

Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars

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IN the course of the second half of the eighteenth century Great Britain virtually ceased to be self-sufficient in grain, and imports were required to supplement home production. The situation in agriculture became more acute in the last twelve years of the century and there was much discussion of the problem of food supplies. Already, with the rapid growth of population, the demands of the home market had become more pressing, and the stage was set for the Malthusian dragon to make his appearance. The scanty crop of 1789 and the poor harvest of 1790 evoked an outburst of pamphleteering and an agitation for greater protection for agriculture. Although these demands were opposed by the commercial and industrial centres, the agricultural interests had their way and a new corn law in 1791 increased the price at which the free import of grain was permitted. This was the immediate reaction to the problem. But the decade which followed was distinguished by an unusual number of bad harvests and it saw Great Britain involved in war. As a result, the clause which enabled the act of 1791 to be modified in case of need was employed every year from 1793 to 1801.

The poor harvest of 1792 forced the government to prohibit the export of grain. Two years later the harvest failed again, the following winter was wet and cold and the crop of 1795 was meagre in consequence. Wheat, which had averaged 43s. a quarter in 1792, 49s. 3d. in 1793, and 52s. 3d. in 1794, rose to 108s. 4d. in August 1795, an increase of 50s. in eight months. As prices rose, unrest spread through the country. In May, for example, "an unlawful assembly of colliers met on Rodway Hill (near Bristol) on account of the dearth of provisions" and had to be dispersed by troops.¹ And similar meetings, some of which led to rioting, took place in other parts of England and Wales.² In the same month, the magistrates of Speenhamland in Berkshire drew up a scale of assistance for agricultural workers, based on the price of bread and the size of the family, which came to be widely adopted. At the same time the government was besieged with appeals for assistance,

¹ PRO H.O. 42, 34, f. 136.

² See J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, pp. 96-8.

whose general burden was "an immediate supply of wheat is absolutely necessary."¹ It endeavoured to meet these demands "by sending supplies of foreign corn . . . to the different ports of this kingdom where the need is most felt."² In July, a ship laden with 500 quarters of wheat was ordered to proceed to Chepstow to supply the Forest of Dean. And similar cargoes were sent to other ports.

But though such action might mitigate, it could not entirely counteract, the effect of the bad harvest. Prices continued to rise and disaffection to spread. In October the carriage of the king was attacked as he was on his way to open parliament. Immediately the government provided time for a debate on the high cost of provisions. In the course of it, on the 3rd of November, William Pitt announced that "he wanted to lay the foundation of a permanent enquiry . . . (and) he hoped that the measure to be proceeded with on this occasion would be facilitated by the steps which the government had already taken."³ The House then set up a select committee "to enquire into the circumstance of the present scarcity and the best means of remedying it," a move opposed by Arthur Young, who argued "whatever the price of corn, they will have a tendency to raise it."⁴ But he would have approved of "the steps which the government had already taken" to set in train a nation-wide enquiry into the state of the harvest.

I

There had long been a demand for the collection and publication of accurate, statistical information about agricultural matters, about crops and yields and prices.⁵ As early as 1676 John Graunt had urged that details about arable crops and livestock should be obtained so that measures could be taken to supply any want if crops failed.⁶ But apart from estimates like those of Gregory King⁷ and the prices published in Houghton's *Collection*

¹ See H.O. 42, 34-6 and 43, 6 *passim*.

² H.O. 42, 37, ff. 1-3.

³ *Cobbett's Parliamentary History*, xxxii, 1795-7; *House of Commons Journal*, LI, 1798, pp. 19, 58. I owe these references to Dr Joan Thirsk.

⁴ *Annals of Agriculture*, xxv, 1795, p. 450.

⁵ For the history of English agricultural statistics see P. G. Craigie, 'Statistics of English agricultural production', *J. R. Statist. Soc.*, xlvi, 1883; 'Early estimates of grain growing in Great Britain', *J. Min. Agric.*, xxx, 1924; J. A. Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*; J. M. Ramsay, 'The development of agricultural statistics', *J. Proc. Agric. Econ. Soc.*, vi, 1940; and G. E. Fussell, 'The collection of agricultural statistics in Great Britain', *Agricultural History*, xviii, 1944.

⁶ 'Natural Political Observations Mentioned in a Following Index' in *The Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, ed. Charles H. Hull, II, p. 396.

⁷ *Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions upon the State and Condition of England*, (1696), Section VII.

of *Letters for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade* (1692-1703), little was done till the growing interest in agriculture in the middle of the eighteenth century led to a renewal of demands for information. Both Pennington (1769) and Donaldson (1775) suggested that some organization should be established to maintain a permanent enquiry into the condition of agriculture.¹

The want of information was gradually met by the work of commentators, of whom William Marshall and Arthur Young were the chief, and by the *Annals of Agriculture*, which began publication in 1784. Nine years later, when a Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement was set up with government support, almost its first action was to arrange for a series of county agricultural reports. Originally Sir John Sinclair proposed to collect the required information by circulating questionnaires to the clergy,² as he had done for his *Statistical Account of Scotland*, but this plan had to be abandoned because of the opposition of the archbishop of Canterbury. Fearing such an investigation would lead to action on the tithe question, he threatened to withdraw the support of the Church from Pitt's government.³ Itinerant surveyors, of varying capability, were appointed instead to carry out the survey.

But it was harvest failure which gave real point to enquiries into agriculture. The bad harvests of 1756 and 1757 led Charles Smith to make his investigation,⁴ and later harvest failures roused the interest of Arthur Young. In 1788 he called for reports from his correspondents about conditions in their neighbourhoods, and the bad harvest of the following year led him to repeat his request. These reports he published in the *Annals of Agriculture*. Then, when "apprehensions of a scarcity of provisions" were expressed in the House of Commons early in 1795, Arthur Young sent out the following list of questions which he asked his correspondents to answer.⁵

I. What is supposed to be the stock of wheat and rye in hand relative to the consumption of the remainder of the year, previous to the next crop coming to market?

II. What are the expectations of the next year's supply, relative to any deficiency which it is supposed may result from the autumnal rains and the present severe frost?

¹ W. Pennington, *Reflections on the Various Advantages Resulting from the Draining, Inclosing, and Allotting of Large Commons and Common Fields*, p. 47; W. Donaldson, *Agriculture Considered as a Moral and Political Duty*, p. 172.

² The suggested form is to be found in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, I, 1797, p. xli.

³ *Lords' Journal*, XLII, p. 402.

⁴ *Tracts on the Corn Trade* (1766).

⁵ *Annals of Agriculture*, XXIV, 1795, pp. 42-3.

III. What have been the most successful methods adopted for the relief of the poor?

IV. What has been the rise (if any) in the pay of agricultural labour, on comparison with preceding periods?

V. Has any article of food, as a substitute for wheaten bread, been successfully used?

VI. What is the present price per pound of mutton, beef, pork, butter, cheese, and potatoes, regard being paid to such joints of meat as come within the consumption of the poor?

VII. What is the present and ordinary price of coals?

VIII. What has been the effect of the frost on turnips, cabbages, and other articles of green winter-food for cattle and sheep, also on the young wheat?

IX. What is the present price of hay and straw per ton?

X. What is the present or late price of the wool of your country?

An exhaustive enquiry for an individual to carry out. The replies were printed in the *Annals of Agriculture*.¹

The worsening conditions of 1795 produced a spate of investigation. In June the Board of Agriculture proposed the issue of a questionnaire asking "the landed interest": (i) What number of acres are, by estimation, or from regular survey, contained in your parish, constablewick, tithing, division, or district? and (ii) How many of such acres are arable, how many generally kept under each species of crop, how many in fallow, and how many in grass?² A month later it sent out a statement "on the present scarcity of provision" suggesting "measures to prevent any risk of real want previous to the ensuing harvest." The Board clearly stated that "the collecting of information respecting the agricultural state of the country" was necessary before measures could be recommended to parliament.³ "The result of the new crops being uncertain" in October, Arthur Young again circularized his correspondents in terms similar to those of January 1795, with the significant addition of the following question.⁴ "It having been recommended by various quarter-sessions, that the price of labour should be regulated by that of bread corn, have the goodness to state what you conceive to be the advantages or disadvantages of such a system." Speenhamland was already under scrutiny.

Other enquiries were also on foot. The Rev. David Davies was gathering material for his statement of *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry*, Sir Frederic Eden was stimulated by these conditions to begin his examination

¹ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, xxiv, p. 567.

³ *Ibid.*, xxiv, pp. 579-81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxv, 1795, pp. 344-5.

of *The State of the Poor*, and Malthus was turning his mind to a different aspect of the same problem, the pressure of a growing population on food resources. Already the last decade of the eighteenth century was dimly perceiving, what the nineteenth had to learn through painful experience, that effective remedial measures for social problems can only be taken when enquiry has revealed, preferably in statistical form, the dimensions of the question. And war provided, as it has continued to do, the opportunity for the government to embark on a statistical investigation. The ground had been prepared by the work of individuals, the failure of the harvest in 1795 provided the occasion for a government enquiry.

II

Late in October, the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, the duke of Portland, sent a letter to the lords lieutenant of the counties asking them "to procure an account of the produce of the several articles of grain . . . comparing the same with the produce of a fair crop of every such article of grain in common years and with the produce of the crop of 1794 of every such article of grain . . . and to report such account as early as possible."¹ Within the counties, the information was to be collected by the justices of the peace and the high constables of the hundreds. The government was now to learn by experience of the problems involved in carrying out such an enterprise.

First, this task was not universally welcomed. The lord lieutenant of Berkshire, the earl of Radnor, voiced the scepticism of some. Writing to the duke of Portland, he confessed himself "at a loss to imagine by what means the Magistrates of the County of Berks can be competent to obtain such information . . . the comparative statement . . . will necessarily, I conceive, be little more than Guess work."² And, second, as the returns proceeded to demonstrate, "an account of the produce of the late crop" was not a phrase devoid of ambiguity.³ Some returns gave the yield in bushels per acre, some in total acreage under the various crops, while yet others gave only a verbal statement such as: "Wheat, not so good this year as last, Barley, better than last year, Oats, a middling crop, not so good as former years, Beans, a pretty fair crop, about on an average."⁴ Some gave the information by parishes,

¹ H.O. 42, 36-7.

² H.O. 42, 36, f. 244.

³ Some of these returns are to be found in H.O. 42, 37. Additional Gloucestershire returns are to be found in the Shire Hall, Gloucester, and some Leicestershire returns (for information about which I am indebted to Dr W. G. Hoskins and Dr Joan Thirsk) in the County Record Office, Leicester. No doubt other returns will be found in other local collections.

⁴ The return for Hinton, Gloucestershire.—H.O. 42, 37, f. 138.

some consolidated them by hundreds, while others stated the details of individual holdings. An extract from a parish in the last category, Quedgely (Gloucestershire),¹ reads as follows.

Occupier	WHEAT			BARLEY			BEANS		
	Acres	Yield per acre (bushels)	Total Produce (bushels)	Acres	Yield per acre (bushels)	Total Produce (bushels)	Acres	Yield per acre (bushels)	Total Produce (bushels)
Chas. Hayward Esq. ¹	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Mr Jno. Beach									
1794	23	14	322	8	18	144	20	10	200
1795	20	15	300	3	9	27	28	20	560
John Bailey									
1794	28	10	280	8	14	112	28	8	224
1795	27	12	324	8	16	128	25	20	200
Ann Miles ²									
1794	7	15	85	2	10	20	8	8	64
1795	4	15	60	5	15	75	4	20	80
John Purser ¹	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

¹ No tillage. ² Not in the Hundred.

Thus the returns varied in the information they contained, varied in format—only in Warwickshire does a printed form appear to have been issued—and lacked a common standard of comparison. Nor could their accuracy be guaranteed. As the magistrates of one district reported, “We had hoped to convey an accurate account . . . (but we are) disappointed by the Jealousy and miserable Policy of the Farmers and others who in order to conceal, from the Government and from the Landlords, the real state of their Produce have to our full Conviction in many instances estimated their several Crops not less than one-third below the actual amount.”²

Although they were for the most part collected expeditiously, it was not till the Third Report of the Select Committee that the returns received mention. In their First Report they stated that “the crop of the other sorts of grain has been on the whole abundant but the produce of wheat has proved so far deficient as to require the adoption of the speediest and most effectual measures for the alleviation of so great an evil.”³ And the returns generally, as the following table based on the returns for a single county—Gloucestershire—shows, confirmed that the main failure in both 1794 and 1795 was the wheat crop. In both years the best yield of wheat fell considerably short of the best average yield.

¹ Shire Hall, Gloucester. Some of the Leicestershire returns (County Record Office, Leicester) also give information about individual holdings.

² H.O. 42, 37, f. 28. Hundred of Lonsdale South of the Sands (Lancashire).

³ Cited in *Annals of Agriculture*.

The Yields of 1794 and 1795 compared with the Average Yield¹
(bushels per acre)

	Wheat	Barley	Oats	Beans	Peas
1794	7-18	5-24	2-24	1-15	1½-2½
1795	6-15	11-26	7-24	8-24	10-24
Average	8-24	14-25	12-24	12-25	8-20

The Second Report was mainly concerned with the shortage of rye. Then, in the Third, the Select Committee reported that they had received "a considerable number of returns, made by the *custodes rotulorum* of the different counties, respecting the state of the last crop, together with much additional intelligence communicated by many of their members." But, they continued, we "find it impossible as yet to draw, either from these returns or from any other quarter, a precise conclusion. The returns are so incomplete in their number and founded upon so many different principles . . . that it is extremely difficult to combine and compare them, so as to state accurately the result of the whole."² And with this judgement we must concur. These returns do not provide a satisfactory assessment of the state of English agriculture in 1794-5, though studied in detail by the local or parish historian they may yield information of value.

As the returns failed to provide the government with the information it needed, it was forced to resort to emergency measures. The export of corn was forbidden, the manufacture of hand and hair powder—which, according to one correspondent, accounted for a seventh part of the whole consumption of wheat in the kingdom³—and the use of grain for the malt distillery, "which consumes large quantities of wheat and all Barley," were prohibited. Bounties were given for imported grain, attempts were made to popularize a standard wholemeal bread and to reduce consumption of wheaten bread,⁴ and enclosure and the increased cultivation of arable land were encouraged. A scheme for public granaries was dropped after a fierce attack by Edmund Burke.⁵ The activities of middlemen were discussed and criticized. Of these measures, it was the greatly increased import of grain—879,000 quarters—which brought relief in 1796. With harvests at home improving, the price of wheat fell to 53s. 9d. a quarter in 1797 and 47s. 10d. in 1798, the lowest price since 1792. The question of grain supplies was, for a time, less pressing.

¹ H.O. 42, 36, f. 138.

² Cited in *Annals of Agriculture*, xxvi, 1796, p. 209.

³ H.O. 42, 34.

⁴ See J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, pp. 99-108.

⁵ *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity Originally presented to the Rt. Hon. William Pitt, in the Month of November, 1795.*

III

In 1797 and 1798 a more urgent problem confronted the government, the threat of invasion, as with the withdrawal of Austria England stood alone against France. The government made plans for a withdrawal from the coast—a 'scorched-earth policy'—and to this end detailed returns were called for, particularly from those parishes within twelve miles of the sea. In addition to details about the yeomanry, about the waggons and horses available, the number of mills and baking ovens, the lords lieutenant were asked to make a return of live and dead stock.¹ Early in 1798 the Home Secretary suggested that a form drawn up by the county of Dorset should be generally adopted for this purpose.² This provided space for the number of livestock (horses, cows, sheep, deer, and pigs) and the number of acres under crops (wheat, barley, oats, beans, pease, rye, buckwheat, vetches, hemp, flax, potatoes, and hay) to be entered.

Although the lieutenancy records for all counties are not available, these returns are known to exist for Essex,³ Sussex,⁴ Dorset,⁵ and for a few parishes in south Gloucestershire.⁶ For some parishes, as for Kidford (Sussex), the stock lists of individual farmers survive. Similar returns were called for in 1801 and 1803,⁷ so that in some cases a comparison is possible. This has been done by G. H. Kenyon for Sussex for the two years 1798 and 1801 as follows:⁸

	Cattle	Sheep	Pigs	Horses
1798	60,885	549,991		18,414
1801	62,047	346,589	63,094	22,620

Further examination of these returns, a by-product of the government's concern for defence, may well amplify our knowledge of both the general livestock position and the holdings of individual farmers in England at the end of the eighteenth century.

¹ A. Young circulated queries on horses in 1797. *Annals of Agriculture*, xxviii, 1797, p. 405.

² H.O. 42, 39.

³ County Record Office, Chelmsford. See J. L. Cranmer-Byng, *Essex Prepares for Invasion* (1953).

⁴ Lieutenancy records, County Record Office, Lewes. See G. H. Kenyon, 'The civil defence and livestock returns for Sussex in 1801'; *Sussex Archaeol. Coll.*, lxxxix, pp. 57-84.

⁵ H.O. 42, 39.

⁶ In the parish chest, Bitton, Gloucestershire. I am indebted to Miss E. Ralph for this information.

⁷ The returns for 1801 exist for Sussex; those for 1803 for Essex, Sussex, and Somerset (Robertson-Glasgow Collection).

⁸ *Sussex Archaeol. Coll.*, lxxxix, p. 62.

IV

The summer of 1799 was wet and the harvest failure of that year forced the government to reimpose the restrictions on the use of grain and to renew the bounties on imports which rose slightly to 463,185 quarters in that year. Despite these measures the price of wheat rose, unrest became widespread during the cold wet winter, and the government was forced to extend the emergency provisions. Nevertheless a proposal in March 1800 that the Lords should set up a committee to examine the evidence as to the "Deficiency of the last Year's Crop of Wheat, the Stock in Hand at the time of the Harvest, and the supply now remaining in the Country"¹ was defeated as favourable reports about the forthcoming harvest began to come in. Meanwhile the price of wheat continued to rise, reaching 134s. 5d. in June 1800, and less optimistic forecasts were made about harvest prospects. An analysis of the replies to a circular letter sent out by the Board of Agriculture showed that "the produce of the wheat harvest in the whole country will be considerably under the average crop."² The price of wheat remained high and there were reports of unrest and incendiarism (either actual or intended) from many parts of the country.³

In these conditions of shortage, something like panic swept the country. As W. F. Galpin has written, "Impressed by the idea of his own self-sufficiency, the Englishman became visibly excited whenever self-sufficiency was threatened. On every hand he saw visions of impending famine."⁴ To allay these fears, while pamphleteers were active in diagnosis,⁵ the government made frantic attempts to obtain accurate information about the state of the harvest. The duke of Portland asked the bishops to secure answers to the following four questions:⁶

"1. What has been the produce of the late Crop in your district and county, so far as you have means of information, comparative with former crops, or if you can state it, what is the estimated number of Bushels per Acre, distinguishing Wheat, Barley, Oats, and Potatoes and also stating the comparative Crops of Hay, Beans, and Turnips?

"2. What is the Price in your Market Town of Wheat, Barley, Oats, Potatoes, Hay, and Beans, and Mutton and Beef in the month of October 1800 comparatively with the same period in 1799 and 1798?

¹ *Lords' Journal*, XLII, p. 402.

² B.T. 1, 18. See W. F. Galpin, *The Grain Supply of England during the Napoleonic Period*, New York, 1925, p. 15. The monthly prices for wheat are taken from Appendix 5, p. 213.

³ H.O. 42, 49-51.

⁴ Galpin, *The Grain Supply of England*, p. 13.

⁵ See D. G. Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws*, bibliography, pp. 308-9.

⁶ H.O. 42, 52.

"3. Has the produce of the late Harvest been consumed? Is there any reason to believe that there is any considerable quantity of old wheat in store?"

"4. Has much foreign Wheat or Flour been brought into your part of the Country? Is there much use made of Rice, Barley or Oats as Substitutes?"¹

These questions were sent by the bishops—in some cases on printed forms—to such clergymen as appeared to them to be best qualified. The returns, completed with varying degrees of diligence, were collected by the bishops and sent by them to the Home Secretary.²

In the same months the Lords' Committee on the Dearth of Provisions called for reports "from respectable and well-informed persons" about the harvest.³ These are to be found, consolidated by counties, as an appendix to the Second Report of the committee. The Warwickshire summary indicates the form in which the material is available:⁴

	Average Crop, as stated by the Evidence				Proportion of an Average Crop at the late Harvest, as stated by the Evidence.		
	Q	B	Q	B			
Wheat	2	4	—	2	5	2-3ds	— 3-5ths — 2-3ds
Barley	3	4	—	4	0	2-3ds	— 3-5ths — 13-18ths
Oats	5	0	—	5	5	3-4ths	— Average — 11-18ths
Rye	3	0					
Pease	2	2	—	2	5	2-3ds	— Average
Beans	2	4	—			2-3ds	— Average
Potatoes	150 bushels					2-3ds	— Nearly Average

"The Consumption of the New Crop began as soon as possible after the Harvest was in, and much of it was threshed out for immediate Use, the Stock of Old Corn being, comparatively speaking, none (the Case in most of the Midland Counties); in general there used to be enough to carry on the County for three Months. Land sown with Wheat in 1799, 1800—not so much, on account of the Badness of the Season."

The Board of Trade⁵ and the Board of Taxes⁶ made similar investiga-

¹ The appendix to the *Second Report of the Commons' Committee on the Scarcity of Corn* was devoted to "Modes of preparing Rice."

² They exist for almost all the dioceses of England and Wales in H.O. 42, 52-55.

³ *Second Report of the Lords' Committee on the Dearth of Provisions*, p. 4. (Parliamentary Papers, 1801, II)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170. Cited in Pelham, *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, LXVII, 1952, p. 91. In the table Q stands for quarters and B for bushels.

⁵ Galpin, *Grain Supply of England*, p. 16, n. 24. See B.T. 6,139.

⁶ Treasury Letter Books, Board of Taxes, 17 Nov. 1800. I owe this reference to L. S. Pressnell.

tions in the autumn of 1800. Thus not one but several enquiries were on foot at the same time. Rarely in the history of English agriculture can there have been so fevered an attempt to find out the facts.

All this material appears to have been made available to the Commons' Committee on the High Price of Provisions. In their First Report, dated 24 November 1800, they stated:¹

"Having many documents before them, which could be examined without much delay, and which, checked by the very extensive information of members from different parts of the country, appeared likely to enable them to form a general estimate of the crop, your Committee have thought it right to avail themselves of those materials for that purpose. These documents consist of very numerous returns to those enquiries which different departments of Government have directed to be made, by the receivers of the land tax, by the various officers employed under the boards of taxes, stamps, and excise, and by those amongst the clergy to whom circular letters for that purpose had been addressed by the bishops in each diocese. Though the returns are not complete from every county, yet the omissions upon the whole are neither numerous nor important."

When they had made their examination of the whole of this information, the Committee reported there was "reason to believe that the general deficiency of the crop of Wheat in England and Wales, below an average crop, does not amount to quite so much as one-fourth." They also commented on the harvest of the other crops, but the wheat harvest was the crucial crop. Wheat prices had fallen from their peak of June to 114s. 5d. in October, but when the facts about the harvest became known they rose again. Although imports reached a record figure of 1,264,520 quarters in 1800, the price of wheat had risen to 137s. a quarter by the end of December. The committee had seen "no ground for believing that any result attainable by the most detailed enquiry, could lead to any practicable conclusion, applicable to the present emergency." Its remedy for the situation was economy in the use of grain.

As prices continued to rise in 1801—to a peak of 154s. 8d. in April—further proposals were put forward—that the growing of potatoes should be encouraged, that those in extreme and peculiar distress should be helped financially, and that increased efforts should be made to secure foreign grain. The improvement of agriculture was also urged, and the passage of the General Enclosure Act was a result of a recommendation of a Lords' Committee in May.

¹ *Parliamentary History*, xxxv, col. 778. I am indebted to Dr R. A. Pelham for this reference.

Despite the apparently small use it had hitherto made of the agricultural returns, the government continued its quest for accurate statistical information about the condition of agriculture. In the words of Lord Pelham "it occurred to His Majesty's Confidential Servants that if they could be furnished with an annual return of the number of acres under Tillage it would be a circumstance highly beneficial to the Public Interests, as it would form the best criterion whereby to judge of the effects which the provisions of Parliament, both in regard to inclosures and other matters, produce on the Agriculture of the County."¹

Accordingly in the summer of 1801 printed forms were distributed by the Home Office to the bishops and by them to incumbents in England and Wales. The clergy were asked to state the acreage sown since last year's harvest with wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, beans, peas, turnips (with rye, vetches, or dill sometimes entered in addition). A space was provided for General Remarks. The completed returns were sent to the Home Secretary.² Only one diocese, Peterborough, is completely unrepresented, though returns are meagre for a number of counties (Devon, Dorset, Nottingham, Norfolk, Oxford, Suffolk, and Westmoreland).³ These returns were sent for comment to the Board of Agriculture, which reported that "as far as the Members present can ascertain by their personal knowledge of particular Parishes, they are so extremely erroneous that they cannot safely be at all relied on in forming any general conclusions respecting the quantities of Land sown with any species of Grain."⁴ And with this somewhat harsh and hasty judgement the returns were laid aside to be ignored for more than a century.

V

Of recent years, the 1801 acreage returns have been re-examined,⁵ and the published results suggest that if they were regarded as inadequate by some contemporaries they are nevertheless of some value to the historian.

¹ Home Office Domestic Entry Book (H.O. 43, 13, pp. 285-6).

² H.O. 67.

³ H. C. K. Henderson, 'Agriculture in England and Wales in 1801,' *Geog. J.*, cxviii, 1952, p. 339.

⁴ Minute Book of the Board of Agriculture (R.A.S.E.), pp. 310-11 (15 April 1802).

⁵ The following articles have so far been published: W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire crop returns of 1801' in *Studies in Leicestershire Agrarian History*, ed. W. G. Hoskins; W. E. Minchinton, 'Agriculture in Gloucestershire during the Napoleonic Wars', *Trans. Bristol and Glouc. Archaeol. Soc.*, LXVIII, 1949, pp. 165-83; D. Williams, 'The acreage returns of 1801 for Wales', *Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, xiv, 1950-1, pp. 54-68, 139-54; K. G. Davies and G. E. Fussell, 'Worcestershire in the acreage returns for 1801', *Trans. Worcs. Archaeol. Soc.*, xxvii, N.S., 1951, 15-23; H. C. K. Henderson, 'The 1801 crop returns for Wiltshire', *Wilts. Archaeol. and Nat. Hist. Mag.*, LIV, 1951, pp. 85-91; 'The 1801 crop returns: geo-

These studies are generally agreed that the returns of 1801 err on the side of understatement as far as the figures of actual acreage are concerned but that the information they contain about the distribution of crops, about yields and courses of husbandry, should not be ignored. They tend to show that many of the commentators underestimated the acreage under turnips and were sometimes unduly biased in favour of enclosure as a means of improvement. P. A. Churley writes that for part of Yorkshire "open field parishes . . . had not lagged too far behind the best contemporary practice and the cropping was quite different from the traditional open-field pattern."¹ In addition to the information about crop acreages, the returns often contain some analysis of the causes of the present discontents—high prices, the profiteering of middlemen, paper currency, and restrictive covenants. Some incumbents, particularly in Wales, give information about the advance of industrialism, others criticized "the iniquitous system of the monopolizing of lands by our rich farmers," and yet others, echoing Arthur Young, urged enclosure and the cultivation of the waste. Finally, some of the returns include comment about other matters, such as tithes and poor relief. Thus the 1801 returns provide both statistical information and a commentary on rural life, as viewed through the eyes of the local parson.

Since the enquiries of 1795, 1800, and 1801 did not require the same categories of information to be obtained, direct comparison is not generally possible between them. But in some instances acreage returns are available for several years. Dr Joan Thirsk has drawn on the Leicestershire returns for 1794–5 (which also include estimates for 1793) and 1801 for her discussion of Leicestershire agriculture in a forthcoming volume of the Victoria County History, and the table which follows is taken from that account.² The arable acreage in the Guthlaxton hundred of Leicestershire increased considerably between 1793 and 1801 and an examination of the returns for some other Leicestershire hundreds yielded a similar result.

graphical distributions', *Trans. Leics. Archaeol. Soc.* xxvii, 1951, pp. 100–2; 'The 1801 crop returns for Sussex', *Sussex Archaeol. Coll.* xc, 1952, pp. 51–9; 'Agriculture in England and Wales in 1801', *Geog. J.*, cxviii, 1952, pp. 338–45 (includes a discussion of the returns for Herefordshire); R. A. Pelham, 'The agricultural geography of Warwickshire during the Napoleonic Wars', *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, lxviii, 1952, pp. 89–106; and P. A. Churley, 'The Yorkshire crop returns of 1801', *Yorks. Bull. Econ. and Social Research*, v, 1953, pp. 179–97. (The returns for the Yorkshire parishes in the dioceses of Chester and Durham are not included.) H. C. K. Henderson is to publish maps for the remaining counties for which returns are available.

¹ *Yorks. Bull. Econ. and Social Research*, v, p. 189.

² I am indebted to the Editor of V.C.H. Leicestershire and to Dr Joan Thirsk for permission to print this table.

*Table showing crop acreages in Leicestershire between 1793 and 1801
(Guthlaxton Hundred: Totals for 9 parishes)*

Year	Wheat	Barley	Oats	Beans	Peas	Rye	Turnips	Potatoes	Maslin	Total
1793	459	534	403	125½	—	—	—	—	2	1523½
1794	518	566½	503	129½	3½	—	—	—	2½	1723
1795	558	586	517	165	4½	11	—	—	36	1877½
1801	705¼	818	749½	24	40½	5	445	26¾	—	2814½

¹ 2342¼ excl. turnips and potatoes

A comparison of the Gloucestershire returns (for 1794, 1795, 1801, and the acreage of the common years) for the fifteen parishes for which this was possible was much less conclusive. In only six was cultivation expanded appreciably in this decade. For other counties such an examination may yield different results. If such figures are accurate, they may provide a statistical statement of the extension of cultivation under the stimulus of high prices during the Napoleonic Wars. In this and other ways the arable returns of 1794, 1795, 1800, and 1801, and the livestock returns of 1798, 1801, and 1803, can provide a useful supplement to the other accounts of English agriculture available for these years. Particularly where returns for individual farmers for both arable acreage and livestock exist, it should be possible to get behind the generalization of the surveys and so show the detail and diversity of English farming in the late eighteenth century.

VI

Thus the 1801 returns were not the first attempt in this country to obtain agricultural statistics on a national scale but the latest of a series of attempts, on which in two important respects, they are, for all their defects, an advance. First, as the detailed evidence produced earlier shows, the 1801 enquiry was more limited in scope than the previous surveys, and the information required for a single year was defined more precisely. From the elaborate questionnaires of Arthur Young the range was narrowed to a specific and limited set of questions. As the vicar of Hatton (Warwickshire) remarked in 1801: "The foregoing Questions seem to me more judicious, and more in-offensive, more easy to be answered with precision, and far more likely to be answered with fidelity, than those which were sent last year."¹ And to ensure that the material was presented in 1801 in a comparable manner, printed forms were distributed, as had been done in a few cases of local initia-

¹ H.O. 67. See *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, LXVIII, p. 90.

tive for the earlier returns.¹ Secondly, the ecclesiastical machinery of collection, as suggested by Sir John Sinclair in 1793, was used and forms were sent to all incumbents and not merely to those best suited, as in 1800. Although his interest in tithes may have made him the object of suspicion, the parson, as an educated man, apparently proved better qualified for this task than either the receiver of taxes or the magistrate. Neither these nor the previous returns were used, as far as is known, as the basis for government policy.

There were suggestions in 1801 that a regular annual return of the number of acres under tillage should be made parish by parish by the overseers of the poor or the assessors of "the Land or other King's Taxes",² but no further action appears to have been taken. Bad harvests provided the spur for both private and governmental enquiry and the period of pressing scarcity was past. The years from 1795 to 1801 show the government, lacking paid civil servants in the localities, endeavouring to find the best machinery for the collection of information about the food supplies of a country at war. This has been a neglected strand in the study of the history of England during this period. In the past historians have used the reports on agricultural conditions available in Home Office Papers and elsewhere to document the literature of social protests. But it is also possible, without ignoring the picture they have presented, to use this material for other purposes. From it can be gained a clearer picture of the conduct of agriculture in England and Wales at the end of the eighteenth century, of the attempts to collect accurate statistical information to be used as a basis for policy to meet pressing social, economic, and military questions, and of the administrative problems and difficulties in the way.

¹ For Warwickshire in 1795, for Dorset in 1798, and for the diocese of Chester in 1800.

² H.O. 43, 13, pp. 285-6 and Minute Book of the Board of Agriculture (R.A.S.E.), pp. 310-11 (15 April 1802).