

“Leviathan of Wealth”: West Midland Agriculture, 1800–50

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FOR the half-century to 1813 British agriculture had grown accustomed to a market horizon of rising prices and profits. A fifty-year upward trend was followed by a steep descent of food prices. This reversal required a marked readjustment in the industry. Capitalization plans had to be reconsidered, expectations scaled downwards, and the farming community had to face two decades of economic uncertainty. Rising productivity, low food prices in Europe, changing consumption patterns, and resource-utilization problems were elements of the radically transformed post-war environment.

The intensity of these problems, and the responses made by the farmers, varied geographically.¹ In general terms, the counties of the west Midlands were relatively well placed. The proximity of rapidly growing urban markets helped. So, too, did the mixed character of local agriculture—commitment to wheat, while considerable, was less pronounced than in other regions. Industry offered alternative employment opportunities. Nevertheless, adjustment was required of agriculture. Its direction depended on many circumstances, some of which were particular to individual landlords. For the most part, in the west Midlands the response seems to have been progressive. Unfavourable price conditions stimulated improved agricultural practice and the rational balancing of crops. There is little evidence of disinvestment in the post-war phase. At the same time it must be said that levels of agricultural investment were not maintained at wartime levels.

Very few landowners in the early nineteenth century were able to match the Leveson-Gowers in their single-minded pursuit of “Improvement.” In 1803 a combination of circumstances persuaded this family to seek the most radical and recommended policies for the transformation of their lands in the west Midlands. They followed an explicit plan to revolutionize their estate along the lines of best practice in progressive agriculture. These improvements involved the entire framework of rural economy: a renovation of the system of estate management, large drainage schemes, enclosures, road construction, new rotation schemes, a reversal of tenurial arrangements, the rebuilding of farms and offices, new tenants and a more systematic rental policy, the introduction of new methods and implements, as well as a general recasting of landlord–tenant relations. The plan, its vicissitudes, and its consequences for rural society in Salop and Staffordshire form the subject-matter of this paper. In part it exemplifies some of the frustrations of improving landlordism in that time of readjustment that followed in the wake of the Napoleonic wars.

¹ See G. E. Fussell and M. Compton, ‘Agricultural Adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars’, *Economic History*, III, no. 14, 1939; J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, I, Cambridge, 1926, ch. XI.

I

"Leviathan of Wealth," "the richest man in England" were epithets which described George Granville Leveson-Gower (1785-1833), second Marquis of Stafford, and (in the year of his death) first Duke of Sutherland.¹ The extraordinary financial resources of the family reduced, but did not remove entirely, the usual constraints on landlord expenditures. It affected significantly the "criteria of investment" on the Leveson-Gower estates.

Their acres in the west Midlands formed the original territorial foundations of the family, dating from a marriage alliance in the seventeenth century. Upon this was built a much greater concentration of wealth which was inherited by Lord Stafford in 1803. It derived principally from his uncle, the Duke of Bridgewater. By 1833 Stafford had received an aggregate free income of £2,084,373 from this source alone. It was an inheritance with strings attached—the Bridgewater will specified that, on Stafford's death, the income should descend to his *second* son.

Even without this condition Stafford would have been required to consider the deployment of his capital very carefully. Some of his fortune went into canals, but more was invested in railways. Yet more was channelled to the Highlands of Scotland, where Stafford's wife owned most of the county of Sutherland. Stafford and his successor, the second Duke of Sutherland, poured prodigious sums into their northern empire—probably more than £2 million by 1861. Concurrently, the great houses of that family absorbed a growing proportion of the income: "Leviathan of Wealth" maintained Stafford House, Cliveden, Dunrobin Castle, Trentham Hall, and Lilleshall Hall. Conspicuous consumption competed with railway, canal, and landed investment for calls on the family purse. But it was not a bottomless capacity. The wealth of the Bridgewater Canal, with complete certainty, would be cut off on the death of Lord Stafford.

The English estates of the Leveson-Gowers were in a special position. The family came to believe that land was the most secure of all investments. Trentham Hall was a great centre of their social life and their oldest possession. A strategy was devised to raise the profitability of the west midland estates by way of improvement. It was a design for the long run. During the lifetime of Lord Stafford large investments could be made: the benefits would accrue to future generations. The intention was to maximize returns for future decades, and the family was prepared to forgo immediate benefits. This notion complemented the family's conception of aristocratic trusteeship, and the fulfilment of paternalistic duties in rural society.

There were three estates in England: Lilleshall in Shropshire (about 17,300 acres), Trentham in Staffordshire (about 12,500 acres), and, much less important, Stittenham in Yorkshire (about 1,850 acres). Together they amounted to less than 40,000 acres, only 4 per cent of the total territorial empire of the family. Yet the English

¹ See Eric Richards, *The Leviathan of Wealth, The Sutherland Fortune in the Industrial Revolution*, 1972, which considers the Scottish and transport investments of the family fortune. I have dealt with the industrial aspect of the west midland estates in a separate paper, 'The Industrial Face of a Great Estate: Trentham and Lilleshall, 1780-1860', to be published in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxvii, Aug. 1974.

estates yielded more gross rental income than the entire 1½ million acres it held in Scotland. Even without the alliances with the Sutherland and Bridgewater fortunes, the Leveson-Gowers would have remained comfortably within the class of "great landed magnates," as defined by F. M. L. Thompson.¹

II

Of all the Scottish agents employed by the great landed proprietors of England the most influential was probably James Loch (1780-1855). He was certainly "one of those Scottish agricultural experts of whom Cobbett could never speak without explosion."² As "Commissioner" to Lord Stafford, a great deal of the direction of the Leveson-Gower fortune was vested in his hands. He became the line of continuity between the generations as well as the multifarious interests of the family. He was regarded as the most able professional manager of his day. Although he expended most of his efforts in the service of Lord Stafford, he was simultaneously engaged in the management of the estates of Count Flahaut, Earl of Dudley, Lord Carlisle, and Lord Egerton. He was an M.P. and a member of several committees, including that which examined the state of agriculture in 1836. All this was additional to his task of supervising the great Highland policies in Sutherland, and his involvement in the complex negotiations between the railways and canals in the 1820's and 1830's. In terms of these professional commitments, Loch over-extended himself to the detriment of some of his duties. Lilleshall and Trentham were a small part of his responsibilities.

On the succession of the second Duke of Sutherland in 1833, Loch drew up a statement of the financial standing of the English estates. It was part of a general survey of the family finances.³ His estimates for the coming year were based on the most optimistic predictions, but they do serve to indicate the magnitudes involved in estates finances.

	Gross rental	Permanent expenditure	Net income	Allowance for improvement	Income
	£	£	£	£	£
Trentham	18,032	15,304	2,727	700	2,027
Newcastle	2,956	477	2,478	—	2,478
Wolverhampton	5,899	158	5,807	—	5,807
Lilleshall	25,899	8,440	17,459	2,000	15,459
	52,854	24,381	28,473	2,700	25,773
Stittenham	1,886	114	1,772	—	1,772
	54,740	24,495	30,245	2,700	27,545

¹ F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963, ch. 2.

² Clapham, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

³ Sutherland Collection, Stafford County Record Office (subsequently S. C.), D593, Rentals, General View, Nov. 1833.

All this was a statement of good and determined intentions, rather than an accurate picture of the actual profitability of the estates. In the previous twelve years, for instance, the gross rental figure was on average about £45,000. Annual expenditures had been considerably in excess of £40,000.¹ Hence Loch's "income" estimate, showing a decisive increase, was founded on the assumption (heroic and misplaced as it turned out) that the gross rental would expand while expenditures (especially on "improvement") would diminish. This development was considered inescapable. In 1833, the income of the Bridgewater Trust was diverted to the second Duke's brother, Lord Francis Egerton. The head of the family could not longer be termed "the richest noble in the kingdom."

The general trends of rental income are relatively clear.² The gross rental income of the Lilleshall estate rose rapidly during the Napoleonic wars: from £10,595 in 1797 to £14,162 in 1805, and £19,717 in 1810. This experience, of course, fits well the national trend of agricultural rents—the effect of which, in terms of income distribution, F. M. L. Thompson has described as "a sizeable unearned increment" accruing primarily to landowners and farmers.³ At Lilleshall it could not be said that the rent increases were in any way justified by improvement expenditures by the landlord, since these were minimal before 1803.⁴ Pressed forward by the recently appointed James Loch (he came in 1812), the rising trend reached its peak of £24,772 in 1817. From then until about 1840 rentals were comparatively depressed, and it was not until 1841 that rents again matched the figure for 1817. Agricultural rents were most depressed in 1824, 1829, and 1837. The industrial segment of the rental (mines rents and royalties) was more stable and buoyant, and in the 1820's and 1830's contributed about 20 per cent of total estate income. In effect, the total rental income during those decades was close to that level of income achieved in 1814. Lord Stafford was thus fortunate to maintain his rents at the highest wartime levels, and fared better than most other west midland proprietors.⁵ Rents were not at all catastrophically depressed, but they were decidedly less lucrative than had been anticipated during the absurdly optimistic years of war. Only after 1840 did estate income reach a higher plateau. The rental was, on average, 10·3 per cent higher in the 1840's than in the 1830's. The first four years of the 1850's were poor, but in 1856 the trend began to rise again—partly as a result of better farm rents, but also because of a new agreement with the main industrial enterprise, the Lilleshall Company. In the year of Loch's death the Lilleshall estate yielded a gross rental of £27,800, of which a little more than a third came from industrial sources.

¹ Calculated from S. C., D593, English Estate Rentals.

² Detailed figures are set out in Eric Richards, 'James Loch and the House of Sutherland, 1812-1855', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1967, App. III, and this evidence is discussed on pp. 152-3.

³ Thompson, *op cit.*, p. 215. On this definition one may say that a great deal of the Leveson-Gower wealth derived from "unearned income." The income of the Bridgewater Trust was partly consequent upon monopoly conditions.

⁴ See below, section III.

⁵ James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-1, 1851*, p. 231, quotes the case of the Hatherton estates where, as late as 1850, rents were still 40 per cent lower than those of 1813. Part of the explanation of the Leveson-Gower trends may be found in the relative slowness of the landlord in pushing up his rents during the war.

The figures for the Staffordshire estates are more anomalous and the trends are less explicit. In 1780 Trentham seems to have produced a rent of £5,061, and in 1800 £11,257 (with over 20 per cent coming from mining sources). Another series of rentals (derived from a different base) shows a rising trend through the war years—in 1806 £8,810, in 1814 £10,247, and in 1821 £13,387. The decadal averages are: 1820's £12,720, 1830's £13,520, 1840's £14,110, and 1850's £14,730. In the year 1855 the Trentham estate yielded £14,230, of which £3,051 came from industrial sources.

The Leveson-Gowers possessed two other, lesser, estates in Staffordshire. The Wolverhampton estate was thick with mining deposits and produced an income which was £2,123 in 1812 and £7,949 in 1840. Loch's first impression, in 1813, was that "its value in point of mines is not I believe to be calculated."¹ The smaller Newcastle-under-Lyme estate was on the fringe of the Potteries and gave rents mainly from housing. In the same area the family owned the Lane End Water Works which provided a water supply for Longton—it replaced the barrel-borne supply—and produced about £1,500 in the 1830's.² Finally the old family estate of Stittenham in Yorkshire yielded a rent of about £1,800—that is until 1833, when the income was made over to the Duchess of Sutherland—"in place of pin-money" as Loch put it.³

Any measure of the productivity of landlord capital depends upon the availability of expenditure figures.⁴ Those for the Leveson-Gower estates are very patchy and convey only an impression of the net financial returns. It is certain that expenditures on improvement were large from 1803 to 1823. James Loch claimed, not altogether implausibly, that the equivalent of all the rents for twenty years had been sunk into improvement.⁵ (Taken literally the claim would have entailed an expenditure in the region of £500,000.) Independent evidence indicates with certainty that between 1818 and 1823 aggregate expenditure was greater than income. At Lilleshall fragments of accounts suggest that in 1796 and in 1801 expenditure on improvements and repairs was negligible, while in 1818 over £10,000 was spent in this manner. After 1823 economies were instituted which reduced outlays to about £2,500 (i.e. on improvement, and not including the rebuilding of the family residence). Little net income was received before 1833, and even when a stringent retrenchment programme was instituted it proved extremely difficult to maintain income above total estate expenditure. The absence of "net income" was partly an accounting illusion because estate expenses included items which cannot be classed properly as "agricultural investments." Much estate income, for instance, was soaked up by the hugely expensive rebuilding of Lilleshall and Trentham Halls

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Stafford, 11 April 1813.

² J. C. Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Agriculture*, 1831, p. 1150.

³ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lewis, 7 Nov. 1833.

⁴ The verification of F. M. L. Thompson's argument that landlords overcapitalized agriculture in the middle decades of the century—and thereby subsidized food consumers—is also dependent on investment estimates, which are elusive.

⁵ James Loch, 'Memoir of George Granville, late Duke of Sutherland, K.G.', unpublished, 1834, copy in Stafford County Record Office.

during the 1820's and the early 1830's. Nevertheless, improvement expenditures rose in the 1830's—to levels close to £4,500 per annum at Lilleshall.

One point is clear. Despite the large and concentrated investments on the west midland estates during the lifetime of Lord Stafford, the estate income responded very sluggishly to the family's development policies. The high hopes of 1813, and even the scaled-down intentions of 1833, were unfulfilled in the outcome. It was more a reflection of general economic conditions than of the efficiency of the estate management. The landlord sought his return on capital in future rent increases and on the appreciated value of the estate. As two decades passed without sizeable rent increases, even the Leveson-Gowers, for all their long-run horizons, felt a rising frustration. Nevertheless, their levels of investment continued well above the expenditures of the late eighteenth century. The family settled for lower returns than had been expected, and lower than they might have gained in alternative enterprise. It was tacitly acknowledged that in land "the criteria of investment" were less stringent—it was a recognition that the returns were as much psychic as economic. Lord Stafford's outlays, wrote Loch in 1816, should be "laid out in a way to add to the permanent interest and consequence of his family."¹

III

Rents were the fulcrum of the agricultural economy and determined the relationship between the three elements of rural society—the landlord, tenants, and labourers. Rental policy in the post-war period was beset by problems—a landlord had to consider not only the yield on his investment but also the effects of the secular decline in prices, the "stickiness" of costs, the over-expansion of many sectors of the agricultural industry, the uncertainty over the government's tariff and fiscal policy, and the widespread problem of rural under-employment.

The appointment of James Loch in 1812 came at an inauspicious time: henceforth it would be very much more difficult to raise rents. It was also a time when the Leveson-Gower family wished to bring their finances into a more efficient order. Specifically it was considered that the English estates should be administered independently from Lord Stafford's other affairs, and that they should be self-supporting.² Land purchases in the west Midlands, election expenses, improvement outlays, as well as running expenses—all these were to be supported by the rental. Loch saw clearly that, as things stood, the burden was too great. Efforts were made to reduce expenses; leasehold tenants were called upon to perform their repairing covenants; for rent defaulters Loch thought that he might "be obliged to proceed against one of them before we convince them we are entirely serious";³ building outlays were curtailed. Very soon Loch came face to face with the perennial

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lady Stafford, 18 June 1816.

² At the time of Loch's appointment a family relative commented that "The Staffords seem to have turned their thoughts entirely to economy and the society of Scotch agents. They . . . are raising their rents all about here. They make Lord Gower their steward, and the advertisements are all published with 'apply to Earl Gower'."—F. Leveson-Gower (ed.), *Letters of Harriet, Countess Granville, 1810–1845*, I, 1895, p. 39.

³ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Fenton, 10 Feb. 1813.

dilemma of rural economy: that further expenditure was indispensable for the future growth of the estate income. The first Marquis of Stafford, said Loch, had left his estates "in a most delapidated state": his successor could not "get large rents and good tenants without sufficient building," and other improvement outlays.¹

The estate policy sought a widening net income by way of rising rents and diminishing expenditures. In reality, the trends were in the opposite direction—eventually the estate was forced to reduce rents, expressly "to relieve the deplorable condition of the agricultural interest."² Concomitantly, Lord Stafford reduced some of his commitments in the area—notably by withdrawing his direct political influence in Staffordshire. Improvement investment developed along very deliberate lines which Loch explained to the family heir in 1816. "All expenditure upon this property," he told Earl Gower, "should be directed to those objects which could not be effected except through the assistance which Lord Stafford is pleased and enabled to effect, and which could not be so easily undertaken by your Lordship if in possession of the Stafford and Sutherland Estates—and that it should not be expended on works which will hereafter give your Lordship little additional revenue. . . The present expenditure should be kept to the great series of improvements leaving the smaller parts to be filled up hereafter. . . Upon such an estate such things only can be attempted by one possessing such a fine income as Lord Stafford enjoys."³

As a wedding gift, and for a training in aristocratic responsibilities, Lord Gower was given the estate of Lilleshall in the year 1823. He was expected "to live out of his estate." All effort was made to reduce expenditure and to provide Gower with an income suitable to his position. Improvement expenditure was more than halved immediately. All went well until Gower decided that his social needs included a substantial country residence at Lilleshall. Loch put the position sympathetically: "His Lordship has the greatest property in Shropshire and yet not a single respectable House he can command."⁴ Consequently Lilleshall Hall, designed by Wyattville, was begun—although one agent confidentially (and correctly) predicted that "it will cost too much and will be too long in hand." These fears were fully justified by events. During its construction, Lilleshall Hall cost more than £10,000 each year and exceeded handsomely all the estimates—to the point that, by 1829, Loch was bitterly remarking that "Builder's estimates in a general way are not worth a straw."⁵ Inevitably, Gower's expenditure quickly began to exceed his income and further efforts to retrench were instituted. In 1829 the position had deteriorated—"no improvement on the farm must be thought of," demanded Loch, "or repairs but the most necessary can be attended to and all the new plantation must be abandoned. . . In short in plain English we are reduced to our shifts and we must not think what will be the best for the estate but with how little we can keep the thing

¹ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lady Stafford, 29 Sept. 1814.

² *Ibid.*, Loch to Suther, 26 Dec. 1816; Loch to Lord Stafford, 22 March 1818, 3 May 1821; Loch to Lewis, 16 Jan. 1818.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Gower, 17 June 1816.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 20 May 1823; Loch to Gower, 16 July 1823.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Lewis to Loch, 22 Feb. 1824, 26 Nov. 1825; Loch to Lewis, 8 Jan. 1829.

going."¹ In 1830, Gower considered the question of a loan to tide him over his difficulties. Loch was deeply perturbed: "let me . . . entreat you not to consider lightly a debt of £50,000. It is a sum that the most considerable fortunes will feel, and which I would consider as to be hereafter to be liquidated from income, not to be paid by diminishing capital." As heir to the largest fortune in the land, Gower no doubt found the position somewhat artificial.²

In a real sense the improvement and expansion of all the Leveson-Gower properties hinged on the life of Lord Stafford. As soon as he died the Bridgewater profits—in 1825 worth a clear £95,000—would be cut off. Stafford was sixty-seven in 1825 and his health was deteriorating. Loch was aware of the implications: "Economy must be studied in every department . . . for when there is every chance of a very large portion of his Lordship's income being cut off, it becomes our duty to limit every possible expense." Despite earlier ukases, expenditure had actually increased since 1821—"It is too like our Sutherland proceedings," remarked Loch, referring to the great Highland commitments, "it must come down." Loch put the point repeatedly and as bluntly as he could: "You must see that as the expenditure is at present, if Lord Stafford had no other estate to live upon, it does not afford him the means of doing so." Expenditure, he said, must be brought down below £1,000 a month, even if it required dismissals. He added a rider: "In thus inculcating economy, I am not desiring the improvement of the estate to be abandoned. I still desire that it may be continued, but it must be done entirely by the tenants. Their encouragement has been ample." This indeed became increasingly the trend of estate policy—the landlord had initiated the large-scale developments; the land was now ready for the applications of tenant capital.³

Stafford died in 1833 and the west midland estates were reunited in the diminished financial affairs of the second Duke. Managerial economies were expected in the general reorganization. The estate agents were told that they were "no longer representatives of the richest Nobleman in England." From all the properties Loch was able to estimate a net balance of only £16,000. It was a very serious problem, he told the Duke in 1834: "The more so as your income will be diminished by the falling price of wheat [i.e. by way of corn-rents] . . . the outlay is so very large and complicated and is taking place in so many places at once." Expenditure remained intractably high, while income was static or falling. New work on Trentham Hall proved as embarrassing as that at Lilleshall. In consequence, during the 1830's the Duke was incurring overdrafts, and eating into his capital. "The late Duke," wrote

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lewis, 15 Dec. 1828, 3 Jan. 1831.

² *Ibid.*, Loch to Gower, 6 Jan. 1830; Loch to Lewis, 3 Jan. 1834. At this time Loch was advising Stafford to buy more land—"I cannot help advising against any further accumulation of money in the Funds. Land must always bear the first value in every country."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Stafford, 2 Jan. 1831. "As a mere investment I do not believe anything would give so good a return for money as a purchase of a good Estate in Ireland situated within the influence of the Liverpool Steam Packet."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Stafford, 15 April 1830.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 15 Jan. 1825. The fact that great improvements continued on the Leveson-Gower estate in the post-war period is used by G. E. Fussell to demonstrate that Shropshire was relatively unaffected by the depression. Lord Stafford's investments were not typical, nor were they geared to the level of prices—but Fussell's conclusion is probably valid.—G. E. Fussell, 'Four Centuries of Farming in Shropshire', *Transactions of the Shropshire Antiquarian Society*, 1951-2.

Loch in 1849, "spent a much larger sum, very much—on the estates of the present Duke."¹

Loch's anxious directives were not a signal of Sutherland's impending bankruptcy. It merely indicated Loch's professional concern that the Duke's expenditure frequently exceeded his income, and hence prevented an expansion of his capital and his social prestige. The Duke cheerfully (but vainly) agreed to reduce his own expenses, and the agents were told "to greatly abstain from spending." In August 1835 Loch instructed: "Give every Tenant who is in arrear Notice to Quit without exception."² But the problem remained.

In 1845 Loch pointed out that the Duke "regularly spends more than his income every year."³ He also calculated that the effect of rent abatements had been equivalent to a reduction of rental income by 26 per cent. He told another landlord that "If your English rents have not come down in somewhat the same proportion no wonder your tenants hollow and bellow and scream."⁴ And, although Loch frequently claimed that Sutherland's estates were under-rented and observed improving conditions in the 1840's, he conceded that any attempt to raise rents would have to be limited by the preparations required to meet the repeal of the corn laws. By sacrificing rent increases the landlord consciously shouldered some of the anticipated costs of Repeal to be borne by the agricultural community. By the 1850's the west midland estates were much more prosperous, and in 1851 a net surplus income of £26,400 was confidently expected.⁵ Rents had increased, the Duke's personal expenditure had declined, and the benefits of earlier improvement investment were at last producing sizeable returns.

IV

Rural life on the west midland estates underwent a subtle transformation over the period 1800 to 1850.⁶ Partly it was consequent upon the professionalization of estate management which ran concomitantly with the general 'rationalization' of rural relationships.

The estates of the Leveson-Gowers were administered by a hierarchy of agents and sub-agents centrally directed by Commissioner Loch. Loch checked almost every account, was consulted on the most arcane details of agricultural methods, and solved all problems. In 1833 he told the Duchess of Sutherland that "in the affairs such as the Duke's or Lord Carlisle's the details are infinite. I have twenty-four letters today connected with them . . . if every little trying thing, most for the greater

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lewis, 2 Nov. 1833; Loch to Sutherland, 7 Feb. 1835; Loch to Duchess of Sutherland, Sept. 1849. See also Richards, *Leviathan*, ch. xviii.

² S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lewis, 10 Feb. 1835, 3 May 1835, 4 Aug. 1835, 12 Aug. 1835; Loch to Smith, 20 June 1836.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Duchess of Sutherland, 25 Dec. 1845.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Loch to Denison, 18 July 1846; W. Smith to Loch, 10 July 1845. The rent calculations was probably based on a valuation made in 1818.—*Ibid.*, Loch's Memo Book 1818.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Loch to Sutherland, 4 Feb. 1851; Loch to Walker, 17 Jan. 1851.

⁶ I have dealt with some aspects of this question in my paper 'Captain Swing in the West Midlands', *International Review of Social History*, 1974.

part lead to no conclusion, was to be communicated, you have no notion how they would vex."¹ His headquarters were in London but he travelled regularly to the far-flung estates. Beneath Loch were the main estate agents who supervised management of the local level—substantial men, well paid, and powerful in the local community. Beneath them were the estate surveyors, the office clerks, bailiffs, solicitors, and coal managers. Finally, there was a miscellaneous group of estate employees—labourers, gardeners, servants, stable-hands, etc.²

Loch set about the renovation of the managerial structure in 1812. Economies were begun and new blood replaced old. Estate management was to be a separate and professional function: tenants were no longer to act as agents and the home farm was independently managed.³ The English estates were placed under the direction of an asthmatic lowland Scot, Francis Suther, and the sub-agents were instructed to do nothing "without his authority after reference to me," as Loch put it. Suther had previously worked for Sir John Henderson. He was described as "mild and gentlemanlike . . . a good penman, and understands books"—important qualities in Loch's mind. Suther received a salary of £200 together with a house and a horse.⁴ He was a great success, Loch's first protégé, and in 1816 he was moved to the vast Highland estates in Sutherland where he took over the administration of the clearances.

Choosing Suther's replacement presented some difficulties. Lord Stafford, sensitive to local sentiment, suggested "for the sake of the feeling of the Staffordshire people that Suther's successor should be an Englishman, and if a Staffordshire man, *tant mieux*."⁵ Loch was rigorous in his requirements, and sought a man not only "well acquainted with the most improved husbandry, especially of wet and tenacious soils" but also with the light soil management as practised at Lilleshall, i.e. "strictly upon the principles of Norfolk Husbandry." In addition personal qualities of integrity, honesty, book-keeping skills, and a competent, practical, and theoretical knowledge were required.⁶ In the outcome another lowland Scot—William Lewis of Fife—was appointed. So far as Lord Stafford's doubts were concerned, Suther remarked that "so long as Scotch tenants are not brought in the tenants do not care."⁷ Lewis was especially desirable because "the wet land in Shropshire re-

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Duchess of Sutherland, 16 Dec. 1833. ² *Ibid.*, Loch to Suther, 20 June 1816.

³ In reducing the establishment, Loch trod on many toes. By his new policy he remarked: "I did not mean to recommend to get rid of any of the men now employed in his Lordship's services, such a measure in a great family makes more noise than the saving is worth." Dead or resigning agents were not replaced, piece-rates were used wherever possible, the beer allowance was abolished. In fact, the new broom produced considerable ill-will. Some local recriminations were aired in Thomas Bakewell, *Remarks on a Publication by James Loch, entitled "An Account of the Improvements on the Estates of the Marquis of Stafford"*, 1820.

⁴ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Butt, 11 Nov. 1812, 27 July 1813; Loch to Stewart, 5 Sept. 1813; Loch to Lord Stafford, 1 June 1816; Loch to Fenton, Feb. 1813.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Lady Stafford to Loch, 16 Sept. 1816. ⁶ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lady Stafford, 29 Sept. 1816.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lady Stafford, 11 Oct. 1816. Loch's improvement strategy required the introduction of new tenants to the estates, which he generally justified in terms of the skills they brought. Salop and Cheshire farmers were given farms at Trentham, and Loch undoubtedly favoured Scottish agricultural practice, particularly in ploughing matters. He was prepared to concede that, on the very stiff soils of Trentham "a Scotch farmer would not do, he knows nothing of Stock or the value of old grass land, ploughing is his only system of improvement." The prestige of Scottish farming, in the eyes of Loch, diminished over the years. In 1849 he

sembles some of the wet parts of Fife more than anything I know."¹ (Loch himself had spent many years learning the best agricultural practice in Kinross.) Loch told Lewis that the main part of his duties was to see the errors of the tenants' methods, and to provide remedies: the local agent, in the first instance, was a technician.

Professional, carefully calculating, rational management cut against the grain of the older, paternalistic, rural society. In 1818 a Salopian tenant-farmer wrote to the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* with the observation that, "Formerly the tenant had access to and communicate his griefs to his own landlord, and was heard patiently, but now forsooth, if we have anything to complain of, we are told the agent must hear and determine." Under Loch's direction the tenants of the Leveson-Gower estates were expressly told not to address Lord Stafford directly: they were instructed to use "the regular channel," as Loch termed it.² This marked the character of rural relationships in the new agriculture.

Not surprisingly a good agent was hard to find. The Bridgewater canal-master and employer of many men, R. H. Bradshaw, agreed with Loch that it was difficult to get a competent and trustworthy agent "whom a little authority does not immediately spoil. If taken from the working classes this is increasingly the case, and if the better sort, he generally becomes a fine gentleman and consequently useless."³ Loch sometimes contacted Bradshaw in the hope of a likely recruit for the Leveson-Gower estates. One occasion, in 1824, produced further caustic comment from Bradshaw on the problems of training and keeping agents. "If he is clever," he wrote, "and has learned his business, he is tempted away by high wages . . . and if induced to stay he immediately supposes that we cannot do without him and becomes an idle, impudent Rogue—*au contraire*, if he turns stupid, and incompetent for any situation, he is sure to remain upon our hands, and I can readily send you half a dozen of this sort." The management problem was severe, he reported, particularly around Worsley (in South Lancashire) where the collieries competed for agents—"and all look to our concern for Agents . . . and most unfairly tempt good men by enormous wages and other advantages and indulgences, to leave our Employ."⁴

Estate agents, therefore, were an *élite* in rural society. On the Leveson-Gower estates they were never mere cyphers. Lewis, for instance, was quick to take professional offence whenever the condition of the estates was subject to criticism.⁵ Another agent, William Smith, was prepared to trade arguments with Loch, and

told the Duke: "don't try a Scotch farmer—no good one will come unless he is bribed . . . Scotch agriculture and Scotch education were the best but I take it that the improved districts of England are ejecting them in that more varied course of agriculture which the climate aids them in. Pricey [?] states that Lincolnshire is before the best district in Scotland."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Morton, 7 Dec. 1817; Loch to Duke of Sutherland, 13 Jan. 1849.

¹ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lady Stafford, 11 Oct. 1816; Loch to Lewis, 11 Nov. 1818, 13 Nov. 1818.

² *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 13 July 1815; S.C., D593/K, Loch to Fenton, 29 Nov. 1818.

³ *Ibid.*, Bradshaw to Loch, 1 July 1814. ⁴ *Ibid.*, Bradshaw to Loch, 20 Dec. 1824.

⁵ Loch was especially concerned about Lewis's health: "A due regard for your health . . . is I assure you quite compatible with the execution of your duty to his Lordship . . . go by gig . . . eat a little more animal food."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 13 Nov. 1818.

they conducted a warm correspondence on the likely effects of Repeal. Loch was provoked into sharp criticism of the sceptical Smith, and directed him to read diligently, if not religiously, the weekly columns of *The Economist*.¹

V

In basic characteristics the Leveson-Gower estates carried many of the typical marks of west midland agriculture. Lilleshall, for instance, had a great diversity of soils, but was underlaid by a band of very compact, tenacious clay not far below the surface. This impeded drainage—a fundamental problem and a challenge to the improvers—but the inherent fertility of the soil “amply repays arduous ploughing”.² It was considered the most progressive part of Shropshire in the agricultural reports of the early nineteenth century. The “Agricultural Reporter,” Archdeacon Plymley,³ commented favourably on its general practice, and there is little reason to believe that conditions were particularly backward. But, by contrast, conditions were primitive on the westernmost extremity of the Lilleshall estate, the twenty square miles of swampy flats known as the Wealdmoors.

Heavy clay conditions were dominant at Trentham. In 1813 Loch gave his description (coloured by his own east Scotland experience) of the estate. Trentham consisted “principally of a stiff red clay upon a still more retentive bottom, of course very wet and full of rushes as no drainage has been done upon it to any effect until within the last five or ten years. . . The farms are about 160 to 210 acres English. The buildings [are] ill-placed and in a ruinous state. . . [there is] the difficulty of turning out and consolidating farms in England especially where the Family and Tenantry are both ancient.”⁴ Loch was not unaware of the conservatism and the social cohesion of the established order. The tenants were very good turnip and barley farmers but, said Loch, “they are very deficient indeed in the management of stiff soils.” On solution, he thought, was to bring in new tenants; but the real answer was drainage and superior methods in general. “The lighter soils in Shropshire are as well farmed as any in the Kingdom,” Loch told Lady Stafford, “the stiffer colder soil of which Trentham estate is composed and the bulk of Lilleshall estate . . . on the contrary, is farmed according to the same system which has prevailed for ages in England and nothing could be worse. They are quite unacquainted both how far their land can be improved, and how much it is capable of doing by way of active management, it is with difficulty I can get an adequate rent for it, while for the lighter soils anything might be obtained.”⁵

In 1820 James Loch published a substantial volume entitled *An Account of the Improvements on the Estates of the Marquis of Stafford*. Much of it was an elaborate ex-

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Smith, 14 Nov. 1852. See also the advice of Loch to Smith on his appointment: “. . . keep your own counsel, . . . have little to do with convivial parties . . . the more you dine at home by yourself the better . . . practice your writing . . . have a little English Dictionary along with you. . .”—*Ibid.*, Loch to Smith, 23 May 1834.

² See E. J. Howell, *The Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain: Shropshire*, 1941.

³ J. Plymley, *General View of the Agriculture of Shropshire*, 1803, p. 224.

⁴ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Dr Coventry (Professor of Agriculture, University of Edinburgh), 5 March 1813.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lady Stafford, 29 Sept. 1816.

planation and justification of the controversial policies on the Highland properties. But it also dealt with the west midland estates. It painted a grim picture of conditions at the end of the eighteenth century. It may be that in an effort to do ample justice to the work that he had personally supervised Loch was led to exaggerate the deficiencies of the *status quo ante* the improvements. Quite explicitly he believed, that he had executed a long-overdue *coup de grâce* to an archaic feudal system entrenched on the Leveson-Gower lands. Drawing a parallel with the pre-clearance Highlands, he declared that it was remarkable that both the Scottish and the English estates of Lord Stafford "should have remained precisely in the same situation in which they had existed for at least two hundred years, and probably for a longer period."¹ The estates had retrogressed and had fallen "far behind the rest of the country in improvement, and produced a degree of delapidation in the condition of the buildings, and of exhaustion in the state of the land, beyond example."²

The peculiarly backward circumstances of the estates Loch attributed to tenurial impediments. The root cause, asserted Loch, was the leasing system instituted by the first Marquis of Stafford in 1755. In that year Lord Stafford had incurred very large expenses in the well-known electoral contest for Westminster.³ In his financial embarrassment Stafford had resorted to a quick short-term method of raising capital quickly. He granted every tenant on his estate a lease for three lives, in return for the payment of two years' rent in one. The long-term result was that the estates were tied up in leases into the nineteenth century. One-third of the Lilleshall estate was held on lease in 1813, and as late as 1833 a few farms were still on their original lease.⁴

James Loch was prepared to concede that, *prima facie*, long leases for lives held distinct advantages both for the tenant and for agrarian practice in general. But in reality that had not been the case.⁵ The land had been locked up in the hands of tardy tenants "during that period when the improvement of the country was going on with the greatest rapidity." Such, he claimed, had perpetuated a ruinous "rude state of society." Agricultural practice retained all the unfortunate features of continental Europe—scattered occupation, closes which were too small, crooked ditches, jarring and irreconcilable interests, poor communications, and a total want of

¹ Loch, *An Account of the Improvements on the Estates of the Marquis of Stafford*, 1820, pp. 173–5.

² Loch, 'Memoir'.

³ See Loch, 'Memoir'; S.C., D593, abstracts of Leases, dated 1755, and Sutherland Draft Settlements. References to the elections are found in L. Namier and J. Brooke, *History of Parliament, The House of Commons, 1754–1790*, 1964, I, p. 59; J. Grego, *A History of Parliamentary Elections and Electioneering in the Old Days*, 1886, ch. IV; J. Carswell and L. A. Drolle (eds.), *The Political Journal of George Bubb Dodington*, Oxford, 1965, p. 26 n. 1.

⁴ S.C., D593. Rentals indicate that the number of leaseholders declined from 138 in 1755, to 83 in 1796, to 60 in 1813, to 52 in 1817, and to 11 in 1829.

⁵ The Levenson-Gower experience may be taken to controvert the contemporary opinion (associated with Arthur Young and Nathaniel Kent) that "Leases are the first, the greatest and most rational encouragement that can be given to agriculture."—Quoted in R. A. C. Parker, 'Coke of Norfolk and the Agrarian Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., VIII, p. 158. Nor does this evidence give any support to O. R. MacGregor's interesting contention that the general switch to annual tenancies in the early nineteenth century was motivated by political considerations: R. E. Prothero, Baron Ernle, *English Farming, Past and Present*, Introduction to 1961 edn, p. cxxviii.

general drainage—"nothing could be worse than the course of culture pursued."¹ Compounding the landlord's dilemma, the land, at the turn of the century, was rented at one-third its true value. Yet, for all his indignation, Loch failed to explain the link between long leases and technical backwardness. The implication may have been that long leases offered too much security, and induced complacency, rather more than they encouraged tenant-initiated development. The agricultural reporter, Plymley, confirmed these notions—observing that leases increased indolence and were rarely beneficial.² His fellow reporter Bishton in 1794 noted of Salop that "Leases have of late years been much exploded by gentlemen of landed property, many of whom having granted (formerly) excessive long terms, have been induced by injury thereby to object to any lease."³

As leases fell in the estates reverted to annual tenancies. According to Loch the attitudes of the tenants were dramatically transformed: "the very same persons, immediately upon the expiration of their lease, have become . . . as active improvers as any upon the estates." More remarkably the tenants began to invest considerable capital in their land; and Loch drew the moral: "so distinct in general are [*sic*] mankind to active exertion and industry, unless they are forced to it by necessity."⁴

To the landlord of the late eighteenth century long leases for lives had two prime disadvantages—they obviously prevented him raising rents, and they hindered the introduction of the widening range of fashionable improvements which promised to enhance the future value of his estates. Rising agricultural prices and productivity doubled the frustration. Lord Stafford could undertake no general improvement of his west midland estates until a sufficient number of leases expired, which was not until the 1790's.

Leases fell in and were not renewed, but in many cases Lord Stafford hastened the departure of the old system by purchasing the leases before they expired. This was the moment for the consolidation of farms, rearranged into more regular and uniform shape.⁵ Rationalization had its casualties. Where an old tenant was removed he was given his house and garden, at a low rent according to Loch. There were some economies of scale: "two small farms will require a greater expense of building including houses and offices than one large one," as Loch explained in 1815. When at last a lease was acquired the rent was invariably raised, and sometimes doubled.⁶ The weather played its part in the demise of the old framework. "I am sure,"

¹ Loch, *Account*, pp. 173-7. ² Plymley, *op cit.*, pp. 127-37.

³ J. Bishton, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Salop*, 1794. ⁴ Loch, *Account*, pp. 176-7.

⁵ In 1820 Loch rehearsed the classic arguments in favour of large farms: "... it is from large farms alone that a surplus produce can be obtained for the maintenance of our artisans and manufacturers . . . there is as little doubt that such an arrangement also rather increases than diminishes the agricultural population of the country. Nor can there be much hesitation in admitting that a sober, well-doing farm labourer feels less want and experiences fewer hardships than the poorest class of tenants, formerly the occupiers of the soil."—Loch, *Ibid.*, p. xii. It was "the constant, invariable and necessary progress of society."—*Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁶ It is possible to compile a case-history of one of the original leases on the Lilleshall estate from the rentals, namely that of John Rider of Crudgington. In 1755 he took a lease for three lives covering 104 acres at an annual rent of £39. He died in 1777, but his successor continued to pay £39 in 1796. Eventually the land came into the hands of Thomas Rider who was still paying £39 in 1816, but meanwhile he had acquired a further 84 acres at will, rented at £105. In 1816 the lease expired whereupon the rent on the original acres rose to £300.

Lewis wrote to Loch, "you are not displeased at so many leases dropping as the winter has begun pretty severe, I hope it will carry a few more off."¹

It was Loch's opinion that the tenants themselves were against leases and he believed that "the confidence which has subsisted for generations between his Lordship's ancestors and his tenants is a much finer thing to depend upon and much more effectual in securing extension from the tenants than I ever saw leases produce."² After twenty-five years, in 1842, a sub-agent reported that the tenants had no desire for leases; they were completely confident of their tenurial security, and the evidence was that leases would not induce any more tenant-improvement than would rack-rents. This verdict was strongly sustained by *The Times* reporter, James Caird, in 1850. Generally in Staffordshire he found that farmers had little thought for leases, even where they were offered.³

The reversion to annual tenancies was accompanied by the re-establishment of the old division of function between landlord and tenant. For twenty years Lord Stafford had been prepared to take over responsibility for most capital outlay on permanent improvements. The tenants were responsible for the upkeep and for current expenditure. "The attention and capital of the landlord," wrote Loch, "should be bestowed upon the permanent improvements which, in their execution, would withdraw too large a portion of a tenant's capital from the cultivation of the land . . . this is the Landlord's proper line of duty, and well suited to his station and position in society."⁴ More than that, it was an article of faith, a part of the intellectual and moral justification for the existence of the aristocratic landlord. Such a function, however, was difficult, if not impossible, to perform in a regime of leases. After 1803 Lord Stafford increasingly ploughed his own capital into land, particularly in the form of drainage improvement.

The estates' managers were convinced that improved drainage was "the most important of all improvements," the answer to most of the technical and economic problems of the wetlands. Landlord capital was employed to construct the great lines of drainage ditches across the estates. The local details, the lesser connections, and maintenance were deemed the responsibility of the tenants. The most ambitious and costly of Lord Stafford's undertakings was the Wealdmoor drainage scheme at Lilleshall. Wild, overgrown, marshy, mediævally backward, the Wealdmoors were the subject of an Act in 1801 for the revitalization of the area.⁵ Loch wrestled with rising expenditure on the project which was not completed until 1820. Technically, and in the long run economically, the Wealdmoor improvements were successful.

¹ S.C., D539/K, Lewis to Loch, 21 Dec. 1819. Pressure was also applied. In 1828 one leaseholder was told that "when his lease drops he must quit . . . I told him so before when I offered to purchase his lease for Lord Stafford, which I will not do now."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 5 Nov. 1828.

² In December 1817 Loch noted that the tenants had been offered leases a few years previously but "the general feeling of the tenants was against them and the thing was dropped." He did not mention the terms of the leases so offered.—S.C., D593/K, Loch to Morton, 7 Dec. 1817.

³ S.C., D593/K, Smith to Loch, 29 Dec. 1842; Caird, *op cit.*, letter xxviii. ⁴ Loch, *Account*, App., p. 102.

⁵ See the vivid description of conditions in the seventeenth century by George Plaxton in *Philosophical Transactions*, xxv, 1673. Generally see M. Hill, "The Wealdmoors", *Trans. Shropshire Antiq. Soc.*, LIV.

Tenant capital was also committed to the attack on the wetlands. It was general in the west Midlands, certainly by 1850, for the landlord to provide the drainage tiles while the installation was left to the tenant. At certain times tenants were relieved of rent arrears if they executed a proportion of drainage work under the supervision of an agent. Lord Stafford's agents and tenants were positively encouraged to employ parish labour during poor years. In 1823 Loch wrote: "As the prices are rising and the rent payable by the tenants is very low, it is a good opportunity of imposing upon them some draining and ditching which must be done."¹ At times, employment on agricultural improvements operated in a quasi-contracyclical fashion. It was a deliberate policy that, when labour was cheap, drainage work should progress, while dear labour conditions reduced the speed of execution. Thus, in 1845 an agent reported: "I find we shall not be able to get on so fast with the underdraining this winter owing to trade being so much better and wages higher, many of the labourers are going into the mining districts of Staffordshire where . . . they are getting 3/6 to 4/6 a day."² The proximity of the industrial areas of the Midlands had complex repercussions on local agriculture.

Consolidation of small farms and drainage were complemented by other improvements. Lord Stafford had spent more than £60,000 on farm buildings and offices by 1820.³ Rigorous efforts were made to introduce better rotation practices, and the return to annual tenancies made the enforcement of approved rotations a good deal easier. Erring tenants were severely admonished and sometimes evicted. In Loch's view overcropping was the evil of the times; too much land had been put under the plough during the war; this had reduced yields but by 1820, he said, "the evil had begun to right itself." Stafford had helped by introducing a six-course rotation, deep ploughing, and new tenants to manage the difficult land. Sir John Sinclair gave his approval to the cross-fertilization of English and Scottish ideas in the agricultural practice of the estates. The use of red clay marl was prohibited, and parish labour was employed to level the old marl-pits. A plough maker was brought in to the estate, "not only to afford a good article for the farmers but to improve the artisans of the country." Bone dust and guano were introduced at an early stage to Shropshire. Inter-estate ploughing matches were promoted to encourage rivalry in efficiency and also in the use of the Scottish two-horse plough.⁴ Clearly the landlord was a most active agent for technical innovation in many directions: he was far from being a passive *rentier*.

When James Loch took over Lord Stafford's improvement schemes in 1812, a Scottish colleague told him that his plans were bound to be crowned with success: "you have both proprietor and tenants on your side with discernment and liberality, you have soil, climate and all materials requisite for bringing the land into the highest state of cultivation, the people have capital and seem only to have stood in

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Lewis, 24 Dec. 1823. ² *Ibid.*, Smith to Loch, 7 Nov. 1845.

³ Loch, *Account*, p. 180.

⁴ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Jukes, 12 May 1813; Sinclair to Loch, 13 Aug. 1813; Loch to Heathcote, 6 Nov. 1819; Lewis to Loch, 4 Sept. 1834, 18 Nov. 1818, 29 May 1816, 10 May 1833.—Loch's questions in *First Report from the Committee appointed to inquire into the State of Agriculture*, B.P.P. III, pt 1, 1836.

need of such a person as yourself, to set them in motion."¹ Loch, as a matter of professional pride, intended to raise Lilleshall to the status of model estate: "the boundary of the estate will be distinctly marked by its superiority over all the neighbourhood."² Among the tenants he wishes to create "a community of feeling ... a sort of *Esprit du Corps* ... to give them a pride of being Lord Stafford's tenants."³ The improvements would show their full value, said Lewis to Loch, "when you and I are no longer"—they were establishing the "foundation for a future increase."⁴

Possibilities of both *esprit du corps* and rent increases receded in the 1820's and 1830's. The estate managers had to reconcile themselves to the fact that "the fall in the price of corn and the general distress of the agricultural interest" frustrated rent increases. As early as 1814 Loch acknowledged that the low price of grain and the current debate on the Corn Laws had produced a good deal of uncertainty concerning the future course of rents. Loch said that "upon the whole I do not dread the fall of rents as others do, but no set of men cry so loud or so soon as the farmers and none have so little reason if they have been at all economical for some years past. Their profits must have been very great."⁵ In 1815 he pointed out to a tenant that although corn prices had fallen, so also had the price of labour and the burden of the property tax. No rent reduction could be contemplated since "the high price of one year must go to make up for the low prices of another."⁶ But in the same year Lord Stafford promised his tenants that rents would be reduced when wheat prices fell below 9s. the Winchester Bushel. The *Staffordshire Mercury*⁷ thought this capricious and equivocal, "an ungracious way of doing an act of common justice," since the Corn Bill and the anticipated renewal of war rendered such a price-fall unlikely. A further decision was delayed: there were plenty of tenants willing to take over vacant farms, and in 1816 it was said that "there has been comparatively speaking no distress felt in Shropshire or Staffordshire except in Stock which has fallen absolutely to nothing."⁸

The situation of agriculture deteriorated more seriously in 1819. Lewis reported that there was no demand: "farmers are again beginning to hang their heads, and many of our Shropshire tenants have still their last year's crop by them."⁹ James Loch was rather less touched by their plight: he blamed them for their greediness, for speculating on the grain market: "the farmer is never satisfied with the existing prices, and holds on and on against all reason and probability of success, and always loses in the end. . . Any man who did not sell [i.e. earlier in the season when prices were higher] deserves to lose and I can in no way pity him."¹⁰

As late as 1820, despite mountainous rent arrears, Loch continued to procrastinate

¹ S.C., D593/K, Young to Loch, 7 Feb. 1813. (He drew a contrast with the Highland estates.)

² *Ibid.*, Loch to Lord Stafford, 30 May 1818.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lord Gower, 4 May 1813; Loch to Ford, 10 Feb. 1813.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Lewis to Loch, 4 May 1813. ⁵ *Ibid.*, Loch to Firchild, 12 Oct. 1814; Loch to Gower, 26 May 1814.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Loch to Duncalfe, 9 Jan. 1815. ⁷ *Staffordshire Mercury*, 25 March 1815.

⁸ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Stafford, 7 Nov. 1815; Loch to Sellar, 3 May 1816; Loch to Dean of Lichfield, 2 May 1816; Loch to Firchild, 13 Dec. 1815, 29 Dec. 1815.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Lewis to Loch, 31 May 1819. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 2 June 1819.

nate on the question of rent abatement, but he did sanction a delay of audit. He told one tenant: "though you have borne the pressure of some unfavourable seasons, yet you had the full benefit of all the best years . . . previous to the fall in the prices without the landlord participating in the benefit"¹—that is, before Stafford had been able to raise his rents and take his increment of rising agricultural incomes.

In 1821 Loch was forced to relent: he conceded that the tenants could not pay their rents without "encroaching upon their capital which if it goes on must soon bring them down and the condition of the land together." He was prompted by Lewis who believed that the farmer must be assisted "before his own funds and capital are entirely exhausted." Farmers in the west Midlands, even Stafford's tenants, were no longer exempt from the full rigours of the depression. Loch had investigated the policies of Coke, Lord Lauderdale, and the Dukes of Norfolk and Bedford. His conclusion was that landlords could not hold out any longer, and he recommended an immediate rent reduction of 10 per cent. He comforted Stafford with the thought that "as there is a proportional fall in the value of every other article of consumption, a fall in the rentals of land will in its effect be more nominal than real."² Within a few months a further crisis occurred as the corn market tumbled, and a permanent rent arrangement became imperative. Grain rents were instituted and, apparently, the tenants approved: Lewis observed, "Lord Stafford's arrangements are universally approved of and his health drunk in every company as the best landlord in England."³

Loch explained the system to the Scottish worthy Dr Thomas Chalmers. The rents were based entirely upon wheat, since oats, barley, and dairy prices had moved in unison. The rents would fluctuate with the price of wheat: 80s. a quarter was judged to be the break-even level of prices for the farmer. Loch gave Chalmers his own analysis of the national agricultural situation. "Parliament," he wrote, "can and ought to do nothing." The "mischief" proceeded from several causes: the alteration of the value of the currency, the effects of three abundant crops, a diminished consumption of wheat, an inflow of Irish grain, excessive taxation, high rents, and the failure of landlords to make abatements, the diminution of tenants' capital, and "from the cultivation of much bad land which can only pay from exorbitant prices." Agriculture, he asserted, had no more claim to government assistance than the mercantile or manufacturing communities. The general problem would solve itself—poor land would go out of cultivation, land would be sold at enormous losses, and those left would be compelled to accept lower profits. Government interference would be foolish: "if you try to bolster it [agriculture] up by raising the price of corn you destroy our manufactures."⁴

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Picken, 23 Nov. 1820.

² *Ibid.*, Loch to Stafford, 3 May 1821; Loch to Lewis, 24 June 1821; Lewis to Loch, 18 Feb. 1821.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Lewis, 26 Sept. 1821, 5 Dec. 1821; Lewis to Loch, 13 Sept. 1822.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Loch to Chalmers, 24 Jan. 1822. Parliament ought not to provide relief: "If it does it may postpone the evil, it cannot cure it, it may put off the crisis, but only to make it the worse." Bad land would go out of cultivation, and many farmers would lose money. The government should concentrate on the "strictest and most rigid economy."—*Ibid.*, Loch to Sinclair, 2 Feb. 1822. Loch believed that the prices of 1812–13 were freakish and would never return.

Loch was well aware of the varied incidence of the depression of prices in Britain. It was "a crisis of no ordinary nature," but, he said (in agreement with modern historical writing), it mainly affected "the worse parts of England," especially where the landlords had overcommitted themselves or continued to overcharge their tenants. Acute crisis was unlikely to spread to Stafford's west midland estates: "The heavy lands alone can at any time be in this situation, it is a great object therefore to get good tenants for such land, and to bear less heavily upon them." In the early 1830's Loch believed that the time had come to stiffen the attitude towards rental policy: reductions would be carried no further, and all abatements were to depend upon the tenant performing improvements.¹

The Leveson-Gowers considered a substantial diminution of the corn law's protection virtually inevitable, and not at all an unwelcome prospect. As early as 1842 Loch warned his agents to prepare for a further "relaxation in a short time." By preparation he meant increased efficiency, better rotations, and, as always, better drainage, and the agents were instructed to study closely the agricultural publications of the day.² Foreign competition would be most formidable for the heavy lands and "to their improvement attention must be directed." It was the south of England that was vulnerable, where wetlands had "been badly cultivated and have fallen into the hands of an unskilled and impoverished tenantry."³ The second Duke of Sutherland supported Repeal and he believed that, in the fullness of time, it would actually aid English agriculture.⁴ Nevertheless some of his Salopian tenants were less sanguine, many of whom thought they could not escape ruin; although others thought that immediate Repeal (in 1846) would end the suspense which was their main complaint.⁵ In Staffordshire the tenants took comfort from the operation of the corn rents system which meant that they would be "less likely to lose if a fall of prices should take place."⁶

It was, of course, widely held that drainage and farming "high" were the answers to the anticipated effects of Repeal. Landlords received government assistance by way of the Public Monies Drainage Acts. Even before the Acts, the Duke of Sutherland had offered his tenants drainage improvements if they would agree to pay 5 per cent interest, but the response had been poor because they preferred a tile allowance.⁷ In 1847 Sutherland applied for £35,000 for drainage from the Inclosure Commissioners: this enabled him to reduce his own expenditure in the west

¹ *Ibid.*, Loch to Gower, 9 Nov. 1829; Lewis to Loch, 13 May 1830; Loch to Lewis, 17 July 1830. The general impact of the depression in the west Midlands was cushioned by the buoyancy of local urban demand, by capital improvements, and by productivity improvements. The evidence of an Oswestry farmer, Samuel Bickerton, to the Committee appointed to inquire into the State of Agriculture (B.P.P., 2nd Report, April 1836) gives a relatively optimistic account of local conditions. He particularly stressed the good credit-availability to farmers facilitated by the joint-stock banks. (p. 239). On wage levels, see R. W. Sturgess, 'A Study of Agricultural Change in the Staffordshire Moorlands, 1780-1850', *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies*, 1.

² S.C., D593/K, Loch to Smith, 7 March 1842.

³ *Ibid.*, Loch to Smith, 10 March 1842; Smith to Loch, 7 March 1842.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Morton to Loch, 18 Jan. 1846. J. Barron, *The Northern Highlands of Scotland in the Nineteenth Century*, 3 vols., Inverness, 1903-10, III, p. 94.

⁵ S.C., D593/K, Smith to Loch, 5 March 1846; *Records of Protection to Agriculture and Native Industry and Autograph Letters*, a volume in Borough Library, Shrewsbury.

⁶ S.C., D593/K, Steward to Loch, 5 March 1846. ⁷ *Ibid.*, Loch to Duke of Sutherland, 8 Jan. 1845.

Midlands in favour of more expenditure on his Scottish estates.¹ It was a time when the Duke found it difficult to reconcile Peel's idea of increasing expenditure on real improvements with Loch's demands for retrenchment.

Concurrently the tenantry was encouraged to plough its own capital into the permanent improvement of the land. Increasingly, and despite Caird's declarations,² Loch realized that a more formal acknowledgement was required for the compensation of departing tenants. In 1859 compensation clauses were written into the new farming agreements on the Sutherland estates.³ In a way it reflected the very gradual shift of emphasis from landlord to tenant capital in the progress of improvement in agriculture.

VI

James Caird visited Lilleshall and Trentham in 1851. He observed that the tenants, occupying somewhat small farms on cold, difficult soil, made rather less complaint than other Staffordshire farmers. He offered fulsome praise to the extent and quality of the improvements he saw, but he suggested that the Lilleshall estate had advanced further than Trentham.⁴ The Trentham estate agent was piqued and suggested that Caird's investigation had been superficial—"we know he saw very little here." Loch, however, sprang to Caird's defence. He was a "shrewd, clever, observing man . . . of reserved and unobtrusive manner," and his verdict had been perfectly correct.⁵ Loch was much gratified to have Caird's *imprimatur* on the schemes of improvement he had directed for almost forty years.

The improvements on the English estates, which Loch claimed had "absorbed the whole of the free rents,"⁶ between 1803 and 1833, reaped their returns mainly in the years after 1840. Certainly by the 1850's conditions had changed. For instance, Lilleshall was said to be "the lowest rented estate in England" and that therefore arrears were altogether inadmissible. Rental income rose more firmly. Rotation requirements were relaxed a little. Another sign of change was an increasing prevalence of leases which complemented the changing attitude towards compensation.

The west midland estates had weathered the depression of prices: the proximity of large urban markets no doubt helped, as did the relatively diversified character of agriculture. Among the influences should be counted the adjustments made by the farming community in terms of productivity and costs. Landlord initiatives by way of improvements and rent reductions were positive forces.⁷

It is sometimes suggested that by mid-century English agriculture was over-capitalized, and that the great landowners were in effect subsidizing agriculture. Undoubtedly profits turned out to be lower than alternative investments in some

¹ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Steward, 5 Feb. 1847. ² Caird, *op. cit.*, letter xxviii.

³ S.C., D593/K, George Loch to Smith, 10 July 1856; Smith to George Loch, 14 Dec. 1859.

⁴ Caird, *op. cit.*, pp. 229 f.

⁵ S.C., D593/K, Loch to Smith, 25 Jan. 1851; Smith to Hinkley, 14 March 1856; G. Loch to Smith, 14 July 1856.

⁶ See above, section III.

⁷ Not excluding the assistance given to farmers to reduce arable acreage on least suitable soils. See Loch, *Account*, p. 195.

branches of industry and commerce. The "Leviathan of Wealth" conformed to this pattern. But, in part, the argument is founded upon hindsight. The landed interest in the early nineteenth century, without perfect prescience, had little reason to fear for the long run. Any landowner confident of the permanence of the corn laws, and resting his future on Ricardian assumptions concerning rent, invested in his land with reasonable expectations.¹ Certainly in the case of the Leveson-Gowers the horizons of profit expectations were very long, and their agricultural investments were not irreconcilable with notions of profit maximization.

The criteria of aristocratic investment in agriculture were complex. The Leveson-Gowers—with the strongest prompting from James Loch—held a high propensity for investment in land for social reasons. They rationalized their outlays in terms of social prestige and economic security: land was safer even than consols. Loch put the matter clearly enough in December 1820 when he told Lord Stafford that "Land is best, for in this country whatever may happen that will be safe."² But "Leviathan of Wealth" was not typical. The family in fact invested in a great range of activities. In the half-century before 1830 the family had invested in canals, railways, consols, iron, and coal, roads, American stock, and in many disparate enterprises on its estates in Scotland and England. But after 1830 the commitments of the Leveson-Gowers turned inwards, towards the original landed foundations of the family's position. On their west midland estates their investment in agriculture *per se* was partly counterbalanced by undisciplined expenditure on the great houses at Lille-shall and Trentham. The priorities of the family effectively channelled their funds into their landed estates and into aristocratic consumption.

But "improvement" raised many more questions than the mere return on aristocratic capital. The social consequences of such single-minded rationalization of rural life were the transformation of the foundations of rural life and a changing role of the noble family in west midland society.³ In broader terms, it is now widely recognized that the great landed proprietors contributed substantially to the process of economic growth in the industrial revolution.⁴ This recognition ought not to obscure the fact that such a distribution of wealth also diverted resources into investments (e.g. country seats, the overcapitalization of agriculture) which, on most definitions, were hardly optimal in any national sense. The "Leviathan of Wealth" contributed strongly to this distortion of the economic system.

¹ Conversely, in times of uncertainty, land might be regarded as the most stable of assets. Loch epitomized these attitudes in 1819. He told Lord Stafford "... In these times it appears to me that land is far the best security to possess. I am no alarmist but it is impossible as it appears to me for any person to look at the present temper and condition of the times without much anxiety and disquietude. ... I firmly believe that the great landed proprietors will suffer less whatever happens to the funds."—S.C., D 593/K, Loch to Stafford, 9 Nov. 1819.

² *Ibid.*, Loch to Stafford, 11 Dec. 1820.

³ See my forthcoming paper 'The Social and Electoral Role of the Trentham Interest, 1800–1860', *Midland History*, 1974.

⁴ See, for instance, the volume edited by J. T. Ward and R. G. Wilson, *Land and Industry*, Newton Abbot, 1971.