Enclosure of land through the mutual agreement of landowners began during the 16th century. During the 18th century, enclosures were regulated by Parliament; a separate Act of Enclosure was required for each village that wished to enclose its land. In 1801, Parliament passed a General Enclosure Act, which enabled any village, where three-quarters of the landowners agreed, to enclose its land.

**ENCLOSURE OF A VILLAGE**

**Before enclosure (Open field system)**
- Farmer’s strips of land are scattered around the village in large, unfenced fields
- Strips of land owned by one farmer
- Church

**After enclosure**
- Farmer’s land is all together and fenced
- Farmer’s land now enclosed
- New farm buildings
- Road
- Hedge

**STAGES OF THE ENCLOSURE PROCESS (BEFORE 1801)**

**Stage 1**
- Owners of at least three-quarters of the village land agree to enclosure
- Petition is drawn up asking parliament to pass an Enclosure Act for village
- Notice is posted on church door informing villagers of intention to enclose

**Stage 2**
- Small committee of members of Parliament consider the petition and hear objections
- Parliament passes an Enclosure Act or rejects the petition, depending on the recommendation of the committee
- Commissioners (usually three) are appointed to supervise the enclosure

**Stage 3**
- Commissioners draw detailed map of village marking out all individual strips
- Landowners have to prove their legal entitlement to the land they farm
- New map is drawn up allocating plots to legally entitled landowners
- Landowners enclose their plots with hedges, fences, or walls, and build access roads and farmhouses on their new land

**CAUSES OF INCREASE IN ENCLOSURES**
- Increase in food and wool prices encouraged the search for more productive farming methods
- Political power of the new, landowning middle class ensured that enclosure applications succeeded

**NUMBER OF ENCLOSURE ACTS**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Period</th>
<th>Acts</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1770–1780</td>
<td>660</td>
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**MAIN AREAS OF ENCLOSURE IN BRITAIN 1700–1870**

**IMPACT OF THE ENCLOSURE ACTS**

**Positive Effects**
- Less land wastage—boundaries between strips could now be farmed
- Land of a good farmer no longer suffered from neglect of neighboring strips
- Machinery such as the seed drill could be used on the larger plots of land
- Farmers were encouraged to experiment (e.g., with crop rotation).
- Animal diseases were less likely to spread to all village animals. Separate fields for animals made selective breeding possible
- Less labor was needed to tend crops and animals on more compact farms

**Negative Effects**
- Eviction of farmers (known as customary tenants) who failed to prove legal entitlement to land their families had worked for generations
- Eviction of villagers who owned no land and had kept animals on common pasture (common land was allocated to other farmers through enclosure)
- Poor farmers, allocated small plots of land, were unable to compete with large landowners. Many lost their land when their businesses failed
- Migration of poor, evicted peasants to industrial cities to find work. Having lost their means of self-sufficiency they were forced to accept low wages and poor conditions. Casual agricultural laborers suffered similar poverty