

THE CROFTING 'PIONEER FRINGE' IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SHAPINSAY, ORKNEY

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The thorough-going changes to the landscape and economy brought about by Orkney's massive agricultural revolution (1848-1870) sometimes create the impression that what went before was an age-old system of farming and a relatively static pattern of settlement. However, capitalist reclamation by lairds and big farmers was preceded by a quite distinct phase of crofter-reclamation. As the tide of proto-industrial handicrafts receded from rural areas, the Orkney economy was becoming of necessity more purely based on the land. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Hudson's Bay Company ceased to recruit in Orkney, whaling declined, kelp-making collapsed in spectacular fashion, linen-making ceased, straw hats went out of fashion, and herring and cod fishing passed their peak. Paradoxically, as ancillary industries declined, the population, which had been remarkably steady for much of the eighteenth century, began to increase dramatically. The result was a movement of an impoverished crofting population on to reclaimable land, and a great acceleration of the well-established tradition of nibbling away at the margins of the commons.

Division of commonry came late to Orkney and, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, all major tracts of hill land were still undivided. Ever since the abolition of the heritable jurisdictions after the 1745 rebellion, and the consequent disappearance of Orkney's distinctive system of parish Bailie Courts, the management of common grazings had broken down. Exploitation of hill land was subject to little effective control (Thomson). Older farming districts were often ringed with a 'pioneer fringe' consisting of the holdings of crofters and squatters who attacked the heather-covered moorland with the spade, carving out new holdings for themselves. Their right to do so was seldom questioned.

But when the time came for the commons to be divided, as all were in the course of the nineteenth century, this zone of crofter-reclamation was subjected to intense scrutiny, since encroachments continued to be regarded as part of the common until forty years had passed. Hence the crofter-fringe was a debatable zone which might or might not be part of the common, and so maps and papers relating to the legal process often show it in considerable detail. The examples which follow are from the island of Shapinsay where, by a happy accident, a number of splendid maps survived the break up of the estate. Recently they were re-discovered and deposited in the Orkney Archive.

The 'hill' in Shapinsay was not, in fact, high. Being an area of low relief, much of it capable of reclamation, it was widely regarded as an important public resource. However, Scots law paid little regard to traditional users of commons and deemed the hill to be the property of owners of adjacent arable land. In Shapinsay there were three landowners, Captain William Balfour, Samuel Laing and the Crown (as successor to the Bishopric of Orkney). The presence of Crown property inhibited improvement, since "King's land" was specifically excluded from the terms of the 1695 Act for dividing commonalty, and it was only after amending legislation in 1829 that division became possible. A survey of common land was immediately undertaken; Balfour had already appropriated most of the West Hill and it was discovered that this could no longer be contested by the other landowners since more than forty years had elapsed. However, 2,956 acres remained, of which 167 acres had been subject to encroachment in the period 1791-1831. The piece-meal nature of crofting reclamation is illustrated by the fact that these 167 acres consisted of no less than 221 parcels of land; 155 of these were cultivated with the commonest size being no larger than twenty yards each way; the remainder consisted of tiny grazing enclosures, sheep pens, pig-houses, *planticrøes* (for the growing of cabbage plants) and house sites. Surveyors had a low opinion of these developments, many of which they valued lower than unreclaimed moorland. The crofters, despite all their efforts, had merely succeeded in diminishing the original value of the land – that, at any rate, was the opinion of surveyors intent on a quite different type of improvement.

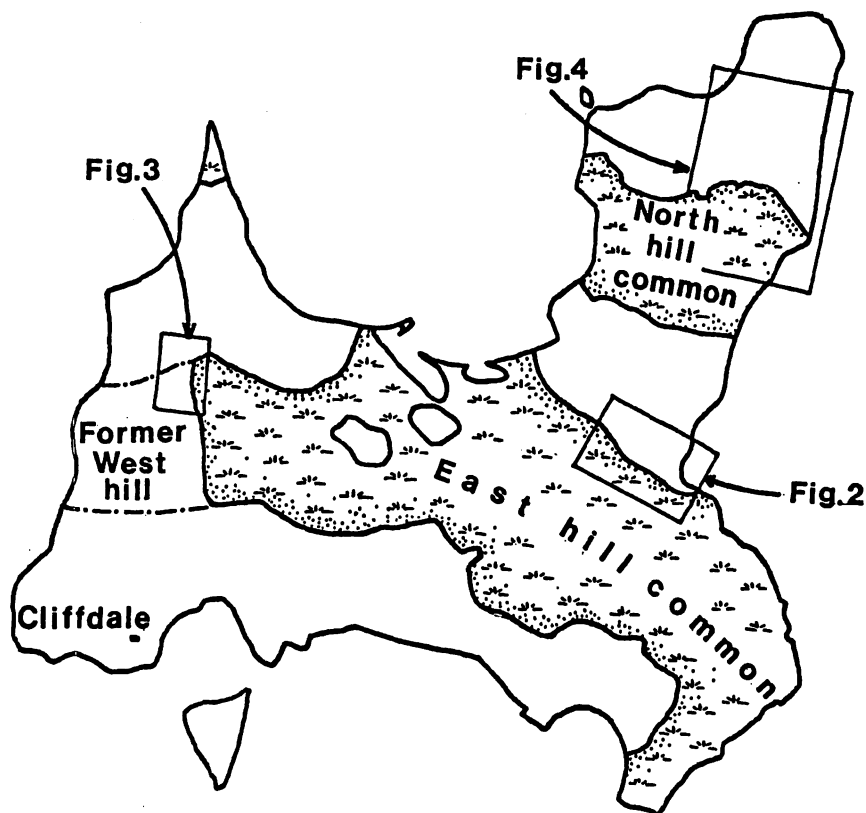


Figure 1 Common land in Shapinsay, 1831.

Figure 2 illustrates the crofting fringe on the southern margin of the district of Hollandstoun. New Gorn, Little Foxtoun, Tea Ha' and Greenataing had probably come into existence before 1791 since they lay just outside the area regarded as common in 1831. Between 1791 and 1831 Chingley Brae, Heatherhouse, Waterhouse, Slap and Swartabreck were added and, in the immediately succeeding years a further five crofts, Pekin, Burnside, Petra, Pictou and Haughland, pushed the margin of cultivation still farther southwards on to the common. These places provide a typical selection of crofting-reclamation names, quite as worthy of study as the prestigious *skaills*, *bisters*, *stadir* and *garths* of the Norse past. Some names reflect the

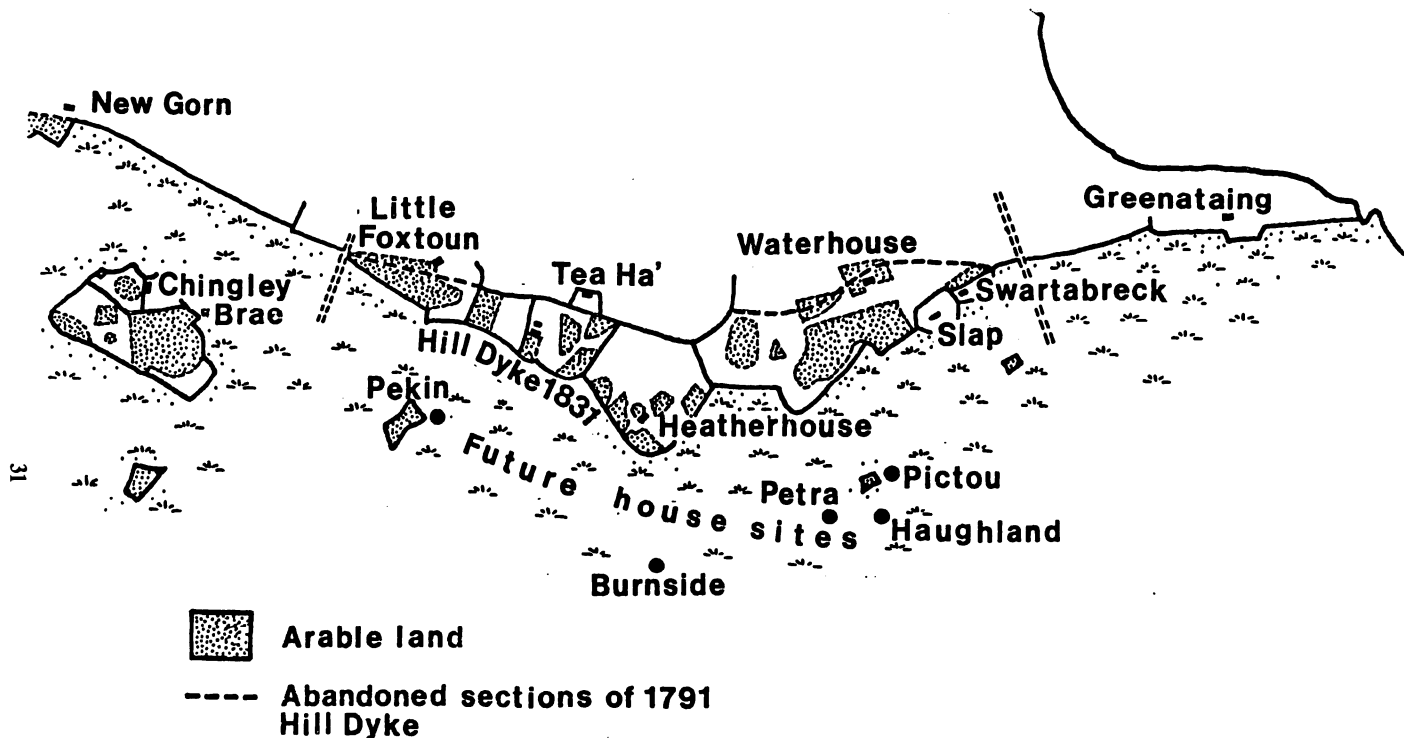


Figure 2 The crofting 'pioneer fringe' on the southern margin of Hollandstoun, 1831. The map shows how the 'flitting out' of the old hill dyke of 1791 had given rise to a series of hill-margin crofts, of which the 4¼ acre holding of Waterhouse was the largest. Chingley Brae provides an example of a 'ringit quoy'. In the years following 1831 a further series of crofts were reclaimed from the common, the sites of which have been plotted on the map.

marginal nature of the land, others commemorate the travels of nineteenth century Orcadians and their involvement in the great events of their times, and a further class of names with a frequently humorous turn of phrase, confer the title *Ha'* (hall) on huts of the smallest size and flimsiest construction. Tea Ha', for example, was inhabited by Marion Drummond who lived alone and earned a meagre living as a straw-plaiter (1841 Census), an occupation notoriously connected with visits by gossiping neighbours, much idle chatter, and the extravagant habit of drinking tea. In the same spirit of humorous naming, this entire area was known as 'The Balkans' because it was fragmented into little territories and inhabited by people for ever fighting with one another. While Figure 2 shows that most new crofts had been formed by 'flitting out the dykes' of existing arable land, Chingley Brae provides an example of an enclosure totally surrounded by common. This is what was known in Orkney as a 'ringit quoy' and to describe a farm as such was the ultimate insult, carrying the connotation, not only that the land was marginal, but also that it had been 'stolen' from the common.

Along this section of common edge – a distance of not much more than half a mile – the 1841 census recorded eighteen households and fifty-five people. The leading male occupation was fishing, but a high proportion of the population was female, and the nine households which relied on an income from straw-plaiting must have been badly hit as prices fell back. Spinners, knitters and a solitary cotton handloom weaver can hardly have been better off. Only two members of the community were classed as 'paupers', but others were clearly surviving on minimal incomes eked out by the produce of their tiny holdings. Several were farm servants, but only James Stevenson, occupier of the 4¼ acre croft of Waterhouse, described himself as a "farmer".

The Rev. George Barry, author of the *History of the Orkney Islands* and parish minister of Shapinsay, was highly critical of common grazings. Hill dykes were built of turf rather than stone, and they often proved insufficient to protect growing crops. He described how invading sheep, "instead of being directed by the tender and attentive care of a shepherd, are attacked with sticks and stones, and hunted by dogs, with more fury than is commonly used to ravenous

beasts in other countries” (OSA Shapinsay, 275). Those who have witnessed the wrath of a crofter pursuing sheep which have got into his corn can well picture the scene. However, the somewhat sycophantic minister’s proposal that the whole system of common grazings should be abolished was not a little influenced by the fact that the leading landowner had recently taken the West Hill into his private possession. On the other hand, the poor people who lived along the edge of the common had no such doubts about its value; for them, the hill was an essential resource, and it provided a reservoir of new land on which their future prospects depended.

Strange though it may seem, a common method of adding to the arable land was for crofters to bring abandoned turf dykes into cultivation. Turf dykes required to be re-built each spring to make good the erosion of winter rains and the depredations of cattle, sheep and the highly-agile Orkney pigs which were kept in large numbers, “to the regret of all good farmers” (OSA Shapinsay, 276). The ancient Country Acts decreed that dykes were to be “five quarters hight” and placed on farmers an annual obligation to make them stock-proof (Barry, 463). This re-building was supposed to be completed by mid-March, but Bailie Courts (when they were still in existence) frequently repeated the injunction in April and, by June, they often ordered the work to be done within forty-eight hours “under payne of poynding” (impounding of stock). The typical hill-dyke was a crumbling rampart of turf, meandering across the landscape, and built on a broad ridge formed from the outward-spreading remains of its predecessors. The hump-backed ridge of an abandoned dyke, with its deep organic soils and surface drainage, was an attractive site for cultivation; indeed, in size and shape it closely resembled an ordinary rig.

In the vicinity of Plover Ha’ (another good example of a reclamation name), a curious rig pattern is to be found on a map of 1831 (Figure 3). A series of rigs ran through low-valued grassland, each rig apparently five to ten yards in width and up to a quarter of a mile in length. Since the westernmost of these rigs corresponded to the boundary of the common as it had been in 1791, it is clear that former turf dykes were under cultivation. The low value of adjacent grassland can be explained by the damage to pasture caused by the annual paring of turf for dyke-building. Since the oldest of the dykes in this area

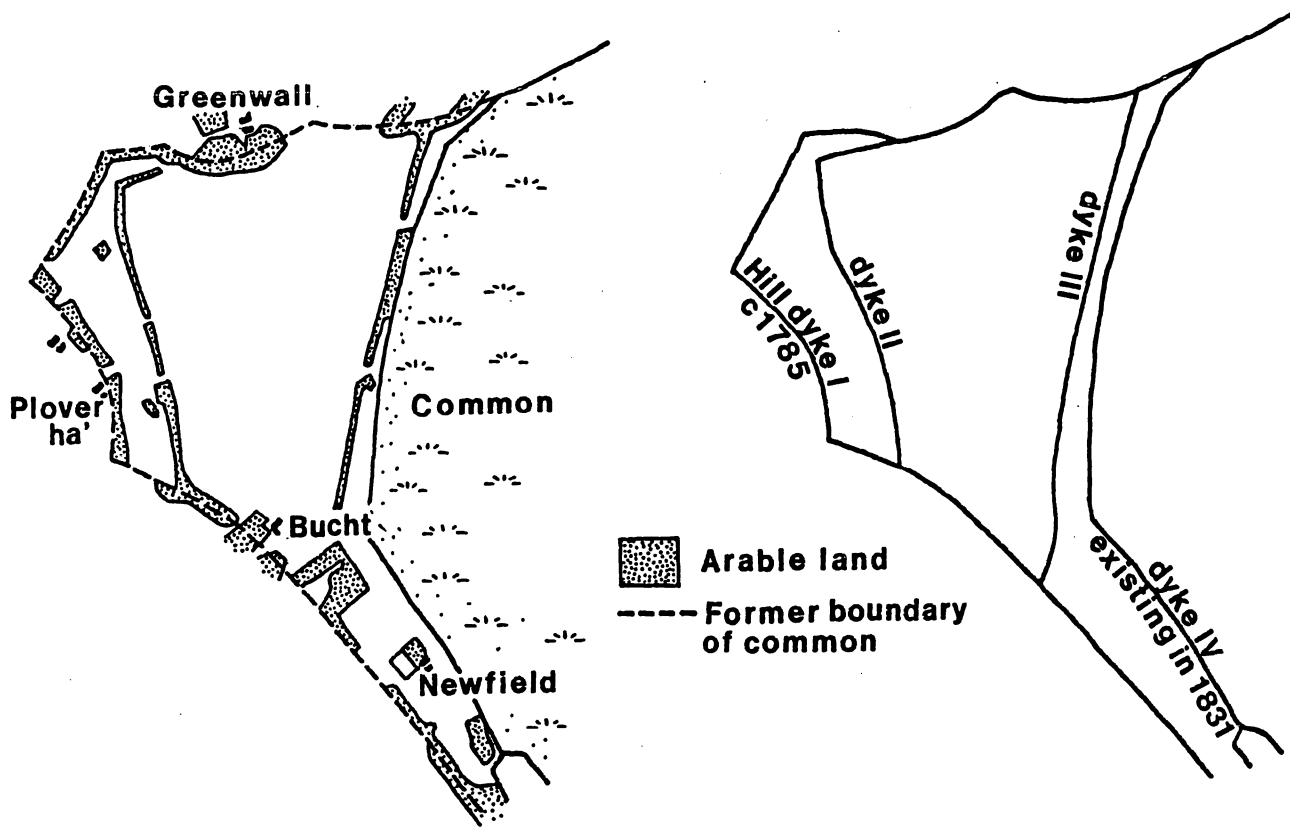


Figure 3 Cultivation of abandoned turf dykes in the vicinity of Plover Ha', 1831.

cannot be earlier than the appropriation of the West Hill (c. 1785), these four successive dykes had an average life of only about a dozen years – it was a very mobile frontier.

Once ‘fossil dykes’ preserved in rig patterns have been recognised, they begin to turn up all over the place! It becomes apparent that, in a flat landscape like that of Shapinsay where much of the common was reclaimable, hill-dykes were not fixed by topography and soils, but were mobile features advancing across the landscape (and presumably at other periods retreating). An estate map of 1846 shows particularly good examples of fossil dykes in the vicinity of Vedesquoy (Figure 4). In this part of the island, there were two nuclei of settlement, the township of Burroughston on the east and the district of Meoness on the west side, originally separated by an extension of the North Hill Common. In Burroughston, the names East House, Mid-House and Nist-House (nethermost house) record the intensification of settlement. However, the process of expansion can be seen more clearly in Meoness where settlement centred on the vestigial *boer*-name, the Noust of Erraby, a name generally accepted as denoting early and important Norse settlement. Outward from this are to be found, first, a zone of Norse *quoy*-names (Sholtoquoy, Haquoy, Vedesquoy and Quoys) and, second, Biggings and Diggings-names of Scots origin lying amid traces of fossil dykes. This outward movement impinged on the common which separated Burroughston from Meoness until the point was reached where it was abandoned as common, thus greatly shortening the length of hill-dyke which had to be maintained. The abandoned hill-dykes were brought into cultivation, thus preserving the fossilised outline in a striking looped pattern of rigs.

When Colonel David Balfour succeeded to his father’s estate, he was also lucky enough to inherit the Indian-based fortune of his parsimonious and extremely long-lived great-uncle, John Balfour. The purchase of the financially embarrassed Laing estate and the former bishopric property belonging to the Crown gave Balfour sole ownership of the island. He had elaborate plans for his estate, including the building of the mock-baronial Balfour Castle whose gothic exterior now completely surrounds and entombs the old family home of Clifdale. Balfour’s succession coincided with the very

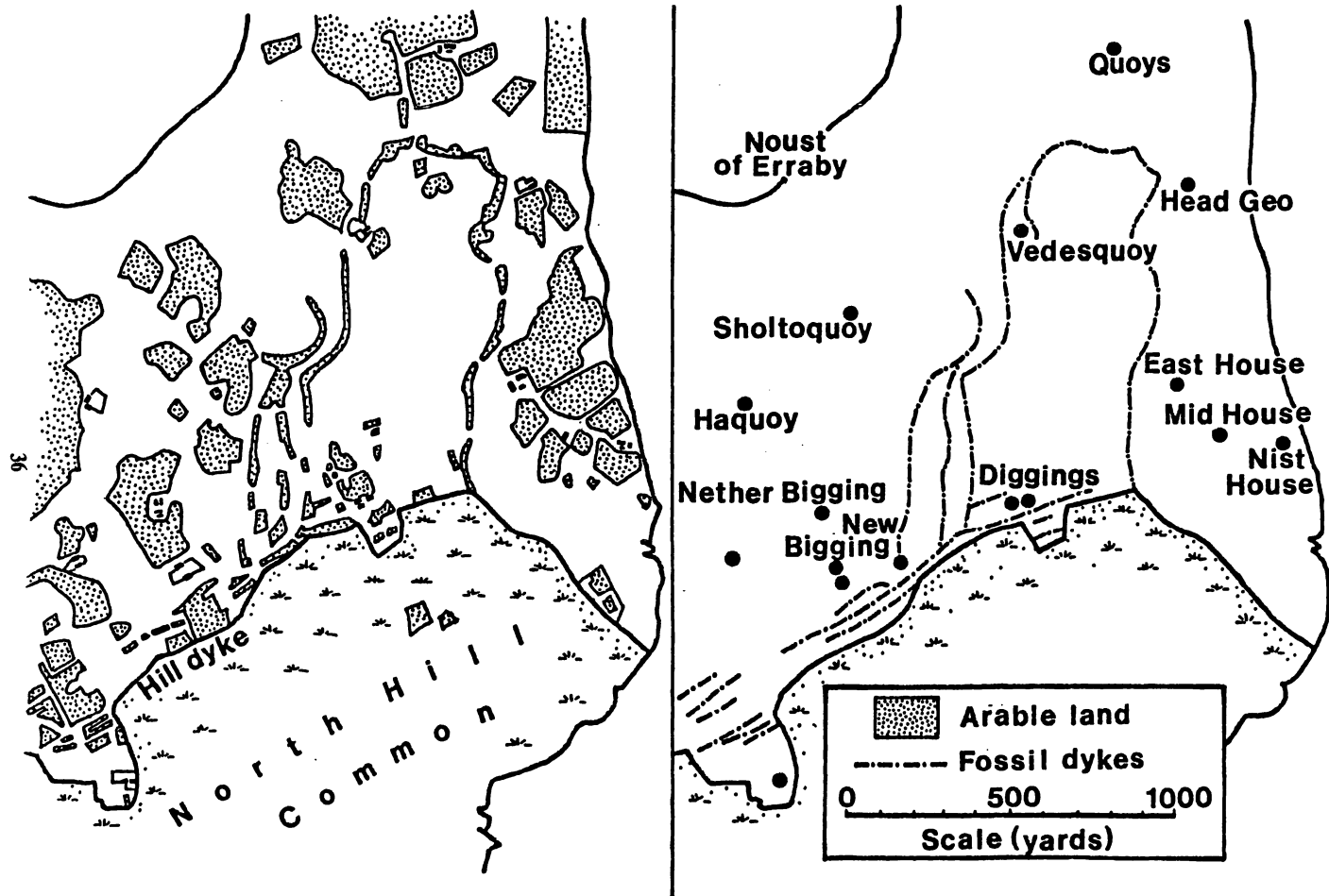


Figure 4 Fossil dykes preserved in rig patterns in the Meoness-Burroughston area, 1846

beginnings of the new wave of prosperity then reaching Orkney. The coming of steamships opened new markets and, in response to vastly improved cattle prices, the Orkney economy entered a period of rapid and sustained growth. At the same time, new capital became available for improvement in the form of government loans for drainage. Orkney lairds were quick to take advantage of the scheme and Balfour, with a loan of £6,000, was the biggest single borrower (O'Dell).

What he planned was nothing less than the comprehensive development of the entire island (Pringle). His factor, Marcus Calder, imposed a grid of ten-acre squares – a drawing board and T-square exercise – with straight line boundaries running unbroken for three miles or more. Open ditches were driven across the island without regard for existing fields, and the grid was used as the basis of letting. Leases obliged tenants to put in stone drains and build field-dykes and, if they were unwilling or unable to do so, the work was undertaken by the estate and charged as an addition to rent. Such a rigidly planned landscape could only have come into existence in that generation; in earlier times when estates were fragmented and land was in the hands of numerous lairds, or later when Orkney became a country of owner-occupiers, field patterns of such geometric regularity could never have been created – it was, *par excellence*, the landscape of the big estate. The nineteenth century author, Daniel Gorrie, compared reclamation of this kind to the breaking out of the American prairies (Gorrie, 277), and certainly there was the same total disregard for what went before.

However, Orkney farmers were not Red Indians and Orkney's farming revolution was based on the indigenous population, in marked contrast to the way in which 'Improvement' arrived in the Highlands in the form of sheep farming conducted by immigrants. Shapinsay farmers and crofters might object to the disruption of the familiar pattern of their fields, and complain about Balfour's rigid adherence to his grid which he was reluctant to modify even when the lie of the land made it necessary to dig ditches of inordinate depth. But they quickly discovered that there were profits for the tenant in the new methods of farming and, in an era of expansion, there was land for all who were able to farm it. For poor people, there was casual work to be had in draining, dyke-building and picking stones off newly reclaimed fields.

Shapinsay was much admired as an example of what might be achieved by capitalistic reclamation – it was the “fons et origio” of Orkney improvement (Pringle). Previous to development, the island had contained a mere 748 acres of arable land (NSA, 82), but the grid provided a framework within which a further 1,500 acres were added over the next twenty years. Figure 5 shows the new field pattern on what once had been the North Hill Common. Not only were common grazings, the crofter-pioneer fringe, ‘fossil dykes’ and the old rig pattern swept away in their entirety, but the whole area of common had disappeared under the plough, being completely cultivated almost to the very edge of the cliffs.

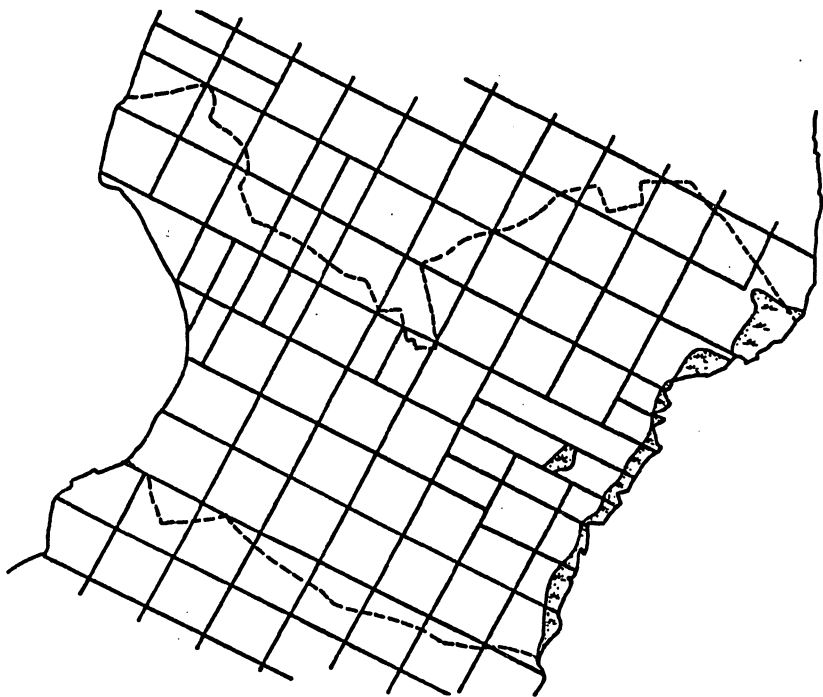


Figure 5 Field patterns in the former North Hill Common. Broken lines indicate the boundaries of the common in 1831.

Map Sources

Grainger & Miller, 1831, Plan of the Commonly in the Parish of Shapinsay.

Map of the Island of Shapinsay, 1846.

Miller, J.D., 1861, Map of Shapinsay.

(These maps are deposited on temporary loan in Orkney Archives).

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