

*Period Fencing: Methods of Enclosure of  
the Medieval and Renaissance Periods*

By Master Henry Fox

## Definitions

### Why?

Before we get into definitions the question needs to be asked: why would I investigate this subject?

Part of it certainly came from the jokes every time the subject of period fencing came up. The other side is because it is a subject which many assume they know, just from “common sense” and yet there is a lot more out there than people realise.

### What’s a Fence?

*“A fence is a structure that encloses an area, typically outdoors, and is usually constructed from posts that are connected by boards, wire, rails or netting. A fence differs from a wall in not having a solid foundation along its whole length.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the Medieval and Renaissance period, the option of wood, was the most common material for fences in different forms. Metal was not used because it was used for tools, weapons, and other things, even the fasteners which held the fence together.

For this discussion of the fence, the focus is use, though there will be fences used for a variety of things, use is essential. Walls can do what fences do.

There is also the indication of a ditch with a hedge grown in it, such a thing is called a fencerow, sometimes called a hedge-row where a hedge is present but serves the same purpose.

*“A fencerow is the strip of land by a fence that is left uncultivated. It may be a hedgerow or a shelterbelt (windbreak) or a refuge for native plants. If not too narrow, it acts as a habitat corridor.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia “Fence” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fence>, accessed 12/10/2021

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia “Agricultural fencing” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agricultural\\_fencing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agricultural_fencing), accessed 10/7/2021

## Fence Types

### Wattle

*“Wattle fences may be one of the oldest types of fencing still in use today. They were used in England long before Medieval times. Traditionally the fences are built from straight, slender, flexible saplings up to one and a half inches in diameter. These “withies” were then woven between upright wood posts. Willow was the ideal wood because it is pliable and resists splintering, but other woods were used as well.”<sup>3</sup>*

The wattle fence is the oldest form of fence present in the Medieval and Renaissance period, constructed from weaving, an ancient craft, saplings into one another to create sections of fence and then woven in amongst upright posts. This form of fence is even still used today.

*“Evidence of wattle construction was found at Woodcutts Settlement from the British Iron Age, and the Roman Vitruvius wrote about wattles in his book on architecture, De architectura, but the technique goes back to Neolithic times.”<sup>4</sup>*



Figure 1: “Gardening” translation of Christine de Pisan’s *Cité des Dames*; from Bruges, dated 1475

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<sup>3</sup> Fiske, J. “Wattle it be?” in *In My Opinion*: Sept. 15, 2020, *Digital Antiques Journal*, 2020, <https://antiquesjournal.com/index.php/2020/09/14/in-my-opinion-sept-15-2020/>, accessed 10/7/2021

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia “Wattle (construction)” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wattle\\_\(construction\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wattle_(construction)), [accessed 29/6/2022]

Weaving was a technique used in clothing manufacture used for another purpose, or in another case, it was a method used for baskets and clothing, turned to the purpose of creating fences. In either case, evidence for these fences can be found in images of the period. The “Gardening” image presented, shows an example of wattle in the background.

## Hurdle

*“A hurdle (UK English, limited US English) is a moveable section of light fence. In the United States, terms such as “panel”, “pipe panel” or simply “fence section” are used to describe moveable sections of fencing intended for agricultural use and crowd control;”<sup>5</sup>*

The hurdle is a section specifically created in the wattle form, created as a separate unit for sectioning off an area, usually to herd animals or protect crops from animals; “crowd control” referring to animals rather than human beings.

## Hedge

The hedge in the Medieval and Renaissance period was a standard form of fencing used frequently by the peasant farmer for its utility, and the seasonal supply of resources.

*“A hedge or hedgerow is a line of closely spaced shrubs and sometimes trees, planted and trained to form a barrier or to mark the boundary of an area, such as between neighbouring properties.”<sup>6</sup>*

The hedge was an effective method for delineating a property or boundary because it presented a natural barrier, and an obvious one. The greater advantage of such a fence was it produced resources the owner could use.

Branches within the plants were often trained by the individual to make the hedge thicker and stronger. The hedge was most often combined with a ditch to improve its effect.

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<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia “Hurdle” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurdle>, accessed 29/6/2022

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia “Hedge” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedge>, [accessed 30/3/2023]

## Ditch

*"125. To make a ditch*

*If thou make thy dyche foure foote brode, than wolde it be two foote and a halfe depe. And if it be .v. fote brode, than .iii. fote depe, and so accordynge; and if it be fyue fote brod, than it wolde be double sette, and the 4 rather it wolde fence it-selfe, and the lower hedge wyll serue."*<sup>7</sup>

The hedge and ditch advised by Fitzherbert's *The Book of Husbandry* of 1534 would present quite a formidable barrier, especially considering the most likely intruder would be a wandering animal of some kind rather than a human being, even then it would be a deterrent. This combination has a long history back to the Neolithic. Such combinations were common and used to good effect.

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<sup>7</sup> Fitzherbert, A. *The Book of Husbandry*, Reprinted from the Edition of 1534, Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1882., p.94

## Picket

The picket fence, a relatively common sight in our contemporary world, also the paling fence, with the palings closer together, both are associated with more modern periods, usually with the United States and the “perfect house”, than the Medieval and Renaissance period, however the evidence dates them earlier.

The picket fence is present in artworks throughout the medieval and Renaissance period. The paling fence is presented in images as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The “Virgin Saints in the Garden” is from a wood-cut image, and is English and dated to 1418, the artist is unknown.<sup>8</sup> Technically, this is a paling fence.

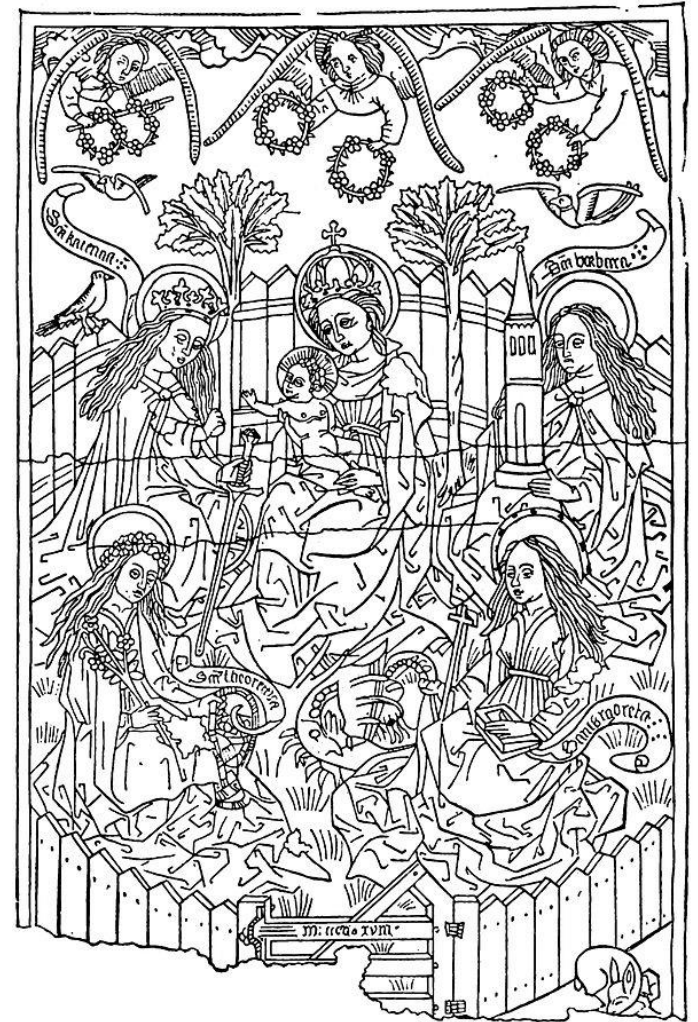


Figure 2: “Virgin Saints in the Garden”, Unknown, English, 1418, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus\\_conclusus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus_conclusus)

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<sup>8</sup> “Virgin Saints in the Garden”, Unknown, English, 1418, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus\\_conclusus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus_conclusus)



One of the most famous representations of the picket fence is in Sandro Botticelli's "Agony in the Garden" dated to approximately 1500.

With such examples of the picket and paling fence presented in such images it is certain that this form of fence was certainly present in the Medieval and Renaissance period.

Figure 3: "Agony in the Garden" Sandro Botticelli, c. 1500,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OrazioneOrtoBotticelli.jpg>

## Roundpole

*“The roundpole fence is a wooden fence typical to the countryside in Sweden (in Swedish: gärdesgård), Norway (in Norwegian: skigard), Finland (in Finnish: riukuaita, risuaita or pistoaita) and Estonia (in Estonian: roigasaed or teivasaed).”<sup>9</sup>*



Figure 4: “Fence from Smaland” By I, Boberger, CC BY-SA 3.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2461292>

The roundpole fence is made from round poles placed together, then a diagonal is placed and bound to it, connecting it to another pair of vertical poles, where further diagonal poles are placed in between.

This type of fencing is used for fencing off animals rather than fencing boundaries, and this is of no surprise considering the resources required. However, there was an abundance of wood available.

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<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia “Roundpole fence” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roundpole\\_fence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roundpole_fence), accessed 29/6/2022



## Dry stone

Dry stone is a wall, and most would separate walls from fences, especially considering the definition given at the beginning, however, the purpose is the most important.

*“Dry stone, sometimes called drystack or, in Scotland, drystane, is a building method by which structures are constructed from stones without any mortar to bind them together. Dry stone structures are stable because of their construction method, which is characterized by the presence of a load-bearing façade of carefully selected interlocking stones.”<sup>10</sup>*

This was not the only method by which stone walls were created, vaccary fences were also created in other places by placing slabs of stone upright, particularly for herding cattle.

However, the drystone is the most common, and most prevalent method present in the period.

We can see evidence of walls in images, especially in the gardens of the upper echelons.

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<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia “Dry stone” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dry\\_stone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dry_stone), [accessed 30/3/2023]

An example of such a wall is found in The Harley MS 4425 Fol.012v, known as the “Roman de la Rose”, dated to c 1490-c 1500, and was illustrated by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.<sup>11</sup> While likely not of the dry stone construction it demonstrates the presence of walls used as fences.



Figure 5: Harley MS 4425 Fol.012v, Roman de la Rose, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, c.1490 – c.1510,  
[https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley\\_MS\\_4425](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_4425)

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<sup>11</sup> Harley MS 4425 Fol.012v, Roman de la Rose, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, c.1490 – c.1510,  
[https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley\\_MS\\_4425](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_4425)

## Military

All the previous fences which have been presented have been civilian in nature, however fences of a military nature must be acknowledged, at least in part, as a part of the family of fences.

Fences have been used in military works for many centuries. This form of fence could be termed a palisade. *“Palisade derives from pale, from the Latin word pālus, meaning stake, specifically when used side by side to create a wood defensive wall.”*<sup>12</sup>

That “pale” is what the Roman legionaries carried with them, and when they camped, they were placed closely together often bound with some kind of rope to form a defensive wall of stakes around their encampment (Figure 6).

This is the also the origin of the concept of the paling fence.

The Roman palisade is only the beginning of the military construction of such fences. They expanded to include entire walls which surrounded forts in much more permanent structures, such concepts can be seen in Medieval and Renaissance military structures.

When looking at examples of fences we must not look at them with a narrow mind but must be broad in our approach.



Figure 6: “Example of a Roman palisade.” Vallis Particolare  
<https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/593560425905552801/>

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<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia “Palisade” in Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palisade>, [accessed 29/6/2022]

## Available Materials

With the different types of fences presented a person would ask, why are there so many different types of fences? The answer: available materials.

A place with rich soil and not too many stones wouldn't be the best place to try and start building a stone wall; whereas a place which has few trees and bushes, but rocky soil wouldn't be the best place to try and use a hedge, or wattle. The available resources determine the type of fence.

There was stone to be found on ridges, and this is one of the reasons we find stone walls in hilly country, and which has the least trees. The one does not tend to go with the other. There are always exceptions.

For the roundpole fence from the Scandinavian countries, the trees were felled to thin out the forest for animals to graze and other farming pursuits. The presence of the trees was an advantage, especially with them being so plentiful, they were the available material.

Where hedges were possible, then the farmer had the advantage that once a season they could draw resources from the hedge to build other fences. The hedge would produce appropriate sticks and so forth for the construction of hurdles and the like.

However, there were processes which did not leave things so much to chance. Here, we must examine both coppicing and pollarding.

## Coppicing

Coppicing was the process of growing saplings and taking them from old stumps of larger trees. They would restrict the size of these trees by cutting them. A single stump could produce many more harvests than if allowed to grow to full size.

*“Coppiced trees needed annual pruning during which thinner saplings were removed to encourage the larger ones to grow even faster. These prunings, of course, were not wasted. They were put to good use – particularly in making wattle fences.”<sup>13</sup>*

## Pollarding

*“Pollarding was more productive than coppicing because it allowed meadow grass to grow around the trees. Pollarding was basically coppicing that was six or seven feet off the ground. The original tree was cut off about six feet up the trunk, not felled to ground level. Cattle or sheep could graze on the grass that grew around pollarded trees, and the pollarding kept the young twigs out of the reach of hungry animals.”<sup>14</sup>*

A learning process involved. A cut tree has dead ground beneath it due to the felling and the scrap left behind which kills the grass. This method did not kill the grass giving the animals something to eat and kept new shoots out of the reach of the animals. Hence there was an advantage to this over coppicing.

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<sup>13</sup> Fiske, J.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

## Nothing Wasted

Nothing was wasted. No cutting, no pruning was wasted, even the smallest piece of wood found a purpose, even if it was just firewood. There was no waste in this process, nor in any other of these processes.

*“Leaue grubbing or pulling of bushes (my sonne)  
till timely thy fences require to be donne.  
Then take of the best, for to furnish thy turne,  
and home with the rest, for the fier to burne.”<sup>15</sup>*

Not only was there a purpose for each piece of wood; there was also a process which was followed to ensure the farmer gained the greatest advantage from their resources. Fences took priority over furnishings, and wood for the fire, and even removing bushes. Fences were the priority because they kept unwanted intruders out of the fields, the stores, and away from the animals.

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<sup>15</sup> Tusser, T. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, The Edition of 1580 collated with those of 1573 and 1577. Together with a Reprint, from the Unique Copy in the British Museum, of "A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie," 1557, London, Trübner & Co., 1878, p.96

## What's the Purpose of a Fence?

Everything has a purpose, and we must examine the purpose to understand the thing, so we must find the purposes of the fence.

*“Let pasture be stored, and fenced about,  
and tillage set forward, as needeth without:  
Before ye doe open your purse to begin,  
with anything dooing for fancie within.”<sup>16</sup>*

Fences were considered important for keeping things out, considered important enough to spend real money to ensure they are properly built, they were essential.

### Animals

Animals are a part of the agrarian lifestyle. There are farm animals, and there are animals which are not. Some of these others are wild, others are not. All animals must be considered.

In some instances, fences were used to keep animals in a particular area, sometimes they were used to keep them out. Generally, animals were allowed to roam and graze, so they were more often kept out rather than kept in.

Animals were fenced in for protection against theft during the night and against predators, however as crop agriculture increased in the later part of the Renaissance, animals became fenced in more often to prevent them from destroying crops.

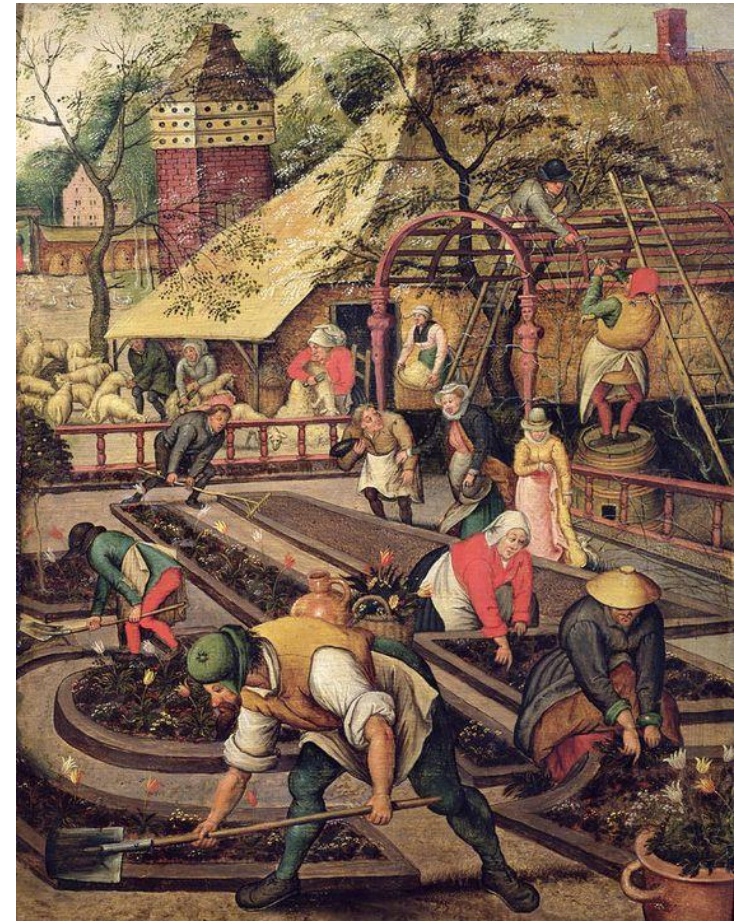


Figure 7: "The Spring" by Jacob Grimmer (c.1526-89)

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<sup>16</sup> Tusser, T., p.55

*“There swineherd that keepeth the hog,  
there neatherd, with cur and his horne,  
There shepherd with whistle and dog,  
be fence to the medowe and corne.  
There horse being tide on a balke,  
is readie with theefe for to walke.”<sup>17</sup>*

In the middle, there two lines about the shepherd and how the meadow and corn crop are both fenced to protect them. The corn crop needs to be protected against animals invading it, the meadow could be used for grazing, but more likely for hay, so still needed to be fenced, separated from the crop.

The land which is a meadow which is for hay needs to be fenced, to keep the animals out so the hay can grow.

*“Land meadow that yeerly is spared for hay,  
now fence it and spare it, and doong it ye may.  
Get mowle catcher cunningglie mowle for to kill,  
and harrow and cast abrode euerie hill.”<sup>18</sup>*

The mole was a pest to the farmer and had to be kept out or they could destroy the crop. The advice here is to get a mole catcher to get rid of all the moles out of every hill around the farm. However, moles were not the only pests.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.155

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.107



## Thieves

*“Kéepe safe thy fence,  
scare breakhedge thence.  
A drab and a knaue  
will prowle to haue.”<sup>19</sup>*

Thieves were present and a good fence, like today, was to discourage the thief, a deterrent against crime. The importance of maintenance of hedges and other fences was emphasised.

*“Keepe safely and warely thine ottermost fence,  
with ope gap and breake hedge do seldome dispence:  
Such runabout prowlers, by night and by day,  
see punished iustly for prowling away.”<sup>20</sup>*

A break in a fence is an invitation to a thief to come in and try his luck, so the fence should be maintained to discourage such individuals. So, fences served much the same purpose as they have always done, to discourage those who should not be there. Farmer or noble.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.54

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p.62



Figure 8: "Claverton, Soistershire" Richardson, C. *Specimens of the Architecture of the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James 1st*, Holborn, John Weale Architectural Library, 1837, Plate III

## Enclosure

Most people know about the Enclosure Acts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where people of the lower classes were forced off their land and into cities, increasing populations, the working classes, and unemployed, leading to high rates of crime. What most people don't know is this started in the Renaissance period.

*"[In England] farmers began exchanging their scattered plots of land in order to consolidate individual holdings. These consolidated plots were then enclosed with a hedge or fence to prevent them from being fence subjected to the regulations that governed the use of the remaining strips."*<sup>21</sup>

The purpose of this consolidation was to increase the yield of these plots. This was done on a more "innocent" basis during at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century for the purpose of allowing landholders to manage their land more easily, and have people work it for them. This is recognised in period documents.

*"In euerie greene, if the fence be not thine,  
now stub vp the bushes, the grasse to be fine.  
Least neighbour doo dailie so hack them beliue,  
that neither thy bushes nor pasture can thriue."*<sup>22</sup>

There is a note to be careful about whose pasture and fence a person should draw their resources from, giving evidence such separation of land was more common than rare. The enclosure concept was around at least in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was a general practice, not just being used by large landholders.

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<sup>21</sup> Britannica "origins of agriculture - The medieval period: 600 to 1600 ce", Britannica.com, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/agriculture/The-medieval-period-600-to-1600-ce>, accessed 10/12/2021

<sup>22</sup> Tusser, T., p.96

Lines of hedgerows and trees were often used to separate one portion of land from another, using natural resources to their advantage. Where such resources were not found, we find the long lines of stone walls we see in many pictures.

*“By the sixteenth century the growth of population and prosperity provided incentives for landowners to use their land in more profitable ways, dispossessing the peasantry. Common fields were aggregated and enclosed by large and enterprising farmers —either through negotiation among one another or by lease from the landlord—to maximize the productivity of the available land and contain livestock.”<sup>23</sup>*

Sheep were found to be especially profitable. Evidence points to entire villages being destroyed to make room for grazing land. The same led to the destruction of the formerly common land for grazing, enclosed for individual’s animals. Here we see the beginnings of what was to come in the later centuries.



Figure 9: “Walls” by Dimitry Shakin  
<https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/593560425894717657/>

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<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia “Fence”

## Conclusion

When I first started my research, I thought it would be a simple method of examining some images and writing what I saw. It did not turn out this way.

There is quite a bit more information to be found on this subject. I have merely performed an examination of some of the material, scratched the surface. There are a lot more examples to be found.

The most important thing I discovered, is we should not take any subject at face value, everything can be interesting, no matter how simple it may seem.

## Questions?

## More Pics

Here are some more examples of fences depicted in manuscripts of the Medieval and Renaissance period. There are many more out there.



Figure 10: Pierpont Morgan Library MS H.8 fol-2v, Hours of Henry VIII, Illuminated by Jean Poyer, c.1500, <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-henry-viii/10>



Figure 11: Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.366. Fol.050r, Book of Hours, Tours, France, ca. 1470



Figure 12: "The Annunciation", Fra Angelico, Basilica of St Mark, 15th-century, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus\\_conclusus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus_conclusus)



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## Images

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