

Sectoral Advance in English Agriculture 1850-80: a Summary

By E. H. WHETHAM

THE discussion on this topic between Dr E. L. Jones and Mr E. J. T. Collins, on the one hand, and Dr R. W. Sturgess on the other,¹ has reached a point where a summary from a third party may perhaps be useful.

Dr Jones and Mr Collins maintain that the changes which occurred on the clay soils of England after 1840 were neither as extensive nor as important as those which raised the output of the light soils in the preceding fifty years. This judgement of relative importance, which will command general assent, is followed by attempts to prove that field drainage, the main technical improvement in this period for the clay soils, was useless and unproductive, and that clayland farms showed virtually no increase in production in this period. Here surely the authors do protest too much, for, as Dr Sturgess comments, their quotations supporting these arguments could be matched by others proving the opposite, and there is a sad lack of statistics.

Drainage. If field drainage was unproductive and unprofitable, why was £12 million of public money borrowed for it by landowners and farmers between 1850 and 1873? Admittedly some schemes were badly planned and executed and quickly became ineffective, but on at least one estate tile drains of nineteenth-century pattern were still discharging water in the 1930's. Contemporary literature comments on the improved state of the land after drainage, and it seems silly to argue that the operation had no effect on productivity. Apart from schemes financed privately,² the total area drained with the help of public loans in this period was not large—between two and three million acres—and this certainly does not compare with the area of light land brought under high cultivation by the turnip and the folded flocks, but it was an improvement of importance.

¹ E. J. T. Collins and E. L. Jones, 'Sectoral Advance in English Agriculture', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xv, 1967, pp. 65-81; R. W. Sturgess, 'The Agricultural Revolution on the English Clays', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xiv, 1966, pp. 104-21, and xv, 1967, pp. 82-7.

² The Hope family spent about £2,500 on tile drains for their East Lothian farm, of which one-third was boulder clay.—*Jnl Roy. Agric. Soc.*, xiv, 1853.

Claylands. Dr Jones and Mr Collins state that "ever since the middle of the seventeenth century English farming had been afflicted by a laggard clayland sector" (p. 81), and that "the clayland tenantry were notoriously impoverished at the start of the third quarter of the nineteenth century" (p. 74). These sweeping generalizations show the confusion which results from using aggregates such as light land and clayland—loose descriptions of soils each supporting a variety of enterprises, both arable and grass. There is also a confusion between absolute productivity on different soils at any one time, and trends in productivity over time, which seem the main point of the present argument. During the Napoleonic Wars, farmers on the chalk and gravels learnt how to obtain an increase in output by raising the level of inputs, and their enterprises could more easily be adapted to the post-war depression since they combined grain and livestock. The heaviest midland clays give high yields of grain under thorough cultivation, which involves high costs; because of their inflexibility, these farms which flourish in war-time tend to go into grass when grain prices fail to provide profits. But the lighter the clay, the more flexible its economy, and to argue that clay farms everywhere showed no increase in output after 1840 ignores the variety of improvements available to arable farmers on all soils—guano, superphosphates, cattle cake, purer seeds, better implements. It ignores, as Dr Sturges points out (p. 83), the rise in cattle numbers in almost every county, surely a sign of rising productivity.

Dr Sturges rightly disclaims the title of 'impoverished tenantry' for the dairy farms in the north and west, blessed with an annual rainfall of 40 inches or more. This section of farming certainly saw great changes in the period under discussion, including improved techniques in cheese-making, the use of purchased feeds, and the use of rail transport. 'Railway milk' was being sold in London and the northern towns before the cattle plague of 1866; by 1880, milk was flowing into London from the clay soils of Wiltshire and Buckinghamshire, and even from the vales of Derbyshire;¹ the composition of the cattle population was changing in consequence.² Dr Jones and Mr Collins dismiss all these changes as "unsatisfactory adaptations to the swings in the market" (p. 81); yet in the 1880's, it was the grasslands of the north and west which supplied the men and the capital for the derelict farms of East Anglia, and that trend implies previous profits.

Finally, changes in costs cannot be dismissed by an index of weekly wages, in a period which saw the mechanization of the grain and hay harvests, to

¹ E. H. Whetham, 'The London Milk Trade, 1860-1900', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, xvii, 2nd ser., 1964, p. 370.

² C. S. Orwin and E. H. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1846-1914*, pp. 137, 358.

mention only the most important economy in labour. Perhaps agricultural historians might refer more often to the map of Farming Types published by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1941, which employed all the letters of the alphabet and still failed to describe the variety of English farming. The patches on that map indicate the areas which might now be taken as units for the further study of agricultural history in the nineteenth century.

NOTES AND COMMENTS *continued from page 14.*

(95616), a new bibliographical guide compiled by James H. Shideler and Lawrence B. Lee. The guide, *A Preliminary List of References for the History of Agriculture in California*, was a co-operative project of the Agri-

cultural History Center and the Agricultural History Branch of the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and was published in June 1967.

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