

Laxton: farming in an open field village

Exhibition at the Weston Gallery, DH Lawrence Pavilion, Lakeside Arts Centre

Thursday 9 April – Sunday 16 August 2009

Admission to the exhibition is free

Viewers of the 'Victorian Farm' series shown recently on BBC Two enjoyed seeing nineteenth-century farming methods in action and watching how the presenters coped with the hard labour required to earn a living from the land. Some of the processes and equipment from the 1880s remained in use into the mid-twentieth century and are still remembered by many people today.

The village of Laxton in North Nottinghamshire was a typical agricultural community, and nineteenth-century farmers there would have worked in much the same way as people in other areas. However, the way Laxton's fields are laid out and managed is unique.

Laxton escaped the parliamentary enclosure process of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and still preserves the medieval traditions of open field farming. It is the only place in Europe where open field farming is still practised across a whole village. In an open field system, individual farmers work separate strips of land but the field has a strict crop rotation which they must all follow. Laxton still has a functioning Jury, reporting to the manorial Court Leet, to oversee the management of the open fields and levy fines against offenders. Such systems date back to medieval times but in most places they were swept away by enclosure.

This exhibition highlights aspects of farming life in Laxton from the eighteenth to the early-twentieth century. It is a story which illuminates agricultural routines and processes which were commonplace, but have long since disappeared from similar villages in the Midlands.

The core of this exhibition is an exceptional series of records from the Thoresby estate, owners of the manor of Laxton from 1640 to 1952. Glimpses of the lives of ordinary people living and working in Laxton are revealed through the maps, surveys and correspondence preserved by the Thoresby agents. The control of agricultural life by the manorial court is illuminated by examples from original Laxton manor court minutes and presentment papers. Finally, illustrations from printed books and photographs, including photographs taken at Laxton's Jury Day and Court Leet in 2008, bring farming traditions there and elsewhere to life.

ITEMS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST

- Photographs of Jury Day and Court Leet taken in Laxton in 2008
- Artefacts used for butchering pigs and making pork pies, brawn and sausages, borrowed for the exhibition from the collection of the late Reg Rose of Laxton
- A series of three detailed plans showing Laxton's open fields in 1635, 1862 and 1939. The last two plans are colour-coded so that viewers can plot the lands farmed by particular tenants
- Laxton manor court records from 1768-1769 and 1909 naming people fined by the Court Leet
- Sale notice for furniture and farming stock advertised for auction at Mr Joseph Rose's farm in Laxton in 1849. The notice includes many old-fashioned items – do you know what a piggon was?

- Extracts from the reminiscences of Edith Hickson, a resident of Laxton in the 1890s
- A copy of the 1860 Enclosure Plan of the hamlet of Moorhouse
- Examples of schoolwork done by Key Stage 3 students using a series of free activity plans based on original documents relating to Laxton. The activity plans are available on the Manuscripts and Special Collections website, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss/learning/laxton-teaching/>
- Books, photographs, engravings and documents relating to agricultural processes before the advent of mechanisation and farming specialisations in the mid-twentieth century

QUOTES

Kathryn Summerwill, Assistant Archivist and curator of the exhibition: "This exhibition offers a fascinating insight into farming life before the twentieth century. What makes Laxton so interesting is that the open fields and the Court Leet are still an integral part of the agricultural cycle. Understanding how Laxton works helps to make sense of the history of other villages and the people who lived in them."

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Notes to editors:

1. The Manor of Laxton has been owned by the Crown Estate since 1981.
2. Laxton: Farming in an open field village has been curated by Manuscripts and Special Collections, The University of Nottingham. You can contact Manuscripts and Special Collections on 0115 951 4565 or by e-mail mss-library@nottingham.ac.uk
3. Three lunchtime talks accompany this exhibition. Each will take place in the Performing Arts Workshop at 1pm. Admission to all talks is free, but those intending to come should notify the Lakeside Box Office on 0115 846 7777 as spaces are limited.

Wednesday 13 May: 'Laxton wildlife and conservation'. The sykes of Laxton's open fields are rich in wild flowers, and the fallow field provides shelter for ground-nesting birds. Stuart Rose, a Laxton farmer, explains how the village's unique farming methods support wildlife, and how Countryside Stewardship encourages conservation of the historic landscape and biodiversity.

Wednesday 24 June: 'Castles and Communities: Exploring Laxton via lifelong learning'. Dr. Sarah Speight of the School of Education looks at a long-term research project to understand a major medieval site in North Nottinghamshire within a context of the history of its community.

Wednesday 15 July: 'Why has Laxton survived?' Laxton is an anomaly. Open fields existed in many parts of England, but they were gradually enclosed from the later medieval period onwards. Hardly any now survive, and only Laxton has a functioning Court Leet. In this lecture, Professor John Beckett of the School of History asks why Laxton retained its open field heritage while thousands of other villages succumbed to enclosure.
4. Lakeside Arts Centre is situated at the south entrance to the University of Nottingham campus, just off the A6005 (University Boulevard). The Weston Gallery is in the DH Lawrence Pavilion. For more information please contact Lakeside Box Office on 0115 846 7777.
5. Opening hours of the Weston Gallery are Monday – Friday 11:00-16:00; Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays 12.00 noon-16:00.
6. For more information, press images or interviews, please contact:

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