

# Reassessing the influence of the aristocratic improver: the example of the fifth Duke of Bedford (1765–1802)

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## Abstract

The significance of the aristocratic improver has been questioned by recent research which has tended to see financial return as the sole motive for agricultural development. This paper seeks to re-assess the rôle of the improving landowner by offering the first modern study of one of its leading examples, the fifth Duke of Bedford (1765–1802). It argues that he was influential both in his county and in the broader development of scientific agriculture. His motivation was not financial return but derived from the intellectual and political environment of his time. Indeed, his policy was doomed as it took no proper account of return on investment and, if generally pursued by his class, would have quickly destroyed their élite position.

The cliometric calculations of Crafts have re-emphasized the contribution of agriculture to economic growth after 1750. Explanations of the agricultural revolution by historical economists now tend to focus on the operation of the market place in response to the growing demand generated by population growth and urbanisation. In this approach, the rôle of the individual agricultural improver, like the fifth Duke of Bedford of Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, is relegated to that of a mere actor imprisoned in an econometric drama, reciting deterministic lines of which he was not the author. Allen, in his chapter on agriculture in *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, scarcely discusses the motive of the landowner in economic development except to comment that 'higher rent was the motive behind the creation of large farms'. Cultural explanations of innovation (or lack of innovation) are in one case contemptuously dismissed as 'another case of British irrationality like real ale or silly mid-off'.<sup>1</sup> Many agrarian historians and historical economists discount the possibility of a philosophical commitment to the idea of improvement or, indeed, any sense of altruism in favour of pure financial return. To quote McCloskey, 'the assumption of close calculation' should be made by historical economists unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. This profit-oriented approach probably reveals more about our own materialistic society than about the minds of eighteenth century aristocratic improvers.<sup>2</sup>

This has not always been the case. Lord Ernle stressed the critical rôle played by such aristocratic improvers as the fifth Duke of Bedford, Coke of Holkham and Lord Egremont at

<sup>1</sup> N. F. R. Crafts, *British economic growth during the Industrial Revolution* (1985); R. Allen, 'Agriculture during the Industrial Revolution' in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds), *The economic history of Britain since 1700* (3 vols,

1994), I, p. 114. D. N. McCloskey, *Econometric History* (1987), p. 28

<sup>2</sup> McCloskey, *Econometric History*, p. 30.

Petworth in setting a fashion followed by their tenants and neighbours. However, these men are now often seen as exceptional and their achievements overrated. Beckett maintains that 'the true credit for agricultural innovation ought perhaps to rest with the lesser landowners, with estate stewards and tenant farmers'. While he acknowledges that a 'handful of leading aristocrats were major figures in agricultural improvement', he thinks that Ernle has largely 'mistaken paternalist endeavour for real achievement'.<sup>3</sup>

While many historians have diminished the significance of eighteenth-century improvers, there are some who would accept that improving landlords were motivated by more than the maximisation of profits. Both the modern studies of Coke argue that his improving activities were as much concerned with display and the search for deference as financial return. Studies of the agricultural improvements made by the heirs of the Duke of Bridgewater have ascribed various dynastic motives to their activities. Other motives have emerged. For example, Wasson's recent study of Earl Spencer indicates that he was motivated by a mixture of evangelicalism, scientific enthusiasm and the necessity of adjusting to the spirit of the age. Nevertheless only Wasson has considered the influence of the landed improver and these individual studies have not changed the general consensus on the issue among historians.<sup>4</sup>

This case study of the fifth Duke of Bedford (1765–1802) will focus on his mind set, activities and rôle as a landed improver. It will show that, like Coke of Holkham, Bedford was a frustrated politician who tried to improve agriculture both on his large estate and beyond. He, and not his steward, was the driving force behind improvement: he was motivated not by financial return but by his physiocratic beliefs as an enlightened Whig. He thought the aristocracy could only survive as the enlightened leaders of a democratic, capitalist, society but, unfortunately for his estate, he had little idea about how to make his policies pay. He adopted the most modern – and expensive – of methods and set up the first agricultural experimental station. His general profligacy and zeal for improvement required various expedients to raise money which all but ruined his estates.

This study will also outline the means by which the Duke's influence extended beyond his own estate and time. It will show that while his Tory enemies rejected his plans as harmful both to his estate and to the community, there were many other enlightened Whigs who shared much of the same kind of philosophy and influence at least in their counties. The distinction between Whig and Tory ideas can also be related to rival strategies for ensuring their survival advocated by members of the élite. Mandler and Hilton have argued that by the

<sup>3</sup> Lord Ernle, *English Farming, past and present* (1936), pp. 207–8, 221; J. V. Beckett, *The Agricultural Revolution* (1990), p. 29 and in his chapter in G. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), pp. 569–70.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. C. Parker, *Coke of Norfolk* (1975), pp. 200–1; S. Wade Martins, *A great estate at Work. The Holkham estate and its inhabitants in the nineteenth century* (1980); E. Richards, *The leviathan of wealth* (1970), pp. 291, 296; M. Turner, 'Land, industry and the Bridgewater inherit-

ance', in B. A. Holderness and M. Turner (eds), *Land, labour and agriculture 1700–1920. Essays for Gordon Mingay* (1991), pp. 1–25; E. A. Wasson, 'A progressive landlord. The third Earl Spencer, 1782–1845', in C. W. Chalklin and J. R. Wordie (eds), *Town and Countryside. The English landowner in the national economy, 1660–1860* (1989) pp. 83–101. See also B. A. English, *The great landowners of East Yorkshire* (1990), pp. 152, 190, 224.

1820s a majority of the landed élite had accepted a kind of capitalist individualism. Bedford was an early convert to this attitude, but did his version of it help to preserve his position and promote social harmony, or cause social dislocation?<sup>5</sup>

## I

The fifth Duke destroyed his private papers: therefore to understand the man, we have to rely on other sources. In some respects these are relatively plentiful: apart from estate records, his activities are recorded in enclosure acts and awards and articles in the contemporary farming journals. Bedford inherited the title and estates in seven counties from his grandfather in 1771 when only six years old. It was possibly the richest inheritance in the country. By 1740 the fourth Duke's annual income was £56,300 and growing as his London estate was built upon. On his coming of age, the fifth Duke's inheritance had grown to £74,000 a year clear of all encumbrances. Bedford decided to emulate his grandfather's career as a prominent Whig. His education – Westminster, Cambridge and the Grand Tour – seems to have imbued him with a mixture of radicalism, physiocracy and agnosticism. Bedford would have rejected any justification by 'divine will' for his élite position, stressing instead his innate intellect and reason. He became a radical Foxite, but the public reaction to the excesses of the French Revolution and the subsequent war against France obliged him to limit his political activity after 1793 to moving motions in favour of peace, much like his friend Coke of Holkham.<sup>6</sup> While advocating democratic reform and continuing to support rational economic change, he believed that aristocrats like him would still form an economic élite, presuming that a popular government would not redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from his political expenses, the young Duke quickly found other ways to spend heavily. Even before inheriting, he had run through £13,000. He loved horse racing, gambled heavily and was a notorious 'soft touch'. To maintain his famous 'open table' for his guests required the produce of two large farms and £20,000 a year. He was master of the Oakley Hunt, keeping 25 fine horses and a pack of hounds. The new stables these required were only part of the huge rebuilding undertaken at Woburn under the eye of the architect Henry Holland (?1746–1806).<sup>8</sup> The Duke did undertake practical improvements in the early years after his inheritance, but largely for aesthetic reasons. Although only allotted 10 acres or so under the Wavendon enclosure act of 1789, land tax returns and the tithe apportionment show that after the award, the

<sup>5</sup> P. Mandler, *Aristocratic government in the age of reform* (1990); A. J. B. Hilton, *The age of atonement* (1988).

<sup>6</sup> E. Johnson, 'The Bedford connection. The fourth Duke of Bedford's political influence between 1732 and 1771' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1979), pp. 46–51; *Norfolk Chronicle* 15 Apr. 1786, p. 2, col. 2, and cf. Joshua Wilson, *Biographical index to the present House of Lords* (1808), pp. 58–9 who reckoned £90,000 p. a. plus money accumulated during the trust. J. G. Gazley

(ed.), *The life of Arthur Young* (Philadelphia, 1973); John Bowles, *A letter to C. J. Fox in consequence of his speech . . . on . . . the late most noble Francis Duke of Bedford* (1802); M. McCahill, *Order and Equipoise. The peerage and the House of Lords, 1783–1806* (1978), pp. 46, 66, 126, 169, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *Biographical Index*, pp. 58–9. I. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions. Britain, 1760–1815* (1982), p. 241.

<sup>8</sup> For Holland, see *DNB*.

Duke purchased over 300 acres of low value heathland adjoining Woburn parish and had planted many hundreds of acres both there and in Woburn by 1794.<sup>9</sup>

The Duke's 'peculiar fondness for farming' only became manifest in 1793 when his existing programme of development expanded in conception under his direct 'enlightened management'. This coincided with his political isolation although one contemporary apologist believed that he had simply 'determined to retrench', and so 'applied himself to nobler objects' involving estate improvement and scientific farming. If altruism did play a rôle, retrenchment certainly did not. Spending remained high. It was claimed that over a ten year period, his general expenditure exceeded £700,000.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the Duke's motivation was not financial return, except in the long-term. Although the general rent increase of the time was creating an environment for profitable investment, his agents told him plainly that the rate of spending was ruinous and many of his plans would be unremunerative. Nevertheless the Duke ignored his employees and was prepared to sell estates to fund his plans. So what were his motives?<sup>11</sup>

For one thing, Bedford's activities gave him the chance to gain the approbation denied to him in the political world. They also seem to have been inspired in part by his belief in possessive individualism. It is true that freehold ownership was necessary for him to effect his changes; but this cannot explain the construction of a brick wall fourteen feet high and four bricks thick at the base which encircled his park and farms at Woburn. Further, his democratic ideas and close involvement in estate improvement indicates he was one of those rational improvers who had been strongly swayed by the ideas of the enlightenment such as economic liberalism. For example, he engaged in enclosures on his own estate and supported a facilitative but not a compulsory general enclosure act.<sup>12</sup>

However, to see his interest as deriving only from liberal economics and an immediate need for status gratification is to overlook much more pressing motives hinted at by his friend, Fox. Britain was facing food shortages and social dislocation due to bad harvests and the interference with imports caused by warfare. As a man interested in 'publick utility', agriculture seemed to Bedford 'the most important [employment] to engage in'.<sup>13</sup> The Duke's own words on the subject echo this view: 'I consider myself a steward to do the best I can with the money placed in my hands, no doubt, for the benefit of others. A rich man can use very little of his riches on himself, and he should use them to promote as much general good as possible'.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this seeming altruism, a more likely construction is that the fifth Duke believed that such action was needed both to maintain and justify aristocratic authority. It is also likely that he realized, much as Peel did fifty years later, that agricultural modernisation represented the only long-term hope for the aristocracy. Put simply, he envisaged an agrarian capitalist system with the aristocracy owning the means of production and maximising their exploitation.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *Biographical index*, pp. 58-9; *Trans. of the Society of Arts* 23 (1805), pp. 112-147. T. Batchelor, *General view of the agriculture of Bedfordshire* (1808), p. 464. Buckinghamshire RO, IR74 (Wavendon Heath award); Q/RP17/12-16 (Wavendon Land Tax Returns, 1791-5) and Wavendon Tithe Award; Bedfordshire and Luton RO (hereafter BLRO), X395/80.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *Biographical Index*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> A. Young, 'Obituary of the Duke of Bedford', *Annals of Agriculture* (hereafter *Annals*) 38 (1802), p. 369. Wilson, *Biographical index*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times* 9 May 1798.

<sup>13</sup> *Worcester Herald* 20 Mar. 1802, p. 4, col. 3.

<sup>14</sup> quoted in G. Blakiston, *Woburn and the Russells* (1980), p. 166.

Country folk would be reduced to an economically dependent rural proletariat, renting their cottages from the landlord, relying solely on wage labour, without any chance to gain an independent living from casual work, or using the commons for grazing or gathering fuel. The goal was the survival of the elite in three main ways. First, by reducing the poor to economic dependency; next, to justify the aristocracy's supremacy by the rational exploitation of their estates; finally to encourage methods to maximize production in order to feed the growing population and avoid social conflict. Whether this would produce profit in terms of financial return on investment appears to have been a secondary consideration; if there was an assumption, it was not of 'close calculation', but that modernisation would naturally bring profit in its wake.

This plan was flawed in several ways; estates which did not pay would not survive long; the poor would not long tolerate quietly what appeared to be simple oppression; and not all aristocrats would follow Bedford's lead. The key flaw was the management of the initiative. Instead of hard-headed, experienced businessmen superintending this initiative – and even they could waste their investment as E. L. Jones showed of the Arkwrights – it would be master-minded by an enlightened nobleman. As a result, Bedford turned not to practical men for assistance but to leading scientists. Apart from receiving advice of Arthur Young, he employed three men of enduring reputation. Robert Salmon (1763–1821) 'conducted the architectural and mechanical departments', patenting many agricultural machines; the geologist John Farey (1766–1826) supervised his plantations and later managed the estates. However, Bedford's commitment to scientific improvement is best shown by his employment of the Rev. Edmund Cartwright (1743–1823), inventor of the power loom, to superintend his experiments from 1800.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless these men were merely the Duke's servants; he was the author of these changes. Once he became disillusioned with politics, estate matters preoccupied him; Farey complained of 'the multiplicity of temporary business . . . on which His Grace frequently gives me directions'. Indeed in 1801 the Duke was prepared to miss crucial parliamentary debates to attend the sheep-shearing at Woburn.<sup>16</sup>

Bedford had great scope for his plans. His estates, like Bedfordshire generally, were notoriously backward. A three course fallow rotation was generally followed to maximize short-term returns to the long term detriment of the soil. The fields were ill-drained, leading to huge losses of crops and sheep. Bedford extended his demesne at Woburn to some 2251 acres as a centre for innovation based on the home farm, an experimental station and an annual sheep shearing conference. Beyond this, he planned to end the open field system on his estates, convert wastes into productive land and to drain and irrigate fourteen parishes.<sup>17</sup>

His plans required the purchase of several adjoining estates and expensive legislative activity. He needed to obtain several enclosure acts and include provisions within them to drain these and adjoining parishes; to amend the local turnpike act to prevent traffic crossing the extended

<sup>15</sup> E. L. Jones, *Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution* (1974), pp. 160–183. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1821 part ii, pp. 381, 648. Batchelor, *General view*, preface. For Salmon, Farey and Cartwright, see their entries in *DNB*.

<sup>16</sup> BLRO, R/3/1728 Farey to Macnamara 28 Aug. 1794; British Lib., Add. Ms. 51533, fo. 41, Moira to Holland,

13 June 1801.

<sup>17</sup> T. Stone, *General view of the agriculture of Bedfordshire* (1794), p. 31. A. Young, 'The husbandry of the late Duke of Bedford', *Annals* 39 (1802), pp. 387–92, 414–9. Figures from *Staffs Advertiser* 13 Mar. 1802, p. 4, col. 4; BLRO, R/1, 76, 77, 239–40; R 2/67, 68

Woburn park; and to obtain at least two estate acts to allow him to sell, exchange or lease estates to raise the cash for his activities. Even this would prove insufficient and so further expedients had to be found.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, his experiments and proselytising were expensive. As Thomas Batchelor wrote 'His Grace spared neither attention nor money in the elucidation of any dubious fact' and showed an 'experimental spirit'. The entertaining of three hundred or so guests at sheep-shearings was typical of his spending. Enclosures on the Woburn estate between 1793 and 1799 cost Bedford £11,658 in public expenses and fencing; together with some small purchases and spending on building and drainage, his total costs may have exceeded £30,000; against this the Woburn rental leapt 67 per cent from £8486 to £14,256 in seven years. However, the Duke tried to find relatively inexpensive methods to encourage others to copy his example. For example, Park Farm and its buildings were built of pisé walls, which were praised for their cheapness. He also designed an octagonal farm house which was £60 cheaper to construct. The problem was not what went on beyond the park wall but the unproductive spending on experiments, entertainments and building at Woburn itself and the cumulative rate of expenditure.<sup>19</sup>

The continued high spending had terrible effects even on Bedford's long purse. During Holland's building work, the Woburn steward complained 'the vast expenditure here is beyond conception – I am almost plagued out of my life for money'. Bedford dealt with his financial problems simply by ignoring them. Farey complained in 1798 that 'when His Grace is here he is completely engaged that I can rarely introduce the subject of money, and when I do he is always adverse to talk upon it or give drafts'. Unsurprisingly, the Duke left unsettled accounts of £400,000 at his death because he was 'so disposed to postpone business'. While this may appear shrewd practice, it was really the product of the Duke's dislike of business and meant that he had no clear idea of his financial position, hardly the way in which a successful businessman would operate.<sup>20</sup>

Even Bedford had to face up to his debts eventually. Adopting the last resort of other impoverished aristocrats, he raised £150,000 by the sale of annuities at a high rate of interest. This practice was publicly commended to aristocrats

as the principal is never returnable, but becomes their sole property; and they have the opportunities of applying the money to great and important purposes. In this, his late Grace will stand ... an ever memorable example by his noble application of it to the highest of all national pursuits.<sup>21</sup>

As Bedford owned much of his estate in fee simple, he was able to raise annuities for the purchaser's life, attracting annuitants by paying 10 per cent rather than the maximum allowed under the Usury Laws of 5 per cent. By his death, only 6 per cent was being paid on the capital and, as many annuitants were frail, it was expected to fall under 5 per cent by 1807. Sales of

<sup>18</sup> 35 Geo. III, c. 151.

<sup>19</sup> Batchelor, *General view*, p. 626; A. Young, 'Husbandry of ... Bedford'. BRO, R5/82/90–102.

<sup>20</sup> BLRO, R3/1252, J. Kingdon to Daniel Beaumont, 7 Dec. 1792; see also R3/1728. K. Garlick, A. Macintyre and

K. Cave (eds), *The diary of Joseph Farington* (16 vols, 1978–84), VI, p. 2197, 20 Dec. 1803.

<sup>21</sup> *The Times* 9 Mar. 1802, p. 3, col. 1. H. J. Habakkuk, *Marriage, debt and the estates system. English land-ownership, 1650–1950* (1994), pp. 262–3, 265, 374.

estates were also required. Holland's fees were in part settled by giving his nephew a moiety of the rotten borough of Okehampton in 1795. Dry Drayton in Cambridgeshire was sold in 1795 and Houghton followed in 1800. Part of the Streatham estate in Surrey and Stratton in Hampshire also went and an estate act was secured to sell Pains Manor in Amersham.<sup>22</sup>

Bedford also explored the opportunities of raising income from non-agricultural sources. Large amounts of timber were cut for fencing and for sale. He accelerated the building development of his London estate. An estate act in 1800 allowed him to demolish Bedford House and make building leases of the site. Moreover the Duke was the first of his family to develop their tin mines in Devon rationally, by encouraging mining speculators with realistic royalty demands and giving the land free for the construction of a canal to connect the works with Mowellham Quay. Nevertheless such investments were necessarily long-term and so he had to rely on sales and annuities to satisfy his immediate needs.<sup>23</sup>

Bedford's plans were attacked by conservative-minded opinion. While Burke satirized his improvements generally in 1796,<sup>24</sup> the most detailed assault came from John Byng (1740–1813, later Viscount Torrington), who described the Duke as 'a compound character of avarice and extravagance, wasting a princely fortune'. The criticism went further; Byng railed against the Duke and his kind in 1793, protesting that

Nothing has been so baneful to this country as the monopoly of land; for the great holder lays all waste, cuts down his woods, clumps all his farms together ... and wants to diminish his tenantry, and to swell his rents without the expense of repairs and taxes. At his own seat (the school of folly and of prodigality) nothing but waste and intemperance are to be seen; from which only flattery and villainy can prosper; whilst ... benevolence [is] unknown in and about the mansion.<sup>25</sup>

This judgement on the Duke's profligacy was not wholly fair. Bedford made huge plantations which more than compensated for any felling of trees and enabled the Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire estate to derive 18 per cent of its income between 1816 and 1895 from timber sales. Moreover, his later drainage work increased rents by reducing losses of sheep and cereals. Furthermore Byng was inconsistent about the Duke's wastefulness. When he observed the Duke's men demolishing Houghton House and using its materials to build his new inn at Bedford, he even managed to attack the profligate Duke for his 'cunning stinginess'. Often Byng's political antagonism to the 'leveller' Duke, whom he believed might be levelled in his turn, caused him to criticize Bedford for the wrong reason.<sup>26</sup>

Underpinning these attacks on his profligacy lay a fundamental difference with the Duke

<sup>22</sup> R. G. Thorne (ed.), *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons, 1790–1820* (5 vols, 1986), I, p. 156; VCH *Cambridgeshire*, IX, p. 74; *J. House of Commons*, LIV, p. 597, 5 June 1799; C. Bruyn Andrews (ed.), *Torrington Diaries* (4 vols, 1934–8), IV, p. 32; VCH *Buckinghamshire*, III, p. 150; VCH *Surrey*, IV, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism. Historical Change and the labour process in the production of the built environment* (1992), pp. 107, 181. F. Booker, *The industrial archaeology of the Tamar Valley* (1971), pp. 15–16, 106–7.

<sup>24</sup> E. Burke, 'A letter to a noble lord' (1796) in R. B. McDowell (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Edward Burke* (9 vols, 1981–97), IX, pp. 177–9.

<sup>25</sup> Andrews (ed.), *Torrington diaries*, III, pp. 200–1.

<sup>26</sup> H. A. Russell, *Thirteenth Duke of Bedford, A great agricultural estate, being the story of the origin and administration of Woburn and Thorney* (3rd. ed. 1897), pp. 218–26. Andrews (ed.), *Torrington Diaries*, IV, pp. 32–3.

about his political strategy. Thinkers like Byng were convinced that the Duke's plans for a capitalist democracy would destroy the whole landed élite by harming the poor, whereas the Duke's apologists believed exactly the opposite, despite any temporary harm inflicted upon the poor. To resolve this debate, it is important to assess how his improvements affected the poor.

In all his enclosure acts, the Duke maximized his allocation of land, especially at Husborne's Crawley, which was used to extend his home farm and park. He was concerned to acquire the maximum territory to employ in his schemes of improvement. One method that he adopted was pre-enclosure purchases, as at Husborne's Crawley, where he made seventeen small purchases before precipitating the enclosure in 1794 by acquiring the rectoral estate for £9444. This policy was repeated on his other Bedfordshire enclosures. Where he could not purchase the lands he wanted, like the rectoral estate at Maulden, he simply rented the tithe allotment to add it to his managed estates. Exchanges also proved useful in consolidating his estate. For example, the Husborne's Crawley act appointed certain turnpike roads and specific lands to be allotted to the vicar in lieu of his glebe, which the Duke then added to his estate. Perhaps the most pernicious way in which the Duke gained land was to ensure that the poor obtained inadequate compensation for their customary usages of the commons for grazing and fuel. This increased the amount of land available to be allotted to himself and the other freeholders while obviously reducing that available for the poor. Further, he bought cottages which enjoyed common rights and added their allotments into his park and large farms, although he did ensure that small gardens were added to the cottages.<sup>27</sup>

Young praised the effects of the Husborne's Crawley act in 1801. The parish

before the enclosure, was a scene of filth and ruins: the road a bog, and the houses hogsties. After enclosing, the Duke of Bedford built several cottages new, repaired others, made the road an excellent one, fenced and assigned gardens, paled them, and cleared away obstructions; the whole is now a scene of comfort, and every cottage has a good garden, full of cultivation. A dismal spectacle of poverty is become a clean, well-built cheerful village.<sup>28</sup>

This contrasts with Byng's criticisms of the Duke building fox hound kennels near St. Neots whilst the poor lived in 'miserable mud hovels' which encouraged 'Democracy'. Perhaps Byng suspected that Bedford was deliberately spurring the poor to support his political goals! The real reason was that St. Neots was not the estate village which Bedford employed to impress visitors.<sup>29</sup>

However well the poor were treated in terms of new cottages and gardens, the enclosure acts at Husborne's Crawley and Maulden served to complete the transition of an independent peasantry into a dependent rural proletariat. This process was resisted; for although his enclosures may have been intended to help the poor, they did not view the ending of their traditional 'rights' as beneficial. Attempts in 1794 to deny the poor rights of pasturage and cutting furze on Streatham Common as a preliminary to an enclosure (after which the land was to be sold as building plots for villas) were met by incendiarism and the destruction of palings.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> BLRO, X21/104-20. J. Godber, *A history of Bedfordshire* (1969), pp. 363, 404; VCH *Bedfordshire*, III, p. 396.

<sup>28</sup> *Annals* 36 (1801), p. 608.

<sup>29</sup> Andrews (ed.), *Torrington Diaries*, IV, pp. 48-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* 1794 part i, p. 571. *Annals* 36 (1801), p. 513; 38 (1802), p. 113.



Bedford acted less arbitrarily thereafter. The acts he sought subsequently gave the poor fuel and grazing allotments administered by trustees. Nevertheless the ending of such rights was still resented and caused an enclosure riot in 1796 at Maulden, where 200 people prevented a survey of the common and a cavalry troop had to be stationed at Ampthill.<sup>31</sup>

This incident illustrates another major flaw in Bedford's strategy to which attention was drawn by a local paternalist magistrate. He sent for troops at Maulden because he feared that 'if ye poor people are suffered to make laws for themselves, we shall very shortly have no government in this county'. The grounds for their discontent were that 'part of it [the moor] is to be given up to the poor ... but they are not contented with part of the common, and claim a right to the whole'. The real problem for a democratic aristocrat was this: if the poor were enfranchised, would they allow a law which deprived them of their commons? How the Duke resolved this dilemma is unknown; but one thing is certain. He and his successors stuck to their plans and continued to demand their legal rights and to rationalize the rights of the poor. In 1810, an amending act vested the Wavendon Heath fuel allotment of 150 acres in the sixth Duke for £300 per annum to buy coals for the poor. This demonstrates that the fifth Duke believed in the sanctity of private property and saw the concession of popular democracy only as the way for the landed élite to preserve their economic interests.<sup>32</sup>

Young – elsewhere a champion of the poor – faced difficulties in defending the Duke over the Maulden enclosure. One cottager told him that before enclosing he 'kept four cows ... now I don't keep so much as a goose'. In this light, the violent reaction of cottagers both at Maulden and Streatham appears natural. Young took the line that 'these accounts of advantages, especially when they are gone, are not to be credited'. Further, he implied the Maulden riots were unjustified as an 'extensive' (nineteen acre!) allotment had been made. When Young turned to the improvements produced by the process, he found much to praise. Although leading to a reduction of 115 acres in the land growing wheat by 1801, the Duke's three acts increased yields by allowing drainage, irrigation and the introduction of a new crop rotation. This ended problems with the rot and made worthwhile the introduction by the sixth Duke of John Ellman's Southdown sheep. Young particularly commended a clause in the acts secured by Bedford 'to enable him to irrigate, by carrying a canal through the property of other persons, paying them compensation for damages'. Bedford obtained the boggy land in his enclosures 'because they were in no estimation amongst the proprietors in general'. By 1798, Farey was supervising the reclamation of 200 acres on the edge of Crawley bog. Although Joseph Elkington had failed to drain Prisley bog at Flitwick in 1795, the Duke employed the geologist and engineer William Smith (1769–1839) on the same task. Smith drained the bog in 1802 and won a silver medal from the Society of Arts in 1805 for draining another eleven acres in 1803–4. This success encouraged the sixth Duke to enclose Flitwick in 1806. Apart from converting these 'boggy bottoms' into water meadows, by 1797 the Duke had started to improve 'some poor sandy hills' at Crawley, exhausted by tillage, and used by cottagers for fuel, until the enclosure act gave them an allotment let for £30 a year to supply them with

<sup>31</sup> J. Bohstedt, *Riots and community politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (1983), p. 197.

<sup>32</sup> Public Record Office, WO40, 17 Aug. 1796; Batchelor, *General view*, pp. 235, 438.

firewood. The Duke planted this 100 acre allotment for game and shelter. Further he had the heath marled and planted with turnips.<sup>33</sup>

On balance, the Duke's policy as regards his own estate was damaging. The enclosures and even the drainage may have paid, although they provoked popular discontent; unfortunately the experiments – £20,000 a year apart from his other personal spending – certainly did not. His profligacy in only sixteen years forced him to sell huge estates and still leave a debt of £200,000. More judicious and gradual investment might have achieved the same long-term results without jeopardising the estate's survival. Like Coke of Holkham, Bedford continued to spend blindly without any real consideration of cost or return.<sup>34</sup>

As regards the aristocracy's long term survival, certainly capital-intensive improvements were needed to increase their incomes to face the challenge of the emergent bourgeoisie and to prevent food shortages and discontent. Unfortunately such policies inflicted short-term harm upon the poor at a time of social unrest, and engendered hatred. There were disturbances at Bedford's funeral at Woburn, from the local 'populace stealing escutcheons from the hearse' and breaking the church windows.<sup>35</sup>

## II

The fifth Duke's objectives – to promote agricultural improvement and to change society – required finding the means to influence events outside his own estate. He did so in several ways. His improvements, especially the creation of a scientific research centre, were intended to persuade other owners to innovate. He then publicised these new methods in order to reach a wider audience. Further he encouraged change by his patronage of agricultural institutions, obtaining changes in the law, as well as benefiting from emulation and personal influence.

Certainly his home estate was planned to serve as a model to his peers. Three hundred acres of his home farm was converted to a scientific research station in 1800, long before the era of John Bennet Lawes and Rothamstead. He installed Cartwright to superintend 'an establishment for agricultural education ... that the improvement and cultivation of his farm might go hand in hand with those scientific inquiries which would offer the most precious opportunity to students'. These experiments were many and various, but mainly concentrated on stock breeding and the value of various crops – chicory, hay, turnips and oil cake – in feeding different types of stock.<sup>36</sup>

All of the Duke's drainage and planting activities were deliberately innovative in order to gain the maximum scientific benefit and publicity. They were reported in the many widely-read agricultural publications of the time. These reports also mentioned the practical inventions and new buildings erected under Salmon's direction. Bedford's innovations were given a showcase at his annual shearings from 1797. Although Coke had beaten him to the idea, his were relatively small affairs, whereas Bedford's was the 'most respectable meeting in the whole

<sup>33</sup> Board of Agriculture [A. Young], *A general report on Enclosures* (1808), p. 232. *Annals* 41 (1803), p. 539. A. Young, 'Husbandry ... of Bedford', pp. 392, 442–3. *Trans. of the Society of Arts* 23 (1805), pp. 148–72. *DNB* XVIII, p. 559.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, *Coke of Holkham*, pp. 188–92; Wade Martins, *Great estate*, pp. 69–70, 156.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times* 13 Mar. 1802, p. 3, col. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Young, 'Obituary', p. 369. Young, 'Husbandry ... of Bedford', p. 387; Batchelor, *General view*, p. 32.

world' to which he attracted European and American visitors. In 1805, some 892 people dined at Woburn at the sixth earl's shearings. Many of the ideas propagated there were copied or improved upon by aristocrats on their own home farms and estates. Despite the fact that 'this truly rational Agricultural Fete' was the world's leading agricultural conference, its aim was 'principally of stimulating the Bedfordshire farmers to improvement'. Prizes were awarded to the best tenants, who also acquired status through publicity in the newspapers. This gathering, perhaps more than anything else, helped to establish the idea of farming as a fashion.<sup>37</sup>

The extent to which the Duke's tenantry followed this fashion is hard to assess. Certainly the improved infrastructure produced by the Duke's investment facilitated the adoption of better husbandry. Although the Duke did not adopt improving leases, Bedfordshire tenants were rarely dispossessed of their farms so they would reap the benefits of any improvements.<sup>38</sup> It is true that tenants who had to make their farms pay or face eviction needed hard evidence of the profitability of new husbandry; unlike their landlords, many tenants were obliged to calculate closely. Despite this caution, the attraction of prizes and pressure from the Duke's agents and the landlord himself must have spurred them to adopt a more scientific attitude to their farming. At a minimum, tenants would be expected to at least interest themselves in the Duke's ideas. More conclusive proof of the extent to which improving landlords – in general – influenced their tenantry awaits the work of future historians.

Outside his own estate, he accepted the offer of many official positions in order to promote scientific agriculture. Apart from his patronage of the local agricultural society, he was a founder member of the Board of Agriculture in 1793. Then, at the 1799 Woburn meeting, he was persuaded to help found and act as President of the Smithfield Club for the improvement of stock breeding. He promoted laws to encourage agricultural change. His resolutions to the House of Lords in 1800 to reduce the parliamentary costs of enclosure led directly to the Commons' decision to bring in a consolidated bill on the subject which became the 1801 General Enclosure Act. Embodied in the act was the Duke's proposal that witnesses could prove the allegation of an enclosure petition before local magistrates rather than a parliamentary committee.<sup>39</sup>

Another mechanism for exercising influence was emulation. Take, for example, Samuel Whitbread whom one contemporary described as 'a vain ... ostentatious and expensive man ... was ambitious of being a great landed proprietor and ... [who] bought up all the land offered to sale in his own neighbourhood'. While more concerned about profit than the Duke, Whitbread's keenness to invest in land required large transfers of capital from his lucrative brewery and ruinous loans. Like Bedford, Whitbread used enclosure acts to extend his estate. His keenness to buy led to both high prices and ruinous loans to secure land before others

<sup>37</sup> BLRO, R3/1243, Jones to Beaumont 11 May 1792; *Trans. of the Society of Arts* 23 (1805), pp. 112–72; *Communications to the Board of Agriculture on subjects relative to the husbandry and internal improvement of the country* (7 vols, 1800–13), II, pp. 349–50; IV, pp. 370–81. Batchelor, *General view*, p. 215. Young, 'Husbandry of ... Bedford', p. 420. E. Clark, 'House of Russell', *JRASE* 3rd ser., 2 (1891), p. 132. Parker, *Coke of Holkham*, p. 116. Mingay

(ed.), *Agrarian History* VI, p. 933; Young, 'Obituary'; J. V. Beckett, *The Aristocracy in England, 1660–1914* (1986), p. 165; *Staffs Advertiser*, 25 June 1813, p. 3, col. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Batchelor, *General view*, pp. 40–3; J. Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850–1* (1852), pp. 441–2.

<sup>39</sup> *Farmer's Magazine* 8 (1807), pp. 189–92. *The Times* 4 July 1800, p. 2, col. 2; 10 July 1800, p. 1, col. 2; 12 July 1800, p. 2, col. 2 and 15 July 1800, p. 2, col. 2.

could buy it; 'he was obliged to take up money at a high rate of interest whenever he wanted it ... he became a needy man'.<sup>40</sup> Whitbread was keen to emulate the Duke's landed status but also his social and political goals. Whitbread became the Duke's close friend and political ally. He regularly attended the Woburn fetes and was a founder member of the Duke's agricultural society of Bedfordshire: indeed, he succeeded the Duke as President.<sup>41</sup> Between them, Bedford and Whitbread owned a sixth of Bedfordshire – but what about those smaller owners of the other five-sixths who lacked the wealth to aspire to such status? Copying the Duke's example would enable them to be seen in his company. Moreover the Duke would give them the time of day, having 'the intelligence and breadth of mind to listen and evaluate anybody's opinions'. The Duke took his rôle as a local leader seriously and did far more than simply hold his shearings. In Bedfordshire alone he controlled one county seat and one seat at the county town. He was the master of the Oakley Hunt to which Whitbread also belonged. The Duke's enthusiasm and local influence must have led to great interest in the new agricultural methods.

The way in which the Duke's enthusiasm could influence landlords beyond Bedfordshire is perhaps best illustrated by this anecdote. Coke of Holkham was surprised one day to see 30 Devon oxen – a breed unknown in the area – coming up his drive. Upon enquiry, he was informed that they were a present from the fifth Duke who wished him to try this special breed of oxen of which he personally approved. Coke was so impressed with them that he introduced the breed into the county – largely for meat rather than as draught beasts – and popularized them with London butchers.<sup>42</sup>

In fairness, it is true that the Duke's methods were rarely adopted by contemporaries through fear of bankruptcy. Certainly Bedfordshire was never awash with octagonal farmhouses, nor Norfolk with Devon oxen. Nevertheless, he made dramatic improvements on his own estate, set the fashion for farming and created an ethos for change. His influence was such that the whole county's agriculture improved rapidly after his death. Young felt that 'any person that knows tolerably well the husbandry of Bedfordshire will recollect that such a farm as his Grace's was scarcely anywhere more wanted'. Subsequent generations also tried to measure his significance. In 1857, W. Bennett attributed the 50 per cent increase in production on many farms in Bedfordshire since 1794 to the influence of the Duke upon the 'torpor-stricken agriculturalists of his day', particularly in draining their land.<sup>43</sup>

Recent research has shown that the most effective innovators were not aristocratic improvers but professional farmers whose ideas actually had to pay. Nevertheless, the climate where interest was shown in innovation was created by the great improvers through their shows, prizes, publications and speeches. Also, they set the fashion of improving farming as a means of gaining deference which influenced magnates both in establishing model home farms and

<sup>40</sup> Warwickshire RO, CR1381, *Memoirs of Sir George Philips* (1845).

<sup>41</sup> D. Brown, 'Enclosure and Improvement. An investigation into the motives for parliamentary enclosure' (PhD thesis, Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1992), II, p. 223. Dean Rapp, 'Social mobility in the eighteenth century: the Whitbreads of Bedfordshire, 1720–1815', *EcHR* 27 (1974), p. 391; Roger Fulford, *Samuel Whitbread* (1967),

pp. 78–80.

<sup>42</sup> A. W. A. Stirling, *Coke of Holkham and his friends* (2 vols, 1908), I, p. 258.

<sup>43</sup> Batchelor, *General view*, preface, p. 626. Young, 'Husbandry of ... Bedford', pp. 386–7. W. M. Bennett, 'Agriculture of Bedfordshire', *JRASE* 1st. ser. 18 (1857), p. 28.

in their general estate management. Certainly, the rôle model presented by the fifth Duke locally seems to have been crucial in both these ways to the improvement of his native county. In this he was not alone. Many early nineteenth-century Whigs, Coke of Holkham, J. C. Curwen of Workingham Hall, Cumberland (1756–1828) and Sir James Graham of Netherby, Cumberland (1792–1861), all frustrated at their political impotence, turned to their estates as a means of pursuing their enlightened and rational ideas and obtaining the respect denied them at Westminster. Bedford's status ensured that his ideas permeated throughout Britain; for example, Edward Knight was influenced by his visits to Woburn in his reclamation of Exmoor Forest.<sup>44</sup> Young wrote that 'the agricultural world never perhaps sustained a greater individual loss than ... by the death of the Duke of Bedford'.<sup>45</sup>

### III

The case of the fifth Duke of Bedford demonstrates three main points. First it suggests that the rôle of the aristocratic improver has been underrated. The fifth Duke certainly had both a local and a national significance and his part in the formulation of the 1801 general enclosure act should not be overlooked. Nor was he unique. Other Whig improvers had exercised influence upon their peers, Coke of Holkham on his relatives, the first Viscount Anson of Shugborough, Staffordshire (1767–1818), and the third Viscount Talbot of Ingestre Hall, Staffordshire (1777–1849), and Curwen on Sir James Graham, his 'favourite pupil'. As Ward commented, 'the attraction of appearing among such neighbours and such aristocratic celebrities as a great landed proprietor must have been considerable'. Their impact was such that their supporters and tenants were prepared to spend large sums upon testimonies to their influence. Two hundred and ten leading individuals, led by the Prince of Wales, gave a total of £3172 in 1809 to erect a statue (which still stands in Russell Square) to commemorate Bedford's agricultural activities. Earl Talbot was presented with a costly vase in 1818 by the Staffordshire General Agricultural Society 'fostered by his care and animated to useful exertion by his example'. Other examples, like the massive statues erected by the tenantry to the first Duke of Sutherland on his three main estates, could easily be cited.<sup>46</sup>

Much of the debate is based on the attitudes of contemporary writers who often had their own prejudices. Bedford's celebrity was due to his status in Whig circles and in his county, and so panegyrics about his importance could be dismissed as pure sycophancy; but critics of the influence of great landowners could have their own agenda. Whilst the author of the *General view of Staffordshire*, William Pitt, paid obligatory praise to several aristocrats, he felt that it was men like him with under 300 acres who were the real improvers. Yet an outside observer, James Caird, some forty years later, could compile a completely different list of aristocrats as shining

<sup>44</sup> Brown, 'Enclosure and Improvement', I, pp. 312–29; M. Williams, 'The enclosure of waste lands in Somerset, 1700–1900', *Trans. Inst. British Geographers* 57 (1972), pp. 99–100; S. Sidney, 'The reclamation of Exmoor', *JRASE* 2nd ser. 19 (1878), p. 76; *Gentleman's Magazine*

1802 part i, p. 285. J. T. Ward, *Sir James Graham* (1967), p. 55.

<sup>45</sup> Grazley (ed.), *Arthur Young*, p. 468.

<sup>46</sup> Ward, *Graham*, p. 66. *Annals* 39 (1803), pp. 11–19; *Gentleman's Magazine* 1818 part ii, p. 461.

examples to Staffordshire farmers. On balance, the weight of contemporary evidence points to the significance of the Duke and his kind being greater than is often accepted.<sup>47</sup>

Some qualifications must be made about the influence of the great improvers. Certainly their record on their home estates was not good; Coke and the first Lord Hatherton (1791–1863) of Teddesley in Staffordshire both nearly ruined themselves. Their influence on their tenantry remains uncertain. Further, although they had some national and international significance, most of their sway was confined to their own estates and those of their neighbours, relatives and friends. Few of their peers had either the resources or the manic enthusiasm to pursue their wilder plans. Moreover their influence, as John Beckett points out, is ‘fundamentally unquantifiable’ and so not susceptible to econometric techniques. This does not mean that this influence did not exist and their potential importance in raising the profile of scientific husbandry should not be underrated. In 1873, only 1688 people owned 43 per cent of England and Wales. This small elite played a disproportionate role in the establishment of the nation’s husbandry. What is clear is that at any particular time and in any particular area, much depended upon the accident of the attitude and residence or absenteeism of the leading landowners. Thus, without a resident improving landlord, Oxfordshire in 1850 lagged behind the times; meanwhile great progress had been made by the resident aristocrats of the Nottinghamshire Dukeries. Furthermore, despite its essential patchiness, the influence of the landed improver increased over time. While Adam Smith was probably right to say in 1776 that ‘great proprietors are seldom great improvers’, but their influence increased thereafter and it seems no accident that this coincides with the fears generated first by the American War of Independence and then fanned by political revolutions in Europe and socio-economic revolutions at home.<sup>48</sup>

This leads to the second point. The motivation of historical actors cannot always assumed to be the close calculation of financial returns. While this assumption might apply to a certain extent to his tenantry, the fifth Duke of Bedford probably never closely calculated anything in his life except the results of agricultural experiments. His policies were the product not only of the economic, but also of the intellectual and political environment of his time. Sufficient studies of individual aristocrats exist to show that the Duke’s adoption of some form of capitalist individualism represented the policy of increasing numbers of the élite.

Finally there is the issue of the influence of aristocrats like the fifth Duke upon the long-term prospects of their own estate and their class in general. Despite his appreciation of the new capitalist and democratic ethos of the time, his policies lacked business sense and consideration for the poor. Indeed the survival of the aristocracy depended upon policies like Bedford’s being tempered by paternalism and greater economic prudence.

<sup>47</sup> W. Pitt, *General view of the agriculture of Staffordshire* (1813), p. 20; Caird, *Agriculture*, pp. 229–251.

<sup>48</sup> D. Brown, ‘The variety of motives for parliamentary enclosure: the example of the Cannock Chase area, 1773–1887’, *Midland Hist.* 20 (1994), pp. 111–12; Parker, *Coke of Holkham*, p. 192; Beckett, *Aristocracy*, pp. 50, 205. A simi-

lar point is made by Thomas about Welsh agricultural improvement during the period of the Napoleonic Wars. D. Thomas, *Agriculture in Wales during the Napoleonic Wars* (1963), pp. 180–1; J. R. Wordie, *Estate management in eighteenth century England* (1982), p. 275.