

The Dixton Paintings: vision of *News from Nowhere* or dream?

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Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.¹

Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum contains two strange paintings, known variously as 'The Dixton Paintings' or 'The Dixton Harvesters' which, as the name suggests, depict haymaking, and – more important for this article – the landscape of the North Cotswolds about 8 km northwest of Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, during the period 1710–1725. The paintings are of unknown origin, almost certainly by the same artist, and represent panoramas of the view from the hill above the hamlet, one to the south and west, the other to the east. Both are very accurate topographic representations, in which many extant features of the landscape can be identified: they were probably made using a *camera obscura*, a technique which apparently became fashionable during the eighteenth century, 'using the conventions of panoramic battle-painting'.²

The view to the south and west, towards Gloucester (Figure 1; the cathedral can just be picked out on the middle distance) illustrates a foreground consisting of hedgerows and enclosed fields not dissimilar to that of the present day. It is mainly being used to pasture sheep and cattle. On the immediate skyline, however, and on the Cotswold scarp to the left, the land is more wooded, and beyond that a mixture of woods and open country can be seen. As an aside, I find it intriguing, and highly significant, that artists painting during the eighteenth century, i.e. in the 'classical' tradition – and later even Constable – make English native trees (in this case I would suggest, from the modern landscape, mainly oaks) look like Mediterranean species. In the very far distance is the heavily wooded country of the Forest of Dean, and beyond that the Welsh mountains.

To the east, (Figure 2) lies a very different landscape; of large open fields, few hedges, and even fewer trees – the fields divided into strips, these in turn (as with the paler field at the very centre of this second painting) grouped into furlongs.



Figure 1—Dixton Painting (CHE 18102) looking west across a mainly bocage landscape toward Gloucester. By permission of Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery (Bridgeman Images).



Figure 2 – Dixon Painting (CHE 68500) looking east over landscape still containing elements of unenclosed champagne. By permission of Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery (Bridgeman Images).

This second view clearly illustrates a local example of the ancient *champagne* of Europe north of the Alps (or ‘champion land’, as the English called it), which occupied the country in a great triangle with its base running from North Yorkshire to Norfolk, and its apex more or less in this very part of Gloucestershire, in which, according to maps made about a century ago, and reproduced nearly sixty years ago by W.G. Hoskins, sixty to eighty percent of the land lay under this kind of cultivation.³

As indicated, this second painting also depicts haymaking, with mowing by scythe conducted in rectangular plots, according to the Gloucestershire method. Each team of mowers worked one block at a time and then other workers, both men and women, raked the hay and piled it into (hay)cocks in order for it to dry before it was loaded on to wagons (‘haywains’) and taken from the field. Plots in various stages of being harvested are shown. To the left and the right are those in which hay already has been, or is being ‘stooked’; in this painting almost exclusively by women. In the left centre, a gang is mowing a strip in a diagonal. In the centre right three riders – landowners and/or overseers? – are riding (‘roughshod’) across a newly-mown strip.

At the far side of the field, another group of women is perhaps preparing refreshments, which, in this part of England, and in those days of hard manual labour, abundant orchards and uncertain water quality – and as celebrated many years later by Laurie Lee – would almost certainly have included cider. There is even a group of Morris dancers, cavorting their way (I think) *out* of the field, which surely must have been a relief to the rest of the company.

In other words, the unknown artist has tried to make the scene as ‘Merrie England’ as possible, and to emphasise the importance of haymaking and the ways in which a good harvest was enthusiastically celebrated.⁴ Or as Morris put it:

... of all the cheerful meals in the year, this one of haysel is the cheerfullest.

For a successful hay-making meant that there would be enough fodder for the coming year for the livestock, and in particular for the horses (or in earlier times the oxen) without whom next year’s ploughing could not be easily conducted. Alternatively, if the oxen starved, so – the next year – did the people.

Morris however, was under no such romantic illusions:

As we went, I could not help putting beside [Dick’s] promised picture of the hay-field as it was then the picture of it as I remembered it, and especially the images of the women engaged in the work rose up before me: the row of gaunt figures, lean, flat-breasted, ugly, without a grace of form or face about them; dressed in wretched skimpy print gowns, and hideous flapping sun-bonnets, moving their rakes in a listless mechanical way.

How often had that marred the loveliness of the June day to me; how often had I longed to see the hay-fields peopled with men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer, of its endless wealth of beautiful sights, and delicious scents. And now, the world had grown old and wiser, and I was to see my hope realised at last.

In contrast, in *Nowhere*, when Guest finally does encounter the long-promised hay harvest:

I came to the hurdles and stood looking over into the hay-field, and was close to the end of the long line of haymakers who were spreading the low ridges to dry off the night dew. The majority of these were young women clad much like Ellen last night, though not mostly in silk, but in light woollen most gaily embroidered in bright colours. The meadow looked like a gigantic tulip-bed because of them.

All hands were working deliberately but well and steadily, though they were as noisy with merry talk as a grove of autumn starlings. Half a dozen of them, men and women, came up to me and shook hands, gave me the sele of the morning, and asked a few questions as to whence and whither, and wishing me good luck, went back to their work.

Elsewhere:

[T]he people in the fields looked strong and handsome, both men and women, and that so far from there being any appearance of sordidness about their attire, they seemed to be dressed specially for the occasion – lightly, of course, but gaily and with plenty of adornment.

Even people whose life does not normally involve agricultural labour are roped in:

[I]n this haymaking work there is room for a great many people who are not over-skilled in country matters: and there are many who lead sedentary lives, whom it would be unkind to deprive of their pleasure in the hay-field – scientific men and close students generally: so that the skilled workmen, outside those who are wanted as mowers, and foremen of the haymaking, stand aside, and take a little downright rest, which you know is good for them, whether they like it or not: or else they go to other countrysides, as I am doing here. You see, the scientific men and historians, and students generally, will not be wanted till we are fairly in the midst of tedding [*i.e. turning over the grass in order to speed up the drying process*], which of course will not be till the day after to-morrow.⁵

And even in modern countries where the hay-harvest remains more important than it does in Britain, this kind of thing still happens. The first time I visited Fin-

land (over forty years ago now, but a country whose principal resources remain, even today, the river, the lake, the tree and the cow) I was frustrated by the fact that it was often so difficult to contact various academic colleagues during summer. Many of them had gone home to the family farm in order to help get the hay in.

But perhaps the most significant thing about these paintings, especially the eastward view, is that they *just* pre-date the whole scale enclosure of the English landscape known as the Parliamentary Enclosures.⁶ As indicated, land had been enclosed before, especially during Tudor times, but between 1750 and 1820, somewhat after these paintings were produced, just over half the remaining unenclosed arable land of the kind shown here, and much of the commons and ‘waste’ (according to Hoskins, some 4.5 million ha)⁷ were enclosed by Act of Parliament. During the first phase (1755–1780), it was mainly the open fields which were enclosed; during the second (1790–1815, coinciding with the Napoleonic Wars) the common heaths and wastes were also taken – even more profitably than the open arable – into private hands. In fact we might regard the Parliamentary Enclosures as one of the first great privatisations. But as the Dixton paintings date from the earlier eighteenth century, they probably depict land which is beginning to be enclosed, but which has not yet been fully commercialised; from open arable devoted mainly to growing food for people, to pasture used to support animals.⁸

Much the same kind of misery as currently being created by ‘shrinking government’ was also produced by the Enclosures. In particular, depriving ordinary people of access to common land, where traditionally they had been allowed to collect food and fuel, and even hunt small game such as rabbits, took away their emergency support system, soon leading to the need for Poor Laws. Instead of Malthusian ‘overpopulation’, this may well have been the true ‘Tragedy of the Commons’.⁹ By the late nineteenth century, agricultural labourers in England & Wales, as well as being required to perform long hours of arduous manual work, were obliged to live on a food intake of fewer than 2000 calories per day, less than the amount which Richard Lee found that the !Kung San of the Kalahari (2140 cal) were able to collect daily by foraging (‘hunting and gathering’).¹⁰

The Dixton paintings therefore pre-date much of the enclosure, commercialisation and specialisation toward monoculture of the lowland English landscape. And in a way, they therefore provide us not with an accurate image of what Nowhere *would* look like (which is, of course, impossible), but certainly with an *idea* of what it *might* look like. However, the use of open arable to produce hay for livestock (as shown in Figure 2), as opposed to food crops for human subsistence, suggests to me that even by 1710, a certain amount of commercialisation of farming in this part of Gloucestershire had already occurred. In medieval times, the hay had been produced in the meadow, mainly in the valley bottoms, not the arable.¹¹

In contrast, in Nowhere:

One change I noticed amidst the quiet beauty of the fields – to wit, that they were planted with trees here and there, often fruit-trees, and that there was none of the niggardly begrudging of space to a handsome tree which I remembered too well; and though the willows were often polled (or shrowded, as they call it in the countryside), this was done with some regard to beauty: I mean that there was no polling of rows on rows so as to destroy the pleasantness of half a mile of country, but a thoughtful sequence in the cutting, that prevented a sudden bareness anywhere. To be short, the fields were everywhere treated as a garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all ...¹²

Over great swathes of England, Enclosure was about to transform the landscape out of all recognition, sometimes – as documented in poems by John Clare, such as *The Mores* or *Swordy Well* – almost overnight (although it only accelerated a process which had been going on for a couple of centuries, as part of the development of modern, commercial society). Since the disappearance of the Royal Forest during the later Middle Ages, ordinary people had made few songs about poachers. But beginning with the Game Act of 1671, which reduced access to many of the commons, songs such as *Van Diemen's Land*, which highlight the perils of 'transportation' for the crime of poaching, became only too popular.¹³ The last phase of Enclosure – that of the common lands – finally deprived the poorest country people of their traditional support systems – their rights to gather food and fuel from lightly-used parts of the landscape, and to keep a few animals of their own there – and led to the need for Poor Laws. Thus it was indeed probably 'the true Tragedy of the Commons'.

Traditionally, agricultural historians – trained in a modernist paradigm – have considered the 'Open Field' system, in which strips of land were reallocated annually around the community according to need, as inefficient, and one in which there was no incentive to innovate. But while this may have been the case under the English feudal tax economy (a system which has been described elsewhere as 'legalised extortion'),¹⁴ it clearly need not be under a different economic system. It at least possessed the advantage of being mildly democratic (strips were allocated by the Manor Court, which was often run by the peasants themselves), and it bore a striking resemblance to the kind of land use system set up by the Collectives of the Spanish Revolution.¹⁵

Clearly there is, and never can be, a completely accurate image of Nowhere. We will just have to make our own.

NOTES

1. James Redmond, ed, *William Morris. News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 182. (Subsequently *NfN*)
2. Alan Rich, 'Dixton Manor haymaking: a visual encyclopedia', *Hay in Art*, 2004; as seen at <http://www.hayinart.com/000981.html>. (4 February 2015); Jane Sale, 'The Dixton Paintings', *Gloucestershire History*, Vol. 6, 1992; <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/Docs/Dixton%20paintings%20A5.pdf> (as seen 9 December 2014); John Barrell, 'Sportive labour: the farmworker in eighteenth-century poetry and painting', in Brian Short, ed, *The English Rural Community. Image and analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 105–132. (p. 110; afterwards Barrell) I first came across the Dixton Paintings via the BBC television series *Talking Landscapes*, 2009 (6 x 30 minute programmes, presenter Aubrey Manning; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/boomrtct>, as accessed 23 March 2015).
3. W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955, Figures 12 and 14, pp. 114, 140. (Afterwards Hoskins) Although at first sight the view to the south and west (Figure 1) may depict the alternative European landscape – the wooded country or *bocage* – the presence of 'fossil' strips in some of the fields shown on the lower part of the Cotswold scarp indicate that Sale is probably correct when she suggests that this area may also have been partly enclosed before 1700 – perhaps during Tudor or Stuart times when much land was 'taken in' in order to raise sheep for the wool industry. The same is suggested by Barrell (p. 111), who draws attention to the fossilised strips of the 'ridge and furrow' of medieval open field shown at the bottom right of Figure 4, Barrell, p. 112
5. *NfN*, pp. 178, 123, 132–133, 139, 178.
6. Mark Overton, *The Agricultural Revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500–1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 257 pp. (Afterwards Overton)
7. Hoskins, pp.138–139.
8. Anne Laurence, 'Status and Gender in English topographical paintings, ca 1660–ca 1740', *Architectural History*, Vol. 46, 2003, pp. 81–94. (p.90; Afterwards Laurence) One difficulty with this analysis is that such paintings were usually produced during early summer, before the cereal harvest was ready. It is not therefore not possible to test the hypothesis that grain growing was still not commercialised (i.e. the seed corn would still have been sown broadcast, as opposed to the rows in which it would have been grown during commercial cultivation; Laurence pp. 90–91).
9. Simon Fairlie, 'A short history of Enclosure in Britain', *The Land. An occasional magazine about Land Rights*; <http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/>

- [articles/short-history-enclosure-britain](#) (as seen 10 December 2014).
10. Overton, p. 125; Richard Lee, *The !Kung San: men, women and work in forager society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 556 pp. The penury and insecurity in which farm labourers in Leicestershire lived during the same period as the Dixon paintings were produced are recorded by Laurence. (p. 90)
 11. Brian Roberts, *The Making of the English Village*, Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman, 1987, Chap. 6, esp. Figures 6.3a and 6.3 b, pp. 110–111; Michael Aston, *Interpreting the Landscape: Landscape Archaeology and Local History*, London: Routledge, Chapter 9, pp. 103–119.
 12. *NfN*, pp. 164–165.
 13. Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment*, London: Pimlico, pp. 47–50.
 14. Tom Williamson & Liz Bellamy, *Property and landscape: a social history of land ownership and the English countryside*, London: George Philip, 1987, p. 32.
 15. Patrick O’Sullivan, ‘Homenaje a Aragón! *News from Nowhere*, collectivisation and the sustainable future’, *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, 2011, pp. 93–111.