

# Discover Ansty's Ancient Landscapes 4

In this series of photo-information we choose well-known areas of the Ansty Parish and investigate the history and geography of the surrounding landscape. This set looks at the early open field systems of Ansty.



Ansty: a photo reference diagram.

Source Google Earth 2021







Picture taken 17-10-2021

This annotated photograph taken using a wide-angle lens looking towards the west from the slopes of Middle Down allows the discerning viewer the ability to 'read the landscape use' right back to Saxon times, when Ansty village was founded.

In the immediate foreground where the camera was positioned are the chalk downs and their steep scarp slopes. The forest cover would have been more extensive in Saxon times. The large flat bench slopes gently upwards towards the tree lines marking the near horizon (such as 12 Acre Copse and Gore Copse). Past and present streams have eroded quite deep-set valleys or 'coombes' with clay bases creating a rolling 'greensand' landscape with forested tops. Here, Saxon settlers moved in (between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries) and built their settlements.

In Ansty, Saxons established a 2 open field-farming system after clearing the acres of woodlands and scrub. Hill Field or West field was established to the west of Ansty, and the East field was created on the tops of Cholden Down - in both cases they would have had a southern boundary roughly where the A30 is today. One field was worked and other was kept fallow to allow soil fertility to rebuild after cropping. The fields were divided up into strips called furrow longs (furlongs) with peasants cultivating holdings of scattered strips: each household was allocated a 'hide' of land (for the purposes of taxation) – a hide being deemed sufficient to support one family. A hundred hides made up an administrative division. Ansty was part of the Dunworth Hundred (and technically still is!) Peasants grazed their animals on established 'common lands' and 'waste'.

All our neighbouring settlements – Tisbury, Alvediston, Fovant, Swallowcliffe were established at this time by tribes belonging to the West Saxons – hence the name Wessex. Although the modern field boundaries have changed, the outside boundaries remain fundamentally the same to this day as does the parish boundary.

The communal open field system that was established by the Saxons was taken over by the conquering Normans after 1066 but the one difference was that all the land now belonged to the crown, which was then parceled out to the victors of the battle who paid homage to the King and thus the 'Feudal System' was established. Of course, this made little difference to the peasants of the land – they still had to toil the fields as they always did!

Ansty's 6 miles of public footpaths, bridleways and byways were all established from these early days and linked all three fields and common lands as well as sources of water and other resources.

As the population increased during Medieval times, the East and West fields expanded and a third one was established (Sheaf field or Shave field) which stretched far into the distance - the end marks the extremities of Ansty Parish's western boundary. These huge open fields remained much the same for centuries and were still well established towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the Arundells of Wardour Estate who owned the whole of Ansty from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Along with these fields were areas of woodland and pasture lands for communal grazing – referred to as common lands. Much of Ansty's common land was enclosed from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards and after the 18<sup>th</sup> century almost all the open fields were parceled up and awarded to private landowners. The chalk scarp slopes, and parts of the greensand bench was taken over by sheep farming during mid medieval times and beyond – denuding the slopes of their forest cover. The peasants gradually finished up as low paid farm labourers (who often poached the land to supplement their meagre diet) or drifted off into towns to find other work.

Ansty remained a very conservative 'feudal' village throughout the centuries almost until the Wardour Estate was sold in 1946 and this included the whole of Ansty village.

For more information, please view: [Maps and History](#)