

Background to History

Monty Python

PROF. JONES: Good evening. One of the main elements in any assessment of the medieval open-field farming system is the availability of plough teams for the winter plowing. Professor Tofts of the University of Manchester puts it like this:

(A rocking beat starts and a 60s-style folk rock song with some heavy caribbean influence begins.)

To plough once in the winter Sowing, and again in Lent,
Sowing with as many oxen
Sowing with as many oxen
As he shall have yoked in the plough
Oh yes
Oh yes
As he shall have yoked in the plough.
Oh yes
Oh yes

PROF. JONES: But of course there is considerable evidence of open-field villages as far back as the tenth century. Professor Moorhead: (Dramatic metal chords, reminiscent of British punk or perhaps groups like Black Sabbath.)

Theeeeeere's ev-i-de-ence
Theeeeeere's ev-i-de-ence
There's evidence (evidence)
Evidence (evidence)
Evidence (evidence?)
There's evidence (evidence!)

Evidence of settlements with one long village street,
Farmsteads, hamlets, little towns - the framework was complete
By the tiiiiime ... (OF THE NORMAN CONQUEST!) The rural framework was complete
Rur-al
frame-work
wa-as
com-plete.

PROF. JONES: This is not to say, of course, that the system was as sophisticated as it later came to be. I asked the Professor of Medieval studies at Cambridge why this was.

PROF. HEGERMAN: (stuttering) Well, i-it may not have been a - a statutory obligation, but, uh, I mean, uh, a guy who was a freeman whuh - was obliged in the medieval system to...

PROF. JONES: To do boonwork?

PROF. HEGERMANN: That's right. There's an example, ah, from the village rolls, ah, in 1313.

PROF. JONES: And I believe you're going to do it for us.

PROF. HEGERMAN: That's right, yeah...

(Pop beat sets in, reminiscent of the Beatles in their later period but with some of the spastic quality of a Joe Cocker.)

Oh it's written in the village rolls
That if one plough-team wants an oxen
And that oxen is lent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the loooord's consent.
Yeah, yeah,
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
(na na na na)
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
(na na na na)
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
(na na na na)
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent
Then the villeins and the ploughmen got to have the lord's consent.

That was a talk on the open-field farming system by Professor Angus Jones. Some of the main points covered in this talk are now available on a long-playing record entitled "The Ronettes Sing Medieval Agrarian History."