

EDWARD BERKLEY PORTMAN (1799-1888)

First Viscount in 1873, Baron Portman in 1837. Edward Berkeley Portman promoted the enclosure of Neroche Forest and began improving his Somerset estates. By 1850's he had ended the perpetual tenure of the small local farmers. As the small farms fell vacant he gathered them up and turned them into larger more profitable units, using new tenants for short fixed term leases. It is during this period that new farm buildings such as those at Staple Farm and Portman Farm are added.

On the Portman estate, innovations created by crop rotations and new equipment allowed the new tenant farmers to grow a variety of crops. The first hop crop in the county appeared in 1820 and survived until 1845.

In 1843 Edward Berkeley Portman gave orders for the demolition of Orchard House (which had been given over to the tenants of Orchard Portman Farm), following an outbreak of typhus. A cess pit later found under the servant's hall explained the recurrence of mysterious illnesses which plagued the various occupants of the house. The outline of the building is still shown on the 1851 Taunton Deane Enclosure Map. Architectural fragments of the building survive in several local buildings.

Edward Berkeley's zealous estate reforms and clearances continued during the 1840s. Fourteen houses at Heale, the south aisle of the church at Orchard Portman, the mansion at Playstreet and Bickenhall Church all fell victim to Edward Berkeley's clearance regime. However despite these clearances Lord Portman was considered to be a generous landlord. He and his son were responsible for building new labourers cottages, and supporting local education (a new school is founded at Staple Fitzpaine in 1829).