

The Foldcourse and East Anglian Agriculture and Landscape, 1100–1900, by John Belcher. Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2020. 213 pp., \$130.00, hardback, ISBN 9781783275670

Throughout the light soil districts of medieval and early modern England the mixed farming practice of sheep-corn husbandry was a widespread method for contributing to the fertility of arable land. The medieval system involved sheep grazing by day on pasture, but being folded each night on arable stubble or ploughed fallow.

Prior to delving into this recent offering from Boydell Press' *Garden and Landscape History* series, I was guilty of viewing the foldcourse husbandry of East Anglia as simply a regional variation of sheep-corn husbandry. As Belcher shows, however, the similarities are only superficial. The foldcourse was a complex, flexible and distinctive approach, locally adapted to particular soils, social and settlement contexts. It was an advanced means of open-field agriculture that was malleable and responsive. It was also beneficial for grazing and livestock, making use of outfields and permanent pasture (particularly heathland). In these ways, and also in terms of the associated settlement pattern, it contrasts considerably with the arable focussed and often conservative Midlands system of 'classic' English open-fields.

The East Anglian foldcourse has received a number of studies over the years, but its variable, fragmented and flexible nature has sometimes made it hard to define. When Bailey (1990) attempted to illustrate its evolution in west Suffolk it was clear that this aspect of past farming required further research, particularly in terms of its development geographically over time. Belcher's latest contribution marks a valuable detailed study of a particular historic agricultural regime and clearly responds to the research called for by Bailey. It adds to academic discourse on how agricultural regimes developed and were tailored to local situations. Belcher takes the 'long view' and successfully illustrates the evolution of this complex legal right and farming method. He tracks the foldcourse from its medieval routes through the 'climax' system of the 16th and 17th centuries, until its decline and elimination as a legal entity in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This is a regional study of a distinctive system. As such, it is necessary to familiarise the reader with the landscape and environment of the study area in question. Belcher's approach does, however, fall a little short in this respect, an issue that may be compounded for international readers not acquainted with the East Anglian countryside. The work could have benefitted from photographic content to aid visualisation of the environment. Belcher's approach is one that emphasises the contrasts between agricultural districts, including between the wood-pasture and open field regions of East Anglia, and yet there is no clear attempt to define these on the ground. Illustrative material would have been helpful for identifying where 'countries' such as the Breckland or Good Sands lay. These could have been further adapted to show the varying density of foldcourse and how this changed over time. Furthermore, this could be compared against other factors such as degree of dispersed settlement, tenurial aspects (such as density of freeholders) and the amount of open-field.

These issues aside, the work succeeds in its aim of increasing knowledge of the foldcourse and elucidating the impact of the system on the region's landscape and agriculture. It acknowledges the role of human agency whilst understanding the influence of environment. In contrast to sheep-corn, the right of the foldcourse was restricted to the outfield, it was not solely the preserve of lords, freemen also held the right. Belcher, while remaining cautious, puts some emphasis on the community in managing systems in East

Anglia, particularly where manorial organisation was loose and fragmented. Despite foldcourse most often being investigated as an early modern practice Belcher demonstrates that an embryonic form was already well established by 1086. During the late medieval period there was an increasing seigniorial interest in the sheepfold as a response to market forces. At this point the foldcourse began to change, with the rise of so-called ‘flockmasters’ and a more entrepreneurial and capitalist approach extending into the 17th century.

Though this work by its nature perpetuates the focus on sheep and arable elements of British agricultural history, it does include an increasingly valuable realisation of how traditional practice can inform modern landscape management. The improvement of the heathy outfield brecks, by the folding of sheep, leads to a more productive landscape of herbage and higher quality soil for arable cropping. Belcher provides an interesting study in soil husbandry and the regrowth of grazing resources and weeds on land left fallow. The work helps demonstrate how lost methods of sheep grazing can aid the maintenance and regeneration of threatened heathland.

As an in-depth and informative study of a distinctive agricultural practice this book is a useful contribution to agricultural history, especially the study of mixed sheep and arable regimes. It is of wider value for demonstrating the intricate and complex relationships between medieval and early modern farming systems and soil, field-systems, settlement and social structures.

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REFERENCES

Bailey, M. 1990 ‘Sand into gold: The evolution of the foldcourse system in west Suffolk, 1200–1600, *Agricultural History Review*, 38, 40–57