

In Travel
Best of Britain

An expert in his fields

Clive Fewins meets those fighting to preserve the names of ancient land enclosures

Ask Ken Doughty what the fields are called in the Devon parish of Aveton Gifford and he will rattle off a long list as easily as the names of his best friends. Rathole Orchard, Wrinkle's Piece, Shabby Court, Froggy Meadow, Grey Mare Meadow, Kiln Meadow, Butt Park, Muster Park and Paradise are just a few of the 1,000 or so field names that exist in a parish of just 12 square miles.

In his 24 years in the parish, Doughty, a retired librarian, has only found time to delve into the meanings of half of these, and he is still battling over the meaning of some of the most puzzling of them.

"It is relatively easy to guess that names like Homer and Yonder mean the nearest and farthest, and names like Grey Mare Field and Kiln Meadow are also fairly self-explanatory," he says.

"I also think I know how Giant's Table and The Tongue gained their names. But I am still puzzled by Muster Park and Butt Park. The former possibly refers to local soldiery and the latter to archery practice, but I can find no firm evidence to confirm this."

Doughty, who is also the footpaths warden for Aveton Gifford and has written several books about the parish, marvels daily over the wonderfully rich selection of field names found all over England.

"Each one tells you something about the individual piece of land and differentiates one field from another. I find this fascinating," he says.

Doughty is worried that an important part of our heritage would be lost if these names were to fall from usage, and be entirely replaced by the numbering scheme that farmers use for their official records and for returns to the Government and the EU Single Payments Scheme.

"To be fair to the farmers round here, they show a fair degree of interest," he says.

"But I wonder about other parts of the country where the farming is far more intensive. Does the interest persist there?"

"I fear there is a trend among some farmers and farm managers to dispense with field names and



Ken Doughty, field marshal (above): the campaigner takes a walk in Tower Park, Aveton Gifford, with his dog, Jake. **Sue Clifford (far left), director of Common Ground, with fellow director Angela King in Shaftesbury, Dorset**



use only the field numbers that they are required to use for official purposes."

His concern is shared by the environmental charity Common Ground, which has long urged farmers and landowners to have the names of old fields painted or carved on their gates. The group would also like to see a "field marshal" like Doughty in all rural parishes.

"Many field names are brilliantly descriptive and tell us precisely the use to which the field was put in the past," says Sue Clifford, director of Common Ground.

"They remind us that fields are a great deal more than factory floors with everything geared to production. I believe that by telling us about something that has been tried and works, they are helping us go with the ecological flow and saying: 'This could well work again.'

"We also see no reason why people moving into parishes – perhaps from towns – should not invent new names, as long as they keep the old ones, too."

Common Ground is also campaigning for new houses and housing developments to refer in name to the field they replaced.

The village of Calverton in Buckinghamshire is on the edge of Milton Keynes and has a population of 150. With the latest expansion of the adjoining city, that figure will soon rise to 1,500 – as a number of fields are shortly to be swallowed up to make way for houses. There, a team of villagers has completed a survey of all the field names.

"We hope that by familiarising themselves with the old field names, newcomers will gain a sense of place and this will help them get to know and enjoy their new surroundings," says Lucinda Lourie, spokeswoman for the Calverton Records Project.

❖ Common Ground (www.commonground.org.uk; 01747 850820).

WHAT NAMES MEAN

❖ Many field names such as "Bee Hole Meadow", "Fox Run", "Badger Bank" and "Sheep Walk" are close to being self-explanatory.

With other names, such as "Bubbles Field" or "Plashets" (springs and marshy ground), "Hard Bargain" (difficult terrain) and "Jerusalem" (a remote field), it is fairly easy to work out the origin.

However, this is not always the case. Here are some harder ones, with their possible explanations.

❖ **Urchins Dumble:** lots of hedgehogs around in the hollows.

❖ **The Tumps:** ancient earthworks or quarry remains.

❖ **Toad Pipe Meadow:** land on which field horsetail (*equisetum arvense*) grew.

❖ **Custard Stiles:** steep land frequented by cushats – wood pigeons.

❖ **Wot Ground:** land on which woad was grown.

❖ **Caper Meadow:** land on which a type of strawberry was grown.