

## Changing landscapes, changing environments: enclosure and culture in Northamptonshire, 1700-1900

*Professor Matthew Cragoe, University of Hertfordshire*

**Start Date: May 2007, Duration: 36 months**



Enclosure played a crucial role in the evolution of the English landscape, reconfiguring familiar distributions of public and private space. During the intense period of 'parliamentary' enclosure between 1750 and 1836, over 5000 Acts of Parliament were passed, permitting the enclosure of open fields, commons and 'waste'. While scholars have focused on the consequences of this severe rationalisation of the landscape for agricultural productivity, land-holding structures, and, most emotively, the economic well-being of the poor, little work has been undertaken on its long term cultural impact. Were the effects of enclosure on local communities enduring, and if so, how did they manifest themselves? In no county were the effects of enclosure more severely felt than in Northamptonshire: according to one recent estimate, as many as half of all those with access to common rights may have been deprived at enclosure. Here, if anywhere, we should be able to find plentiful evidence of the myriad ways in which individuals and communities engaged with and accommodated themselves to the new landscape created by enclosure over the long durée. The project has four thematic strands. The first explores enclosure in relation to the landowning classes, investigating its impact both on the core business of the great estates – agriculture – and on the cultural authority of the aristocracy. This aspect of the research will be supported by our partners in English Heritage. The second theme, supported by our partners in The John Clare Trust, examines enclosure in relation to contemporary aesthetic perceptions. It examines pictorial representations of the countryside (paintings, drawings, prints, maps) alongside literary sources, ranging from the poems of John Clare to Victorian guide books. B what means did the enclosed landscape, so 'new' to Clare, itself become 'traditional' a century later to an observer such as H. V. Morton? The third theme examines the culture of formal religious observance in the parish. The Religious Census of 1851 showed that the Church of England flourished in enclosed parishes: why? Did enclosure stymie the opponents of Anglicanism in some way (notably Methodists), or was Anglicanism itself positively benefited? Finally, we will seek to ascertain how traditional belief systems were affected by enclosure. Using court records and newspaper evidence, we will examine popular attitudes towards traditional customary activities and beliefs regarding witchcraft and the supernatural: how were these affected by changes in the social and physical landscape? The project thus brings together a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to bear on its central preoccupation: the need to understand how communities traumatised by the experience of enclosure, healed themselves in the decades that followed.