Oxon. for the benefitt, use and direction of his tenants and the Landlords thereof, and for the Sixteens to register yearly all their orders made at the Crosse of Aston aforesaid, according to their ancient suctome and to be kept in safe custody by the Stewards pro tempore.

No person in Aston so proper to keep this book safe and cleane as Richard Alder, and so convenient to wayte on the Sixteens And to write down all their orders so plaine and legible as he; who ought not to suffer the book to be taken or put out of his house to any person or persons but by the order of the Sixteens, who ought to reward him for his care and paynes att the discretion of the said Sixteens, either at every meeting att the Crosse as they make orders, or every halfe yeare or yearly, as they shall think fitt. And I trust the Sixteens will meet lovingly and kindly, from time to time, as they are directed by their auncient and laudible custome, to the general satisfaction as nere as possible can be endeavoured by them that love and friendship, peace and prosperity may continue for many ages to the whole neighbourhood of Aston and Coat; Which hath been and is the hearty wish of Their Loving Landlord and Neighbour, Thos: Horde Coat House, 3 April, 1708.

On the second leaf of the book is the following entry:

If any person desires to read what orders have bin made to satisfie himself concerning the land or about any other matter that is mended or wrott down in his book, he may come to the Steward's House who keeps the book and in the presence of the said steward may peruse it and read therein when he pleases, but the Steward is not to carry or send the book up and down att the towne's pleasure, but to the lord only to set downe orders made att the Crosse in the presence of the Stewards or one of them.

If it fall out that all the Sixteens sette not their hands to orders made at the Crosse, then the Steward is to carry the book to those that have not subscribed and to noe other, unlesse the whole towne att any time have occasion to subscribe to any agreement made for the benefitt of the towne upon such generall agreement then the Stewards or Steward shall carry the book to those persons who ought to subscribe and have not if the Steward doth otherwise then is hereby directed he shall forfeit two shillings to be given to the poore of the towne of Aston and Coat, att the discretion of the Lord for the time being, and to be impounded for by the Sixteens the Steward or Stewards that keepeth the book shall promise on the 24th of March yearly (being the Lady Eve) att the Crosse before the Sixteens for the payment of the two shillings as above-mentioned if they offend herein being proved by their own confession or witness of credit that is a reputed honest person.

That the Stewards doe fairly transcribe their orders into this book, and, att the Sixteens' next meeting att the Crosse, to bring the book for them to subscribe to the orders againe that they may continue upon recorde, unlesse the Stewards will carry the book to the Sixteens.

That the Stewards suffer not any person to subscribe or write any matter in this book, nor the Stewards themselves, but what is don att the Crosse, by the consent of the Lord and the Sixteens, unlesse the Lord have a desire to send att any time for the book to insert something for the benefitt of the towne

As the matters in this book are divided into so many sheets for the conteineing thereof, this book may serve to register all the affairs of the towne for twenty years.

That the Stewards buy a stick or black-lead pencill and a ruler to draw and rule the lines in the book, as 'tis now done that all matters may be wrott in order fairely and handſomely for the better and easier understanding of the neighbors that shall peruse the book.

Also put a clean sheet of brown paper between the fresh written leaves that they blott not.

That when this book is finished and noe blank paper left, yet it ought to be carefully kept and preserved in the steward's or some other's custody but rather delivered up to the Lord then in being, that the inhabitants may know what have bin aunciently acted for the good of the towne and a guide for the succeeding Sixteens.

Richard Bersall, due to me

1704 seventeen and 4 pence. 17s.4d.

On the third leaf:

That noe officer whatever be pd for writing anything for the towne but what the law gives them or the Sixteens for the former all the king's officers must doe their duty upon their owne expenses unlesse the Law have appointed them some recompense for the latter the Sixteens have given an office out of which they are to pay their clark or scrivener, if they cannot be their owne scrivener.