

Agricultural Rent in South-East England, 1788-1825

By H. G. HUNT

MOST of our knowledge concerning the development of agriculture and the fortunes of landowners and farmers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is derived from the commentary of contemporary witnesses. The county reports to the Board of Agriculture, the correspondence published in the *Annals of Agriculture*, and the numerous pamphlets on the plight of the poor contain many references to the inflation of farmers' profits and landlords' rents during the Napoleonic Wars. The Reports of the Select Committees in 1820, 1821, 1822, and 1833 leave no doubt about the widespread distress among farmers and the difficulties of estate stewards during the period of adjustment that followed, particularly in the early 1820's. But if the general trends are clear, much of the evidence suffers from a lack of precision. To take just one example, John Boys, writing on the agriculture of Kent in 1805, states that "Since the former edition of this work [1796], rents have much increased, and in some instances have experienced an enormous advance; particularly in rich soils, and in the neighbourhood of market towns. The late extravagantly high prices of corn operated as a bounty upon its production, by encouraging an enlarged cultivation."¹ This observation shows quite clearly some of the changes that were taking place at the turn of the century; nevertheless one would like to know a great deal more about them. What was the extent of the increase in rent? For how long did it continue, and how quickly was the landlord able to tap the increased prosperity of the farmers? Similarly, the minutes of evidence taken by the Select Committee in 1821, although voluminous, leave a number of important questions unanswered.² It is evident that by that date prosperity was at an end. But it is necessary to discover how quickly and in what ways rents were adjusted to the changes in the fortunes of the tenants, and when the actual turning-points came. Fresh advances in this field of study are now to be made mainly by the detailed examination of estate papers and other material which throw light on these questions. A contribution is made in this article by the analysis of changes in agricultural rent in one area of south-east England.

The Kent Archives Office contains a fine series of account books pertain-

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Kent*, 1805, p. 39.

² *British Parl. Papers*, 1821, Vol. ix.

ing to the estate of Lord Darnley of Cobham.¹ In addition to his extensive estate in Ireland and smaller properties in other parts of England, Darnley owned a good deal of land in north-west Kent, particularly in the parishes of Cobham, Gravesend, Cliffe, Chalk, and Cuxton. The account books compiled by his steward, William Stevenson, contain details of the income and expenses of Darnley's Kentish property in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and are of great value to the historian in providing complete and continuous data concerning rents, sizes of farms, leases, and capital improvements on the estate. In order to trace the course of agricultural rents it is necessary to distinguish the income from Darnley's farms from that of his other property. The latter included a large number of houses and gardens, shops, a rope yard, a shipwright's yard, a boatbuilder's yard, a corn mill, and a public house. Darnley was the impropiator of tithes in a number of parishes and also owned land used for digging chalk.² In 1788 Darnley owned ten farms in north-west Kent varying in size from 250 acres to 700 acres, the aggregate area being approximately 3,800 acres.³ By 1820 he had considerably enlarged his estate to 7,500 acres by the purchase of a further twenty-five farms. The following table summarizes the changes in his income from farm rents between 1788 and 1820, including the rent from the farms he purchased between these dates.

<i>Date</i> ⁴	<i>Aggregate Rent</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Aggregate Rent</i>
1788-89	£2,229	1807-08	£5,243
1791-92	£3,098	1810-11	£6,525
1794-95	£3,269	1813-14	£7,260
1797-98	£3,349	1816-17	£7,477
1801-02	£3,486	1819-20	£8,149
1804-05	£4,022		

Darnley's total farm rents rose from £2,229 in 1788 to £8,149 in 1820, an increase of 266 per cent in thirty-two years. While this large rise can partly be accounted for by the increase in land values between these two dates, his purchases of land also helped to swell his income from farm rents. Thus it

¹ K.A.O. U565.

² Some of his land was leased by a group of men who proposed to construct a tunnel under the Thames at Gravesend. For the plan of the project, which was never carried out, see K.A.O. Q/RUM 89.

³ It is not possible to ascertain the exact size of Darnley's estate in 1788 since there was no survey of his farms at that time and acreages are not mentioned in the account books. Later surveys, although providing a guide, do not contain references to recent increases or reductions in the size of the farms.

⁴ Darnley's financial year ran from Michaelmas to Michaelmas.

is clearly necessary to consider separately (a) the rent from those farms he possessed in 1788 and (b) the rent from those farms subsequently purchased.

First let us trace the rents paid by the occupiers of the former group of farms. The aggregate rent from these farms rose from £2,229 in 1788 to £4,404 in 1820, i.e. a rise of about 100 per cent. This rise did not take place evenly. A close analysis of the rent changes shows that five distinct periods can be distinguished:

	<i>Average increase in rent per annum</i>
1788-99	1.6%
1800-04	1.8%
1805-11	5.0%
1812-15	nil
1816-20	3.3%

If we compare these changes with the price of corn in Kent (Fig. I) an interesting correlation emerges. Corn prices fluctuated considerably from year to year, but apart from one or two years of good harvest, prices were on average creeping upwards between 1788 and 1804. Rents also underwent a



FIG. I

Kent Corn Prices (first week in October), from the *London Gazette*. After 1820 prices are the average from Canterbury.

modest rise in this period. The most rapid advances in rent took place between 1805 and 1811 when wheat prices were increasing rapidly. On the other hand, rents were almost stagnant between 1812 and 1815 when wheat prices fell by more than 50 per cent. Between the end of the war and 1820 rents began to rise again. This at first sight seems puzzling in view of the uncertainty among farmers and landowners and of the sharp fall of corn prices in 1819 and 1820. The estate account books show, however, that Darnley enlarged a number of his farms each by a small acreage from his purchases of land in this period, and that this rather than any change in land values accounts for the increase in rent.

The additions to Darnley's Kentish property between 1788 and 1820 were made in four main stages: eleven farms were purchased between 1790 and 1793, two in 1803-4, three in 1808-9, and nine between 1817 and 1820. The

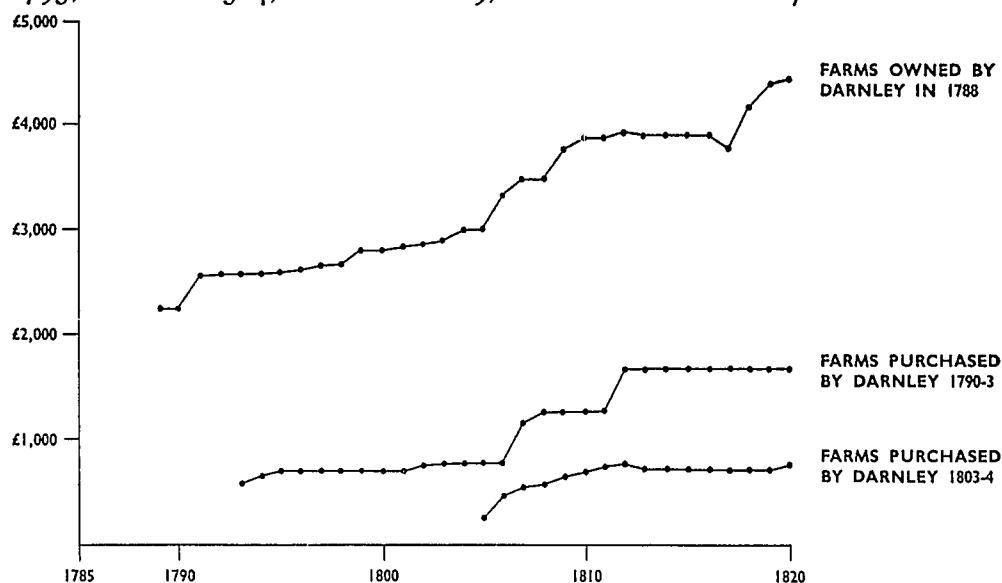


FIG. II
Lord Darnley's agricultural rent.

rents from the farms purchased up to 1804 have been traced in Fig. II and the annual average rate of increase shown in the following table.

	Average annual rate of increase in rent	
	Farms purchased 1790-3	Farms purchased 1803-4
1793-99	1.5%	—
1800-04	2.0%	—
1805-11	13.5%	6.6%
1812-15	nil	nil
1816-20	nil	1.4%

The course of rents on the newly acquired farms is similar to that on the farms already in Darnley's possession in 1788. The period of most rapid increase appears to have been 1805-11, while rents were generally stable after 1812.

Rents could be changed most quickly on farms held by tenants-at-will. Before 1815 many of Darnley's farms were, however, occupied by farmers holding leases of between seven and twelve years' duration,¹ and this tended to reduce the sensitivity of rents to prices. Nevertheless when the time came to renew a lease the enlarged income of the farmer was at least partly absorbed by an increase in rent. Two examples will show how the fortunes of farming changed and how Darnley's steward took every opportunity of seeing that the rent was at an economic level. In 1788 the tenant of Knight's Place Farm in Cobham paid £80 p.a. for some 200 acres. At the expiry of the lease in 1790 the rent was raised to £100 p.a. with a new lease for twelve years. In 1802 the rent was raised to £160 and the farmer was forced to accept a tenancy-at-will in place of his lease. Further rises in rent took place in rapid succession, to £180 p.a. in 1803 and to £230 p.a. in 1809 when a lease for twelve years was granted. By 1814 and 1815 the falling prices had forced the tenant to run up arrears on his high rent which had been contracted at the height of the boom, and he was forced to quit the farm. His successor contracted a lease in 1816 for twelve years at the same rent and was able to pay his way for three years during the partial recovery of prices. But in 1819 depression set in and the farmer found himself in difficulties. His arrears rose from £119 in 1819 to £461 in 1822, and Darnley was forced to give him a rebate of 25 per cent of his rent in 1823 to prevent him from sinking further into debt. A similar case was that of Ranscombe Farm (some 250 acres) in the parish of Cuxton where the changes of rent were as follows:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Rent</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Rent</i>
1788	£120	1808	£300
1790	£145	1812	£288 ²
1798	£180	1820	£200
1801	£200		

The reduction in rent at Michaelmas 1820 came after the tenant had piled up £657 in arrears, and Darnley was also compelled to grant a rebate in order to keep the farm occupied. The conversion of leaseholds to tenancies-

¹ It was normal for Kentish tenants to hold leases of from seven to fourteen years' duration.

² A reduction in rent took place in this year when the tenant agreed to pay the tithe which had previously been paid by the landlord.

at-will between 1795 and 1812 was evidently a move by Darnley to tap more quickly the increases in his tenants' incomes due to rising prices. Leases were only granted on terms which anticipated future rises in prices. Thus Darnley granted a twelve-year lease on Green Farm, some 400 acres in the parish of Shorne, in 1803, but the new tenant was forced to accept an enormous increase in rent from £194 to £350 p.a.¹

The height of prosperity in farming in north-west Kent appears, from the changes in agricultural rents, to have been in the years between 1805 and 1812. After 1812 corn prices began to fall sharply, and the uncertainty of the future at the end of the war is reflected in the terms of new agreements that were reached between landlord and tenants. After 1814 it was exceptional for a rent to be increased at the expiry of a lease.² In a number of cases leases were converted to tenancies-at-will, perhaps a precautionary measure in view of the varying forecasts of the future of corn prices. The fortunes of farmers varied according to the dates when their leases expired. Those farmers who contracted new terms for a lease, say, of twelve years or longer when prices were still rising rapidly, found themselves in serious difficulties by 1820; whereas those whose leases expired immediately after the war managed to escape an increase in rent and were thus less burdened during the ensuing depression. The state of anxiety amongst farmers even as early as 1813 is shown by the fact that Darnley agreed that the tenant of Wickham Farm, 266 acres in the parish of Wickham, should receive a rebate of £50 on his annual rent of £400 whenever the average price of wheat fell below £4 per quarter.³

The general apprehension at the end of the war was somewhat allayed during 1816, 1817, and 1818, when prices showed a mild recovery, but towards the end of 1819 corn prices began to fall (owing partly to a sudden importation of corn but mainly to good harvests) and continued to do so until they reached their nadir in 1822. The worst fears of depression were realized and petitions of distress poured into the Commons from farmers throughout the country. What was the reaction on the Darnley estate? Darnley's aggregate agricultural rent after 1820 has not been traced in Fig. II because the figures obtained would not be comparable with those at earlier dates. Darnley's steward was engaged in a considerable readjustment of the

¹ K.A.O. U565 A22a.

² Except where the size of the farm was increased as in the cases discussed above.

³ K.A.O. U565 A32a. It is interesting to note that according to a clause in a lease granted to another farmer ten years later the landlord agreed to give a rebate of £50 on a rent of £300 when the price of wheat fell below 52 shillings a quarter. The difference in the price of wheat to qualify the farmer for a rebate in 1813 compared to 1823 is indicative of the changed expectations of farmers and landlords.

estate: some farms were being split up and let off in small acreages, sometimes for non-agricultural purposes, other farms were being increased in size and much land was being bought and sold. Where, however, his original farms were left intact it is possible to trace the course of rents into the late 1820's and after. One inevitable development was that Darnley was forced to reduce rents on a number of farms in order to keep them in occupation during the depression. The following examples illustrate this.

<i>Farm</i>	<i>Size (acres)</i>	<i>Old rent</i>	<i>New rent</i>	<i>Year of reduction</i>
Cheney's Farm (Cuxton)	219	£286	£230	1823
High Birch Farm (Cuxton)	209	£180	£140	1823
Court Lodge & Whorne's Place Farms (Cuxton)	457	£430	£390	1823

Those farms on which reductions in rent were allowed were held by tenants-at-will. Rents paid by leaseholders could not be so quickly adjusted to the changed market prices. Darnley's steward was wise enough to realize, however, that if he held his tenants to their original bargain many of them would have to quit. Thus while nominal rents paid on unexpired leases remained constant throughout the depression, rebates were allowed to those farmers in severe distress. For example, the tenant of East Court Farm (Manor of East Chalk) was allowed a £60 rebate on his rent of £646 in 1820. In the following year a number of tenants were allowed rebates ranging from 15 per cent to 25 per cent "in consequence of all agricultural produce selling at prices below the expence of growing it."¹ Similar allowances were made in 1822 and 1823, some of the rebates rising to 30 per cent. This timely financial assistance by the landlord undoubtedly had the effect of saving his leasehold tenants from insolvency and enabling them to continue farming in the face of the depression. One tenant, the occupier of West Cliffe Court Farm (700 acres), had fallen behind on his rent to the extent of £650 in 1822, and a rebate of £725 enabled him to start with a clean slate in the following year. By 1824 the worst of the immediate depression had passed,² and Darnley no longer found it necessary to allow rebates on his rents. Many of the tenancies-at-will were converted to leaseholds once more, and leaseholders were being charged more realistic rents on the renewal of their contracts.

¹ K.A.O. U565 A40a.

² The recovery in prices in 1824 and 1825 was followed by another depression in the later 1820's. See G. E. Fussell and M. Compton, 'Agricultural adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars', *Economic History* (Supplement to the *Economic Journal*), III, No. 14, 1939, pp. 186 *et seq.*

We have seen how unpaid rent had to be written off by the landlord in the early 1820's. It is interesting to establish how far changes in the aggregate arrears of rent on Darnley's estate reflect changes in the prosperity of farming. The graph of arrears on agricultural land in Fig. III shows that, apart

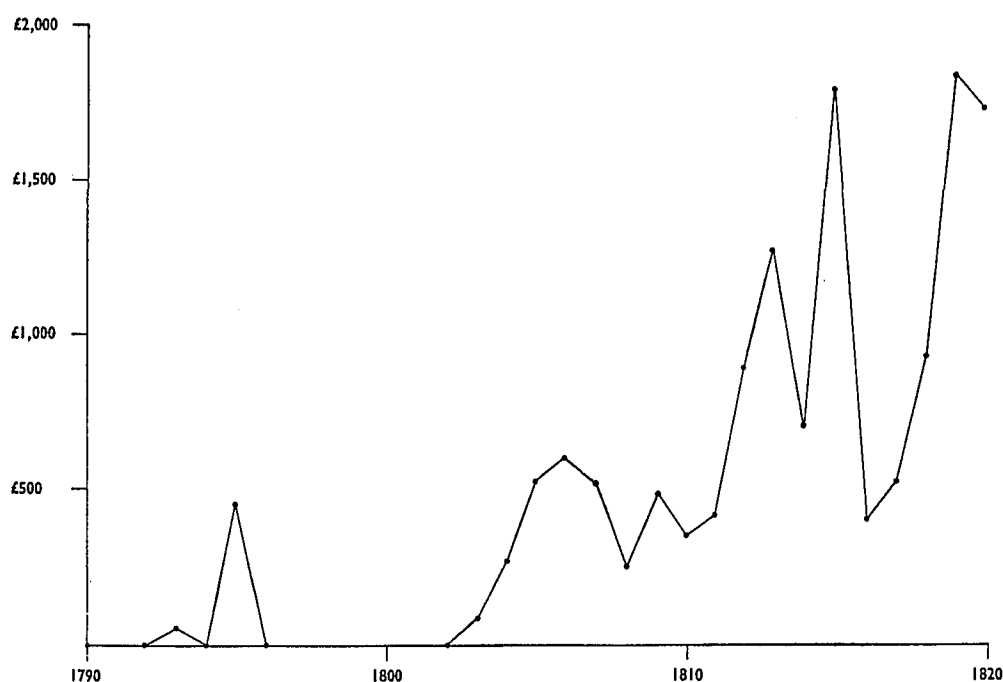


FIG. III

Rent arrears on Darnley's estate.

from the year 1795, arrears on the estate were negligible in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The £445 of farm rent arrears in 1795 can be attributed to the bad weather in the late summer of that year which delayed the harvest and compelled some farmers to be late in paying their rent. The increase in aggregate arrears in the first twelve years of the nineteenth century took place in a period of prosperity, and was mainly due to the inability of farmers to pay, in the first year or two, rents which had been scaled up in anticipation of further rises in agricultural prices. The arrears after 1812 are, however, of a more serious nature and are a truer reflection of the vicissitudes of that period. Farmers found it difficult to pay their rents when prices were falling; thus the level of arrears soared to over £1,700 in 1815 after three years of rapidly falling corn prices. Arrears rose again to a record height in 1819 after a sharp downward turn in corn prices. But the level of arrears did not always vary inversely with the price of corn even in the post-war years, since a late payment by a farmer, not always the result of an unfavourable

market for his produce, was entered as an arrear in the account book. Moreover, in the years between 1819 and 1823 arrears were kept down, and in some cases cleared up, by the rent rebate that Darnley allowed his tenants. Thus the level of arrears in each year is not always a reliable guide to the prosperity of farming.

Corn prices during the agricultural depression in the early 1820's were on average no lower than they had been in the 1780's and early 1790's; it was the difference in the farmers' costs between the two periods which largely explains the severity of the distress. We have seen how leaseholders were burdened with high rents contracted during the height of the boom ten years previously. John Lake, the Kentish witness before the Committee of 1821, mentions the failure of certain tradesmen such as blacksmiths and wheelwrights to reduce their charges.¹ The malt tax also bore heavily on the farmers since it was still the widespread practice to supply a quantity of beer free of charge to agricultural labourers.² One item of farmers' expenses, that of labourers' wages, can be traced in detail. Darnley's home farm, 378 acres in Cobham, was managed by the steward, and we may consider the wages paid by him at Cobham to reflect the general level paid by the farmers in the surrounding parishes. The following table shows the wages paid to day labourers employed on the farm at Cobham up to 1814. After 1815 wages of agricultural labourers paid by the day no longer appear in the estate books. But the wages of day labourers employed in the grounds of Cobham Hall are still recorded, and these may be taken as a guide to the wages of agricultural labourers since the two sets of wages were identical before 1815.

Day Wages of Male Agricultural Labourers on Darnley's Home Farm³

	<i>Winter</i>	<i>Summer</i>	<i>Harvest Period</i>
1790	1s. 6d.	1s. 8d.	2s. 0d.
1794	1s. 6d.	1s. 8d.	2s. 0d.
1797	2s. 0d.	2s. 0d.	2s. 4d.
1800	2s. 0d.	2s. 0d.	2s. 6d.
1803	2s. 0d.	2s. 0d.	2s. 6d.
1806	2s. 6d.	2s. 6d.	2s. 6d.
1809	2s. 6d.	2s. 6d.	3s. 0d.
1812	3s. 0d.	3s. 0d.	3s. 0d.
1814	2s. 6d.	2s. 6d.	2s. 6d.

¹ British Parl. Papers, 1821, IX, p. 74.

² Poor rates were of course very much heavier in the 1820's compared with thirty years earlier, and this burden appears to have been shouldered by the tenants.

³ These figures do not include a daily allowance of beer received by the labourers.

*Day Wages of Male Labourers employed by the Month in the Grounds of
Cobham Hall¹*

1815	2s. 6d. & 2s. od. ²	1821	2s. od. & 1s. 8d.
1817	2s. 6d. & 2s. od.	1823	1s. 8d. & 1s. 6d.
1819	2s. 3d.	1825	2s. 6d. & 2s. od.

The daily wages of labourers responded fairly swiftly to changes in the fortunes of farming. Money wages on Darnley's home farm rose between 4d. and 6d. per day in the middle of the 1790's and further rises of 6d. per day took place between 1803 and 1806 and between 1809 and 1812, the maximum rate of three shillings per day being reached in the latter year. By 1814 the diminishing prosperity of agriculture had its effect on labourers' wages which fell to 2s. 6d. per day. This rate was maintained during the next three years of uncertainty, but in 1819 the onset of depression resulted in another fall in wages, this time to 2s. 3d. per day. As the agricultural depression developed, wages were forced down until by 1823 they reached the level obtaining in 1790, although a recovery in corn prices in 1824 and 1825 enabled labourers to gain a higher rate once more. Thus, while the wages of day labourers rose by 100 per cent in the period of prosperity up to 1812,³ farmers were able to reduce them by the same extent in almost half the time during the harder times that followed.

The general conclusions drawn from the statistics presented in this article may be briefly summarized. We have seen that agricultural rent increased between 1788 and 1812, first at a fairly modest rate, but later, after 1805, very rapidly. The close correlation between rents and corn prices shows that the landlord was quick to participate in the 'unearned' increase in farmers' incomes. During the period of rapidly rising prices the landlord ensured his share in the growing prosperity of agriculture in two ways. Some farmers were required to pay high rents when their leases were renewed in anticipation of further price rises; others were forced to accept tenancies-at-will which were subject to frequent changes in rent. The good harvests between 1813 and 1815 called a halt to rising farming profits, and rents consequently ceased their upward trend. The comparative stability in rents continued in 1816, 1817, and 1818 (allowing for the increase in size of some farms) despite a mild recovery in prices and the Corn Law. In 1819 prices began to fall again and a severe depression set in lasting till 1824. Worst hit were those

¹ The figures do not include a daily allowance of beer received by the labourers.

² The lower rate was usually paid in the winter months after Christmas.

³ The rise in the wages of agricultural labourers between 1794 and 1812 was spectacular in view of the fact that they had scarcely changed during the previous ninety years.

tenants with leases dating from 1812 and earlier who could continue to farm their land only by eating into reserves or by piling up arrears of rent. Tenants with one-year contracts received immediate relief by a reduction in rent. Leaseholders were, however, less fortunately placed, but were relieved by abatements in their rent, up to thirty per cent in some cases, until their leases ran out or until the worst of the immediate depression was over. Thus while the landlord had been quick to profit by the scarcity of foodstuffs during the war and had been somewhat reluctant to reduce his rents after the peak of 1812, he had accepted the fact of lower land values by 1820. Re-adjustment to the changed circumstances was not achieved without considerable financial loss by the farmers. But tenants in difficulty between 1819 and 1823 were not evicted, since the landlord preferred to adopt a realistic attitude rather than see his land withdrawn from cultivation.¹

¹ This was usually the case. See, for example, Joan Thirsk and Jean Imray, *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century*, Suffolk Record Society, 1, 1958, pp. 96 *et seq.*

Social Mobility in Nineteenth-Century Devon

By DUNCAN MITCHELL

DEVON is an area of small farms. The tradition is not a new one, for Robert Fraser, writing toward the end of the eighteenth century, noted it. "Farms in general are small, from twenty to forty acres being the common run of the holdings in this county." But he observed that there were some changes. "Of late, the farmers are beginning to increase, and one farmer is sometimes found to occupy two, three, or more of these tenements; but I found very few farmers exceed two, or at most three hundred acres." There was, in his words, a "respectable class of yeomanry."¹ This tradition of independent small-holdings was, and still remains, strong. The question arises, however, how this class of small-holder was recruited. Some evidence is available to show

that it was not altogether a self-perpetuating class, but that it drew some of its members from the labourers.

To appreciate this factor of social mobility we have to note two things. First, during the nineteenth century farmers quite often changed their holdings. In the years following the Napoleonic wars the return on farm produce was small; but although rentals were repeatedly lowered by from 25 to 30 per cent, such reductions did not prevent a considerable movement among farmers from one holding to another and cheaper one.² In the later times of relative prosperity the movement was reversed. This geographical mobility in fact persisted down to 1939. Men did not always feel obliged to farm the same land as their forbears, although they seldom left

¹ Robert Fraser, *General View of the County of Devon*, 1794, p. 17.

² *Agricultural State of the Kingdom in February, March, and April 1816.*