

The eve of the Industrial Revolution: access to land in the weaving parish of Bisley

by Joan Jameson

Access to land is the *raison d'être* of the peasant economy. That much is certain. Much less certain, and the topic of some considerable debate, is the role of land in any proto-industrial system. Prior to the conversion of cloth manufacture in the West of England to a fully mechanised industry, the weaving process was carried out within households in rural parishes such as Bisley.¹ Here, by the very nature of the location, the role of land in the shaping of this proto-industrial economy would appear to be critical. The probability is that the land system evident in the parish depended in varying degrees on opportunities for land husbandry by families who were also skilled in weaving. If that were the case, at an intimate family level many weaving households' access to even very small pieces of land could have been of considerable significance to them. This paper aims to explore the implication of access to land for the Bisley weaving population.

Before the industry's expansion during the eighteenth century, it is almost certain that cloth was produced in the area from as early as the twelfth century and much firm evidence for the manufacture of cloth dates from the sixteenth century. With the growth of sheep farming on the wolds in the fifteenth century wool dealing became especially important. Then in the following century Flemish influence on the wool trade, when several Huguenot families brought their expertise to the region, ensured the trade's continuing development. When efforts were being made to confine the manufacture of woollen cloth to towns around 1557-1566 an exception was made for the valley of, amongst others, Stroudwater. In the early 1580s, there was evidence of the manufacture with the mention of two 'rack-places' (for drying dyed cloth on the hillsides) and of a 'dyehouse'. In another instance a tenant of Bisley, William Esler, "was fined for cutting down an oak upon his tenement, and making thereof 'a boame for a loome'." The importance of the industry is also reflected in the 1585 Acts of Parliament which were passed regulating the breadth of cloth in Gloucestershire.²

The fabric produced in the region was a superior, fine woollen cloth, for both the country's internal market and abroad. Known as 'Stroudwater scarlet', the rich red cloth was exported in the seventeenth century to American colonies, and by the eighteenth century was in demand for soldiers.³ By then the majority of the processes of manufacture had been transferred to mills. Essential to industrialisation were the fast running streams in the steep valleys, providing power to mills for fulling and finishing the cloth. The broadweaving process, nevertheless, continued to be carried out within the rural setting, and had become organised into a proto-industrial system whereby clothiers based in Stroud 'put out' work and materials to hand weavers in the surrounding rural parishes, and paid for work done in individual households. The weaving procedure was carried out by two skilled weavers working at opposing sides of a wide loom within their cottage or small workshop; hence the term 'broadweavers'. By the eighteenth century the weaving families were in effect selling their skills and labour to clothiers in Stroud, whose prosperity from the business peaked around 1690-1760.⁴

In assessing key requirements for larger scale industrialisation, Perry observed that "the agricultural wealth of the county [Gloucestershire] was the foundation of its industrial prosperity."⁵ Hence, arable farming in the north of Bisley parish enabled the south of the parish to focus on cloth manufacture more generally. Historians of rural industry have recognised that the rapid development from the peasant family unit, weaving on a small scale, to a proto-industrial system circa the 1700s had a profound effect on people's relationship with the land.

Drawing on the foregoing this article offers a case study of the large proto-industrial weaving parish of Bisley and its rural households, focussing on their relationship with land in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. Whilst investigating the socioeconomic conditions in this community 'from

below', particular attention is paid to the degree of access to land and the parishioners' attitudes to changing roles and opportunities associated with land availability.

It is important to note that Bisley parish was endowed with many advantages, which stimulated its cloth manufacturing industry. In this very large parish, the demise of manorial control, with its ensuing freedom of organisation within the industry, was attractive to the continental cloth workers who had migrated to the region.⁶ Later, in the eighteenth century this freedom, with the parish's abundant access to land, continued to be an attraction to succeeding generations of cloth workers in the region. In the late 1770s, canal ways constructed along the valley linked the region with the River Thames and hence to ports.⁷ In common with many parishes, a proposal was made to implement parliamentary enclosure early in the century, threatening the parishioners' continuing benefit from large open fields and large commons.⁸ If the labouring poor of this rural parish were able to combine its farming and weaving employment as a dual agricultural and industrial economy they were in a position to continue, to some extent, their customary way of life.

The following sections will give an impression of life in the parish by looking at families who were involved in these changes, their occupations, living standards, and particularly the degree of access they had to land and the significance of this resource.

Occupations

Parish registers offer a means of taking a somewhat closer look at the community's inhabitants. The occupational structure (only men's occupations recorded) of Bisley parish is revealed in the marriage records (unusually for this time the vicars recorded this detail), so offering the opportunity to establish the parish's significance as a rural manufacturing parish within an agricultural context.⁹ These records provide evidence at an individual level of the scale of the parish's involvement in both cloth manufacture and agriculture, and the extent of the population's rural poor.

During the middle years of the eighteenth century, as an example, the occupational structure of Bisley parish comprised only three significant recorded male occupations, namely, men working in the cloth industry, labourers, and yeomen. By far the predominant occupations for men were related to the cloth industry. Of these, the vast majority were broadweavers, apart from whom, out of the many trades within the industry, only a very few shearmen, scribblers, and the clothiers themselves were mentioned in the parish register. The other significant occupation was that of labouring. It can be assumed that in a rural parish such as Bisley, at that time, this referred in the main to agricultural labourers, though a few quarrymen may have been included. Somewhat inexplicably, there was virtually no evidence in the parish marriage records of yeomen, that is, more well-off family farmers, operating at this date.

Other anomalies occur in this source, which reveals very few examples of presumed typical occupations, such as carpenter, slater, cordwainer, mason, baker, tailor, pargiter, and butchers. Others who only appeared once or twice were a pig killer, musician, soldier, razorgrinder, and a 'Dealer in Spirituous figures'. Despite the assiduity of the vicars, during these almost thirty years, some occupations, which would have been prevalent, must be missing. For instance, it is unlikely that none of the many shopkeepers, victuallers, and blacksmiths married during the period in question. (This same problem of missing names of people marrying has also been found in the parish of Colyton.)¹⁰

Overall though, the occupational structure is evidence of a dual economy in Bisley parish, where agriculture and manufacture coexisted, emphasising the importance to the rural poor of agricultural labouring and working in the cloth industry.

Families

The poverty of the people of the parish, according to an example from the middle of the eighteenth century, was reflected at the heart of their families where they suffered high infant mortality rates.¹¹

It has been suggested that higher mortality rates were more likely in large populations and communities in urban and industrial areas, rather than rural parishes, since they were more likely to come into contact with people from outside the district.¹² However, even though Bisley was a rural parish, both these conditions were relevant to it. Rudder substantiates this view, and with particular reference to Bisley, wrote that its “inhabitants were more unhealthy from an epidemic fever prevailing,” particularly in the years 1711 to 1715.¹³ Rudder gave as the causes of unhealthiness “the accession of people from other parts, to a growing manufacture, ... [and] the poor people’s incommodious way of life in close and crowded habitations; but especially the general intemperance of manufacturing people ... few [of whom] make any provision for sickness or old age; and a hard season ... [which] carries many of them off.”¹⁴

Their suffering was exacerbated at the end of the century, especially as a result of bad harvests comparable to that of 1781. The increasing harshness of conditions for the poor was manifested in the form of cutbacks in the parish: “To pay only rents that are promised and meat only once a week in workhouse and that only ½ what it used to be.”¹⁵ These reductions reflect that at the end of the century the community was suffering from rising food costs, and could not afford to increase or even maintain its commitments to the poor. At the end of the eighteenth century high prices of provisions caused the government to investigate the state of agriculture and in 1802 returns for the acreage of arable crops were requested of the incumbent of each parish in England and Wales. Although the year before, 1801 was one of good harvest, in Bisley the incumbent did not feel that the abundance of the crops at that time was proportionately beneficial to the population.¹⁶ By the early nineteenth century, it was noted that “conditions in Bisley were possibly the worst in the country”, yet alone the county, and that there was “suffering beyond belief”.¹⁷

So, several factors have been shown here to contribute to the predicament of poor families in the parish. Among these were poor health with regard to young infants and their mothers, disease epidemics, and the burden of supporting the poor at a time of rising food costs. Besides these problems, their access to land was dwindling, as will be seen in the next section.

Access to land

As Bisley’s families who were at the bottom of the social scale were moving from their peasant existence towards being members of a rapidly expanding industrial society, their experiences in relation to the land underwent some changes. An assessment has been made as to how much land was available to different occupational groups. This has been based on cross-referencing individuals’ land tax assessments with individual grooms named in the parish register. 1790 has been chosen as a sample year, by which time a little extra information was being recorded in the deficient land tax assessments. In order to facilitate the use of this source, a calculation of the acreage equivalent of land tax assessments has been made.¹⁸

Inevitably a somewhat impressionistic view results from this analysis, given the lack of detailed information in the sources, but its value lies in a representation of the situation of the lower level of society which would otherwise remain hidden.

By 1790 families who were exonerated from paying any land tax were recorded. Reasons for this were: people who had an ancient plot consisting of a house with a garden which was too small to be taxed; and by law, poor smallholders of land who paid rent of less than twenty shillings a year were exempted from paying land tax.¹⁹ Also, ancient common land should not have been taxed.²⁰ In the parish of Bisley roughly 40% of households were free of this taxation. This high degree of exoneration in itself is an indication of the small size of pieces of land to which they had access. Furthermore, of the remaining 60% of properties which did attract taxation, taking into account the low value of land tax allocated to them, well over half were attached to very small properties apparently consisting only of a house and garden.²¹ The high number of people with a very small amount of land, or who were actually landless, and were therefore impoverished, is further evidence that work would be sought outside the family unit either through industrial or agricultural wages.

This illustration, taken from the single year 1790, is suggestive that to the lower level of society, (consisting mainly of broadweavers, yeomen, labourers, and tradesmen) virtually no land over 30 acres was available. Broadweavers did hold a large number of properties, possibly as many as those at the top of the social scale. However, they do seem to have been the group who individually held the least amount of land. Broadweavers' access to at least a tiny piece of land was likely to have been perceived by them as a valuable asset which could be cultivated for food production, and so supplement their broadweaving income.²² Their involvement in the cloth manufacturing industry would have relied not only on their traditional skill in weaving, but resulted from their impoverishment because they were land poor or landless.

Access to very small plots of land was evident for tradesmen and craftsmen too. Records show them to have been working as, for instance, baker, victualler, blacksmith, mason, millwright, shopkeeper, carpenter, tailor, pargiter, musician, carrier, or scribbler.²³ In addition to such petty traders who were land poor, it has been found that there were some weavers in the community who had to rent land for their business. These were weavers who were taking on an apprentice or two at the end of the eighteenth century, a sign that they must have been well enough established to be able to do so, and yet were land poor.²⁴

Whether or not such weavers by then would have chosen to supplement their wages from some access to land, it seems that this was not an option. Then again, it may have been that established broadweavers found it more lucrative to concentrate on their manufacturing business and so had forsaken agricultural production. How vital was the poor parishioners' bond with the land, albeit in most cases with very small pieces of land?

Small pieces of land

In this parish of extremely fragmented land tenure, during the years 1802 to 1856 the authorities had painstakingly recorded land size and its uses. The very smallest plots of up to five acres consisted of three types of land: orchards, common land, and gardens. Out of a total of around 120 small pieces of land, a fifth was described as common land, whereas twice as many were orchards. Ten quarries were mentioned. Attached to each of twenty-two parish properties provided for the poor, was at least one garden. It is important to identify how such plots were cultivated and to what extent they were valued by the parishioners.²⁵

With regard to orchards, it was not uncommon for them to have been planted on a small plot of under two acres, several being less than one acre; and many of between two and four acres. Orchards had a higher value recorded than did other types of land. They were a very important asset producing a high value crop which could be harvested from a very small piece of land. It is possible that there were at least fifty orchards on such small pieces of land in the parish.²⁶

Traditionally, cider had been drunk by farmers and labourers in the West Country, and according to Rudder writing in 1779, commercial cider making became very important to Gloucestershire's rural economy.²⁷ Not all cider would be brewed on a commercial scale though, and if, as was common in the region, Bisley labourers were receiving part of their wages (a form of 'truck') in ale or cider, it would have been advantageous to them to have a few apple trees of their own for brewing cider independently of their employers. So when the Cider Act was passed in 1763, whereby a tax was levied on makers of cider as well as its retailers, labourers were denied that tax-free benefit. The perceived value placed upon orchards is further illuminated by responses to this cider tax. It was claimed that the "woollen manufactory ... greatly decayed, owing chiefly to the Cyder Tax, as the spinners and others employed in that branch are not able to maintain themselves by reason of the excessive high prices of provisions, and that Cyder is now almost as dear as beer."²⁸ In Stroudwater strong feelings against the cider tax were expressed in a symbolic act of cutting down an apple tree together with an effigy of the imposer of the cider tax. Protest at all levels of society resulted in the speedy repeal of this act in 1766.²⁹ Records for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries demonstrate that labourers in Bisley and its contiguous parishes continued to

value cider making, since they were prepared on very many occasions to steal a substantial 'quantity of apples' from orchards, at risk of a fine, or even serving one, two, or up to six months' hard labour in a house of correction.³⁰

Apart from the very small amount of land required for such a lucrative product, an added advantage was its low level labour intensity. Unlike most crops, the fruit trees did not need to be replanted every year, since, according to Rudge (1807) they lasted between 50 and 100 years. It was even observed that in the case of perry pears, trees could survive for up to 300 years.³¹ Though many of the above mentioned very small pieces of land utilised fell far below five acres they would have been of great significance and value to their holders and cultivators.

Another very important category of land for the poor of the parish was that of common land, in the form of both commons and their adjoining open fields. Anciently the commons had been woodland when under the control of manorial estates. Tenants had had commoning rights to take wood, and where woods later became commons, the customary rights continued with inhabitants enjoying common of pasture.³²

A survey undertaken by the authorities illustrates that Bisley was a good example of a parish where the rural poor, both agricultural and manufacturing workers, could profit from tiny pieces of land. The surveyors valued common land lower than orchards, though the fact that it was given a reasonable value, and recorded, underlines the importance of at least some access to land by small occupiers. Very small pieces of land recorded as "Common" and occasionally "In common Field" were often valued at 10s (per acre per annum), although two cases were recorded at 22s.³³

At this point, it is useful to consider, from a report on cottage allotments to the House of Commons, the significance of such pockets of land to men who were skilled in working the open fields. A man, with a wife and five children, had been let one rood of land (a quarter of an acre) at the cost of £1 a year. On this small piece of land he produced a staggering amount of food during the year. He cultivated for sale onions to the value of 24s, carrots 8s, and his wife sold gooseberries and currants worth 2s 6d. From the allotment the family had all types of culinary vegetable, including potatoes, and he over the course of twelve months had had to purchase only one sack of potatoes for their consumption.³⁴

Other uses to which common land was put in the mid eighteenth century is revealed by the following list relating to the vicar's glebe lands: "flax hemp, milk, butter, cheese, calves, cocks, hens, swans geese ducks pigs, eggs wax hony apples pears gardens mills, Pigeons, fish, fowling rabbits hares and all sorts of business herbage coppice wood". Pack horses and donkeys too needed pastureland, as did cows, especially the more highly valued milch cows.³⁵

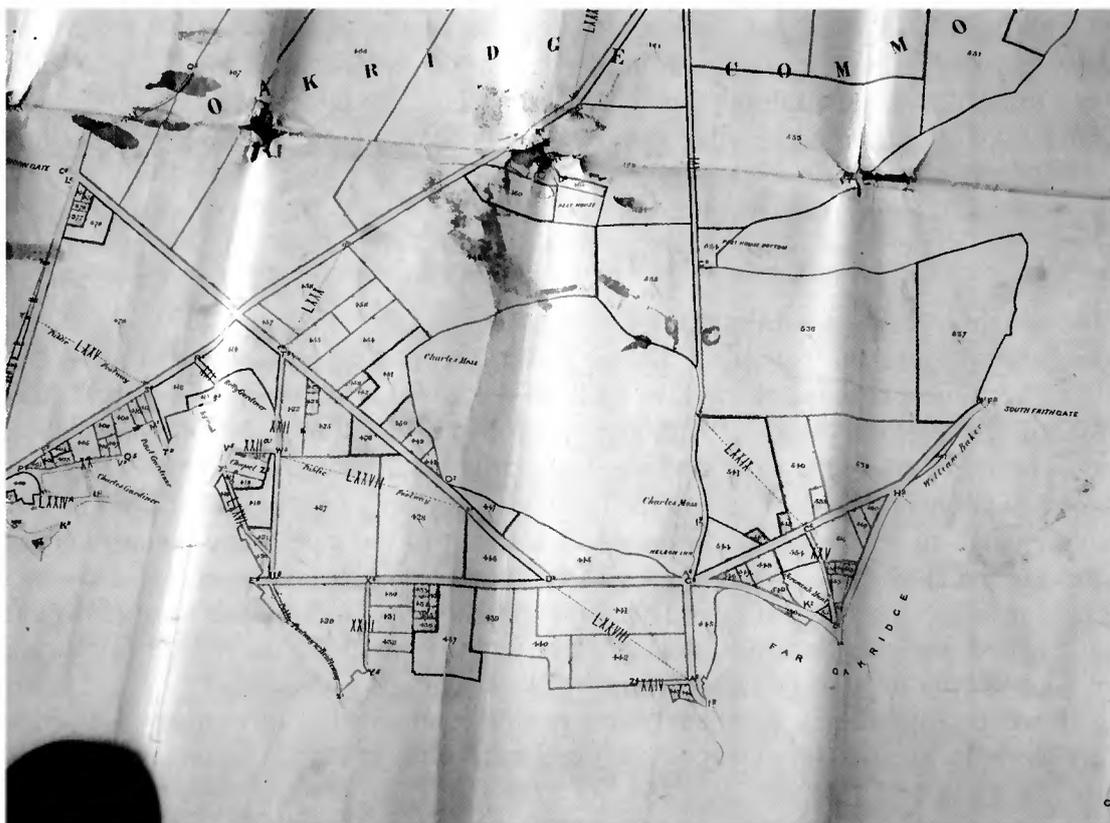
The value of the commons is further underlined by the fact that, in Bisley parish, they were still being used by the poor in the early nineteenth century. In 1817, Thomas Dickenson, a labourer of Bisley was convicted and fined £1 for "depasturing one scabby or mangy sheep on Bisley Common, contrary to statute"; four others from the parish were fined up to £5 for the same offence.³⁶ This is an indication that the authorities were exhibiting much concern about the health of the commons, aided by the vigilance of other commoners. The commons were still valued for pasture, and were not disease ridden and worthless. This efficient regulation of the commons is counter to the assumption by the Reporters to the Board of Agriculture and their supporters that common usage made it more difficult to control disease, compared to enclosed land.³⁷

In an 'open' parish such as Bisley, with the virtual disappearance of the manorial system here, control over the use of the commons would have weakened. The extensive commons of the parish, together with the cloth industry, had attracted large numbers of people into new cottage weaving settlements on the fringe of the commons. Squatters' dwellings were developed by weavers and cloth workers.³⁸ As was noted at the time: "The Establishment of the Manufacture of Cloth introduced many new Inhabitants, who availed themselves of an undisputed Settlement of the Waste Lands. A detached Village, on the Declivities of the *Great Common* consists of these Cottages, to which, long Possession has given a prescriptive Right".³⁹

For instance, it is evident that people migrating from the neighbouring parishes of Miserden and Minchinhampton took advantage of the above superior conditions in Bisley parish. In the case of Miserden the rural poor would have valued the preferential conditions for the cultivation of crops afforded by Bisley's lower altitude and greater land availability. Minchinhampton did have a large common and a large cloth industry, but nevertheless the inhabitants appear to have recognised that Bisley could offer more.⁴⁰ Where land ownership was much divided, there would have been less control over incomers, leading to the development of a "densely populated and heavily pauperised" 'open' parish.⁴¹

Later, with an ever increasing population, immigration did eventually decline, presumably because competition for paid work and for land intensified. Ongoing private enclosures by landlords would also have made less land accessible to both the parishioners and immigrants. Such informal methods of enclosure are unlikely to have been recorded, so cannot be investigated.⁴²

The problem of private enclosures eating into land, had already been brought to the fore in 1733 when Bisley parish was threatened with parliamentary enclosure. The bill was met with fervent opposition and elicited a petition from "the inhabitants, the copyholders, labourers, and small freeholders" whereby they stressed that the commons were fundamental to their existence, having been "freely built over by 'Carders, Spinners, Weavers, and numberless Artificiers' employed in the woollen manufacture" and that it would "entirely destroy several hundred industrious families, which are now settled upon these commons ... and consequently must prejudice the Woollen Manufacture by removing the hands absolutely necessary for their business."⁴³ The determination with which the parishioners triumphed over this threat for well over a century (although piecemeal private enclosures continued) is a demonstration of the enduring perception of the value of even small pieces of land by the poor of the parish. The following protestations to the vicar of Bisley illustrate this clearly: he, along with others, was accused of "trying to rob the working class of their Birthright" and threatened that if they didn't favour the poor, "By God I will shoot you or employ someone else to do it!"⁴⁴



Oakridge Common GA: Q/R1.22

By the mid nineteenth century, after the passing of General Enclosure Acts, parliamentary enclosure was inevitable in the parish. The above detail of the 1869 enclosure map of Oakridge Common in the parish of Bisley illustrates how tiny were some of the plots of land around the edges of the common, many being described in the enclosure award as a house and garden. Of people in Bisley parish who were awarded money rather than an allotment, out of a total of 110 cottages with very small amounts of land, 94 had less than one acre. Where claims for allotments were allowed, over 70% of the properties consisted of less than one acre.⁴⁵ It has to be recognised that such apparently insignificant pieces of land were in fact crucial to the poor of weaving communities, and it had been worth their while fighting enclosure to retain them for as long as possible.

Despite all the protest and value placed on using the commons, though much later than most parishes in England, parliamentary enclosure did go ahead in the year 1869. The parish did not get a good deal though: in exchange for 900 acres of common land the parish gained “15 acres of recreation ground, 30 acres of garden allotments and 5 burial grounds”.⁴⁶

Alongside orchards and commons, the importance of the garden did not go unrecognised in surveys at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Specific mention of a garden was made in many documents, such as the “Inventory of Houses, Gardens, Loom, &c being the property of the Parish, March 24th 1829”⁴⁷ where some of the parish poor may have enjoyed the provision of gardens. A germane observation has been made: that a garden constituted “a crucial asset to offset the grinding poverty of the agricultural labourer” who was land poor and needed to grow his own food.⁴⁸ If the poor of the parish were living on bread for most of the time, being able to cultivate every fragment of land, at which they would have become very skilled, could mean that they had the luxury of eating potatoes for probably half of the year.⁴⁹ Even Thomas Lambert would have valued his rented cottage and presumably very small garden, albeit he only paid rent of 8^d or 9^d a week.⁵⁰ The parish Survey Book recorded that in Water Lane and other locations poor weaving families in the parish were provided with rented housing containing at least one broadloom, but these too had a garden which was not overlooked.⁵¹

From the above preoccupation with land it is apparent that just before the vestiges of the peasant system had given way to an fully industrialised society, access to land continued to exercise the minds of both those to whom land was mostly inaccessible and to the authorities who were monitoring such an important resource.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to engage with questions over access to land in relation to the development of the proto-industrial economy in the parish of Bisley. From this has emerged a convincing impression of attitudes to land access by families at the lower end of the social scale on the eve of the comprehensive mechanisation of the cloth industry. Although they had to endure low living standards, families compensated as best they could by being employed primarily by either the local cloth industry, or working on the land, or a combination of the two. In the heyday of the cloth industry conditions in the parish had been attractive enough to accommodate broadweavers living in the parish and some migrating workers from neighbouring parishes. The large commons in particular, together with adjoining open fields, were an essential land resource for the rural poor. Not only did common land provide pasture for their animals, but arable land added, for some families, vital produce and the possibility of selling any surplus. To this end, plots of land did not need to be large, as the value of gardens and especially highly prized orchards has shown. However, over the century, and into the nineteenth century this situation deteriorated when manufacturing work declined, as too did access to even small plots of land.

At the parish level, it can be said that the cloth industry was able to flourish in the run up to the industrial revolution owing to a dual agricultural and manufacturing economy. Likewise, to some extent the industry prospered on the back of the workers’ access to land, though that access was mostly minimal and did not guarantee the workers a high standard of living. Nevertheless, as the population increased, both ongoing private enclosure settlements and the 1869 parliamentary award bit into what little land remained available

to them. So, with the decline in the putting out of broadweaving work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, coupled with a diminishing ability to be self-sufficient by the time of enclosure, a great number of broadweaving and labouring families suffered the loss of supplementary means to support themselves.

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- ⁴⁴ GA: D745/E3 *circular 'Bisley Inclosure'* lists over 1,228 sheep, 237 beasts, 53 horses, and 57 donkeys; GA: P47 IN 4/6 *correspondence relating to enclosure, 1845-1864*; Shipman, J *Bisley – A Cotswold Village Remembered* Chantry : Eastcombe, Gloucestershire (1991) pp9-12
- ⁴⁵ GA: Q/RI.22 *enclosure map*; RE.22 *enclosure award*
- ⁴⁶ GA: D745/E3 *Bisley Inclosure*; Shipman, J *Bisley – A Cotswold Village Remembered* Chantry : Eastcombe, Gloucestershire (1991) p9
- ⁴⁷ GA: P47 VE 1/3 *Survey & Memorandum Book* (1802-1856)
- ⁴⁸ Shaw-Taylor, L 'Access to land by labourers and tradesmen in 18th century England' in Bavel, Bas J P van & Hoppenbrouwers, P *Landholding and land transfer in the North sea area (late Middle Ages – 19th century)* Brepols : Turnhout, Belgium (2004) p266
- ⁴⁹ Martin, J M: personal communication 8.4.2009
- ⁵⁰ GA: P47 OV 3/2/2 *Removal Orders from Bisley*
- ⁵¹ GA: P47 VE 1/4 *Survey Book* (1803)