

The Enclosure System

One new approach to agriculture, the enclosure system, brought about some of the earliest and most drastic changes. It was first widely practiced in the Netherlands during the 1600s. When English and French farmers heard about the benefits of the system, they too adopted it.

Open-Field System

Under the previous system, called the open-field system, landowners allowed small farmers to plant crops in a part of the owners' fields. The small farmers grew a variety of crops on the strips of land set aside for them. The landlords also let the local farmers graze their livestock in meadows and other pieces of land that were not good for cultivation. Such communal, or jointly used, pastures were called "commons"

Specializing

As Europe's trade expanded, the number of people in European cities increased. The open-field system did not produce enough food to feed them. It did not supply the surplus of goods necessary to meet the demands of the world market. Landowners realized that they could make more money if they grew produce and raw materials for the city and foreign markets. Small farmers could no longer use the large landowners' land. Fields were enclosed, or fenced off, and planted with crops that could be sold for large profits. The Dutch, for example, planted flax (the plant from which linen is made), which they sold to cloth manufactures. Where flax was grown, food could not longer be planted.

Source: Global History & Geography: The Growth of Civilizations (2nd Edition).