

The Content and Sources of English Agrarian History after 1500

By JOAN THIRSK

PRESENT knowledge concerning the agrarian history of England after 1500 owes most to a group of historians who published books on the subject in the period 1907-15. An earlier generation of scholars, including Seeböhm, Vinogradoff, and Maitland, had devoted their attention to the origins of the manor and its development in the Middle Ages. The next generation broadened its interests to cover later periods and other aspects of agrarian life: agricultural techniques, and the economics of farming, as well as tenurial relationships. The history of farming from the earliest times was surveyed by W. H. R. Curtler in *A Short History of English Agriculture* (1909), and by R. E. Prothero (later Lord Ernle) in *English Farming Past and Present* (1912). Enclosure, and particularly the effects of Parliamentary enclosure, were discussed by Gilbert Slater in *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of the Common Fields* (1907), by A. H. Johnson in *The Disappearance of the Small Landowner* (1909), and by E. C. K. Gonner in *Common Land and Inclosure* (1912). The economics of peasant versus capitalist agriculture were examined by the German scholar Hermann Levy in *Large and Small Holdings*, first published in 1904 and enlarged in an English translation in 1911. *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* by the German political economist W. Hasbach appeared in an English translation in 1908, with a preface by Sidney Webb. It was followed in 1911 by *The Village Labourer*, a more concentrated study of the effects of Parliamentary enclosure on the same class by J. L. and Barbara Hammond. Professor R. H. Tawney pushed the investigation back in time, and in *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912) analysed the impact of the price revolution on the rural classes. Finally, the American historian H. L. Gray made a study of English field systems in a book of that name, published in 1915.

These were landmarks in the writing of modern agrarian history, and since all appeared within a few years of each other, it looked as though a strong school of agrarian historians had been established. In fact, however, the subject languished for the next twenty years. This may have been due in part to the authoritative nature and seeming finality of the works then published—they are still the standard text-books on their subjects, and are likely to remain so for years to come—but the more likely explanation is that

they were a by-product of hot political debate, which lost energy and urgency when war brought prosperity to the farmer in 1914. The writings of these historians made their appearance during an agricultural depression, in the midst of earnest, anxious discussion about the future of agriculture, which taxed the historian with questions about the past. What had happened to the stout English peasantry of the golden Tudor age? Had the Parliamentary enclosure of the open fields, so long acclaimed as a wholly progressive measure, benefited society as much as it had benefited the land? Had peasant proprietorship possessed some virtue, unseen till now when disaster befell? Did the past, in short, hold the lost key to agricultural prosperity?

Writing in an atmosphere charged with "anticipations, whether true or false, of coming change,"¹ none of these scholars could fail to be aware of the topical nature of their researches. Some, having reached their conclusions, threw their opinions into the political debate. Lord Ernle wrote in the conviction that "a considerable increase in the number of peasant owner-ships, in suitable hands, on suitable land, and in suitable localities, was socially, economically, and agriculturally advantageous." Hasbach held that an increase in peasant proprietorship was not only desirable, but inevitable, a view which was not shared by the writer of the preface to his book, Sidney Webb. Gilbert Slater summed up his opinion in the sentence "British agriculture must be democratised," which allowed for the increase of small holdings and allotments, together with some form of agricultural co-operation "suitable to modern conditions," which he did not further define.²

These views read oddly nowadays, but in the circumstances of the time they were not illogical. The tide of opinion, among historians at least, was running in favour of small holdings, because these had withstood the rigours of economic depression better than the large farms.³ With the outbreak of war in 1914, however, the discussion was postponed because the problems of agriculture were temporarily solved. After the war, the controversy did not again engage the historians.

The significance of the meagre harvest of writing on agrarian history after 1915 is easily misunderstood, however. After a lull of some twenty years, fresh advances in understanding of the subject began to be made in the 'thirties through more modest local studies, many of which were prepared as university theses and never published. Their scope was narrow, geographi-

¹ R. E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (2nd ed., 1919), p. 393.

² *Ibid.*, p. vii; W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, p. x; Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of the Common Fields*, p. vii.

³ See Hermann Levy's explanation in *Large and Small Holdings*, pp. 1-2, 211.

cally speaking—the history of a county or smaller unit, covering no more than a century or two—but they immensely enriched the content of agrarian history by underlining the great diversity of farming practice and social structure between regions. In consequence, scholars turned away from the writing of general works on a national scale and concentrated instead on regional studies, mostly written up into articles for local historical societies. Even so, the harvest of writing between 1918 and 1945 could not be called abundant. The more remarkable growth of interest in the subject has taken place since 1945, and has been coincident with the development of local history. Under its influence, agrarian historians have been drawn from the study of single aspects of the rural economy such as field systems, rents, tenures, or social classes towards the study of the local community in all its aspects.¹ At the same time, monographs on medieval estates have demonstrated the wisdom of this approach by showing the complex circumstances in which regional variations emerge. They have shown that the current facts of landownership, land distribution, tenure, and agricultural prices do not alone account for regional eccentricity, that some of its causes lie deeper, in soil and physical environment, the history of early settlement, size of population, and local customs of inheritance.²

The scope of agrarian history has broadened, therefore, but so also have the sources of information. New classes of documents have been discovered, and more assiduous use is being made of evidence on the ground. Fresh paths have been opened up, and more pitfalls dug for the unwary.

Study of the ground evidence is as yet in its infancy. Our present meagre apparatus of knowledge does not allow us to interpret the landscape without much preliminary information from documents. Perhaps this will always be so. On the other hand, it is conceivable that new methods will be devised, at least for dating features in the landscape, which will relieve some of the pressure on documents. As things are at present, the history of fen reclamation, or of sheep farming on the Cistercian granges of Yorkshire, can be placed in their exact topographical setting by reference to the fendikes, the sheephouses, and sheepwalk boundary marks which survive on the ground.

¹ A pioneer study was J. D. Chambers, *Nottinghamshire in the Eighteenth Century*, 1932. It was not concerned with agrarian history alone, but was the study of a community from all points of view, inspired by the belief that local history could enlarge our understanding of national history.

² See, in particular, R. H. Hilton, *Social Structure of Rural Warwickshire in the Middle Ages*, Dugdale Society Occasional Papers, No. 9, 1950; G. R. J. Jones, 'Some Medieval Rural Settlements in North Wales', *Institute of British Geographers: Transactions and Papers*, No. 19, 1953, pp. 51–72; G. C. Homans, 'The Rural Sociology of Medieval England', *Past and Present*, No. 4, 1953, pp. 32–43.

But without documents—and this is the problem which obstructs the interpretation of ridge and furrow—the evidence of the landscape is unusable.¹

This is not to say that the general survey of a region as it is today will not help the historian to reconstruct in imagination the condition of the land in the sixteenth century. The disposition of most villages, rivers, and meadows, for example, remains the same. The principal changes that must be allowed for in the appearance of the countryside are those brought about by enclosure, land drainage, and the use of artificial fertilizers. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers on husbandry have made us familiar with contemporary techniques and tools of husbandry.² Knowing their limitations, and with a rough mental picture of the countryside before the improvements of the nineteenth century, we shall be prepared for some of the more obvious regional differences. On grounds of common sense, it is likely, for example, that farmers in coastal villages with wide stretches of saltmarsh will favour sheep fattening rather than crop growing; that farmers in the ill-drained fenland will specialize in cattle rather than corn, since seasonal flooding exposes their fields to continuous risk. Farmers on the clays may concentrate on corn or stock, or give equal attention to both according to the state of the market and their personal preferences, but a farmer in the chalk country will have less choice. His arable is restricted by the amount of manure he can get from the cattle and sheep which he feeds on the downland commons. If no stint of animals is in operation, a convention, not always strictly adhered to, required him to limit them to the number he could winter on his arable land.

If physical conditions prepare us for certain conclusions about sixteenth-century husbandry in a particular district, we may look for confirmatory evidence in the manorial surveys, which show the proportion of cultivated land on the manor which was devoted to arable, meadow, and pasture. Manorial surveys were intended to inform the manorial lord of the way in which his land was tenanted and rented. The fullest survey, though rare to find, will give the size of each tenant's holding, the acreage of each man's arable, meadow, pasture, and closes, the type and conditions of tenure, the rents and dues, the area of common pasture, and the stint of animals allowed to each tenant according to the size of his arable holding. The most detailed

¹ For an excellent combination of documentary and ground evidence, see H. E. Hallam, *The New Lands of Elloe*, Department of English Local History, Occasional Paper No. 6, University College of Leicester, 1954.

² For a bibliographical discussion of these writings, see G. E. Fussell, *The Old English Farming Books from Fitzherbert to Tull*, 1947; *More Old English Farming Books from Tull to the Board of Agriculture*, 1950.

and informative manorial surveys belong to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century their place was taken by valuations, which contain equivalent information, or by rentals, but these omit descriptions of the use and disposition of the land.¹

An examination of some manorial surveys of the Midlands suggests that in districts of mixed husbandry it was usual for somewhere between 60 and 80 per cent of the cultivated land (i.e. excluding the common pastures and waste) to be devoted to crops. In a pastoral region the proportion of ploughland was not likely to exceed 45 per cent, and might fall as low as 10 per cent. To measure the full significance of these variations, however, it is necessary to know what proportion of the arable land was sown each year. Some land was sufficiently fertile to be fallowed every fourth year, other land was fallowed every third or even every second year. Unfortunately, the number of fields is not a reliable guide to the rotation. It is frequently true that a village possessing fields with two or three clear directional names, such as North and South Fields, or East, West, and South Fields, will have two- or three-course rotations respectively. But since villages might modify the rotation when there were more mouths to be fed, or because of an increase or diminution in the supply of manure, or as a result of piecemeal enclosure, guesswork by the sixteenth century is dangerous. A statement about the rotations will sometimes be found in a manorial survey, or in a manorial court roll. It may occur incidentally in the bills and replies of plaintiff and defendant in a lawsuit, or it may not be mentioned anywhere.²

In both arable and pastoral farming regions it is usual, in the sixteenth century, to find some 8 to 15 per cent of the cultivated land in meadow, while the rest of the land, apart from the open arable, is taken up with temporary ley,³ or with pasture closes. These may lie at the back of the farmhouse, or they may consist of consolidated strips taken out of the open fields and held in severalty. By the sixteenth century, in the Midlands at least, the area of commons and waste in districts of mixed husbandry was small, while in pastoral areas it was extensive. The chief reason for this was that pastoral areas had their husbandry thrust upon them by the physical conditions, and if the land was not suited to crops, not only was there less incentive to engage in assarting, but there were often positive advantages to the majority in

¹ A number of surveys have been printed by local societies. See, for example, *Surveys of the Manors of Philip, First Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, 1631-2*, ed. E. Kerridge, Wilts Archaeolog. and Nat. Hist. Soc., Records Branch, IX, 1953.

² See also below, page 73.

³ For the use of leys in open fields, see W. G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History*, 1951, pp. 140-4.

keeping their grazing in common.¹ In districts of mixed farming where the waste was potential arable land, gradual encroachments in the course of the centuries had brought much of it into cultivation, and by the sixteenth century there was only a limited quantity of common pasture left.

Manorial surveys indicate broad differences in land-use, but it is on the probate inventories, which record the crops and stock on individual farms, that the more detailed picture of husbandry depends. Inventories are lists drawn up by neighbours of the possessions of a deceased person who has left a will. They list his furniture and household possessions room by room, the animals and implements in the yard, the animals and crops in the fields, and the quantity of grain, hemp, flax, wool, wood, and hay in store. The animals are usually counted and classified with great care. Less often, the exact acreages of the crops growing in the fields are given.²

The inventories available to the historian at present are those of wills proved in local probate courts, and housed either in the local probate registries or in local record offices. Inventories of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, which include those of the more substantial gentry, are at Somerset House, London, but are not available for inspection. The inventories begin in the 1530's, and are most informative in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They become less detailed in the course of the eighteenth century, and cease about 1830.

Since the inventories have only recently been explored by economic historians, certain problems are as yet unsolved concerning their reliability for use in comparative studies between different periods and different districts. The question is of fundamental importance for agrarian history, since the character of farming regions will not be fully uncovered without the aid of comparative statistical material from different districts. Yet the answer must wait upon further use of the inventories, and the comparison of results with information derived from other sources. It is a case of having to use the tools in order to learn how to use them.

¹ See the preamble of the Inclosure Prevention Act, 1684, repealing certain clauses of an act of 15 Chas. II (an Act for settling the draining of the Great Level) which had allowed manorial lords to enclose a part of the commons for themselves. "... such taking and cutting of the said commons and wastes into small pieces is since found to be very prejudicial to the owners and country, being a great waste of ground in division, which are hard to be kept as fences between party and party, the roadways and passages through such commons as set forth being very low, and generally in bad ground, not passable or well to be amended, whereby such divisions are of little value."—Samuel Wells, *The History of the Drainage of the Great Level*, 1830, II, pp. 519–20.

² A sample of Essex inventories has been printed in *Farm and Cottage Inventories of Mid-Essex*, ed. F. W. Steer, Essex County Council, 1950.

The main question is whether the inventories fairly represent all classes of the community. A recent study of this question showed that in one Nottinghamshire village hardly more than a quarter of the population which died between 1572 and 1600 left wills, while in the period 1660-1725 the proportion was just over a fifth. Yet the most cursory examination of inventories will show a wide variety of social classes represented: not only gentry and yeomen, but husbandmen, craftsmen, labourers, and widows. The first question then can be reduced to this: how poor and how numerous were the very poor who were omitted? The second question is whether the inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were equally representative of the same classes. Can a comparison be safely made between standards of wealth at two different periods, or did the habit of leaving wills gradually lose its hold on the poorer classes? Did more and more of the gentry and even the yeomen apply for probate to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury? In this connection, it is prudent to notice conclusions drawn from the inventories of four Nottinghamshire parishes, even though the sample is a small one. They showed that the proportion of craftsmen and labourers represented in them fell considerably as between the period 1575-1639 and 1660-99. This may reflect similar changes in the class structure of the four parishes. But if so, it is the reverse of the class changes which we have been taught to expect.¹ So far as our experience extends at the moment, it would seem to be safer to make comparisons between regions than between centuries.

Of greatest value to the agrarian historian is the information in the inventories concerning the numbers of stock, the acreage of crops, the quantity of grain and other farm produce in store, and the implements and tools of husbandry and of the dairy. Judging from the inventories of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire in the sixteenth century, the two most important crops grown by the Midland peasant were barley and pulses. Wheat ranked third in importance, rye fourth, and oats fifth. But although this order of precedence was widely observed, the average area of sown land, and the pro-

¹ Class representation in the inventories is considered in Maurice Barley, 'Farmhouses and Cottages, 1550-1725', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, VII, 1955, pp. 291-306. A sample of inventories from four Nottinghamshire parishes, 1575-1639, showed the classes represented in the following proportions: gentry 5 per cent; yeomen 11.4 per cent; husbandmen 15.7 per cent; craftsmen 11 per cent; labourers 21.5 per cent; widows 11.6 per cent; not stated 23.7 per cent. If the last two groups are omitted from the figures, the proportions are as follows: gentry 7.7 per cent; yeomen 17.6 per cent; husbandmen 24.3 per cent; craftsmen 16.9 per cent; labourers 33.2 per cent. These figures seem to give generous weight to the lower classes. The proportion of labourers agrees with the evidence of the 1524 subsidy that one-third of the population of most villages depended at least in part on wages for a living.

portion of land devoted to each crop, varied significantly between regions. In Lincolnshire, for example, barley occupied 58 per cent of a sown area of twenty-six acres on the wolds and heath; 54 per cent of a sown area of eight acres in the fens, 42 per cent of a sown area of sixteen acres in the clay vales, and 30 per cent of a sown area of seventeen acres in the marshland. In the Leicestershire claylands the figures were much the same as for the Lincolnshire clays. The average sown area was about twenty acres, of which some 38 per cent was sown with barley.¹

Experience so far suggests that single inventories are of little use for indicating the crop rotations of the open fields. More often than not, there is an awkward disproportion in the amount of land which the peasant had under spring and winter crops.² This was probably due to the disproportions in the amount of land he held in each field—the result of much buying and selling of land over the centuries. It meant that the peasant whose land lay wholly in the open fields did not reap the same harvest every year. Alternative explanations of the disproportion are that parts of his arable land were enclosed, and not subject to the same rotations as the land in the open fields, or that not all the arable lay in one village and subject to the same field course.

The study of single inventories is necessary to explain individual idiosyncrasies in stock keeping, but average figures for a whole region are the vital clue to regional specialization. Nearly all Midland peasants who left wills at death kept a cow or two, fewer people kept sheep and pigs, and fewer still horses, while goats were almost, if not entirely, unknown. These generalizations mask striking regional differences. For example, in sixteenth-century Lincolnshire the average flock of sheep in the claylands was twenty-six, whereas in the marshland, the centre of sheep fattening, it was forty. The average farmer in the more wooded claylands kept six pigs, where the fenland peasant with meagre resources of wood and scrub kept only four. Cattle of all kinds were more numerous on the farms of the fen and marsh than on the wolds and heath. It is from these and other comparative observations that regional variations in Lincolnshire finally emerge, and lay bare the contrast between the dairying and sheep husbandry of the fenland, the sheep and cattle fattening of the marshland, the sheep and barley farming of the wolds and heath, and the mixed husbandry of the clay vales.³

¹ W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, pp. 137, 160, 168, 171.

² See the attempt to deduce rotations from inventories in Julian Cornwall, 'Farming in Sussex, 1540-1640', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, xcii, 1954, pp. 71-2.

³ The regions of Lincolnshire are analysed in greater detail in a book I have in preparation on Lincolnshire agrarian history, 1540-1914.

Having obtained some idea of land use and the specialized husbandry of a region, the historian must consider the size and social structure of its villages, for changes in population and land distribution in the next two centuries exerted a profound influence on the organization and techniques of farming. The size of village communities can be gauged from ecclesiastical returns giving the number of families or communicants in the parish. In 1563 the archdeacons of the dioceses throughout the kingdom were asked to submit a return of the number of families in each parish, and although the order was not everywhere complied with, the returns for many dioceses have survived.¹ In some, the enquiry was followed by others, which, so long as the figures are directly comparable, allow changes in population to be observed at different dates in the course of the next two hundred years. In the diocese of Lincoln,² for example, the number of communicants was returned in 1603, the number of communicants and non-conformists in 1676, the number of families in 1705-23, and the number of families in 1788-92. In districts where no such returns exist, the hearth tax returns, which are tax assessments covering various years between 1662 and 1674, and which give the names of all householders paying the tax, together with those who were exempt on grounds of poverty, can be used to give a rough idea of the number of houses per village in the mid-seventeenth century.³

For a picture of the social structure of a village or district, information has to be drawn from two imperfect sources. The manorial survey gives the size of farm holdings rented directly from the lord, but it tells us nothing about the sub-letting and exchange-letting which went on among tenants, and which is known to have been considerable. This is a serious shortcoming, but it does not empty the survey of all useful content. It may not tell the exact truth concerning the distribution of land among the tillers of the soil, but at the same time it is unlikely to distort the picture out of all recognition. In the fenland of Holland, for example, where there were frequently three, four, or five manors per village, the manorial survey shows a large proportion of very small allotment-like holdings. Since it is probable that many peasants held land of more than one manor, a single manorial survey undoubtedly exaggerates the smallness of the holdings. Yet at the same time,

¹ These returns are in British Museum, Harleian MSS 594, 595, and 618.

² The diocese of Lincoln included the counties of Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Huntingdonshire.

³ The Hearth Tax Returns are discussed in C. A. F. Meekings, *Surrey Hearth Tax, 1664*, Surrey Record Society, xvii, parts 41-2, 1940.

it serves to illustrate reliably enough the contrast between the small holdings of the fen and the large farms of the neighbouring wolds.¹

The second source of information on the class composition of the village is the subsidy assessment of 1524, which was a completely new assessment in that year, village by village, of all persons possessing goods or lands, or earning wages, worth at least twenty shillings a year. In the country districts, though not in the town, this assessment seems to have included the great majority of householders, and although the meaning of the valuations placed on goods and land is not yet fully understood, they seem to offer a rough and ready guide to the relative distribution of wealth in the village. They emphasize the contrast, for example, between the social structure of the small wold villages of Lincolnshire, which possessed a rich squire, one or two yeomen and husbandmen, and a group of wage labourers, and the large fen villages with every grade of wealth represented in a gradually descending scale.²

The broad picture of a region, showing the size of the average village community, its class structure, and predominant system of husbandry in the sixteenth century, lays the foundation for the third and most important task of all, to trace the process of change in the course of the next three and a half centuries, and if possible analyse its causes. To do this, account must be taken of the many aspects of social and economic development which, by their interaction, brought about alterations in farming practice: changes in market demand, for example; changes in food habits and standards of living; changes in the distribution of land between classes, and changes in the size of classes; and finally, more important than any of these as the agent of agricultural revolution, the changing relationship between the supply of land and the size of the population. Any community which earns its living almost exclusively from agriculture will be most profoundly affected in its husbandry by alterations in its resources of land or people.

Many of these changes can be traced for the seventeenth century in the same classes of documents as were used to compile the account of the Tudor period, particularly manorial surveys, probate inventories, and ecclesiastical

¹ In fact, however, the fenland yields another type of record, peculiar to the district, the acre book, which is an assessment for sewer tax compiled on a *parish* basis, and listing every acre of land in the parish and the tenants' names. For evidence of land distribution based on surveys, see, for example, Joan Thirsk, *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century*, Occasional Paper No. 3, University College of Leicester, 1953, pp. 39-40.

² For examples of the use of the subsidy assessment, see W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-30; Joan Thirsk, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-4.

returns of population. The progress of enclosure may be judged from the returns of the enclosure commissioners of 1517, 1548, 1565, and 1607,¹ from lawsuits concerning land, from surveys, and terriers (including glebe terriers),² and for the second half of the seventeenth century onwards from formal enclosure agreements, found among family papers or among Chancery Decrees in the Public Record Office.³

A great wealth of material on agrarian matters will be found in lawsuits: in the bills and answers of plaintiff and defendant, and sometimes in enquiries carried out locally by specially appointed commissioners in an effort to reach a settlement. They may describe and account for changes in crop rotations and fallowing, enclosure disputes and agreements, the engrossing of farms, gains of land by reclamation along the coast, losses through erosion, and the improvement of waste, commons, and fen inland. Disputes about broken sales contracts may disclose the most important markets for agricultural produce, and the principal channels of trade with neighbouring counties and London. Areas where the pasture shortage was becoming acute will be disclosed in lawsuits concerning the unauthorized use of commons by outsiders, or the overcharging of the commons by the inhabitants. Since many changes in farming techniques in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were due fundamentally to the shortage of land, brought about by the increase of population and the growing commercial incentive to use the land more productively, it is essential to ascertain the urgency of this problem in a region. In some pastoral areas, a grazing shortage was unknown in the Tudor period and the commoners' animals were still unstinted. In others, stints were in operation, but they were generous. In the clay Midlands, however, there were many signs of increasing economy in the use of both arable and pasture. The insufficiency of arable in some townships led to a reduction in the number of fallows in the open fields. Pasture scarcity led sometimes to the introduction of a stint, limiting the numbers of cattle, horses, and sheep which each commoner might keep on the common, or a reduction in the number previously permitted. Sometimes the crisis precipitated the partial or complete enclosure of a village, since enclosure enabled each farmer to use his land as he pleased. Short of this, it might

¹ These records were used extensively in Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, 1954, *passim*, but see in particular pp. 106, 142, and footnotes 1, 2, and 3, p. 423.

² For a description of glebe terriers, see M. W. Beresford, 'Glebe Terriers and Open-Field Leicestershire', *Studies in Leicestershire Agrarian History*, Trans. Leics. Archaeolog. Soc. for 1948, 1949, pp. 77-125.

³ For examples of enclosure agreements enrolled in Chancery, and their resemblance to later Parliamentary enclosure awards, see *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, II, 1954, pp. 218, 225.

persuade individuals to lay more and more of their arable strips under temporary grass or ley. They were then obliged to tether their animals for grazing immediately their neighbours sowed corn in the remaining strips in the furlong, but neither lost any common rights by the change in land-use, for after harvest both the leys and the grain stubble were thrown open to the stock of the whole town.

For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the evidence of agrarian change is to be found in Parliamentary enclosure awards, land tax assessments, rentals, tithe awards, and crop returns, and in officially printed population censuses, Parliamentary papers on the state of agriculture, agricultural statistics from 1866 onwards, and newspapers.¹

Parliamentary enclosure awards, which may be found in parish chests, among private muniments, or among the records of the Clerk of the Peace, set out all the new allotments of land and the new roads to be made. They have been much studied of late, mainly as a check upon the opinion held by earlier historians such as J. L. and Barbara Hammond that enclosure "broke the back of the peasant community."² The execution of enclosures, their cost, and social consequences have all come under scrutiny. The approach to the last problem has been made by comparing the distribution of land at the time of the enclosure award with that which can be inferred from the apportionment of land tax between 1780 and 1832. The tendency nowadays is to praise the fairness of the enclosure commissioners (Dr J. D. Chambers has gone so far as to call Parliamentary enclosure "a milestone in the recognition of the *legal* rights of humble men"), to treat sceptically the complaints of contemporaries about the high cost of enclosure, and to play down the contribution of enclosure towards the decline of the peasantry. Apart from the fact that enclosure often tended at first to increase, rather than reduce, the number of land-owning peasants, it is now recognized that their decline was already under way in the late seventeenth century. At the same time, it is important to remember that all recent studies of this subject have been of a statistical nature, and have traced the fortunes of classes, not of individuals. They have ignored the personal tragedies of enclosure, with which contemporaries were much concerned, because the administrative documents, while illustrating the transfer of land from one class to another, do not readily disclose, and certainly do not explain, transfers of land within a single class. The peasant, ruined by enclosure, who gave up his holding to another of his class, does not proclaim his tragedy loudly enough to be heard in the pages of

¹ The list of sources described below is of manuscript, not printed sources, which are too numerous to be dealt with adequately here.

² J. L. & Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, Guild Book edition, 1948, 1, p. 101.

the land tax. His story is more likely to be found in the pamphlet literature of the time.¹

Tithe awards, which were nineteenth-century agreements for the commutation of tithes in kind, give the amount of tithable land in the parish, its current use as arable, meadow, or pasture, and the money charge to be borne by each landowner after commutation. When the whole of the parish is tithable, the award gives a complete picture of land use and the size of farms.

During the French wars when the grain shortage and consequent high prices threatened to cause serious social disturbance, crop returns were collected by the Home Office covering the years 1793, 1794, 1795, 1800, and 1801. A full account has been given recently of the origin of the returns, and of contemporary opinions on their reliability,² but although some of the returns have been printed and commented upon, no attempt has been made so far by modern historians to investigate their accuracy. It is known that the total acreage returned for each parish was rarely a complete record of the total land under crops. It is likely, however, that the returns indicate reliably the proportionate importance of each crop.

It is impossible in a short article to give due consideration to all the diverse aspects of change which fall within the province of agrarian history. Some of the problems enumerated here will be found amplified in accounts of regional economies already published. But the study of a fresh district will always prompt new questions or suggest fresh answers to old problems of explaining the seeming eccentricity of local farming practice and social organization. At the same time, the student will encounter problems of interpretation which defy solution until more regional surveys are available for comparison. He will notice more acutely than before the lamentable gaps in our knowledge of even general agricultural trends. Writing on the sixteenth century has so far been almost exclusively concerned with enclosure and rent. The seventeenth century has received hardly any attention: the first forty years have been treated as a tailpiece to the boom of the sixteenth century, the next twenty years as a bleak and barren interlude, and the last forty years as a

¹ J. D. Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd Series, v, 1953, pp. 319-43, and the works cited in the footnotes. The phrase quoted is on p. 327; W. E. Tate, 'The Cost of Parliamentary Enclosure in England', *ibid.*, 1952, pp. 258-65.

² W. E. Minchinton, 'Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars', *Agricultural History Review*, 1, 1953, pp. 29-43. This article lists all the returns in print at that time, to which the following should now be added: R. A. Pelham, 'The 1801 Crop Returns for Staffordshire in their Geographical Setting', *Coll. for History of Staffs.*, 1950-51, pp. 231-42.

period of preparation for the so-called eighteenth-century agricultural revolution. This revolution has been seen only through the eyes of four exceptional farmers, Lord Townshend, Coke of Holkham, Jethro Tull, and Robert Bakewell, and is therefore hopelessly out of focus. Later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing has dwelt mainly on the changes in land-ownership effected by Parliamentary enclosure, and on nineteenth-century depressions affecting the corn-growing districts. In a sense, however, local studies have postponed immediate consideration of problems of general development by showing that England has not one agrarian history but many, that the old corn-growing areas of the Midlands are not the whole of England. No new survey of English agrarian society and agriculture will be entitled to the name which does not take full account of the diversified character and fortunes of its many regions.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Mrs Joan Thirsk, B.A., Ph.D., is Research Fellow in Agrarian History at University College, Leicester. She has published *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century*, and a chapter on the modern agrarian history of Leicestershire in the *Victoria County History*.

S. R. Eyre, B.Sc. (London), Ph.D. (Sheffield), is a Lecturer in Geography in the University of Leeds. As a climatologist and bio-geographer he is particularly interested in agricultural problems.

G. E. Fussell, formerly on the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture, took an active part in the formation of the British Agricultural History Society. He has published a number of books, the most recent of which are *The Farmers' Tools*, and *The English Country-woman*.

J. D. Gould, B.A. (London), M.A. (Bristol), is an administrative officer in the Department of Adult Education at University College, Leicester, and author of several studies on economic history published in the

English Historical Review, the *Economic History Review*, and other journals.

J. H. Smith, M.Sc., is Lecturer in Economics at King's College, Aberdeen.

R. Trow-Smith is on the editorial staff of *The Farmer and Stock-Breeder*. He has published *English Husbandry*, *Society and the Land*, and several novels of rural life, of which the latest is *Clay Village*.

T. H. Aston, M.A., is a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

J. G. Jenkins, who graduated in geography and anthropology at the University of Wales, is now Assistant Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life, Reading.

Miss E. A. L. Moir, B.A., is a senior research scholar in the Department of English Local History, University College, Leicester.

L. F. Salzman, M.A., F.S.A., formerly editor-in-chief of the *Victoria County Histories*, has published *A History of Building in England down to 1540*, and other works.