

'Open' and 'Close' Parishes in England in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

By B. A. HOLDERNESS

ESTIMATES of employment in agriculture in the first half of the nineteenth century indicate no general deficiency in the supply of agricultural labour, but it is evident that its distribution was imperfect. The most important deficiency occurred in parishes which regularly excluded all but the bare minimum of wage-dependent families from gaining settlements by the expedient of limiting the number of available cottages. These were described as 'close' parishes, often so rigidly controlled by landlords and ratepayers that labourers, employed by farmers in the parish, were compelled to walk to and from work. James Caird, in 1850, believed it very common to find agricultural labourers "lodged at such a distance from their regular place of employment that they have to walk an hour out in the morning and an hour home in the evening, or from forty to fifty miles a week."¹ An 'open' parish was overcrowded, insanitary, and ill regulated, with numerous small proprietors who let tumbledown cottages at exorbitant rents. Charles Kingsley's description in *Alton Locke* is comparatively restrained: "a knot of thatched hovels, all sinking and leaning every way but the right, the windows patched with paper, the doorways stopped with filth, which surrounded a beershop." Gilbert à Beckett, who reported on East Anglia in 1850, expressed the contrast simply: "in almost every Union where the course of my inquiry has taken me, I have found some one or more densely populated parishes in the neighbourhood of others very thinly inhabited by labourers, and in some instances, having scarcely any cottages at all. In the former, the dwellings are for the most part wretched, damp, unwholesome, inconvenient, excessively high rented, and crowded with inmates, to such an extent as to render it impossible that health and comfort should be enjoyed."² The consequences were not merely the poor hygiene, dilapidation, and despair of such villages, but a marked deterioration in the efficiency of farmworkers whose energies were dissipated by their living conditions and their travelling to work, which, as Caird said, was an enormous tax to pay in labour, "their only capital." Victorian scandals like the Gang System were the product and the symptom of 'open' and 'close' parishes. The Gang System depended upon crowds of women and children, recruited from over-

¹ James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-1*, London, 1851, p. 516.

² G. A. à Beckett, 'Report to the Poor Law Commissioners on Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, and Reading Union, Berks', *Report on Laws of Settlement and Removal*, 1850, BPP 1850, xxvii, p. 238.

populated villages and put out to work in neighbouring villages where there were too few labouring families for the purposes of agriculture. From the Victorian viewpoint, the problem was essentially moral. Private squalor was often identified with moral delinquency, and beerhouses received a large proportion of the blame for rural despair and dissipation. However, a number of writers, while remaining acutely conscious of the incontinence of cottage labourers, sought an environmental cause. Dr Hunter, who wrote in 1865, overstated the case when he described 'open' parishes as "penal settlements for people of bad character from all the country round," but foul conditions engendering delinquency and sexual promiscuity were widely described by mid-nineteenth-century investigators, since 'open' villages were forced to receive the "scum and offscour" of the countryside hindered from settling anywhere else. Most counties from Dorset to the East Riding could show one or two particularly notorious examples.¹

The problem of 'open' and 'close' parishes itself became a mid-Victorian scandal. Thirty years of investigation and propaganda culminated in the Union Chargeability Act of 1865, which substituted a system of assessment by poor law unions for the old parish poor rate, and thereby changed the problem from a parochial to a Union responsibility. It was in the thirty years between the Poor Law Inquiry Commission and the Act of 1865 that the issue was first properly discussed and separated from the general problem of rural poverty. It continued to occupy much space in the Reports to the Royal Commission of 1867, but there was already evidence that things were gradually changing for the better. The majority of the regional reporters, who found 'close' parishes to be a serious problem, acknowledged that cottage-building to ensure a better economic distribution of labour had already begun, but in the worst areas difficulties remained until at least the 1880's, in spite of the assistance offered by steady rural depopulation.²

The distinction between 'open' and 'close' parishes was not a new development of the mid-nineteenth century, although the terminology probably dated from around 1830. Limitations upon cottage-building were mentioned by Eden, Davies, Marshall, and others, and in a more precise way by Arthur Young and Richard Burn in the 1760's. Much earlier, Roger North, whose

¹ Caird, *op. cit.*; Dr Hunter, *Seventh Report of the Medical Officers to the Privy Council*, App. 6, BPP 1865, xxvi, p. 135; Rev. James Fraser, in *R.C. Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, BPP 1867-8, xvii, p. 92; *Report to the Poor Law Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, 1843, pp. 220-6.

² For the background, see S. & B. Webb, *History of Local Government in England*, London, 1928, vol. 8, pp. 419 ff. and Robert Pashley, *Pauperism and the Poor Laws*, London, 1852, pp. 274-87, 329 ff. Also, the evidence to the H. of Com. in *S.C. on Settlement and Removal*, 1847, BPP 1847, vol. xi; [Sir Edmund W. Head] 'On Settlement and Poor Removal', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 87, 1848, pp. 451 ff; *R.C. Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, 1867, BPP 1867-8, vol. xvii, and BPP 1868-9, vol. xiii, *passim*.

Discourse on the Poor was not published until 1753, had described conditions which were clearly recognizable: "It is another very great destruction of People, as well as an Impediment to the Recruit of them, that Gentlemen of late years, have taken up an Humour of Destroying their Tenements and Cottages, whereby they make it impossible that Mankind should inhabit upon their Estates. This is done sometimes barefaced, because they harbour the Poor that are a charge to the Parish."¹

In much the same vein, Arthur Young, on various occasions, referred to the malign influence of the settlement laws upon cottage dwellers, as for instance when they provided "a strong and effective motive for many people to do everything in their power against population, by raising an open war against cottages." No one who touched upon the subject underrated the significance of the Acts of Settlement in the establishment and maintenance of 'close' townships. Richard Burn described one of the functions of the parish overseers, "to pull down cottages; to drive out as many inhabitants and admit as few, as possibly they can; that is to depopulate the parish in order to lessen the poor-rate."²

As the quotation from Roger North implies, the Settlement Acts early stimulated landlords to hinder cottagers' settlements as far as possible, but the early history of the 'close' parish can in fact be traced right back to the beginnings of poor law administration in England. Until 1775 the Elizabethan Act which prescribed a minimum of four acres to each cottage, was still in the statute-book. Down to the 1740's at least, Quarter Sessions were prepared to order the destruction of unwanted cottages. Applications for 'judicial' demolition were quite common in the seventeenth century, and as far as one can judge, resort to law was mostly used by large, populous parishes so that, to some extent, Quarter Sessions could be used as a check upon the proliferation of dilapidated eyesores where no other redress was available. After the 1740's, the judicial function languished and thereafter the big parishes were encumbered with the cottages which proprietors chose to erect until they actually fell down.³

¹ Roger North, *A Discourse on the Poor*, London, 1753, p. 51, probably written before 1690.

² A. Young, *Political Arithmetic*, London, 1774, pp. 93-4, 102, where the effect upon sexual morality of the shortage of cottages is clearly drawn; *idem.*, *Farmer's Letters to the People of England*, 1768, pp. 288-9; R. Burn, *A History of the Poor Laws*, London, 1764, p. 211. Cf. also Sir F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor*, I, p. 361; D. Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry*, Bath, 1795, p. 56; W. Marshall, *Rural Economy of the Midland Counties*, London, 1790, pp. 11, 210. In addition, see the neglected work of George Coode, *Report to the Poor Law Commissioners on the Laws of Settlement and Removal*, BPP 1851, xxvi, pp. 171 ff.

³ 31 Eliz., c. 7, repealed 15 Geo. III, c. 32. Cottages could be built on the waste without four acres—43 Eliz., c. 2; J. Dalton, *The Country Justice*, 1635, p. 76; E. Hampson, *The Treatment of Poverty in Cambs., 1597-1834*, Cambridge, 1934, pp. 66, 127-8; E. G. Dowdell, *A Hundred Years of Quarter Sessions: Middlesex, 1660-1760*, Cambridge, 1932, pp. 81-2; D. Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1926, pp. 107-8; H. Copnall, *Notts. County Records of the Seventeenth Century*, Nottingham, 1915, pp. 125 ff; S. A. Peyton, ed., *Minutes of Proceedings in Quarter Sessions: Kesteven, Lincs.*, Lincoln Record Soc., 25, 1931, introduction, pp. c-cii.

In what were to be called 'close' parishes, legal resort was never necessary since the will of the landlord sufficed. As early as 1711, at South Ormsby, Lincs., the up-to-date landowner, Burrell Massingberd, decided in future not to have more cottages on his estate than he and his tenant farmers required for their necessary labourers.¹ To all intents and purposes, the Elizabethan Act, although a useful judicial tool, was a dead letter by the seventeenth century. Landless cottages were already a feature of many estate rentals and surveys by the latter part of the century, not merely because squatters were being brought into the orbit of estate management, but because former cottage smallholdings were being steadily deprived of their land. By 1750-70, the "pauperization" of the agricultural labourer in many parishes of upland Lincolnshire was virtually complete. It was a process independent of the enclosure movement, which if it had adverse effects on the cottage-labourer, merely completed or continued a protracted development.²

Another leading influence upon the establishment of 'close' parishes was early depopulation. Many of the worst examples of 'close' parishes in the mid-nineteenth century were villages which had shrunk or been deserted, for various reasons, between the fourteenth and the early eighteenth centuries. The areas in which deserted villages were numerous, in the north-east Midlands, west Norfolk, and the East Riding, were the main centres of the system by 1850. Enclosure for pasture, the consolidation of holdings under substantial farmers by absentee landlords, and all other factors which influenced local depopulation, contributed in the long-term to the formation of restricted parishes. Consolidation of holdings, which was a movement independent of enclosure, particularly Parliamentary enclosure, most active in the period 1650-1750, was the driving force behind the deprivation of cottage smallholdings just mentioned. Moreover, in areas where pasture farming was of increasing importance, or where, as in the Wolds of Lincolnshire and the East Riding, small, remote, and poor upland townships abounded, the grazier-tenant or warrener-cum-flockmaster often came to hold an overriding influence over his depopulated community in lieu of a landlord. The landlord was usually too remote to care for much except the prompt payment of rent, which was generally too small per acre for him to take an active interest in repairs and dilapidation.³

Deliberate clearances certainly took place after 1750. Evidence from the Census period is quite explicit for many parishes, especially in the Midlands

¹ Lincs. Archives Office, MM IV/I/I.

² See, in part, B. A. Holderness, 'Rural Society in S.E. Lindsey, Lincs., 1660-1840', Nottingham University Ph.D. Thesis, 1968.

³ Holderness, *op. cit.*, ch. vi, *passim*; G. E. Mingay, 'The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xiv, 1961, pt iv; A. Harris, *The Rural Landscape of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, London, 1961, *passim*.

between the Cotswolds and the Humber. From 1821 to 1861, demolition of cottages was, together with emigration, the most frequent explanation of dwindling village populations. The information is probably not comprehensive, but there are enough specific notes on the subject in the Censuses to corroborate the evidence from other reports of the wide distribution and the local severity of the problem. In parts of Lincolnshire, a large-scale clearance occurred between 1811 and 1821.¹ According to John Parkinson, writing in 1816, this was partly a reaction against the county's famous cottage system, which had been "created" in the upland parishes from the 1770's onwards to offset the previous tendency to undermine the labourers' modicum of independence as cottage-holders. The local magistracy, dominated by well-meaning clergymen, had been too free in granting settlements to all who claimed a cottage holding, and so alienated landlords and ratepaying farmers from the system in the depression after the war years. The result was that cottages were destroyed and numbers of poor labourers driven into towns like Louth or Horncastle or large villages like Tetford.² It perhaps explains a sudden lack of interest in cow-holdings by landlords at the time, and the gradual substitution of the more innocuous allotment system, which in itself conferred no rights of settlement. However, the worst phase was yet to come. In 1846, Parliament passed an Act, intended to help the poor, by conferring irremovability upon families who had continuously inhabited a parish for five years. Thus, the Poor Removal Act (9 & 10 Vict., c. 66) greatly increased the burden of the 'open' parishes, since they found themselves responsible for many labouring families hitherto domiciled but not settled within their bounds. The 'close' parishes, which still maintained some poor, had done so before 1846 by out-relief in other villages as a general rule. Under the new law, they naturally lost this obligation, and according to several reports, there were landlords who went so far after 1846 as to force out any remaining poor likely to become chargeable to them. No statistics of demolitions exist for the period after 1846, but it is unlikely that much new clearance was necessary, except as a process of tidying up. Nevertheless, several of the reports to the 1850 inquiry stressed the ill effects of the Act.³ A Beckett was convinced that proprietors were even more strongly opposed to building cottages after 1846 than before, and one Norfolk landlord admitted that he had bought land in adjacent parishes to house his own labourers. In Hampshire, where the distribution of labour was tolerably good, the Act caused some demolitions in Alresford Union, and

¹ *Census Enumeration Abstracts, 1801-51*, vol. II, p. 49, note b.

² Board of Agriculture, *Report on the Agricultural State of the Kingdom, Jan./March, 1816*, pp. 157-8. Landlords' motives in establishing cottage cow-holdings may be inferred from Lord Brownlow, *ibid.* pp. 16-17, whose father claimed to have started the system, and the Earl of Winchelsea (in Rutland) in *Annals of Agriculture*, xxxiii, pp. 535 ff. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. xxxvii, p. 514.

³ Pashley, *loc. cit.*; BPP 1850, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 246, 257, 348.

much the same appears to have been true of parts of Somerset and Dorset.¹ The Act of 1846 was the culminating touch of selfishness, and there is evidence that forces opposed to the system were already massing. Farmers, hitherto bound to their landlords or other ratepayers by the greater fear of inflating the poor rates, increasingly joined in the debate on the other side after the 1840's. Agriculturalists like Caird and some of the essayists of the Royal Agricultural Society in the 1840's and 1850's, as distinct from committed investigators of Utilitarian or Evangelical persuasion, and a handful of landed proprietors, like J. E. Denison of Ossington, Notts., or Sir James Graham of Netherby, Cumb., who did not always practise what they preached, also had some effect. By 1867-9, farmers were leading the local clamour for a better distribution of labour. Even in the Southern Counties in the 1860s, the dread of surplus population shifted to an apprehension that farm labour, if still underemployed, was at times becoming positively scarce. Docking Union in Norfolk anticipated the national system of union chargeability by some years, though not with an unqualified success. From as early as 1841, Robert Weale reckoned that significantly more cottages had been built than pulled down in Bedfordshire, although, with the Woburn estate so dominant in the county, his evidence, even if true, was probably untypical.²

Comparatively little modern research has been undertaken on the subject, and one of the more difficult problems is still that of definition.³ Nineteenth-century investigators had no difficulty in deciding whether a parish was 'open' or 'close' but few made the attempt to define their terms of reference. Even in official reports the majority of writers relied upon their own eyewitness or upon the common knowledge of the district examined. To those who did analyse the distinction, the 'close' parish was simply one in which ownership of land and house accommodation was in the hands of one, or at the most, three proprietors who shared similar interests. The owners had the power, whether or not they possessed the inclination, to exclude potentially chargeable families from settlement. By contrast, 'open' parishes were those in which no such limitations upon settlement could be applied, because ownership was diffuse, the proprietors of lands and cottages serving rather different interests. Cottage owners were often petty tradesmen or speculative builders who pro-

¹ BPP 1850, xxvii, p. 257. Another landowner in Norfolk bought up cottages at Hockham as they came on the market to prevent them from falling to speculators, and lowered their rents.—J. Revans, *ibid.*, pp. 334, 346-8.

² Caird, *loc. cit.*; J. A. Clarke, 'On the Farming of Lincolnshire', *J.R.A.S.E.*, 1851, p. 155; H. Tanner, 'On the Farming of Devon', *J.R.A.S.E.*, 1848, p. 68; Pashley, chaps. xiii, xiv; BPP 1850, xxvii, p. 384; BPP 1867-8, xvii, p. 189. A list of the prize essayists is given in Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past & Present*, 6th edn, 1961, by O. R. MacGregor.

³ A notable exception is D. R. Mills, 'The Poor Laws and the Distribution of Population', *Trans. Institute of British Geographers*, 26, 1959, pp. 193-4, which deals in detail with Kesteven, Lincs., but cites a number of other geographers' theses touching upon the problem.

fited greatly from the heavy demand for accommodation in their parishes.¹

The ownership of a parish is obviously significant in relation to the power to create 'close' communities, but the writers who used it as a yardstick were compelled to include villages as 'close'—because they were owned by few proprietors—in which the supply of resident wage-labourers was adequate, or even surplus to the needs of the place. Robert Weale, for instance, who defined the problem in terms like those used above, found, when he came to analyse the situation in Bedfordshire, that the correlation between what he called 'close' parishes and those with an inadequate supply of labourers' cottages was not particularly close—there were forty parishes in the county deficient in cottages, but only twenty-five 'close' parishes, of which, moreover only twelve drew labour from outside.² In retrospect, a meaningful definition of a 'close' parish must be a place so restricted in the settlement of wage-dependent families that the supply of labour was insufficient for the cultivation of its area. An 'open' parish was one in which labour was surplus to need, and which provided additional manpower for the neighbourhood. In the nineteenth century, all parishes tended to be described as one or the other, which in the context of the distribution of population, is misleading. Outside some exceptional regions of England, where the maldistribution was severe, the parish which housed its own labourers was almost certainly the commonest type of community. Parishes with a balance of this kind were not necessarily more salubrious or endowed with better cottages than the overpopulated places, since the quality of cottage accommodation in particular places, although related to the present problem, was not conditioned by it. Some of the worst rural housing was to be found in north Northumberland where no juxtaposition of 'open' and 'close' parishes existed.³ Dr Hunter, in one of the best known of the medical reports to the Privy Council in 1865, intimated that the show villages attached to many mid-nineteenth-century estates depended for their success upon the 'open' villages into which the less trustworthy or less regularly employed estate labourers could be compelled to reside out of sight and out of mind.⁴ There are some grounds for believing that the contemporary obsession with the picturesque, which brought about the removal and re-erection of many villages like Milton Abbas in Dorset, had some influence upon the creation of 'close' parishes, but as a general rule 'model' villages were not the most offending examples of the system. Landlords who planned settlements like Holkham, Blankney, Lockinge, Sledmere, and Stanton Harcourt were obviously concerned not to permit the infiltration of unnecessary paupers, but

¹ BPP 1850, xxvii, pp. 238, 382, 403.

² Robert Weale, 'Report on Bedfordshire', BPP 1850, xxvii, pp. 380 ff.

³ E.g. see Caird, *op. cit.*, p. 389; G. E. Fussell, *The English Rural Labourer*, London, 1949, pp. 50 ff.; J. H. Clapham, *Economic History of Modern Britain*, London, 1928, I, pp. 27 ff.

⁴ Dr Hunter, *op. cit.*, App. 6, p. 135.

were otherwise determined to have enough labourers for the purposes of the estate and nearby farms, upon which their reputations as agricultural improvers rested. According to the Census data, the majority of such model or show villages, indeed, were quite populous in relation to their particular localities.

Although the creation of 'close' parishes was seldom achieved in a single stride, many depended for labour ultimately upon the existence of already substantial centres of population. The most important 'open' parishes were often small market towns, and many examples are given in the reports of 1850 and 1867-9. Castleacre in Norfolk, for instance, was reputedly where the Gang System originated; Caird noted of Thetford, and Edward Stanhope of Caistor in Lincs., that many labourers had to walk six to ten miles each day to and from work. Around Louth, according to the 1821 census, many parishes had been reduced by the demolition of cottages and their inhabitants driven to the town. At Coggeshall, the same thing happened: "numbers of men go out from here every morning to work in all the surrounding parishes, come home at eventide, and in the event of illness or accident fall upon us. It is notorious that many cottages have been pulled down so as to drive the labourers into the town."¹ The proximity of a small town was therefore a strong temptation. To some extent living in a small town or large nucleated village offered advantages also to labourers. The number and variety of shopkeepers were greater than in small village communities and there was less opportunity for the establishment of retail trading monopolies over the labouring poor.² In the century after 1750, a large proportion of the places, otherwise castigated as 'open' parishes, developed into focal centres for a dependent agricultural hinterland, and the range of services offered even by small towns in the nineteenth-century directories is surprising. Village tradesmen readily became property speculators, who exploited the demand for accommodation, but the existence of a *petite bourgeoisie* of shopkeepers and artisans itself often ensured some additional employment and some provision of charities for relief of the poor, who in some cases had been drawn into parishes of this kind by the survival of unenclosed commons.

Throughout the period there was a remarkable consensus of opinion about the basic causes and the evil consequences of the system of 'open' and 'close' parishes, and despite the large body of discussion on the subject, so many of

¹ *Report on Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, 1843, pp. 220 ff., 279 ff.; Caird, *op. cit.*, p. 161; BPP 1867, xvii, p. 142; *Census Enumeration Abstracts, 1801-51*, pp. 11, 49; BPP 1850, xxvii, p. 278. Similar sentiments were expressed about Norwich, (1850, p. 261) Stowmarket, (p. 247), Woodbridge (p. 253), Colchester (p. 275) Thetford (pp. 257-8), Alton, (p. 331), Basingstoke (p. 337), Newark (p. 373), etc.

² On the subject of village shopkeepers, see the adverse comments in the 1843 Report, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-2.

the same themes and arguments were repeated that a small number of quotations suffices to illustrate the common point of view. It is more difficult to discover the number of 'close' villages, either nationally or in particular localities. In the best manner of Victorian social investigation there are statistical appendages to various reports in 1850 and 1867-9. From three reports, all dealing with Southern England in 1850, evidence from 586 parishes indicates only about one-third (32 per cent) to be short of a resident labour supply. Some of the Rev. James Fraser's data in 1867 agree with this average—in four Unions of Norfolk 33 per cent, and in Westhampnett Union, Sussex, 37 per cent—but from Fraser's and other reports, the proportion elsewhere appears often to have been less, and seldom much greater.¹

Taken together, the various reports give a general picture of the distribution of 'close' villages, if not their number. There was no problem in regions where upland grass farms and family holdings predominated—in Cornwall, Wales, and much of northern England. In Northumberland and Durham, the pattern of settlement, the specially equipped large 'farmeries', cottage boarding, and the 'bondager' system gave immunity even on the good agricultural lands. In Yorkshire the problem was largely confined to the East Riding, but the want of cottages, owing in part to the poor laws, was noted elsewhere in the county in the 1790's.² Around the Welsh border there were only pockets of badly distributed population, especially in the arable parts of Shropshire and Worcs. The problem was most severe in the light soil uplands of the East Riding, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, east Leicestershire, north-west Norfolk, and the Cotswolds, but it also occurred with different intensity on the clays and alluvial soils in which mixed or arable farming was practised in the early nineteenth century, particularly in the Midland Plain. Some areas of southern and eastern England were much less seriously affected. The old forest districts of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Essex, and Herts., were largely exempt. Suffolk, too, was much less influenced by the system than Norfolk, although this does not appear in the 1850 Report.³ To be precise, the territory south of Norwich—Wymondham—Thetford, nearly the whole of Suffolk, and the main arable area of Essex between the forest and the marshes, contained a much smaller proportion of 'close' parishes than northern East Anglia—for instance, in three unions in Norfolk north of the line, 40 per cent of parishes were 'close' against 17 per cent in two unions, Depwade, Norfolk, and Halstead, Essex, in this zone. That this outline of the distribution of 'open' and 'close' parishes is reasonably accurate may be verified from parochial population statistics in the censuses.

¹ BPP 1867, xvii, esp. James Fraser's *Minutes of Evidence*.

² R. Brown, *Gen. View of the Agriculture of the West Riding*, 1799, p. 13; H. E. Strickland, *Gen. View of the Agriculture of the East Riding*, 1813, p. 42.

³ E.g. in Thingoe Union, many villages were said to be depopulated because of the proximity of Bury, according to à Beckett.—BPP 1850, xxvii, p. 242; this is scarcely borne out by the Censuses.

TABLE I

REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF 'CLOSE' PARISHES IN ENGLAND IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

Region	ALL TOWNSHIPS			'CLOSE' TOWNSHIPS			G Acres per house*
	A No. of town- ships	B Av. no. acres per house	C Av. pop. growth, 1801-41	D No. of town- ships	E % all town- ships	F Av. pop. growth, 1801-41	
Essex, Herts., Cambs.	82	16.3	45.7	5	6.1	2.4	40 (5)
Dorset, Som., W. Wilts.	165	16.7	34.7	38	23.0	10.6	40 (29)
Huntingdonshire	98	21.0	54.4	22	22.5	22.4	45 (22)
W. Leics., E. Warks.	145	17.4	39.7	32	22.1	9.6	40 (30)
N.E. Kent	93	20.5	55.9	14	15.5	22.5	45 (18)
Lindsey Marshes	102	28.9	63.7	24	23.6	31.9	60 (17)
Vale of Severn	87	16.3	53.5	9	10.3	15.6	40 (7)
Cotswolds (Glos.)	199	15.1	37.7	56	28.1	22.8	40 (55)
E. Leics., Rutl., West Kesteven	201	28.7	30.2	78	39.8	16.8	60 (47)
West Norfolk	165	25.4	47.0	55	33.3	22.3	55 (48)
East Riding Wolds	157	38.4	61.2	68	43.3	32.0	70 (51)

* Column G gives the number of acres per house used as the demarcation line between 'close' parishes and others, and (in parentheses) the number of places in each region beyond that line. The difference between the numbers in column G and column D was supplied from information other than Census data, for which see text, p. 134.

The accompanying table represents the author's own attempt to calculate the distribution of 'close' villages in selected districts of England. It is based upon analysis of several converging lines of inquiry, the density of population in each village of the chosen district, the relative increase in the number of houses and the growth of population, the evidence of social structure revealed in contemporary directories, and, finally, the rate of expenditure on the poor in two periods, 1785-7 and 1825-9. Used in conjunction, the censuses, local directories, and the poor-rate returns give a reasonably accurate picture of the distribution of 'open' and 'close' parishes.

The proportion of 'close' parishes revealed in TABLE I is rather low. The figures refer to parishes acutely affected by a shortage of labourers and cottages. There were certainly also places which imported part of their daily labour supply, which are difficult to isolate since they tended to share the characteristics of parishes where no restrictions upon settlement were applied. In dealing with the serious maldistribution of the rural labour force, however, such indeterminate parishes were not really very important except where they aggravated conditions in districts in which "decidedly 'close'"¹ parishes abounded. To generalize, one may describe conditions as follows: in the worst affected areas of the north Midlands and the East Riding—the limestone and chalk uplands—the proportion of 'close' parishes was about 40 per cent of the total; elsewhere, in the lower-lying areas and on the Midland Plain, the south-west and the Cotswolds, the average was nearer one-quarter; and there remained many areas even in southern England where the percentage was 15 per cent or much less. A national average is difficult to discover, but from a rapid, and possibly inaccurate, analysis of nearly 14,000 rating townships south of the Tees and Ribble the proportion of 'close' parishes comes out at about 20 per cent.

The social consequences of the system of 'open' and 'close' parishes were numerous and nearly always unpleasant. The heavy emphasis upon labour in the farming of the period—at least in the corn counties—resulted in the development of itinerant labour gangs to eke out a deficient supply of general labour.² The evolution of the Gang System was closely related to the distribution of 'close' villages. It began in an area of west Norfolk where several large open parishes, Swaffham, Castleacre, Litcham, Gayton, Gt Massingham, Middleton, etc., existed side by side with numerous 'close' villages. By the 1850's nearly all these large parishes had at least one public gang. From Norfolk, the Gang System generally spread into similar areas, and in the uplands of Lincolnshire and the East Riding conditions were right for its growth. Edward Stanhope, speaking of the very numerous small villages of the Wolds, declared that "the bad distribution of cottages in this district, as in most other parts of Lincolnshire, arises, not from the destruction of cottages by the large owners to save the rates, but from its being in many respects a new country." Stanhope oversimplified the situation in the county, but his point about Lincolnshire (and the East Riding) being largely a new country is valid, in view of the late development of agriculture in the uplands by contrast with

¹ Francis Howell's phrase in 'Report on Nottinghamshire', BPP 1850, xvii, p. 373.

² The evidence for the Gang System is drawn mainly from the *6th Report of the Children's Employment Commission*, 1862, BPP 1867, vol. xvi, pp. 67 ff., and the *Poor Law Commission Report on Employment in 1843*, *op. cit.*; Edward Stanhope, BPP 1867-8, xvii, p. 133. See also the suggestive article by E. J. T. Collins, 'Harvest Technology and Labour Supply in Britain, 1790-1870'. *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxii, 1969.

Norfolk or Northumberland. Except in the Fens, where the enormous size of the (undivided) parishes created labour problems, the Gang System was entrenched chiefly in regions of 'close' parishes by 1866. Despite the sparseness of population it did not properly exist in Northumberland, and was very much less prevalent in those areas of southern and eastern England in which the problem of 'close' parishes was of minor importance.

Another consequence of the system of 'open' and 'close' parishes was the extra expense and the fatigue caused by the labourers' need to travel to work. Farmers complained of workers' inefficiency, and the labourers found themselves in the unenviable position of paying rents for unsavoury 'open' village accommodation, which were high by any standard, while at the same time having to bear the cost of wear and tear of clothing in walking up to six miles to work. Some overcame the problem of walking by obtaining donkeys. Caird noted it as not uncommon in Lincoln and Norfolk and it was not unknown elsewhere.¹ Donkeys had to be housed and fed and diverted a considerable proportion of the labourers' resources to their upkeep, especially since in 'open' villages the labourers' occupation of more than an exiguous garden plot was scarcely ever possible. The farmers again were prone to complain. The donkeys filled their yards during the day, and in some instances were fed at the farmer's expense. Moreover, they were regarded as an inducement to labourers to steal fodder.

By no means all employers condemned the system which demanded the labourers' travelling to and from work. The majority certainly agreed with à Becket that they suffered "very considerably by the deterioration in the value of a labourer who has to walk some distance to work,"² but in some places at any rate farmers actively preferred non-resident labour. A Beckett himself reckoned that labourers employed outside their parish of settlement were harder working and more trustworthy than those employed at home.³ The inference is that the uncertainty of employment disciplined 'travelling' labourers to hard work, notwithstanding the fatigue induced by their twice-daily walk, and some reporters met complaints of the laziness of labourers settled in parishes where there was no competition for houses and little for available employment. John Revans who thought it was customary to prefer settled labourers stated that some settled labourers complained if unsettled men were given jobs when settled families were under- or unemployed. Moreover, it was generally true that village cottages were reserved by landowners for the "choicest labourers . . . remarkable for strength and skill and character."⁴ In an area of nucleated villages and scattered farmsteads, the Isle of Ely, it was reported that outlying farmers usually had to settle for the worst

¹ Caird, *op. cit.*, p. 197; BPP *Report*, 1850, *loc. cit.*, p. 273.

² BPP *Report*, 1850, p. 238.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 331, 334.

labourers since good men had no need to travel any distance for employment.¹ Employers no doubt professed to believe in the disciplinary virtues of poverty, but by the 1860's at any rate were more intimately concerned with securing adequate regular manpower. Even as early as 1846, it was reported that many farmers already took on more men from their own villages than they actually required to keep poor rates as low as possible, although this seems generally to have concerned villages outside the districts in which 'close' parishes were numerous.² The most trustworthy evidence indicates that 'close' parishes tended to reduce the efficiency of agricultural labourers.

The consequences for the poor rates of the various types of parish can only briefly be discussed. Since the *raison d'être* of 'close' parishes was the saving on poor rates, the result should have been a much slower rate of increase of expenditure on the poor in the period than in parishes without restrictions upon cottage accommodation. This at least was the common assumption of contemporaries. It was claimed of some 'close' parishes, indeed, that by 1850 they had abolished their poor rates. Analysis of official statistics demonstrates no such development between 1785-7 and 1825-9.³ The trend of the increases in poor rates bears no close relationship to the system of 'open' and 'close' parishes. In 1,510 townships in various parts of the country, expenditure upon poor relief between 1785-7 and 1825-9 positively declined only in sixteen, and in about a dozen more the rate of increase was negligible. In addition, there were about ten places described as having no poor, all of which were anciently decayed settlements like Leweston in Dorset, Quarles in Norfolk, and Sock Dennis in Somerset. Moreover, the average rate of increase in all the parishes which were 'close' was no less than the overall average for England, and in some cases the increase was startling, for instance at Brooksby in Leicestershire from nothing in 1785-7 to £65 in 1828 (average, 1825-9, £27); at Barmer in Norfolk from nothing to an average of £107 p.a. 1825-9; and at Duggleby in the East Riding, from £3 7s to £122, all of which were 'close' parishes.

There are grounds to assume that the establishment of 'close' parishes was of limited success in its primary objective. The position probably improved for the owners of 'close' parishes after the 1820's, but presumably not to the extent of reversing all the trends at work until that decade. One cannot ignore contemporary opinions and beliefs, but the real contrast, and the distinction obviously in the minds of landowners and other ratepayers, was between the large 'open' parishes or small towns, in which the increase of poor rates was often cripplingly large in the period, and other rural villages, whether closely

¹ E. B. Portman, in BPP 1867, xvii, p. 163.

² *H. of Lords S.C. on Burdens affecting Real Property*, 1846, p. v.; see also Caird, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 84, 148.

³ Poor rates, 1785-7, in House of Commons *Reports*, vol. 9, pp. 553 ff. (Reprinted, 1803); Poor rates, 1825-9, in BPP 1830-1, vol. xi, pp. 227 ff.

restricted or not. It was in these 'open' parishes that the evil consequences were most marked. As one would expect of nineteenth-century debates, the issue eventually dissolved into a moral question: "We complain of the ante-nuptial unchastity of our women, of the loose talk and conduct of the girls who work in the fields, of the light way in which maidens part with their honour, and how seldom either a parent's or a brother's blood boils with shame—*here*, in cottage herding, is the sufficient account and history of it all."¹

¹ Jas. Fraser in BPP 1867, xvii, p. 93.

Notes on Contributors

Ian Blanchard is lecturer in economic history at the University of Edinburgh. He completed a Ph.D. in 1967 on the regional development of the south Pennines in the later middle ages, and is at present engaged in research on the European lead and silver industries, 1190–1570.

Stuart Elliott is Senior Lecturer in History at Doncaster College of Education and a Course Tutor in Humanities at the Open University. His work on Stamford was undertaken whilst he was an Assistant Lecturer at Peterborough Technical College. He has just completed a paper on water-powered industrial sites in north-east Cheshire.

P. D. A. Harvey is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Southampton, working mostly in English medieval social and economic history. He was formerly Assistant Archivist, Warwick County Record Office (1954–7), and Assistant Keeper, Department of Manuscripts, British Museum (1957–66). Publications include: (with Prof. H. Thorpe) *Printed*

maps of Warwickshire 1576–1900, 1959; *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham 1240–1400*, 1965.

J. A. Hellen is Lecturer in Geography at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. His main research interests are divided between colonialism and colonization in Africa and the regional geography of west Germany. He is author of *Rural Economic Development in Zambia, 1890–1964*, and is currently working on a book on North Rhine-Westphalia.

B. A. Holderness is Lecturer in Economic History at the University of Sheffield, and is about to take up an appointment in the University of East Anglia. He is engaged in research on the rural labourer in northern England, 1700–1900, and on the credit structure of English rural society before 1800.

E. L. Jones is Professor of Economics at Northwestern University, U.S.A. He is working on the early industrialization of Europe and aspects of the history of biology.