

Subletting in eighteenth-century England: A new methodological approach*

by Joshua Rhodes

Abstract

Subletting continues to be overlooked in macro-economic narratives of agrarian change in early modern England. This article outlines a new methodology to reconstruct and map subletting practices. The approach is demonstrated using two eighteenth-century case-study parishes but can be more widely applied. It outlines the proportion of sublet land in each parish and establishes subtenants' socio-economic status. Measured by length of occupancy, subleases are shown to offer subtenants similar levels of tenurial security to those enjoyed by owner-occupying manorial tenants. Manorial documents are shown to inaccurately reflect landholding patterns at the level of occupation because they conceal subtenant-driven engrossment and a substantial subletting market. Finally, the article explores the implications of this for existing methods of calculating early modern farm sizes, and questions the accuracy of existing farm size data.

Despite the considerable body of scholarship on the history of English agriculture, relatively little is known about the identities of those who cultivated land in pre-nineteenth-century England. Early modern sources that recorded various forms of landownership are abundant but they are usually silent on the occupiers of land. One of the most frequently used sources for reconstructing early modern landholding has been manorial surveys, which recorded tenants with whom manors had a direct relationship, i.e. tenants who paid rent to the lord or lady of the manor.¹ However, many direct manorial tenants did not cultivate their land and instead leased their holdings to others. Because historians view this relationship from the perspective of the manor, we refer to it as subtenancy, as these occupiers were the lowest tier in a structure that consisted of manorial lord, tenant, and subtenant.

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¹ E.g. M. Spufford, *Contrasting communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (1974); R. C. Allen, *Enclosure and the yeoman: the agricultural development of the south Midlands, 1450–1850* (1992); J. Broad, 'The fate of the Midland yeoman: tenants, copyholders, and freeholders as farmers in north Buckinghamshire, 1620–1800', *Continuity and Change* 14 (1999), pp. 325–47; J. Whittle, *The development of agrarian capitalism: land and labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (2000); H. R. French and R. W. Hoyle, *The character of English rural society: Earls Colne, 1550–1750* (2007).

Agricultural historians have long known that the tenants enumerated in manorial surveys were often not the actual occupiers of the land and that patterns of cultivation differed significantly ‘on the ground’ to the picture painted by manorial documents.² Subletting could occur on freehold and leasehold land, but most evidence of subtenancy has been drawn from land held by copyhold or beneficial leasehold, since tenants who held under these tenures were most commonly recorded in the records of manorial administration.³ Estimates of the proportion of copyhold and beneficial leasehold land under subtenancy, based on scattered case-study evidence from across England, covering the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, range from around 50 per cent to over 80 per cent of land.⁴ Not only was a high proportion of copyhold and beneficial leasehold land sublet in the early modern period, Turner and Beckett have shown that these forms of tenure survived well into the nineteenth century, suggesting that subletting remained important for longer than has previously been assumed.⁵

It is hard to overstate the potential of subletting to disrupt established narratives of change in agriculture and rural society in early modern England that are predicated largely on evidence drawn from manorial sources. Subtenancy has loomed particularly large in debates about changes to the size of early modern farms. Historians’ calculations of farm sizes have normally been based on the size of tenants’ holdings recorded in manorial documents. These estimates of farm size would be unreliable if it were found that manorial documents did not accurately reflect the distribution of holdings as they were cultivated. The reliability of farm size data is of considerable importance because the size of farms has been a staple proxy measure of the development of agrarian capitalism in England. Although no consensus exists on what constitutes a large or small farm, ‘large’ farms have been taken to indicate the emergence of the conditions of capitalist agriculture as they employed wage labour, in contrast to ‘small’ farms that relied on family labour and were therefore indicative of peasant farming. A substantial body of literature has charted the rise of agrarian capitalism along these lines, although no key period of change has been identified since engrossment has been

² W. J. Corbett, ‘Elizabethan village surveys’, *Trans. of the Royal Historical Society* 11 (1897), p. 78; R. H. Tawney, *The agrarian problem in the sixteenth century* (1912), pp. 80–1; Eric Kerridge, *Agrarian problems in the sixteenth century and after* (1969), pp. 48–9; C. J. Harrison, ‘Elizabethan village surveys: A comment’, *AgHR* 27 (1979), pp. 82–9; Peter Finch, ‘Land holding and sub-letting: a Surrey manor in 1613’, *The Local Historian* 18 (1987), pp. 16–18; J. Whittle and M. Yates, ‘“Pays réel or pays légal”? Contrasting patterns of land tenure and social structure in eastern Norfolk and western Berkshire, 1450–1600’, *AgHR* 48 (2000), pp. 1–26; French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, ch. 8; Stephen Hipkin, ‘The structure of landownership and land occupation in the Romney Marsh region, 1646–1834’, *AgHR* 51 (2003), pp. 69–94; id., ‘Tenant farming and short-term leasing on Romney Marsh, 1587–1705’, *EcHR*, 53 (2000), pp. 646–76; I. Whyte, ‘Owners and

occupiers: subtenancy and subtenants in Watermillock, Cumberland, c.1760–c.1840: a case study’, *Northern Hist.* 50 (2013), pp. 77–92.

³ For further discussion of the complex system of estates and tenures, see M. Overton, *Agricultural revolution in England: The transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500–1850* (1996), pp. 30–5.

⁴ Harrison, ‘Elizabethan village surveys’, p. 86; French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 254; Whyte, ‘Owners and occupiers’, p. 84; Finch, ‘Land holding’, p. 18; Hipkin, ‘Tenant farming’, p. 658.

⁵ J. V. Beckett and M. E. Turner, ‘Freehold from copyhold and leasehold. Tenurial transition in England between the 16th and 19th centuries’, in Bas J. P. van Bavel and Peter Hoppenbrouwers (eds), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages–19th century)*, pp. 282–92.

observed across the early modern period.⁶ In part this is because a farm that was viable in one century appears small in the next, but new long-run estimates of agricultural output indicate that the search for a key turning point in England's agricultural development has been wrong-headed since output only grew incrementally across the early modern period.⁷ The clear-cut distinctions that render 'small' synonymous with 'peasant', and likewise 'large' with 'capitalist', have been challenged, and work by Leigh Shaw-Taylor has shifted the focus away from farm sizes entirely.⁸ Nonetheless, the search for accurate farm size data remains an important but elusive goal, since while land area alone rarely tells the whole story, we cannot undertake more sophisticated analyses on early modern farming without basic but accurate acreage data. Quantifying and accounting for the role of subtenancy is an important step towards more accurate farm size data.

Work that has explicitly examined the occupiers of land in early modern England has broadly followed one of two approaches. The first has been to employ probate inventories to reconstruct patterns of cultivation and crop usage.⁹ However, this approach only captures the dynamics of a farm at a particular moment in time, at the end of a cultivator's life, and does not allow us to reconstruct all farms in a particular area. The second approach has focused on the activities of tenant farmers on large estates. Estate records have facilitated detailed reconstruction of the terms under which these farmers held land, examining the role of leases in offering tenants security of tenure, and considering risk management in farming.¹⁰ Historians have also used farmers' diaries and accounts but these typically tell us only about the landholding practices of wealthier individuals.¹¹

Despite its importance, recovering subtenancy has proved to be difficult. The three main limitations of existing studies that attempt to recover evidence of subletting are that they have not produced comparable data, have relied on snapshot evidence, and have not situated subletting within a spatial context. Largely, this is because little or no direct documentary evidence of subletting survives, so systematically reconstructing patterns of subtenancy has proved challenging. Only a few manorial surveys recorded subtenants because when commissioning a survey, manorial lords were primarily concerned with recording direct tenants who owed them rent and services, rather than subtenants who paid their rent to direct tenants.¹² One such exception is the field book C. J. Harrison used to reconstruct subletting patterns

⁶ For a comprehensive review of the literature, see L. Shaw-Taylor, 'The rise of agrarian capitalism and the decline of family farming in England', *ECHR* 65 (2012), pp. 26–60.

⁷ Broad, 'Fate of the Midland yeoman'; Stephen Broadberry, Bruce M. S. Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton and Bas van Leeuwen, *British economic growth, 1270–1870* (2015), p. 129.

⁸ M. Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm: family and household economy in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), pp. 157–95; Shaw-Taylor, 'Agrarian capitalism'; P. Croot, *The world of the small farmer: tenure, profit and politics in the early modern Somerset Levels* (2017), pp. 8–15.

⁹ B. M. S. Campbell and M. Overton, 'A new perspective on medieval and early modern agriculture: six centuries of Norfolk farming, c.1250–c.1850', *Past and Present* 141 (1993), pp. 38–105.

¹⁰ D. R. Stead, 'The mobility of English tenant farmers, c.1700–1850', *AgHR* 51 (2003), pp. 184–5; Stead, 'Risk and risk management in English agriculture, c.1750–1850', *ECHR* 57 (2004), pp. 334–61.

¹¹ With the notable exception of Richard Latham's account book, many of the examples in the most recent work have been drawn from wealthier individuals, see R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *The farmer in England, 1650–1980* (2013).

¹² Kerridge, *Agrarian problems*, p. 48.

in his classic study of mid-sixteenth-century Cannock in Staffordshire.¹³ Other evidence has been left when manorial lords attempted either to discourage subletting through regular presentments or to raise revenue by requiring tenants to pay fines to obtain licences to let their property. Several historians have reconstructed subletting from these licences-to-let but such licences only leave us with a partial picture of a parish or manor's formal subletting activity.¹⁴ Enrolment of licenses relied on the diligence of manor officials and their ability to enforce fines. Furthermore, licences were typically only required on leases longer than a year, and in order to avoid these fines, manorial tenants often notionally took the property in hand for a day each year despite subletting for several years at a time.¹⁵

Beyond the manor, taxes levied on or which recorded the occupiers of land have produced records that have opened up fruitful areas of enquiry. Steven Hipkin has used scot books, the records of rates levied on the occupants of Romney Marsh, to reconstruct patterns of landownership and occupation in considerable detail.¹⁶ However, these types of records were specific to marshland regions, making wider comparisons difficult, as comparable records were not produced across England. Ian Whyte has used Land Tax assessments to examine subletting in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cumberland.¹⁷ Although Land Tax assessments were produced nationally, they are primarily of use for recovering post-1780 subtenancy because it is only from this date that they consistently record owners and occupiers.¹⁸ More promising sources have been poor rates and tithe accounts, which were produced nationally and together cover much of the early modern period. Peter Finch used a 'ratement' to examine early seventeenth-century subletting in Surrey, but it appears that this only survives for 1613 and was possibly not collected in other years.¹⁹ Although he was not concerned with reconstructing subletting, Joseph Barker has used these taxation records to circumvent the problems presented by manorial documents in order to produce more accurate estimates of farm size.²⁰ Henry French and Richard Hoyle have compared poor rates with manorial documents in the most detailed reconstruction of eighteenth-century subtenancy.²¹

These diverse approaches largely rely on exceptional records, which has meant that most reconstructions of subtenancy can only be made for the particular place and year for which a unique source has survived. French and Hoyle's method represents the closest attempt to situate subletting within manorial tenants' and subtenants' lives, but their methodology did not yield quantitative longitudinal data on ownership and occupation. Finally, owing to the difficulties of recovering subtenancy from the historical record, historians have not brought

¹³ Harrison, 'Elizabethan village surveys', pp. 82–9.

¹⁴ J. Gayton, 'Tenants, tenures and transfers: the landholding experience of rural customary tenants in some Hampshire downland manors, 1645–1705' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2013), pp. 173–81; J. Healey, 'Land, population and famine in the English uplands: a Westmorland case study, c.1370–1650', *AgHR* 59 (2011), pp. 172–4; id., 'The landholding structure of a northern manor: Troutbeck, c.1250–1800', *Local Population Stud.*, 90 (2013), pp. 42–7.

¹⁵ Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems*, pp. 50–2.

¹⁶ Hipkin, 'Landownership', pp. 69–94.

¹⁷ Whyte, 'Owners and occupiers', pp. 77–92.

¹⁸ On extracting more from Land Tax assessments, see Richard W. Hoyle, 'Who owned Earls Colne in 1798 ... or how to squeeze more from the Land Tax', *The Local Historian*, 41 (2011), pp. 267–77.

¹⁹ Finch, 'Land holding', pp. 16–18.

²⁰ J. Barker, 'The emergence of agrarian capitalism in early modern England: a reconsideration of farm sizes' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2013), pp. 29–45.

²¹ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, pp. 251–92.

the conceptual and technological insights of the spatial turn to bear on their analysis of subletting.

This article addresses these methodological limitations and reasserts subletting as a practice that was fundamentally important to early modern English agriculture and agrarian society. Section I presents a new methodology to reconstruct and map subletting practices in unprecedented detail for two case-study parishes over the course of the eighteenth century. This dataset allows many of the prevailing assumptions about subtenancy to be interrogated. Section II demonstrates that subletting was not a fringe practice by showing that subtenants were, in many cases, among the wealthier inhabitants of these parishes. Section III examines the subleasing market, firstly by assessing the security of tenure that subleases offered, and secondly by calculating the volume of land transactions taking place on the subtenancy market. Section IV considers the spatial dynamics of subletting and examines how subtenants used subleases to engross and consolidate their holdings. Section V constructs farm size data that allows for subletting and compares these figures with farm sizes derived from manorial documents to demonstrate that manorial documents systematically under-record the size of farms. Finally, section VI draws together the conclusions and implications of these findings, and outlines an agenda for further research.

I

A methodology has been developed which draws upon but substantially refines and extends French and Hoyle's method of cross-referencing poor rates with manorial documents to reconstruct subletting activity. As records of a tax on occupiers of land, where they survive, poor rates provide longitudinal data on land occupation.²² Manorial documents offer similar levels of coverage for direct manorial tenants. By comparing these two sources we can establish which manorial tenants cultivated their land and which sublet their property. A key innovation in this methodology is to create the links between owners and occupiers at the level of individual fields, so that ownership and occupation data in the databases are linked to geo-referenced shapefiles. This allows, for the first time, the spatial dynamics of subletting to be reconstructed and analysed. Two case-study parishes have been chosen for the quality of their records in facilitating such a detailed reconstruction of subletting: Earls Colne in Essex, for the period 1722–1806, and Puddletown in Dorset, for 1719 to 1792.

This new methodology for recovering subletting practices can be demonstrated with a brief, worked example from Puddletown parish. In c.1725, a survey of Puddletown manor recorded its tenants who held copyhold for lives or lifeleasehold land. The survey noted the name of each property, its tenant, the lives named on either the lease or copy, and a range of other details about the landholding. Importantly, one of these additional details was the property's poor rate assessment.²³ For example, Elizabeth Nightingale owned 'Nightingales' tenement that was

²² For basis of rate as levy on occupiers see R. H. Tawney and E. Power (eds), *Tudor economic documents: being select documents illustrating the economic and social history of Tudor England* (3 vols, 1924), II,

pp. 346–54; R. Burn, *Justice of the peace and parish officer* (seventh edn, 3 vols, 1762), III, pp. 123–4.

²³ Dorset History Centre (hereafter DHC), D-PUD/E/1/1/5.

rated at 2s. 4d. in the poor rates. Each property and its ratepayer can be identified in the poor rates between 1719 and 1792, using the property name and its poor rate rating recorded in the manorial survey.²⁴ As the poor rate for 'Nightingales' tenement in 1725 was levied on Mary Garland, we can infer that Elizabeth Nightingale was subletting her land to Mary Garland in 1725. The properties listed in the c.1725 survey have been linked to other manorial documents, including a further survey produced in 1792.²⁵ By this time, 'Nightingales' was called 'late clapcots' and it was owned by John Corbin. The 1792 poor rate for 'late clapcots' was levied on Robert Alner, once again signifying that the property was being sublet.

The compilers of the 1792 survey detailed the fields that made up each property and listed these along with reference numbers under each property's heading. 'Nightingales/late clapcots' comprised field numbers 59, 289, 290, 300, 352, and 564. The original 1792 map does not appear to have survived but fortunately the mid-nineteenth-century tithe survey employs the same field numbering system, so that properties in the late eighteenth-century survey can be linked to the tithe map.²⁶ The tithe map has been digitized, geo-referenced, and each field has been linked to data on ownership and occupation drawn from the manorial surveys and poor rates.²⁷ Therefore, although no inherent link exists between the poor rates and geo-referenced maps, this process links them through their common connections in the manorial surveys. This allows patterns of ownership and occupation to be reconstructed at the level of individual fields. This process has been repeated for each owner, occupier, and property between 1725 and 1792 at Puddletown, and a similar process has been undertaken at Earls Colne for the period 1722–1806.²⁸ Owing to limitations of the Puddletown sources, while occupiers and their holdings can be reconstructed annually between 1719 and 1792, at present ownership data is only available for 1725, 1775, and 1792. By comparison, data on occupiers and owners is available for every year at Earls Colne between 1722 and 1806. Probate documents, parish registers, and a range of other supplementary sources have been drawn upon to identify owners and occupiers' ages, occupations, wealth, family members, and other landholdings.

Earls Colne scarcely needs an introduction to early modern historians. The collation and digitization of many of its records by a team led by Alan Macfarlane in the 1970s–80s has facilitated considerable interest and research into its history.²⁹ Earls Colne lies in north Essex

²⁴ DHC, PE-PUD/OV/1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4.

²⁵ DHC, D-PUD/E/1/1/8, 1/9, 1/10.

²⁶ DHC, T-PUD.

²⁷ For methodology on geo-referencing historical maps, see A. W. Pearson, 'Digitizing and analyzing historical maps to provide new perspectives on the development of the agricultural landscape of England and Wales', *e-Perimetron* 1 (2006), pp. 178–93.

²⁸ The subtenancy databases form the core source material on which this article draws its evidence. To limit repeat references, all evidence should be assumed to have been drawn from the following documentary sources unless otherwise indicated. Puddletown: DHC, D-PUD/E/1/1/5, 1/6, 1/7, 1/8, 1/9, 1/10, PUD/E/1/2/8,

PE-PUD/OV/1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, T-PUD. Earls Colne: Essex RO (hereafter ERO), D/DPr 26*, 27*, 28*, 29*, 30*, DPr 84*, 85*, 86*, D/DPr 92, 93, 95, 96, D/DPr 612, 613, D/P 209/11/3, D/P 209/8*, D/DSm P1*, D/DPr118* (references marked with an asterisk are available at linux02.lib.cam.ac.uk/earlscolne/).

²⁹ A small sample of the Earls Colne scholarship: A. Macfarlane, *The family life of Ralph Josselin, A seventeenth-century clergyman: An essay in historical anthropology* (1977); R. von Friedeburg, 'Reformation of Manners and the social composition of offenders in an East Anglian cloth village: Earls Colne, Essex, 1531–1642', *J. British Studies*, 29 (1990), pp. 347–85; G. Sreenivasan, 'The land-family bond at Earls Colne

about nine miles west of Colchester and in the eighteenth century comprised two manors, Earls Colne and Colne Priory. The parish covered slightly under 3000 acres and had been enclosed since before the late sixteenth century.³⁰ In the early to mid-eighteenth century, around 30 per cent of people in Earls Colne worked in the agricultural sector and a similar proportion worked in retail and crafts.³¹ Mixed farming was practised at Earls Colne and hops were an important cash crop for its farmers.³² Puddletown (a village, despite its name) is situated five miles north-east of Dorchester in Dorset. It is much larger than Earls Colne, comprising almost 8000 acres. No common fields remained in the eighteenth century but it had a large heath in the south-west of the parish, as well as extensive water meadows, rights to which were apportioned among the copyhold and lifeleasehold tenants.³³ Puddletown was the site of two manors: Waterston, which lay in the north-western tip of the parish, and Puddletown manor, which covered the remainder and majority of the parish. The early eighteenth-century occupational structure was similar to Earls Colne with, again, a third of its inhabitants directly employed in agriculture, who primarily practised sheep-corn husbandry.³⁴ Tenants at Earls Colne and Puddletown appear to have enjoyed relative freedom to sublet. The Puddletown manorial customs stipulated that tenants could sublet their properties without requiring a licence from the lord.³⁵ Although there were 13 licences-to-let granted by the manors at Earls Colne between 1730 and 1763, this number is so dwarfed by the actual instances of subletting that the manorial courts were clearly no barrier to subletting.

This study is limited to copyhold and beneficial leasehold land in each parish because manorial documents reliably recorded conveyances of these properties. Freehold land was also sublet but conveyances of it were not recorded in a single place. The accurate reconstruction of freehold ownership is therefore difficult, if not often impossible. For this reason the tenancy of freehold land is beyond the scope of this study.³⁶ Land held under copyhold for lives or leasehold for lives in Puddletown manor comprised about 22 per cent of land in the parish, while slightly over 36 per cent of land in Earls Colne was held under copyhold of inheritance.³⁷ These are small proportions of the total land in each parish and we have to assume that they are representative of landholding on these tenures more broadly.

When calculating subtenancy rates, a distinction has been made between land cultivated by the owner ('owner-occupied'), a relative ('cultivated by relative'), and an individual to whom no familial connection to the owner can be established ('sublet'). The owner-occupier category

Note 29 *continued*

(Essex), 1550–1650', *Past and Present* 131 (1991), pp. 3–37; French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*; D. MacKinnon, *Earls Colne's early modern landscapes* (2014). The quality of Puddletown records has similarly attracted scholars' attention, e.g. S. R. Ottaway, *The decline of life: Old age in eighteenth-century England* (2004).

³⁰ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 181.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³³ C. L. Sinclair Williams (ed.), *Puddletown, house, street and family: An account of the inhabitants of Piddletown Parish, 1724, Dorsetshire* (Dorset Record

Soc., 11, 1988), p. 10; DHC, D-PUD/E/1/1/10.

³⁴ Sinclair Williams, *Puddletown*, pp. 10, 83.

³⁵ DHC, PE-PUD/RE/1/5.

³⁶ It is envisaged that further research on the subletting of non-customary land will be carried out.

³⁷ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 100; DHC, D-PUD/E/1/1/9. The detail needed to link manorial documents, poor rates, and geo-referenced maps means that not all the copyhold or beneficial leasehold land in both parish has been successfully linked. The problem largely affects Puddletown, with the 1725 and 1775 owner and occupier links on substantially less land than were possible for 1792.

TABLE 1. Patterns of land occupancy in Earls Colne and Puddletown, 1722–1806

Year(s)	Owner-occupied		Cultivated by relative		Mixed		Sublet		Cultivated by relative and sublet		Total acres
	%	acres	%	acres	%	acres	%	acres	%	acres	
Earls Colne											
1722–29	31.5	317.3	17.3	174.3	0.0	0.0	51.2	514.7	68.5	689.0	1006.2
1730–39	47.7	486.9	14.9	152.5	0.0	0.0	37.4	382.1	52.3	534.7	1021.6
1740–49	52.6	539.1	9.6	98.0	0.2	7.3	37.6	384.9	47.2	482.9	1029.3
1750–59	46.9	480.6	16.9	173.4	0.0	0.0	36.1	370.2	53.1	543.6	1024.2
1760–69	48.7	498.7	2.6	38.7	0.0	0.0	48.7	498.4	51.3	537.1	1035.8
1770–79	48.0	491.5	10.7	109.5	0.0	0.0	41.3	423.2	52.0	532.7	1024.2
1780–89	47.4	485.1	10.4	106.3	1.5	15.4	40.8	417.4	51.1	523.7	1024.2
1790–99	63.2	647.7	2.9	29.6	0.2	15.4	33.7	345.4	36.6	375.0	1038.1
1800–06	56.0	572.3	16.6	168.9	0.0	0.0	27.4	279.6	44.0	448.6	1020.8
Puddletown											
1725	81.3	978.5	1.6	19.4	0.0	0.0	17.1	205.9	18.7	225.3	1203.8
1775	85.5	1006.6	1.4	17.0	0.0	0.0	13.0	153.5	14.5	170.5	1177.1
1792	45.8	847.7	9.3	171.5	0.0	0.0	44.9	830.2	54.2	1001.7	1849.4

Note: The total acreage for Puddletown in 1792 is more than the total area of copyhold and beneficial leasehold land (c.1700 acres) because the fields in one farm that contains intermixed leasehold and freehold land are not identified as such, so the figure here includes some freehold land.

Source: Subtenancy databases, see n. 28.

comprises three situations: where the owner and occupier was the same person; when a parent occupied land owned by their child who was under the age of 21; and where the owner and occupier were husband and wife. The category of ‘cultivated by relative’ captures a wider range of circumstances, such as when owner and occupier were siblings or cousins. Also included are instances in which adult offspring occupied land owned by their parents. In many cases, the owners and occupiers that populate the ‘relative’ category did not share a surname, and connections have instead been established through parish registers and wills. This category therefore captures a much broader range of kin than any category of subletting between relatives that only links by surname. Therefore, many of those recorded here as ‘relative’ may have been classed as ‘subtenant’ in other studies.³⁸ The category of subtenant refers to all other cases where none of these connections could be established.

Table 1 summarizes the amount of land that lay in these categories in Earls Colne and Puddletown. For ease of representation, the Earls Colne data are given as decadal averages. The proportion of land in the ‘sublet’ category represents a lower bound estimate of the proportion of land in subtenancy and the land in the ‘cultivated by relative and sublet’ category is an upper bound estimate. These lower and upper bound estimates are premised on the fact

³⁸ Hipkin, ‘Tenant farming’, p. 658. Finch, ‘Land holding’, p. 16; Whyte, ‘Owners and occupiers’, p. 85.

that the 'cultivated by relative' category captures a range of subletting contexts which lie on a spectrum between 'pure' owner-occupation and subletting for a market rent. A substantial amount of land at Earls Colne was sublet and the decline after 1790 can be accounted for by one large farm moving into owner-occupation, rather than an indication of a more general decline in subletting. Subletting at Puddletown became more prevalent towards the end of the eighteenth century, although the data probably overestimate the disparity between the early and late eighteenth century as the figures for 1725 and 1775 underestimate subletting owing to difficulties linking certain farms in these years. Overall, therefore around fifty per cent of land was frequently sublet in these two contrasting parishes, which suggests that subletting was not a marginal practice. These findings are broadly in line with previous estimates in the literature. The next section considers the relative socio-economic standing of subtenants in relation to other parishioners and ratepayers to further demonstrate that subletting was not a marginal practice.

II

Subtenants have often been characterized in the literature as poor and marginal, or at best inferior to owner-occupiers, and historians have tended to draw sharp distinctions between the socio-economic position of subtenants and manorial tenants.³⁹ While this view has predominated in scholarship in largely pre-seventeenth-century contexts, the position of subtenants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains contested. French and Hoyle identified subtenants among the ranks of parish officeholders in early eighteenth-century Earls Colne, and Juliet Gayton has found subtenants residing in substantial houses in seventeenth-century Hampshire.⁴⁰ However, Angus Winchester emphasized subtenants' lack of security and lesser wealth, and while acknowledging that subtenants were not a homogenous group, Ian Whyte concluded that they were less secure and more transient than their landlords.⁴¹ Undoubtedly there were many who endured a precarious existence as subtenants across the early modern period but it should not be assumed that those largely absent from (typically manorial) documents lived a marginal existence. Indeed, that subtenants were assessed for parish poor rates is at odds with this view since ratepayers were expected to *provide* relief to the poor. On this premise, the relative position of subtenants compared to other parish inhabitants can be ascertained in two ways. Firstly, we can determine the proportion of parish inhabitants who were ratepayers, and therefore the extent to which ratepaying subtenants were among the wealthier inhabitants of a parish. Secondly, we can rank ratepayers' assessments to situate subtenants on a spectrum of ratepayers.

Using poor rates to calculate the relative socio-economic position of subtenants compared to other parish inhabitants has some limitations. As a tax on (occupied) landed wealth, poor rates only present one picture of the wealth of a village's inhabitants. A tax on goods or

³⁹ For instance, Healey, 'Troutbeck', pp. 30, 47; 'Land, population and famine', p. 174.

⁴⁰ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, pp. 75–76; Gayton, 'Tenants', p. 186.

⁴¹ A. J. L. Winchester, 'Regional identity in the Lake Counties: Land tenure and the Cumbrian landscape', *Northern Hist.*, 42 (2005), p. 42; Whyte, 'Owners and occupiers', p. 91.

TABLE 2. Proportion of households in Earls Colne and Puddletown who paid poor rates.

	Year	Ratepayers N	Households N	Households paying poor rates %
Puddletown	1724	71	159	45
	1769	41	163	25
	1801	36	188	19
Earls Colne	1723	80	180	44
	1778	78	206	38
	1801	76	211	36

Note: The figures for Puddletown households in 1724 and 1769 are the number of houses. The number of households would have been higher, as some houses contained multiple families. For example, in 1801 there were 151 houses occupied by 188 families. The figures presented here for 1724 and 1769 therefore slightly overstate the proportion of families who paid poor rates.

Source: DHC, PE-PUD/OV/1/1, PE-PUD/OV/1/2, PE-PUD/OV/1/3, PE-PUD/OV/1/4, PE-PUD/OV/1/5; C. L. Sinclair Williams (ed.), *Puddletown, house, street and family: an account of the inhabitants of Piddletown Parish, 1724, Dorsetshire* (Dorset Rec. Soc., 11, 1988) pp. 19, 77–81; ERO, D/P 209/11/3, D/P 209/8; BPP, VI, Census of Great Britain 1801, Census Abstracts of the Answers and Returns: Enumeration, pp. 84, 107.

income would produce a different list of taxpayers.⁴² Also, many people neither paid rates nor received poor relief, so non-ratepayers were not universally poor.⁴³ Nevertheless ratepayers were probably better off than most and since rates were often based on the value of properties, they also provide a good guide to the relative (real) wealth of ratepayers. A particular strength of poor rates is that they provide evidence of ratepayers' wealth over many years, so changes in assessments brought about by increases in the size of farms are captured. To account for these annual fluctuations, we need to calculate a lifetime average assessment for each ratepayer that consists of an average of a ratepayer's average annual contribution to the poor rate. For example, Paul Anthony's land was rated at 5s. in the 1721 Puddletown rates. The total rating of all property assessed in the poor rate in 1721 was £26 13s. 11½d., so Anthony's assessment represented about 0.94 per cent of the rate that year. As he altered the size of his farm, Anthony's assessment fluctuated between 0.94 and 2.53 per cent of the total annual rate. Over his lifetime, he was assessed on average 1.44 per cent of the total rate annually between 1721 and 1746.⁴⁴

Table 2 shows the proportion of families who paid poor rates in Earls Colne and Puddletown between 1723 and 1801. Less than half of all households paid poor rates in both parishes in the early eighteenth century, and this declined to between a third and a fifth of households by the turn of the nineteenth century. Ratepayers who leased some land as subtenants were therefore among a decreasing minority of households on whom poor rates were levied, indicating their

⁴² French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 72.

⁴³ S. Hindle, *On the parish? The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England, c.1550–1750* (2004), pp. 374–78; S. Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle under the*

English poor law, 1760–1834 (2011), pp. 71–3.

⁴⁴ For a similar application of this measure, see French, *The middle sort of people in provincial England, 1600–1750* (2008), pp. 118–19.

TABLE 3. Percentile distribution of average proportion of annual rate assessment

Percentile	<i>Lifetime average % of poor rate assessment</i>			
	<i>Earls Colne</i>		<i>Puddletown</i>	
	<i>All ratepayers</i>	<i>Ratepaying subtenants</i>	<i>All ratepayers</i>	<i>Ratepaying subtenants</i>
10th	0.10	0.28	0.09	0.10
20th	0.14	0.66	0.11	0.19
30th	0.18	0.87	0.19	0.28
40th	0.26	1.19	0.28	0.56
50th	0.36	1.52	0.44	1.38
60th	0.52	1.99	0.66	1.54
70th	0.87	2.85	1.14	1.73
80th	1.52	3.57	2.10	2.34
90th	3.28	5.55	4.31	7.96

Source: See Table 1.

elevated socio-economic position within the parish. Not only were they among an increasingly narrow group of ratepayers, subtenants were substantial ratepayers. Table 3 outlines the proportion of the rate paid by various percentiles of ratepayers and subtenants. It shows that 50 per cent of all Earls Colne ratepayers paid more than 0.36 per cent of the annual poor rate, while 50 per cent paid less. In contrast, and demonstrating their skew towards the top-end of ratepayers, 50 per cent of subtenants' assessments were more than 1.52 per cent of the rate. The same pattern is observed at Puddletown, where half of all ratepayers paid more than 0.44 per cent of the rate, while half of all ratepaying subtenants paid more than three times this at 1.38 per cent. Individuals who were among the wealthiest parishioners leased land as subtenants in addition to those from more modest backgrounds.

So far, these figures have not distinguished different scales of subletting. The category of ratepaying subtenant comprised two extremes, ranging from individuals who leased all their land as subtenants to those who owned most of their holding but who leased a small amount of land from another tenant. This is an important distinction because the relative position of these two types of subtenants indicates the degree to which subtenancy determined socio-economic status. It is possible to make this distinction at Puddletown. Table 4 compares the average poor rate assessments of different groups of ratepayers according to whether they sublet or owned all or some of their land. Overall, ratepayers taxed entirely on land they rented as subtenants had higher assessments in two of the three observation years than ratepayers who either solely occupied their own land, occupied their own land and farmed a relative's, or only occupied a relative's property. Those who leased all or part of their holding as subtenants were the largest ratepayers.

Subtenancy of the kind revealed by poor rates should be distinguished from subletting that allowed poor people to supplement their household income by having a bit of land. Subletting may have provided poor people with access to land, and may have fulfilled the function of

TABLE 4. Average proportion of annual rate assessment grouped by different types of subletting status

<i>Subletting Status</i>	<i>Lifetime average % of rate assessment</i>		
	1725	1775	1792
Owner-occupier	0.90	0.95	0.51
Subtenant	0.25	1.48	1.27
Relative	0.10	0.20	1.48
Owner-occupier and relative	–	–	0.41
Owner-occupier and subtenant	1.25	3.36	4.14
Owner-occupier, relative, and subtenant	–	–	1.81
Subtenant and relative	–	–	1.54

Source: See Table 1.

commons in parishes that lacked common land and rights.⁴⁵ But the type of people who paid poor rates on sublet land engaged in a different type of subletting activity, and it was not used as a means of keeping their head above water. Among the subtenants studied here, there were those who leased land to increase the size of their cultivable holdings, and so we find yeomen, farmers, husbandmen, and gardeners among the occupations of subtenants. There were also farmers of large properties who were styled gentleman in both parishes who were engaged in subtenancy. Tradespeople such as blacksmiths, brewers, butchers, clothiers, and millers also held subleases of land as an adjunct to their trade.⁴⁶ Some may have used this land to keep a horse to transport their goods, while others may have engaged in the kind of vertical integration identified in the scholarship.⁴⁷

Sublet land may have been put to many uses but one of the advantages it afforded subtenants was that it enabled them to acquire fields near or adjacent to their existing holdings. This allowed those who were primarily farmers to produce consolidated holdings that were more efficient to farm, while for tradespeople it was of course beneficial to have access to land near to their homes, inns, or mills. Before reconstructing these processes of consolidation and engrossment in section IV, the next section examines the market for subleases and the security of tenure they offered.

⁴⁵ L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Access to land by labourers and tradesmen in eighteenth-century England', in van Bavel and Hoppenbrouwers (eds), *Landholding*, pp. 265–81.

⁴⁶ DHC, L/A 4/1/1, Ad/D/1/1728/23, Ad/Dt/W/1812/28, Ad/Dt/W/1802/44, D-PUD/E/1/3/1/2/10, ERO, D/ACL

1737/7, D/ACW 32/2/37, D/DPr/25, D/DPr 95 (p. 131), D/ACW 40/4/4, D/ACW 34/6/35, D/ABL 1730/40, D/DPr 93 (pp. 241–2), and TNA, PROB 11/1010/24.

⁴⁷ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 261.

III

Security of tenure is often seen as an important means of incentivizing tenant farmers to make improvements and investments to their land. Consequently, the length of leases and the duration that tenants occupied farms have both been important measures of tenurial security. While Susanna Wade Martins and Tom Williamson downplayed the role of agricultural leases in driving the adoption of new farming methods in the eighteenth century, they acknowledged that the length of leases might have encouraged greater investment from tenants.⁴⁸ David Stead examined the question in relation to the mobility of tenant farmers on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century large estates. Stead demonstrated that tenurial mobility was relatively low because many tenants remained on farms for terms longer than the durations of individual leases.⁴⁹ The practice of renewing leases has recently been shown to have considerably extended the length of time tenants remained on farms under yearly leases in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁰

In contrast, eighteenth-century subtenants have been cast as a highly mobile group, sacrificing long-term security in favour of short-term leases, which enabled them to take advantage of prevailing economic conditions. French and Hoyle have argued that ‘subtenants had no long-term plans for the land’ making short-term subleases particularly attractive.⁵¹ Similarly, Whyte has shown that subtenants were more mobile than their landlords, citing subtenants’ shorter length of occupancy (10.5 years) than customary tenants’ time as owners (17.5 years).⁵² Although farm occupancy reflects patterns of mobility because cultivating a holding requires an individual to be present, landownership was not contingent upon residency. Furthermore, periods of owner-occupation may have ceased without a change in ownership, as owners could lease their land to a subtenant. Consequently, the length of time that a manorial tenant owned land did not necessarily equate to the length of time they cultivated the holding. We therefore need a more direct comparison of the occupancy durations of subtenants and owner-occupying manorial tenants in order to fully assess relative levels of tenurial security and mobility, and to produce data comparable to that for large estate farms.

Leases arranged between manorial tenants and subtenants have generally not survived, and in many cases, were perhaps verbal agreements made year-by-year. The only surviving sublease for Earls Colne or Puddletown is a 14-year lease signed in 1773 between John Lay and Dennis Walford for 100 acres of land, 50 acres of which lay in Earls Colne.⁵³ Other evidence of subleases can be gleaned from the licences that some manorial tenants obtained from the Earls Colne manor courts to sublet their properties. In the eighteenth century, the courts granted licences-to-let to 13 tenants, ranging in duration from six to 21 years. Why some tenants obtained licences to sublet their properties when the majority appear to have not is unclear, and in any case, the durations should be viewed with caution. The court granted licences ‘for

⁴⁸ S. Wade Martins and T. Williamson, ‘The development of the lease and its role in agricultural improvement in East Anglia, 1660–1870’, *AgHR* 46 (1998), pp. 127–41.

⁴⁹ Stead, ‘Mobility’, pp. 184–5.

⁵⁰ S. Garrido, ‘Fixed-rent contracts and investment

incentives. A comparative analysis of English tenant right’, *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 48 (2011), pp. 74–5.

⁵¹ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 282.

⁵² Whyte, ‘Owners and occupiers’, p. 88.

⁵³ ERO, D/DAt 45.

any term of years not exceeding' a stated number of years therefore there is no guarantee the number of years for which a tenant sought a licence corresponded to the length of time they sublet their property to individual subtenants.

Despite the absence of documentary evidence of subleases, the new methodology presented in this article makes it possible to measure how long the leases between manorial tenants and subtenants at Earls Colne continued by analysing the duration of their relationship on particular parcels of land. The length of these relationships provides an estimate for the length of the subleases which are now lost to us. The actual lengths of occupancy may have varied by as much as six months from the figures presented here because data on changes in occupancy are drawn from poor rate assessment books. Poor rates were generally only collected twice a year, and changes in occupancy might have occurred several months before the next rate was recorded and collected. This margin of error does not significantly alter the mean or median duration, so the durations here should be considered accurate reflections of the length of occupancy, and therefore of the length of tenant-subtenant relationships. Occupiers whose periods of occupation crossed the start and end points of the database in 1722 or 1806 have been discounted to prevent durations from being artificially truncated. Leases held only by individual cultivators are distinguished here from leases held by successive members of the same family. Where a property was sublet first to a man, and after his death subsequently sublet to his widow or son, the durations of all subsequent subleases of that property held by relatives have been totalled to calculate the length of a 'family' lease. For example, Samuel Smith held a sublease on 22.5 acres from William Sewell for twelve and a half years which his wife, Mary Smith, continued to sublet for a year and a half after his decease. The total length of the sublease was therefore about 14 years. Individual and family leases are differentiated in this way to assess the continuity that subleases afforded occupiers and their families. In line with the distinction set out earlier in this article, the length of tenant-subtenant relationships has been calculated separately for subtenants who were unrelated to their tenant landlord and those with whom they had a familial connection.

In addition to reconstructing the length of tenant-subtenant relationships, the length of time for which owner-occupying manorial tenants cultivated their holdings has been calculated. By comparing the length of time land was cultivated by subtenants and owner-occupiers, we can assess the relative levels of tenurial security that each form of tenure offered. In total this approach yields 233 'length of occupancy' observations on 47 pieces of land. Previous studies that have examined occupiers' durations on farms have limited their analysis to farms that did not undergo substantial boundary changes.⁵⁴ Applying this criteria to copyhold land at Earls Colne would limit the analysis to a handful of owner-occupied farms, as subletting changed the size and boundaries of farms. Therefore, durations have been calculated on individual fields. Fields cultivated by an occupier for the same duration have been aggregated, to reflect the fact that these were acquired together as a cultivable holding. The durations therefore relate to holdings varying in size from individual fields of less than an acre (often rented and added to larger holdings) to complete farms of over 180 acres. The mean occupancy durations were however the same across the sample of holdings despite the disparity in acreage. Of the 233

⁵⁴ Stead, 'Mobility', p. 183.

TABLE 5. Duration of 'individual' and 'family' occupancy on copyhold land in Earls Colne, 1722–1806 (years)

	<i>Subleases</i>		<i>Leases to relative</i>		<i>Owner-occupation</i>	
	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>
Mean	8.6	19.3	8.9	19.7	8.9	25.2
Median	5.5	18.6	4.4	19.7	5.4	24.1
Minimum	0.5	2.2	1.5	19.7	0.5	5.1
Maximum	41.2	42.5	32.6	19.7	47.0	78.8
Sample (number of observations)	97	44	13	2	40	37

Source: See Table 1.

observations, 150 were the durations of individual occupiers and the remaining 83 were the durations of members of 35 families.

Table 5 compares the different lengths of occupancy of subleases, leases to relatives, and periods of owner-occupation. The number of individual and family lengths of occupancy were broadly similar for owner-occupiers, while for subtenants there were many more individual leases than ones which were successively held by members of the same family. As might be expected, owner-occupation therefore offered greater scope for continuity of occupation between family members. The length of time that family members cultivated their own land was longer on average than subtenants but the differences should not be overstated. The longest owner-occupied family duration of 78.8 years is an outlier, the next longest was 50 years, much closer to the maximum 'family' sublease of 42.5 years. While owner-occupiers were more likely to pass their holding on to a relative than subtenants, there was not a huge disparity in the length of time that these families cultivated holdings. Turning to individuals, there was even less difference in the security offered by subleases and owner-occupation. In fact, the median individual sublease of 5.5 years was marginally longer than the median length of time that an owner-occupier cultivated a holding. The minimum and maximum durations were also similar. Cultivators under both systems therefore held land for similar lengths of time and if there were differences in tenurial security offered by owner-occupation and subletting, these were not reflected in the length of time that occupiers actually spent on individual holdings.

How did subleases compare with leases granted to tenant farmers of large estates? The average lengths of subleases at Earls Colne were much shorter than the length of leases on Stead's sample of large rack-rent estate farms in southern England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁵ The median 'individual' occupancy duration in Stead's sample was 14.9 years, almost three times longer than Earls Colne subleases (5.5 years). However, while the average sublease was much shorter, there was greater scope for long-term tenant-subtenant relationships. The longest length of occupancy by one individual in Stead's sample was 25 years, whereas nine subtenants at Earls Colne leased land for more than 25 years. There was also a similar degree of continuity among families in both samples, as the median

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 184.

family sublease was 18.6 years, which compares favourably with a median period of 19.3 years in Stead's sample. While individual subtenants had shorter relationships with their landlords than large-scale tenant farmers did, subtenants' occupancy durations closely mirrored those of owner-occupying manorial tenants. Finally, the longevity of subtenants' relationships with particular landlords and the succession of family members subletting from the same manorial tenant, fits the pattern of renewing leases found elsewhere in England and Europe in the early modern period.⁵⁶

While the average lengths of subtenants' relationships with their manorial-tenant landlords were similar to owner-occupying manorial tenants' length of occupancy, there were many more subleases (155) than instances of owner-occupation (74). The high frequency of short-term subleases and that subletting could decouple periods of owner-occupation from overall durations of property ownership meant that land experienced a change of occupier more frequently than a change of owner. Indeed, the average length of time that each property had a single occupier was 10.85 years, while the average property experienced a change of owner every 16.63 years. The amount of land that changed hands between occupiers was therefore greater than the volume of formal transfers of property ownership in the manor courts. The greater turnover on lease markets than sales markets resulting from short-term leases has been identified across early modern continental Europe.⁵⁷ However, the turnovers of lease and sale markets have not been compared in an English context.

The volume of land transactions passing through the manorial courts and through the hands of occupiers can be directly compared at Earls Colne. To calculate the volume of land transactions, the number of transactions each year have been identified, the land conveyed in all these transactions totalled, and expressed as a percentage of the total area of the manor or manors under investigation. For example, if there were 10 transactions in 1750, each conveying a property of 10 acres, the volume conveyed would be 100 acres. If the total area of the manor were 1000 acres, then the volume conveyed in these 10 transactions would represent 10 per cent of the total area. If the same property was conveyed more than once, its acreage is counted separately for each transaction, so that a 10-acre property sold to one individual and then inherited by another in 1750 would contribute 20 acres to the volume of land conveyed in 1750.

Figure 1 compares the proportion of land in Earls Colne that was bought or inherited through the manorial court (ownership market) and land passing through occupiers' hands (occupation market) each decade. If all land were owner-occupied, the volume conveyed through both markets would be equal. There was, however, a clear discrepancy between the volume of ownership transactions and the volume of occupancy transactions. In each decade, more land was conveyed through the hands of occupiers than owners, with the surplus being the area of land transferred on the subtenancy market. There was therefore considerably more activity at the level of farm occupancy in each decade, except for the 1760s, and subletting accounted for this increased volume of transactions. In some decades, such as the 1720s, 1770s,

⁵⁶ Bas J. P. van Bavel and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, 'Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages–19th century)', in Bavel and

Hoppenbrouwers (eds), *Landholding*, pp. 31–2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–2.

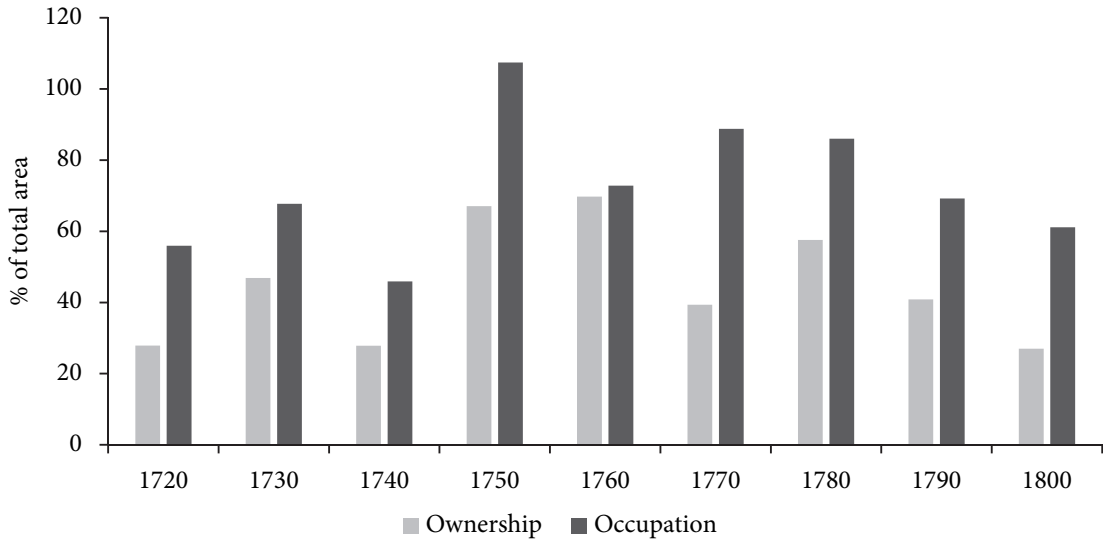


FIGURE 1. Volume of the ownership and occupancy transactions in land markets at Earls Colne, 1722–1806

Source: See Table 1.

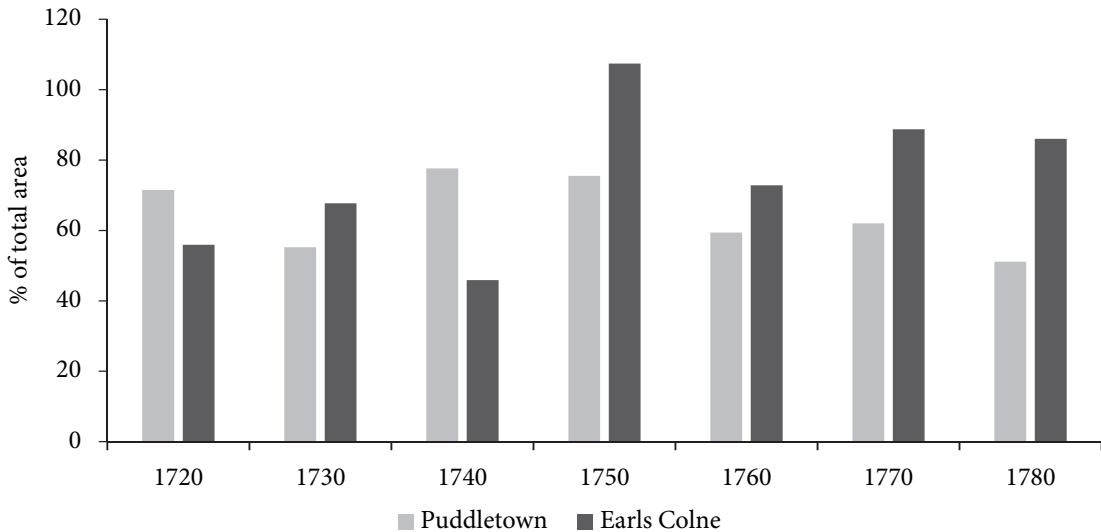


FIGURE 2. Volume of occupancy transactions in land markets at Earls Colne and Puddletown, 1720–1789

Source: See Table 1.

and 1800s, more land was exchanged on the subtenancy market than through the manor court, demonstrating the extent to which manorial documents conceal landholding activity. Figure 2 compares the turnover of land in the occupancy markets at Puddletown and Earls Colne in the 1720s to 1780s. In five out of seven decades, a greater proportion of the total area passed through occupiers' hands at Earls Colne than at Puddletown. Earls Colne had a

more active subletting market in small parcels of land than Puddletown, which amounted to a higher volume of land being transferred since these parcels are counted each time they were exchanged. The higher proportion of land passing through the occupancy market at Earls Colne was due to the higher incidence of subletting at Earls Colne.

To some extent, subtenancy may have contributed to the sluggishness of the manorial land market as subletting allowed manorial tenants to cease cultivating their land while retaining the asset. Indeed, two-thirds of manorial land transfers at Earls Colne between 1550 and 1750 were to inheriting family members.⁵⁸ Subletting may have encouraged families to retain ownership of properties that they no longer cultivated but it also offered occupiers faster access to land with lower transaction costs that circumvented the manorial sales market.

An increasingly important factor determining the supply of sublet land and nature of tenant-subtenant relationships over the course of the eighteenth century was the rise in absentee manorial tenants. French and Hoyle have argued that subletting at Earls Colne cannot be separated from residency, as between 1722 and 1750 the copyholders who never subleased their land were resident in or near Earls Colne. While non-resident manorial tenants were undoubtedly a crucial factor in driving subletting rates, the relationship between residency and subletting is complex. Absentee *inheritors* need to be distinguished from absentee *purchasers* as the latter actively sought property to sublet while the former arranged subleases as a matter of convenience. Distinctions also need to be drawn between resident and non-resident manorial tenants who were subletting. At Puddletown, for example, there was a marked shift in the eighteenth century from co-resident subletting to non-resident subletting. This transition brought with it a change in the character and scale of subletting activity. In 1725 in Puddletown, for manorial tenants who we have residency data for, residents outnumbered non-residents three-to-one as subletters of property, but fifty years later only one resident was subletting. In 1725, non-residents accounted for slightly under 50 per cent of sublet land, rising to 98 per cent in 1775. The honorific 'Mr' proliferated among non-resident subletters in 1775, suggesting a shift in the socio-economic profile of subletting owners in the intervening years.

The subletting stories of Mary Clerk and William Sparks are characteristic of this trend. Mary Clerk had occupied her 16-acre holding before she sublet it to John Harris in 1725, suggesting that she did not purchase the property with the intention to sublet it. Living next door to each other, it is reasonable to assume that when she sublet the property to Harris and his wife, she did so as their neighbour and the lease was a development of an existing relationship. In contrast, when the maltster William Sparks purchased a 19-acre holding in 1771 and subsequently other properties in Puddletown totalling 45 acres, he already owned several properties in Devon and Dorset. He owned a house in Crediton, Devon that he let to one John Davy, and he also owned a series of properties that were conveniently situated in Dorchester where he lived, and in nearby parishes such as Abbotsbury.⁵⁹ It is unlikely that William had an existing personal relationship with any of his subtenants given his dispersed properties, so that he interacted with his three subtenants at Puddletown principally in the capacity as landlord. In this respect, subletting by absentee manorial tenants may have been qualitatively different from co-resident subletting.

⁵⁸ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 190.

⁵⁹ DHC, AD/DT/W/1788.

IV

Historians have frequently found evidence to suggest that subletting was used to consolidate holdings but they have lacked the necessary spatial context to reconstruct or study this form of rationalization systematically. Most evidence of subtenant-driven amalgamation has been found in studies of the sixteenth century. R. H. Tawney hypothesized that tenants sublet some of their own land while simultaneously renting others' land, thereby retaining the same acreage but in a different and presumably more desirable configuration.⁶⁰ Similarly, Joan Thirsk noted that tenants in the Lincolnshire fens granted one another leases to make farming the small strips of land more efficient, and Patricia Croot has identified similar practices in sixteenth-century Somerset.⁶¹ Hipkin has identified occupiers leasing land from multiple landowners in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, arguing that the impetus to create large farms lay with occupiers rather than proprietors.⁶² And recently, Ronan O'Donnell has emphasized the role of tenants in creating ring-fenced farms in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Northumberland.⁶³

The spatial dynamics of subletting can be reconstructed using the Earls Colne and Puddletown subtenancy databases because they contain data on owners and occupiers of individual fields, which are linked to geo-referenced maps. Mapping occupiers' holdings demonstrates that occupiers engrossed their holdings by leasing fields which were adjacent or near to their existing holdings. Engrossment and consolidation were undertaken by small- and large-scale cultivators and by those who were also manorial tenants or who only held land as subtenants.

A common strategy employed by occupiers throughout the eighteenth century in both parishes was to rent land from several manorial tenants to produce a consolidated farm. In some cases, these occupiers did not own any land themselves but produced their holdings entirely by leasing land from other manorial tenants. For example, in 1729 James Vince rented land from three different tenants to produce his holding at Earls Colne (Map 1). John Walford achieved a similar effect by renting from Robert Harris and Henry Adams in Earls Colne in 1770 (Map 2), as did William Crabb junior who rented land from John Harvy and Grace Pattrick at Earls Colne in 1759 (Map 3). This approach to consolidation was not limited to those who were exclusively subtenants; it was also used by manorial tenants to acquire fields next to land that they already owned. In late eighteenth-century Puddletown, Joseph Nightingale supplemented his own land with his brother's and mother's holdings that lay adjacent (Map 4), and Thomas Hailes rented fields adjacent to his own field at Earls Colne in 1778 (Map 5). Some were among the most substantial manorial tenants. In the early eighteenth century, John Harrington rented two fields in the middle of his 161-acre holding to complete a block of land in the north east of the parish (Map 6).⁶⁴ Similarly, in

⁶⁰ Tawney, *Agrarian problem*, p. 165.

⁶¹ Joan Thirsk, *English peasant farming: The agrarian history of Lincolnshire from Tudor to recent times* (1957), p. 14; Croot, *World of the small farmer*, p. 114.

⁶² Hipkin, 'Landownership', pp. 93–4.

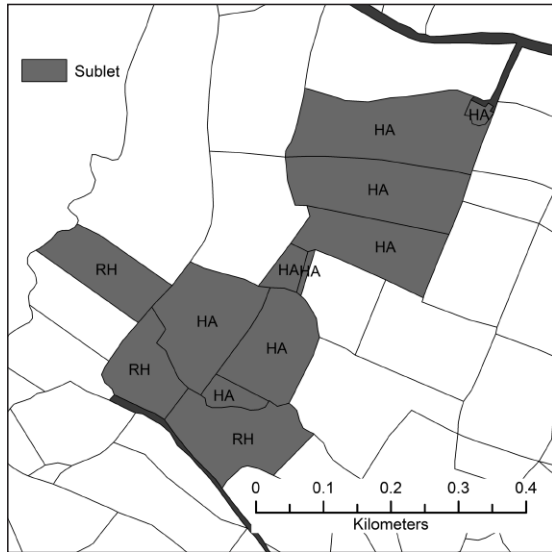
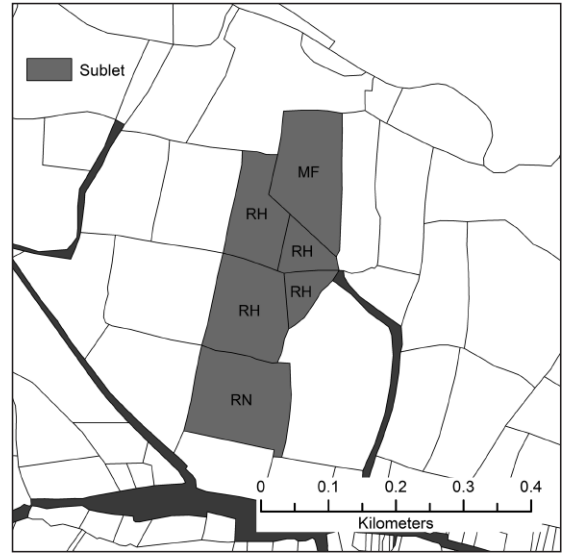
⁶³ R. O'Donnell, 'The creation of ring-fence farms: some observations from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Northumberland', *AgHR* 63 (2015), pp. 39–59.

⁶⁴ French and Hoyle, *Earls Colne*, p. 280.

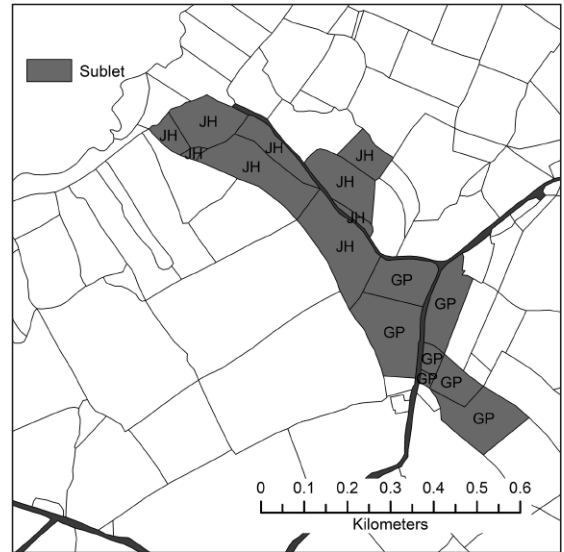
MAP 1. James Vince's holding at Earls Colne, Essex in 1729

Note to all maps: Each map documents subtenants' holdings and indicates fields they owned, sublet, or held from a relative. Fields are labelled with the initials of their owner and the subtenancy status is indicated by the shade of the field.

Source to all maps: See Table 1.



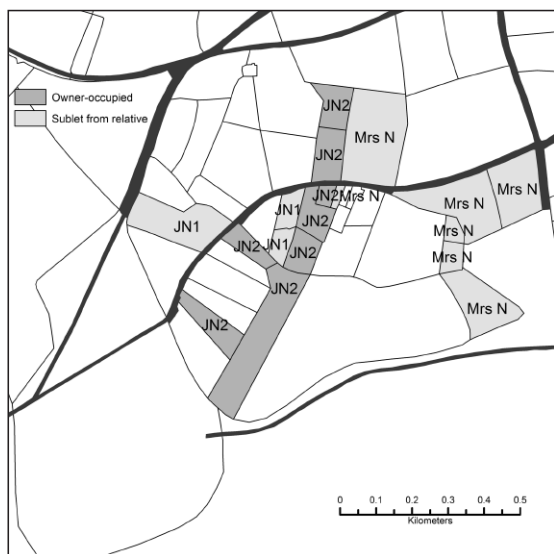
MAP 2. John Walford's holding at Earls Colne, Essex in 1770



MAP 3. William Crabb's holding at Earls Colne, Essex in 1759

1788, Oliver Johnson added to his c.350-acre property in Earls Colne, by renting fields from Mary Bott (Map 7), and ten years later Johnson rented further adjacent fields to his holding from Sarah Solly.

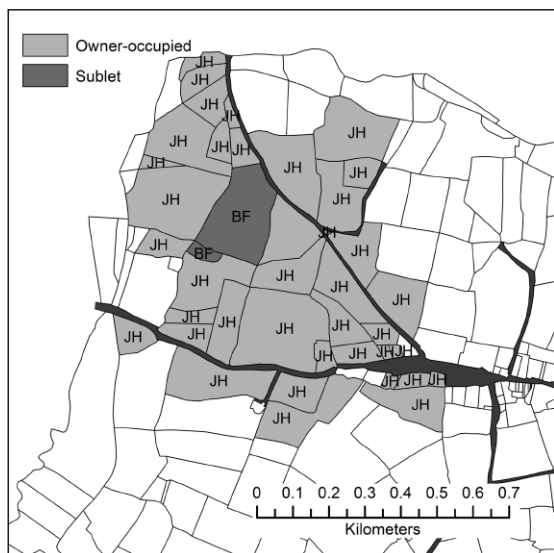
Although not everyone achieved fully consolidated holdings, the location of existing holdings clearly influenced which fields cultivators rented. Map 8 shows John Paskall's farm at Earls Colne, which he had largely consolidated as a block except for the small fields to the east. At Puddletown, Thomas Rawlins acquired a sublease of land that lay adjacent to his own land so that his rented fields were less scattered than his manorial property (Map 9), as did



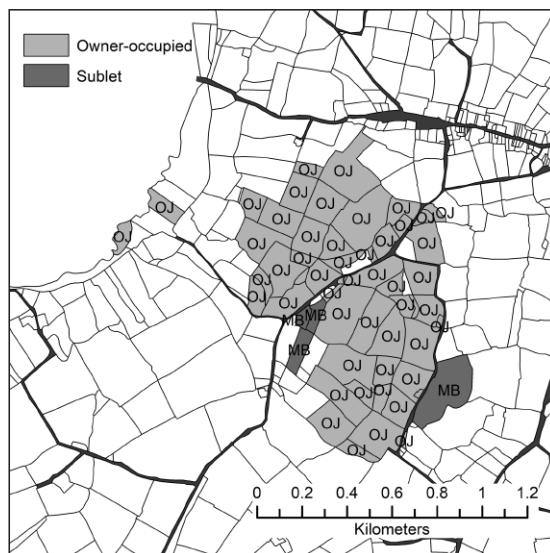
MAP 4. Joseph Nightingale's holding in Puddletown, Dorset in 1792



MAP 5. Thomas Hailes' holding in Earls Colne, Essex in 1778

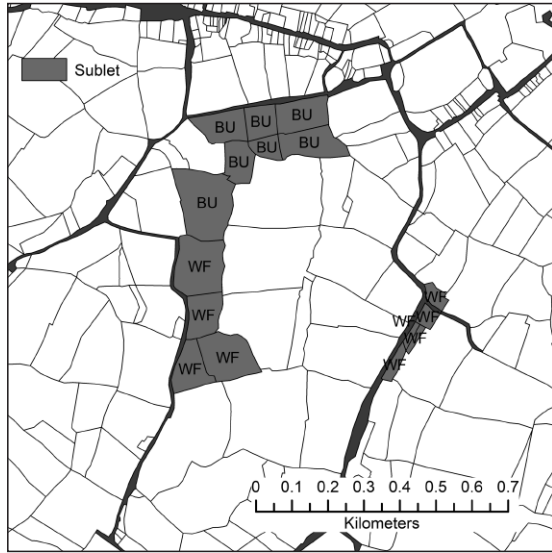


MAP 6. John Harrington's holding in Earls Colne, Essex in 1729

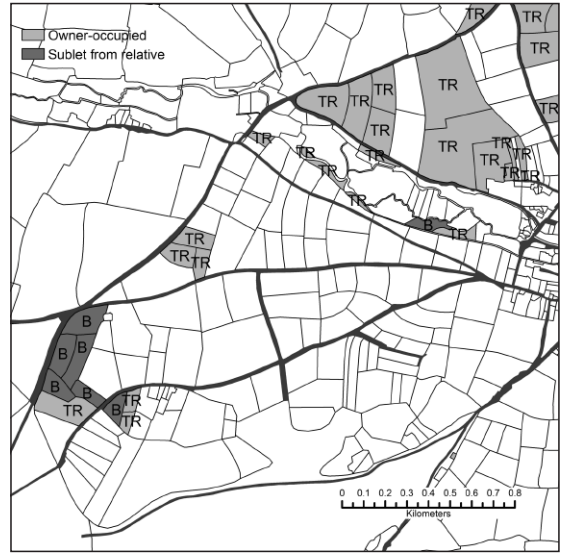


MAP 7. Oliver Johnson's holding in Earls Colne, Essex in 1788

Robert Alner (Map 10). Given the large size of Puddletown parish, that Rawlins' and Alner's lands were no more than 1–2 kilometers apart was a measure of success. William Hill was marginally more successful in this endeavour, since he subleased several adjacent fields from two different manorial tenants, and rented land from a third tenant which was located only a short distance away (Map 11).



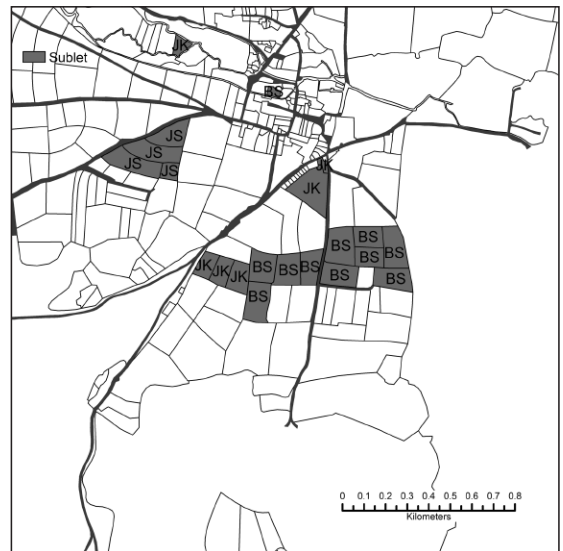
MAP 8. John Paskall's holding at Earls Colne, Essex in 1786



MAP 9. Thomas Rawlins' holding in Puddletown, Dorset in 1775

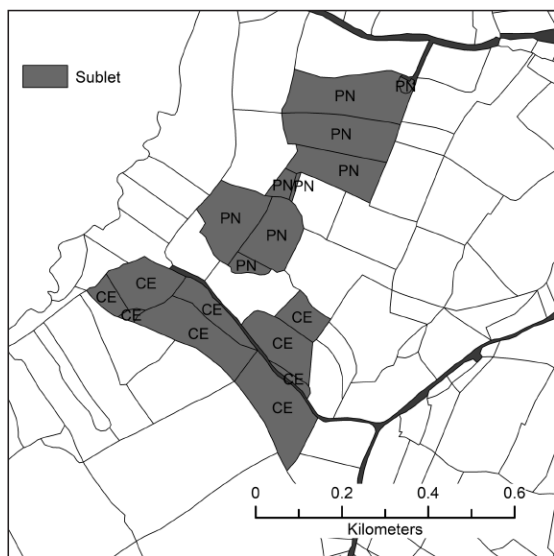


MAP 10. Robert Alner's holding in Puddletown, Dorset in 1775

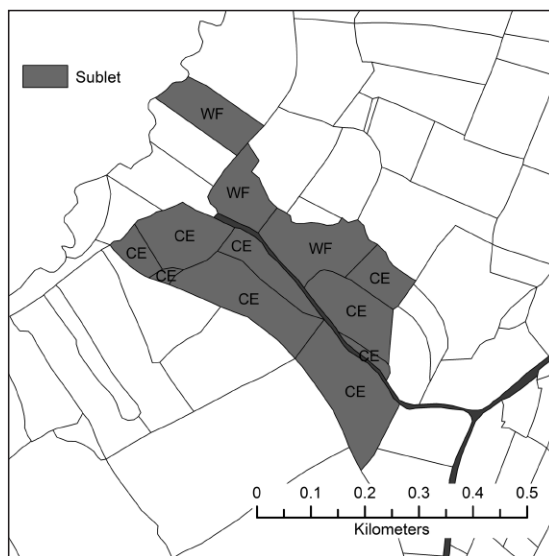


MAP 11. William Hill's holding in Puddletown, Dorset in 1792

Generally, these configurations were the product of cultivators' attempts to exchange holdings over time to produce the desired configuration. James Walford, who cultivated land at Earls Colne in the 1780s, changed the composition of his holding, which resulted in greater consolidation between 1783 and 1785 (Maps 12 and 13). Walford's reconfiguration in 1785 mirrored what another subtenant, Samuel Parkinson, had achieved forty years earlier



MAP 12. James Walford's holding in Earls Colne, Essex in 1783



MAP 13. James Walford's holding in Earls Colne, Essex in 1785

with the same fields. James Vince's holding in 1729 (Map 1) was the product of a series of subleases acquired in the 1720s. He began renting Matthew Fletcher's field sometime before 1722, and subsequently took on the lease of Robert Harris's land in 1726, before adding Matthew Newman's three years later.

That occupiers engrossed their farms through subletting has significant implications for our understanding of agrarian change because it highlights the partial picture obtained by accounts that focus solely on the activities of manorial tenants. Reconstructing subtenants' holdings demonstrates that cultivators combined several manorial properties to consolidate and enlarge their farms. Some were more successful than others in this endeavour. By situating subletting within a spatial context we can observe the underlying rationale in many subtenants' acquisitions of fields. This has important implications for existing methods of calculating farm size, which are discussed in the next section.

V

Sections III and IV demonstrate that manorial documents do not accurately reflect landholding patterns at the level of cultivation because they conceal engrossment and leasing on the subtenancy market. Reconstructing the size of farms from manorial documents means we observe landholding from the perspective of the manor. For example, a manorial survey might have recorded two tenants each holding 10 acres of land. Using the manorial document alone would lead us to calculate the mean size of farms at 10 acres. In reality, we have not calculated the mean size of farms, but the mean size of properties on this manor, since as the previous section has shown, there is no guarantee that the configuration of holdings recorded in manorial documents bore any relation to their configuration as working farms. Hereafter, I

refer to figures calculated using this method as the 'size of properties' or simply 'property size'. Using records levied on the occupiers of land, such as poor rates, might reveal that these two 10-acre holdings were leased by a subtenant who had combined them to form a single 20-acre holding. From this perspective, we would calculate the mean size of farms to be 20 acres. I refer to this process as calculating the average size of farms because the calculation is based on the size of a holding as it was cultivated. In this example, the average size of properties is therefore 10 acres, while the average size of farms is 20 acres.

The only direct comparison of property and farm size remains Harrison's study of sixteenth-century Cannock. In his analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century agriculture, Robert Allen used Harrison's data to argue that subletting did not distort the size of farms recorded in manorial documents. Allen calculated that if the smallest holdings of under 10 acres are excluded, the average farm was 51 acres in 1554 compared to the average property which was 56 acres in 1554.⁶⁵ Harrison found that there were more occupiers than manorial tenants, which resulted in the subdivision of many manorial properties, and there is some evidence to suggest that Cannock was not typical in this regard. Juliet Gayton has identified the reverse trend, engrossment at the level of farm occupation, in seventeenth-century Hampshire. Hipkin has also identified a number of cases in which occupiers held leases from multiple owners in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Romney Marsh. In the eighteenth century, farms in the Dorset and Somerset parishes of Englishcombe, Huntspill, and Trent were between around 30 to 45 per cent larger than properties.⁶⁶

We can directly compare the size of manorial tenants' holdings (properties) and occupiers' holdings (farms) because both are needed to reconstruct subletting activity. Properties and farms that were smaller than 10 acres have been excluded from the analysis because Allen argued that the principal discrepancy in the averages at Cannock occurred on farms and properties smaller than 10 acres. The average size of farms and properties have been compared for both Earls Colne and Puddletown, the results of which are set out in Table 6.

Two important findings emerge. Firstly, the average size of farms and properties differed considerably. While the averages converged in some years such as in 1725 at Puddletown, there were significant discrepancies between the averages in many years. For example, in the 1750s, farms were on average slightly more than 24 per cent larger than properties at Earls Colne, while at Puddletown, farms were almost 40 per cent larger in 1792. These are significant margins of error between the size of farms as calculated using manorial documents and poor rates. If these error margins are applied to Allen's work, which locates the decline of yeomen between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the proposed disappearance of this class of farmer over this period is not supported by the data.⁶⁷

The second important finding is that in each decade farms were larger than properties. This is to be expected, because as Section IV shows, occupiers engrossed their holdings by subleasing properties from several different owners. Table 6 captures the result of this process and shows that manorial documents systematically underestimate the size of farms. We can interrogate the relationship between farm size and property size further by comparing annual

⁶⁵ Allen, *Enclosure*, pp. 75–6, n. 26.

hun/20/1/6, DD\X\JONES/1, and T\PH\dcl/10–11.

⁶⁶ Somerset Heritage Centre (hereafter SHC), D\PH\dcl/10–11.

⁶⁷ Allen, *Enclosure*, pp. 56–106.

TABLE 6. Average size of properties and farms in Earls Colne and Puddletown, 1722–1806

<i>Year(s)</i>	<i>Farm (acres)</i>	<i>Property (acres)</i>	<i>Difference (%)</i>
Earls Colne			
1722–29	39.91	35.79	10.32
1730–39	39.54	36.27	8.28
1740–49	43.65	36.67	15.99
1750–59	50.85	38.56	24.16
1760–69	46.15	42.03	8.94
1770–79	46.28	42.93	7.23
1780–89	49.31	42.38	14.05
1790–99	54.25	43.46	19.89
1800–06	52.13	43.02	17.48
Puddletown			
1725	39.55	37.97	4.01
1775	68.51	55.46	19.05
1792	100.61	62.00	38.38

Source: See Table 1.



FIGURE 3. Yearly average farm and property size at Earls Colne, 1722–1806

Source: See Table 1.

average farm size and property size between 1722 and 1806 at Earls Colne (Figure 3). Only in 1768 and 1769 was the average property larger than the average farm. In all other years across the period, the average farm size was larger than the average size of properties. Furthermore, the manorial averages conceal substantial fluctuations, which the new farm size data capture. The discrepancy between farm sizes and estimates drawn from manorial records is likely to be even larger when cross-parish occupancy is taken into account, as manorial documents also only recorded land within the jurisdiction of the manor. While poor rates are also liable to distortion caused by cross-parish farm occupancy (and future work needs to reconstruct subletting across adjacent parishes), manorial documents doubly underestimate the size of farms.

Manorial documents therefore conceal important trends in the size of farms that require further investigation. Furthermore, reconstructing the size of farms longitudinally is also crucial for identifying and understanding fluctuations in farm size. Work to date has focused on snapshot evidence of farm size, and this approach shows that this misses the ebb and flow we observe in the size of farms at Earls Colne in the eighteenth century.

VI

This study outlines a new methodology to reconstruct the activities of subtenants, which continue to be overlooked in macro-economic narratives of agrarian change in early modern England. It is possible to reconstruct eighteenth-century subletting in considerable detail and to map subtenants' holdings: where appropriate sources survive, this methodology can be applied across the early modern period. The socio-economic base of subtenants was broader than has hitherto been assumed and subletting was a strategy that many cultivators employed to consolidate and engross their holdings. Manorial documents conceal an active market for subleases, which must be uncovered to achieve a fuller understanding of early modern agriculture and farming practices. Subleases were often short but there was no disparity in the length of time that subtenants and owner-occupying manorial tenants stayed on particular holdings. Although owner-occupying farmers could cease farming and retain their asset, which certainly afforded them tenurial security that subtenants did not enjoy, in practice this does not seem to have resulted in an overall discrepancy in continuity of occupation. Finally, manorial documents reflect patterns of ownership rather than occupation and, because occupiers engrossed their holdings, lead us to underestimate the size of farms. Furthermore, manorial documents have concealed short-term fluctuations that are captured by longitudinal farm size data, raising the tantalizing prospect that short-term changes in farm size may reflect occupiers' family life cycles and agricultural prices.