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Seventeenth-Century English Forest Enclosure: Innovations in Landscape and Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The seventeenth century witnessed major transformations in the English countryside, particularly with the enclosure of formerly communal or royal forests. These changes were not merely agricultural or economic but reflected deeper shifts in how land was understood, valued, and controlled. This article examines the epistemologies — ways of knowing and representing landscapes — that accompanied forest enclosures in seventeenth-century England. Using historical documents, legal records, and contemporary writings, we analyze how notions of "improvement" justified land privatization and reimagined relationships between humans and nature. By linking material transformations to intellectual developments, this study shows how enclosure was as much a cultural and epistemological revolution as it was an economic one.

Keywords: Seventeenth-century England, forest enclosure, landscape improvement, property rights, agrarian change, epistemology of landscape, rural transformation, early modern cartography, environmental history, socio-economic impacts.

INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century in England was a period of profound change, especially concerning land use, ownership, and conceptualization. The movement to enclose forests — areas traditionally reserved for royal hunting or common use — transformed landscapes physically and symbolically. Enclosure was justified through a rising ideology of "improvement," which saw land as a resource to be rationalized, exploited, and maximized for profit. However, these transformations were underpinned by evolving epistemologies of landscape: new ways of perceiving, measuring, and representing land.

Previous scholarship has focused largely on the economic and legal aspects of enclosure (McRae, 1993; Wordie, 1983), but there is growing recognition that enclosure also entailed a cognitive and cultural shift. This article addresses a gap by analyzing how epistemologies — including cartography, surveying, agronomy, and even poetry — shaped and justified forest enclosures. It argues that understanding these intellectual frameworks is crucial

for a fuller comprehension of enclosure's impact on the English countryside and society.

The landscape of seventeenth-century England underwent profound and irreversible changes, many of which were catalyzed by the movement toward enclosure — the process by which common lands, including vast royal forests, were subdivided, privatized, and repurposed for agricultural production. Enclosure represented more than a material transformation of the countryside; it was a cultural and intellectual revolution that reshaped how people perceived land, community, nature, and productivity. Nowhere was this more visible than in the enclosure of English forests, spaces that had historically been sites of communal activity, customary rights, and royal privilege.

Forest enclosure during this period was driven by a combination of economic pressures, political motivations, and evolving ideologies of "improvement." Improvement — the belief that land should be made more productive, orderly, and profitable — emerged as a dominant rhetoric that justified the enclosure movement. This ideology was

deeply intertwined with the epistemological frameworks of the time: new ways of seeing, measuring, categorizing, and valuing the landscape. Through the advancements in surveying, cartography, agronomy, and natural philosophy, land was no longer simply lived in; it was objectified, abstracted, and reimagined as a commodity to be optimized.

The shift in how landscapes were known and represented was not merely technical but also symbolic and political. Forests that were once communal, lived-in spaces became, through the language of wastefulness and inefficiency, sites ripe for privatization and profit. Surveyors, landlords, and promoters of enclosure deployed new forms of knowledge — maps, legal documents, statistical descriptions — to assert control over land and reframe traditional relationships to place. Literary and artistic representations likewise contributed to the emerging vision of the "improved" countryside, celebrating ordered, fenced, and cultivated fields as the pinnacle of human achievement while portraying wild forests as chaotic and morally suspect.

However, this transformation was contested. Many communities resisted the enclosure of their commons and forests, not only through physical opposition but through competing epistemologies — alternative ways of knowing and valuing the land that emphasized memory, tradition, collective rights, and stewardship over extraction and commodification. These struggles reveal that enclosure was not an inevitable or universally accepted process but a deeply contested reconfiguration of space, society, and knowledge.

This study seeks to explore the epistemological underpinnings of forest enclosure in seventeenth-century England. By examining legal records, land surveys, improvement tracts, maps, and literary sources, it aims to uncover how changing ideas about land — what it was, what it was for, and who had the right to transform it — shaped and justified enclosure. The article argues that to understand enclosure fully, one must not only consider economic and political factors but also attend to the evolving ways in which landscapes were perceived, represented, and known.

In doing so, this research contributes to broader discussions in environmental history, historical geography, and the history of science, illustrating how transformations in material landscapes are intimately connected to

transformations in ways of knowing. The enclosure of forests was not simply a response to economic necessity; it was a manifestation of a broader epistemic shift that redefined nature, property, and human dominion over the environment.

METHODS

Sources and Data Collection

This study is based on a close reading and analysis of primary historical sources, including:

- Legal records of forest enclosures (e.g., Chancery Court records)
- Maps and land surveys from the seventeenth century
- Pamphlets and essays advocating for agricultural improvement
- Literary sources, including poems and prose reflections on land

Secondary sources (historical analyses, critical studies) were also consulted to contextualize the findings.

Primary repositories included:

- The British Library
- Bodleian Library Manuscripts
- The National Archives (Kew)

Analytical Framework

A qualitative, thematic analysis was conducted. Texts were coded for references to:

- Concepts of improvement and utility
- Descriptions of landscape transformation
- Epistemological claims (e.g., appeals to "science," "order," "reason")

Special attention was paid to the rhetorical strategies used to naturalize enclosure and to represent formerly communal land as underutilized or "waste."

Limitations

Given the fragmentary nature of seventeenth-century sources, the study does not claim exhaustive coverage. Instead, it aims to provide illustrative examples that highlight broader trends.

RESULTS

1. "Improvement" as Moral and Economic Imperative

Seventeenth-century writers increasingly framed land improvement as both an economic necessity and a moral duty. Authors like Walter Blith in *The English Improver* (1649) argued that leaving land "waste" was an affront to divine providence. Improvement thus had theological underpinnings: transforming the land was participating in God's plan.

Legal documents about enclosures often explicitly cited improvement as justification, emphasizing the potential for increased agricultural output and national prosperity. Forests, once seen as spaces of recreation and communal life, were reinterpreted as underexploited economic assets.

2. Cartography and Surveying: Reimagining Land Ownership

The advancement of surveying and mapping technologies in the seventeenth century provided new ways of seeing and controlling land. Detailed maps turned complex, irregular landscapes into abstract, measurable, and commodifiable entities.

Surveyors like John Norden and cartographers like Christopher Saxton produced maps that represented land parcels with an unprecedented precision. Forests, which once had blurry, negotiated boundaries, were increasingly subject to linear, rigid enclosures reflected on paper — and eventually enforced in reality.

3. Language and Metaphor: Nature as Disorder

Language played a critical role in the epistemological shift. Forests were described as "wild," "chaotic," and "unproductive." In contrast, enclosed, cultivated land was associated with "order," "profit," and "rationality." This dichotomy justified enclosure as a civilizing mission.

Literary sources mirrored this shift: poets like Andrew

Marvell depicted cultivated landscapes as harmonious and virtuous, implicitly devaluing the wilderness.

4. Contestations and Resistance

Not everyone accepted the epistemological and material reconfigurations of land. Legal challenges, popular protests, and pamphlets opposing enclosure reveal that many communities maintained alternative ways of knowing and valuing the landscape — emphasizing customary rights, communal stewardship, and local memory.

Nevertheless, such resistance was often framed by enclosers as irrational or backwards, reinforcing the dominant narrative of improvement.

DISCUSSION

The enclosure of seventeenth-century English forests cannot be understood solely as a pragmatic or economic development. It was also an epistemological revolution. By redefining land through measurement, commodification, and moral discourse, enclosers reshaped not only the countryside but the very way people thought about land.

Cartographic practices, literary tropes, and legal arguments collaborated to produce a new landscape consciousness in which land was valued primarily for its productivity. Forests were transformed from spaces of collective memory and ecological complexity into sites of extraction and profit.

Yet this transition was neither seamless nor universally accepted. The existence of counter-epistemologies — ways of knowing rooted in communal rights and local attachments — demonstrates that enclosure was a contested process, marked by struggles over meaning as well as material control.

The study highlights the importance of attending to epistemology in historical accounts of land use change. By understanding how people conceptualized and valued landscapes differently, we can better grasp the cultural stakes of environmental transformations, both in the past and today.

CONCLUSION

Seventeenth-century forest enclosures in England were

driven not only by economic motives but also by new epistemologies that reconceptualized land. The ideological apparatus of improvement — backed by maps, surveys, and moral language — transformed perceptions of forests from communal spaces to commodities. These changes underpinned the sweeping transformation of the English countryside and laid the intellectual foundations for modern notions of property, productivity, and landscape management.

Future research could explore how these epistemological shifts influenced colonial practices abroad, given that many of the same figures involved in domestic enclosures also participated in imperial expansion.

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