

Village Traders and the Emergence of a Proletariat in South Warwickshire, 1750–1851

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THE numerical dominance of the landless labourer within agricultural districts like the Feldon of Warwickshire is a commonplace of nineteenth-century social history. In the east Feldon for example over 60 per cent of occupied males were of that class at the 1851 census.¹ This transformation is often associated with enclosure, although the details remain almost wholly obscure.² One of the present aims is to probe further the implications of Feldon land tax figures which warn of the extreme complexity and variability of rural society on the eve of change.³ By pressing into use a variety of sources one hopes to illuminate more clearly the impact of enclosure and the growing pattern of landlessness. The focus here is largely upon the east Feldon. In 1730 this remained an area of generally nucleated settlement and extensive common fields. Specialized industries like those found in the densely populated hamlets of North Warwickshire, or in adjoining counties like Northamptonshire, were largely absent. The debt here to other writers on the eighteenth century will be obvious. Malcolmson and Patten have made general statements about the cottager and country trading classes, while Kerr, Holderness, Neeson and Obelkevich have

each produced suggestive case-studies with a bearing on the present piece.⁴

The Feldon was a wholly farming locality, but in the eighteenth century the bulk of the pre-enclosure villagers, it will be suggested, probably followed a trade or craft. Malcolmson's recent text can perhaps provide a useful starting point. In many localities, even where most men did not occupy regular field land, they might, he notes, still secure a major part of their livelihood from the land because of the wide prevalence of customary rights of usage.⁵ So in the Feldon many of the near-landless preserved rights of access to the land in one form or another. The present discussion attempts to assess the usefulness of such rights, highlighting the vulnerability of common-field communities on the eve of the re-ordering of the fields. The land could sustain a not inconsiderable population of cottagers and tiny landowners, both occupying and non-occupying, precisely because they drew their living not only from the land, but also from other ancillary pursuits. This can perhaps be seen as an intermediate stage in the proletarianization of the village community, though in its origins it preceded the parliamentary phase of the enclosure movement.

A detail which calls for a word of explanation at the outset is the concept of village trader used here. The cottager who

¹The author is grateful to Drs J Thirsk and M Turner for commenting on an earlier draft of this piece. The 1851 census enumerators' schedules for South Warwickshire, PRO, HO 107/2075–7.

²For general comment see: G E Mingay, 'The Size of Farms in the 18th Century', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XIV, 1961, pp 480–7; Arthur Young and his Times, 1975, pp 112–15; *The Agricultural Revolution: Changes in Agriculture 1660–1880*, 1977, pp 52–3, 64; M E Turner, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and Landownership Change in Buckinghamshire', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXVIII, 1975, pp 565–61.

³J M Martin, 'The Parliamentary Enclosure Movement and Rural Society in Warwickshire', *Ag Hist Rev*, 15, I, 1967, pp 19–39; 'The Small Landowner and Parliamentary Enclosure in Warwickshire', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXII, 3, 1979, pp 323–43.

⁴R W Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700–1780*, 1981, pp 23–158; J Patten, *English Towns 1500–1700*, 1978, pp 205–23; B Kerr, *Bound to the Soil: A Social History of Dorset 1750–1918*, 1968, pp 12–136; B A Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen 1660–1850: A Regional Study in Lindsey', *Lincs Hist and Arch*, 7, 1972, pp 77–81; J Neeson, 'Common Right and Enclosure in Eighteenth Century Northamptonshire', unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1977, pp 188–220; J Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875*, Oxford, 1976, pp 46–102.

⁵Malcolmson, *op cit*, p 24.

inhabited the pastoral districts of England, and who found his salvation around 1700 in the pursuit of some specialized craft activity, has become a familiar figure. Preoccupied with national and international markets, such craftsmen were fundamentally different in character from the class of more localized traders which grew up in predominantly arable districts like the Feldon.⁶ In the latter one can broadly distinguish three types of country trader: a sprinkling of very substantial men—maltsters, mercers and the like; the farmer who from the late seventeenth century also occasionally carried on some trading activity; and finally the figure at the heart of the present discussion: the near-landless cottager who combined some craftly calling with a small, but for him significant, stake in the land.

It is not easy in Warwickshire to assess the effects of enclosure since so many villages were enclosed prior to 1780. Still, where common fields survived up to the era of the land tax both tiny landowners and village traders also sometimes survived in large numbers, the one group lending strength to the other.⁷ There is also a suggestion that in such parishes the cottager class at least were adversely affected by the abolition of the fields, and that this in turn hastened the divorce of the trade and craft elements from the land. As the agricultural economy was transformed these groups came under pressure from other quarters. The outcome can be pieced together from the 1851 census returns. In the light of this evidence the discussion concludes by suggesting that village traders and craftsmen formed a major source of recruitment for the rural proletariat of the nineteenth century. This does not, of course, exclude the possible importance of

other factors like the tendency, touched on elsewhere, for local population to expand.⁸

II

One might begin the detailed discussion by considering the question of occupational structure. At Priors Marston, located on the clays of the east Feldon, Styles discovered that by 1710 some 41 per cent of males were already absorbed into the trades, crafts and professions.⁹ Furthermore this tendency was probably strengthened by the depression of prices at that time. Thus, for example, at Brailes, a parish located in the south-east Feldon, Tennant tells us that the numbers engaged in trades and crafts multiplied then, a tendency which was complemented by a proliferation of very small holdings.¹⁰ And this seems to have occurred elsewhere. At Wolfhamcote nearby even the day-labourer was said in 1730 to be better off than the poor farmer on the clays of the east Feldon, so that a move into village trading perhaps made sense to hard-pressed cultivators on poor soils.¹¹

A source which further underlines this trend is the accounts of overseers of the poor. Those of the parishes of Grandborough and Wolfhamcote were examined for the years 1755–70, and those of the parish of Tysoe for 1790–99.¹² In each case some 40–50 males provided a range of 12–17 trading and craft services; the equivalent of half of the 89 and 85 families returned for Grandborough and Wolfhamcote in 1801. There was also a noticeable crowding in the traditional lesser trades like carpentry, tailoring and shoe-making; this became very much more pronounced in the next century, as we shall see, and can be regarded perhaps as a rough

⁶For the early history of these industries see: J Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, Oxford, 1978, pp 158–80.

⁷On this point see: S Addington, *An Enquiry into the Reasons for and Against Inclosing the Common Fields*, Coventry, 1768, p 38; more recently, Mingay, 'The Size of Farms', *loc cit*, p 473; A J Tennant, 'Brailes: A Feldon Community, 1550–1800', unpubl. MPhil thesis, Leicester, 1977, pp 120–2, 145–52, 193–7.

⁸J M Martin, *The Rise in Population in Eighteenth Century Warwickshire*, Dugdale Society Papers, 23, 1976.

⁹P Styles, 'The Social Structure of Kington Hundred in the Reign of Charles II', in P Styles, *Studies in 17th Century West Midland History*, Kington, 1978, p 154.

¹⁰Tennant, *op cit*, pp 120–1.

¹¹See: 'The Case Stated for the Enclosure of Flecknoe Field', Warwickshire County Record Office (henceforth CRO), ref Z/12.

¹²Tysoe Overseers of the Poor Accounts, CRO, ref DR 288/5; Grandborough, ref DR III/26–8; Wolfhamcote, ref DR 167/5.

index of incipient pauperization, made fact after enclosure.

Support for these findings comes from two other useful sources: the Victuallers Recognizances of 1764, and the Return of Persons using Weights, Measures and Balances of 1797.¹³ The proliferation of victuallers was most marked, with several of the larger agricultural parishes recording eight or nine apiece. In aggregate some 34 east Feldon parishes returned 89 licensed persons. The 1797 Return is equally illuminating. It can yield no more than a rough impression of the number of shopkeepers of various sorts, and even they are probably seriously understated in some instances. A case in point is the parish of Hillmorton which returned only three beershops and one bakery, whereas a valuation of 1803 named eight public houses and three bakers within the parish (which coincided with the village).¹⁴ The Return records a total of 195 village shops spread over 36 agricultural parishes of the east Feldon. There were in all 42 separate village trades and crafts including some 13 specialist trades — six coal merchants, four mealmen, and salt-, cheese-, bacon-, tea-, and pig-dealers. The figures show that in parishes like Harbury, Brailes, Tysoe and Hillmorton there were at least 19–16 food and beer shops apiece, which suggests that in each of the larger parishes nearly 20 per cent of the families were taken up with the retailing of food alone during the second half of the eighteenth century.

A further source which sheds valuable light on this village landscape is the £10 freehold rolls which survive for most years from the 1690s and include occupational detail for all resident lease-, copy- and freeholders qualified to serve on juries.¹⁵ Most of these were farmers of some sort or

other. This material serves to remind us that not all village traders were mere cottagers; some were men of more substance, employed in some form of dual enterprise coupled to farming. It was a tendency which began in Brailes, says Tennant, in the late seventeenth century.¹⁶ The number of freeholders tended to increase over the course of the century: in 18 parishes enclosed between 1775–1815 for instance the rise was from 108 to 152 (40 per cent) between those dates. This influx was mainly of the new class of tenant farmer and more substantial dealer. Nevertheless there was a wide variety of occupations (31) outside farming. A count of individuals appearing in the lists of 14 east with a sizable body of small owners the indicated that of 173 persons, some 73 (42 per cent) were said to belong to some trade or craft. In the tiny market-town of Southam, decayed market villages like Kineton and Brinklow, and advantageously situated parishes like Dunchurch, they formed upwards of 60 per cent.¹⁷ And in the larger agricultural parishes they were hardly less striking, with at least 25 of 64 men appearing in the lists of Priors Marston, Napton and Tysoe engaged in some occupation other than farming. Surviving Militia Lists, as for the tiny Hundred of Chipping Warden located upon the adjoining Northampton Clays, make the same point.¹⁸ Of the 360 men aged 18–45 in the year 1777, some 113 (31 per cent) were engaged in trade and crafts, forming the largest single group. Traders and craftsmen were thus a sheet anchor of the traditional community in south Warwickshire. More generally their numbers found reflection in a sustained pamphlet and parliamentary campaign (in which tiny Feldon towns like Southam

¹⁶ Tennant, *op cit*, p 145.

¹⁷ By 1730 Acts had been passed relating to roads from Birmingham to Warmington, Dunchurch to Northampton, and Stratford to Long Compton. An Act of 1769 initiated the Coventry to Banbury stretch of the Oxford Canal.

¹⁸ V A Hatley (ed), *Northampton Militia Lists 1777*, Northampton Record Society, XXV, 1973.

¹³ Victuallers Recognizances, 1764, CRO, QS/35; Return of Persons using Weights, Measures and Balances, 1797. CRO, QS 89/1.

¹⁴ Valuation, parish of Hillmorton, 1803, DR 367/24 in CRO.

¹⁵ Annual Returns of £10 freeholders, 1698–1820, CRO. QS 76.

played their part) aimed against the hawkers and pedlars.¹⁹

How then do we explain the role of the village trader? One part of the explanation was the precocious transport development which transformed the local economy in the half century after about 1670. Ancient saltways and two great drovers ways leading from Wales to London had long traversed the Feldon.²⁰ In addition Stratford-upon-Avon was by 1670 becoming 'an outpost of Bristol's commercial empire', and most of the rest of the Feldon was said to share in the wealth created by this trade.²¹ This is evidenced by the striking number of tiny market towns and villages in and around the seventeenth-century Feldon.²² All — even Southam — were decayed or in decline by 1750, but as Patten noticed, the retail function of their defunct markets passed then to the surrounding villages.²³ Another feature of the time were the early turnpikes which cut across the county from the south-east.²⁴ By 1720 Nuneaton, Atherstone and Coventry, placed in the north of the county at the centre of the Midlands road system, were all said to be flourishing.²⁵ Later the Oxford canal passed through the east Feldon. There were other less tangible advantages accruing to the local trader able to tap the growing consumer market without jeopardizing his favourable taxation position.²⁶ Homer, the Warwickshire cleric and author, noticed the broad-based expansion of demand which overlay the long troughs experienced by local

bread-grain prices with the result that the common man had 'learnt to live more luxuriously'.²⁷

III

When one turns to examine the links of this trading class with the land two points emerge. A marked differentiation, arising possibly out of settlement restrictions, meant that a high proportion of the Feldon population resided in the eighteenth century in common-field villages.²⁸ In a block of 51 parishes comprising the whole of east and south-east Warwickshire bounded by the Fosse Way and Watling Street, an area of 125,220 acres, a mere 15 of the larger agricultural parishes enclosed between 1754 and 1812 accounted for 2023 (50 per cent) of the 4030 families. Another sample group consisting of 11 old-enclosed parishes accounted this time for a mere 390 (9.6 per cent) of the total families. This feature of the population geography of the Feldon should be borne in mind when assessing the social impact of enclosure.

Another point underlined recently by Malcolmson is the widespread access to the land enjoyed in common-field villages. One form of access was highlighted by Addington, drawing his evidence from the counties adjoining the east Feldon. Most large parishes of this type, he observed, had men with 'little parcels of land . . . by the assistance of which with the profits of a little trade and their daily labour they procure a very comfortable living'.²⁹ Nevertheless the most common form of access was acquired through the rights attached to the occupation of cottages: no less than 538 cottage rights were dealt with under the awards of Atherstone, Alcester and Warwick alone. Atherstone, a small market-town placed between the Feldon and the Arden, offers us

¹⁹ See petition from the traders of Southam, said by 1820 to bear 'the aspect of a large village', Commons Journal, XXI, 1727-32, p 484.

²⁰ J H Drew, 'The Welsh Road and the Drovers', *Trans B'ham Arch Soc*, 82, 1965, pp 38-43.

²¹ A Dyer, 'Warwickshire Towns under the Tudors and Stuarts', *Warwickshire History*, III, 1976, p 123.

²² Dyer, *op cit*, pp 124-5; Tennant, *op cit*, p 195.

²³ Patten, *op cit*, pp 205-7, 222; also 'Changing Occupational Structure in the East Anglian Countryside, 1500-1700', in H S A Fox and R A Butlin (eds), *Change in the Countryside: Essays in Rural England 1500-1900*, pp 105-9.

²⁴ See note 17 above.

²⁵ Dyer, *op cit*, pp 123-6.

²⁶ For complaint regarding the light burden of taxation borne by rural traders see *Gentlemen's Magazine*, XIV, 1744, p 654.

²⁷ H Homer, *An Essay . . . Upon the Inclosure of Common Fields*, Oxford, 1766, pp 16-20.

²⁸ For long-standing effect of the Settlement Laws, see debate 'to prevent vexatious removals of the Poor', *Parliamentary History*, 1775, XVII, col 843.

²⁹ Addington, *op cit*, pp 26-33.

a particularly arresting case-study, allowing the enquirer a rare glimpse behind the screen of words, often heightened improvement propaganda, which tended to dismiss such rights as rendered 'useless'.³⁰ Above 100 of the 160 Atherstone cottagers were keeping up to two horses and two cows which were 'plentifully supplied with Grass . . . because that part of the Fields they are restrained Yield a Supply when that which they Enjoyed is gone, and also for above Halfe a Year they have the whole Reape of the common Fields'; in addition, the cottagers had exclusive rights over certain pastures from 23 April till Opentide, and from Mowing to Opentide they had feeding rights in the Midsummer Grounds and Meadowing; finally there were their rights in the Cow Pasture and Outwoods. Enjoyment of such extensive grazing rights had been fundamental to the personal economy of the cottagers, allowing them to 'carry on their business at a distance' and to participate in an extensive carrying trade between the Feldon, Arden and the nearby coalfield. Many parishes may not, of course, have preserved such generous commoning as this. Nevertheless, information contained in manorial, probate and award documents shows that quite a number of Feldon parishes dealt with in Parliament did, in point of fact, preserve a wide variety of commoning: extensive heathland for example finds mention at Hillmorton, Napton, Brailes, Easington, the Comptons, Stretton-on-Fosse, Tredington and a number of other places. It is also worth noting that many individuals not in possession of regular field land were compensated for loss of rights in the fields (quite apart from loss of common rights). Examples of this are the 'two butts attached to a cottage' at Barford; the compensation for 'a piece of greensward and one land' at Radway; and for 'odd leys', 'odd

lands' and 'lottground' at Harbury, Napton, Avon Dasset, and Southam, to mention but a few. It is clear from manorial court rolls and probate records that much store was set by the grazing of the numerous uncultivated open spaces scattered about the unenclosed village. At Whichford and Harbury the court rolls mention a variety of commoning including the greensward between the strips and about the fields. Such spaces occasionally received specific mention in Feldon wills, as in the bequest by G Bradshaw of Priors Marston of a yardland with its 'leys, heads, baulks and other commonable land'.³¹

The rights arising out of the ordinary working of the common fields were also important. To the 60 or so cottagers who, at Atherstone, declined to stock their commons they afforded 'a certain Livelihood'; at harvest time men got 'six shillings per week and beer' and women got '2 shillings till Corn Harvest, then 3 shillings'; gleaning, we are told, 'secured 15 shillings to a family' while the right to gather fuel brought in an addition 6-8 shillings per week in its season; all other work in the fields got '4 shillings per week and beer in the (various) Branches'.³² Similar opportunities must also have existed in the east Feldon before the abolishment of both common fields and arable type farming. Homer, for example, who drew his observations from the Feldon, underlined the commonable nature of all the fields throughout half of the year, while pointing to the loss of fuel and other rights which always occurred at enclosure. Gleaning rights, he found, were a special boon to the cottager since the amount granted had been as great in years of dearth as of plenty, so that it was 'most advantageous when most wanted to be so'.³³ Addington covers the

³⁰ Enclosure details for Nuneaton and Atherstone are in Compton Bracebridge Papers, CRO, box HR/35; it was only twenty years after loss of the fields that the Atherstone commons were rendered useless, and enclosed without resistance: CJ, XLI, 1786, pp 303, 656.

³¹ Whichford and Harbury manorial documents, CRO, 450/box 30, and 299/4/11, 4/13, 3/3, 319; will of G Bradshaw, 18 June 1737, Lichfield Joint Record Office (henceforth LJRO), Calendar of Wills, 1726-50.

³² Loose document: 'On the Design of Inclosing Atherstone fields, 1730', Compton Bracebridge MS, *loc cit.*

³³ Homer, *op cit*, pp 18-20, 23-5; Addington, *op cit*, pp 33-9.

same points: gleaning and the right to turfs, roots and furze had been widespread; most of the cottagers in every parish that had been enclosed were deprived of the means of support. Previously, 'some in almost all such open parishes had . . . little parcels of land . . . with a right of common for a cow or three sheep'. Significantly both men note the decline in the horse population essential for engaging in trade.

A survey of benefits enjoyed by the community at large must also note those ordinarily attached to the cottagers' homesteads. Thus at Morton Morrell for example the award of 1758 recorded 56 acres attached to cottages in the form of orchards, gardens, backsides, and homesteads which served to complement the commoning lying disposed about the village.

If access to the land was indeed widespread and varied in many common-field parishes, the next question is: to what extent did village traders and craftsmen make use of such rights on the eve of enclosure? Here one can take advantage of the surviving probate material, though problems of space allow only a passing reference. The wills, or where extant, the inventories of all labourers, traders and craftsmen were examined for the period 1727-49, involving the records of some 78 individuals.³⁴ Since most men whose inventory wealth was less than £30 would fall into one of these three occupational groups, a further 20 inventories valued at under £30 were added to the above sample, which was then divided by area, as between the east Feldon and the Avon valley. Towns like Southam and Rugby were excluded, leaving 42 parishes. What does this evidence tell us? If one excludes small parcels of hay, straw and flax, along with stocks of bees and poultry, then one is left with some 37 individuals (56 per cent) who were in possession of field land, animals or crops in the east Feldon, and a

further 17 (51 per cent) in the Avon valley. For various reasons these figures could have underestimated the true proportions involved. Humble testators were nearly as likely to be taken up with some farming, apparently, as the more substantial trader: of 52 men leaving inventory wealth of under £30 some 28 (53 per cent) recorded field land, animals or crops, compared to 26 of 39 (66 per cent) of those valued at over £30.

The bulk of these men were petty traders with their backs in an acre or two: men like T Overton of Morton Morrell worth only £7, who left a cow in the yard valued at £3 together with 'one land of pease in the field'; or M Savage, a shopkeeper of Oxhill worth £38, who boasted half a quartern of land in the field, and grazed cattle worth £8.³⁵

Traders and craftsmen also figured quite often in Feldon enclosure awards. At Hillmorton (enclosed 1754) some 11 of 35 holdings of under 100 acres went to traders; at Priors Marston (1758) and at Grandborough (1766) the figures were 20 of 54 and 5 of 13 holdings respectively. In the small market town of Southam (1761) over half of the allotments of under 100 acres went to tradesmen.

Enclosure came after 1780 to the last great Feldon strongholds. Correlation with the land tax records serves to highlight the presence here as elsewhere of many village traders, particularly amongst the smallest group of contributors. Thus of 23 traders who figured in the returns at Tysoe, 12 contributed a sum of under £1. At Brailes, Tennant found that 15 of the 23 men paying between two shillings and £1 were village traders,³⁶ and at Easington a similar picture emerged.

The existence of such a large class of village traders may perhaps help to explain certain features of ownership in the Feldon. There were, for instance, in some large parishes quite a few forty-shilling free-

³⁴ Probate wills and inventories for South Warwickshire are in LJRO and the Worcester and Hereford Joint Record Office, St Helens, Worcester (henceforth WHRO).

³⁵ WHRO, inventories dated 28 and 21 May 1730.

³⁶ Tennant, *op cit*, p 120.

holders and land tax contributors who apparently owned but did not occupy small fragments of field land.³⁷

IV

It might be useful at this point to summarize the discussion so far. The common fields formed the lynch-pin of an age-old system of cottage farming on a minute scale. The main beneficiaries of this régime were, in the course of time, the village trading and craft families, possibly the most numerous section of the community on the eve of enclosure.

What then was the effect of the re-ordering of the fields? Here one should try to distinguish between the immediate and the longer-term consequences. In large parishes with a sizable body of small owners the former could have been quite serious. At Atherstone (1730–38) many of the 160 cottagers were unable to prove their claims, while at Alcester (1771) Styles found that substantial selling-up occurred amongst the owners of the 280 cottage commons in the interval between Act and award.³⁸ Correlation of the 1774 Poll Book with the land tax lists suggests that after 1780, some small owners, many of whom were village traders, were also affected by the abolishment of the fields in large east Feldon parishes like Napton, Harbury, Brailes, and Tysoe.

A key to understanding this selling-up where it occurred can be sought in a consideration of the costs of enclosure, and of the compensation meted by commissioners. The former were undoubtedly high, while the latter usually took the form of some mere token gesture. The details recorded in 60 Warwickshire awards, while reflecting the survival of extensive commons, also suggest a distinct decline in generosity over time. This hardening of attitudes appears to correspond to a rise in

poor law expenditure in the Feldon. Thus at the enclosure by Private Agreement of the tiny hamlet of Thurlaston in 1728, on the eve of the parliamentary movement, some 45 acres were left in common for the benefit of the poor. More typical later on, however, was the provision of an allotment in place of fuel and furze gathering rights, the benefit confined, as at Napton, Easington and Brailes, to those 'industrious poor not in receipt of relief'. Even such modest benefits as the poor did enjoy came under threat of re-interpretation during the eighteenth century. This tendency is well illustrated by two episodes involving customary practice in Feldon parishes.³⁹ Such events underline the widespread uncertainty which surrounded all communal rights vested in the land, even where common fields remained intact. It also helps to explain the selling-up by cottagers who possessed little or nothing except common rights.

When one turns to the long-term consequences of enclosure the picture appears equally gloomy for the cottager and village trading classes. For the moment, however, one might turn aside to note that it was from the trade and craft families that the eighteenth-century village derived much of its character. Reflecting the exigencies of apprenticeship arrangements as well as the habits of the ubiquitous farm servant, marriage took place late for both sexes, a practice which yielded only slowly to the changed conditions of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Another characteristic was the apparently high level of functional literacy amongst males.⁴¹ In the second half of the eighteenth century five of the six parishes looked at produced a rate of register signing in the range 62–69 per cent. This then fell to 50 per cent in three, and from 68 to 66 per cent

³⁷ For this pattern and the impact of enclosure, Martin, 'Small Landowners', *loc cit*, pp 338–42.

³⁸ *Victoria County History of Warwickshire*, III, 1945, p 124.

³⁹ For threat to custom in Napton, Shuckburgh estate collection, CRO, CR 1248, box 41, 16/11/F; for the Harbury cottagers' rights: Harbury manorial documents, *loc cit*, 450, box 30.

⁴⁰ J M Martin, 'Marriage and Economic Stress in the Feldon of Warwickshire in the Eighteenth Century', *Population Studies*, XXXI, 1977, pp 519–35.

⁴¹ For the literacy of agricultural labourers see Obelkevich, *op cit*, p 78.

in a fourth parish; in two others it remained constant.

This fall-off in literacy was symptomatic of a more general deterioration in village life. While at the end of the century the Earl of Warwick could castigate the Feldon farmer for allowing shortages and actual starvation to go unchecked, behind this lay a set of more fundamental circumstances.⁴² As noted earlier a disproportionately large part of the local population resided in parishes which saw wholesale conversion of former arable fields to permanent pasture. Enclosure thus served as a catalyst. Socially the effect was summed up by Addington: small farmers were tending to be replaced, he noted, by '4-5 wealthy graziers'; and this in turn meant the disappearance of other families employed or supported by them: 'blacksmiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, and other artificers and tradesmen, besides their own labourers and servants'.⁴³ This last point was also made, by Kerr, of early nineteenth-century Dorset.⁴⁴ In Warwickshire, Lane noted that with the fading away of the servant and village apprenticeship groups, both the independent labourer and the lesser craftsman lost status.⁴⁵ The former were then recruited, according to Cobbett, from the 'progeny of miserable and propertyless labourers'. At Tysoe in the Feldon, Ashby traced the disappearance of 30 craftsmen (half of the whole) and 120 dependants in the 20 years following enclosure.⁴⁶ Local manorial rolls and census schedules touched on below tell a similar story. The loss of the fields themselves was perhaps the worst blow of all. The demands made by the community upon small-scale village traders tended then to dry up. In the three years

1818-21 the wages of local agricultural labourers fell by 30 per cent, and rising poor-law expenditure was concentrated, as in Dorset, on a narrower range of relief. Post-war depression hit both agriculture and the local building trade, with house construction standing virtually still in the east Feldon before the 1830s.⁴⁷ The scope for family earnings was also severely diminished, particularly in the east Feldon. Women and children lost their traditional harvest tasks, and apart from a little haymaking, no work remained, as the 1834 commissioner found, even in the vicinity of the largest labourers' parishes like Napton and Wellesbourne.⁴⁸ Nor, as is shown below, did any rural industry spring up in the Feldon to compensate for this loss.

Socially there was a growing differentiation of the rural community. The chief concern of the Warwickshire farmer became, says Quinault, 'to keep the poor-rate low by forcing the despised Hodge to live in insanitary open villages at a distance of two or three miles from his work'.⁴⁹ The 'close' parish, symbol of the triumph of the gentlemen farmer, encroached upon the local landscape.⁵⁰ Close by lay satellite 'open' parishes, divided off, like George Eliot's Bassett, by 'poor soils, poor roads, and rather less than half a curate, also poor'. The local landed interest opposed the notion of allotments, and so near-starvation became, it was said, a not infrequent experience.⁵¹ Feldon farmers also opposed the schooling of the labourers' children, so that where this did exist it was 'bad almost beyond belief', a view reflected in the faltering standards of literacy noted earlier.⁵²

Manorial and census documents relating

⁴² Lord Warwick led the campaign for a wheat maximum: *Parliamentary History*, 32, 1795-7, col 236; 35, 1800-1, cols 833-4; local starvation reports occurred for example in 1795, 1800-1, 1835.

⁴³ Addington, *op cit*, p 38.

⁴⁴ Kerr, *op cit*, pp 125-35.

⁴⁵ J Lane, 'Apprenticeship in Warwickshire, 1700-1834', unpubl. PhD thesis, Birmingham, 1977, pp 14, 89-91.

⁴⁶ A W Ashby, *One Hundred Years of Poor Law Administration in a Warwickshire Village*, Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History, III, 1912, p 334.

⁴⁷ Information on house construction drawn from decennial census returns.

⁴⁸ Poor Law Report, 1834, Irish University Press, 10, Answers to Rural Questions, No 23, Appendix B, I, pp 537-56.

⁴⁹ R E Quinault, 'Warwickshire Landowners and Politics c 1841-1923', unpubl. DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1975, pp 198-9.

⁵⁰ Report to Poor Law Board on Laws of Settlement and Removal of the Poor, BPP 1850, XXVII, pp 171, 409.

⁵¹ J O'Leary, *The Autobiography of Joseph Arch*, 1966, p 23; *The Life of Thomas Wamless Peasant* (by himself), 1885, p 32.

⁵² Wamless, *op cit*, p 32; Arch, *op cit*, p 28.

to the ten principal former common-field and three old-enclosed estate parishes of the east Feldon serve to illuminate this re-shaping of the community. Suit rolls cover the parishes of Eatington and Oxhill: in the former only 23 of 146 occupied males (15 per cent), and in the latter some 14 of 65 males (21 per cent) were in each case engaged in trade or craft callings in the year 1833.⁵³

Turning to the 1851 census, it appears that the three adjoining parishes of Harbury, Napton and Southam together provided a substantial pool of both agricultural and craft labour to serve the needs of the east Feldon, and Brailes did the same for the south-east Feldon. There were, on the other hand, certain parishes, including some former common-field strongholds, with relatively few surviving traders and craftsmen. This question needs to be considered in more detail. What follows, therefore, is an estimate of traders and craftsmen as a proportion of all occupied males in a sample of 13 east Feldon parishes. This comprised the ten principal former common-field parishes of the locality, and three old-enclosed parishes. In the first group of ten parishes there were in aggregate some 621 traders and craftsmen out of 2571 occupied males, a mean of 24.1 per cent of the labour force. This mean varied for individual parishes: in six of the ten cases it lay in the range 15–23, and in the remainder 24–29 per cent of occupied males. In the second group of three parishes — all old-enclosed — the aggregated trades and craft element amounted to 21 of 214, or a mere 9 per cent of occupied males. Finally the figure of 24 per cent or less of occupied males in 1851 can be compared with estimates, noted above for the previous century, of between 31–41 per cent of much smaller village populations who followed some trade or craft in that earlier period.

Even more significant, perhaps, than any shrinkage in overall numbers, was the

crowding of the local labour force into a narrow range of lesser crafts, highlighted also in Kerr's Dorset parishes.⁵⁴ Brailes was the only one of the 13 parishes looked at which attracted any non-village trades. By contrast, in the nine other former common-field parishes no less than 157 of 320 craftsmen (49 per cent) were taken up with the traditional pursuits of carpentry, tailoring or shoemaking.

There was, of course, another side to these events. While the lesser trades sank into the ranks of pauperized labour, some individual traders nevertheless built up quite large-scale concerns. In the neighbouring parishes of Dunchurch and Hillmorton for instance, the existence of road link and canal wharf had encouraged the rise, by the 1790s, of numerous coal, salt and milling enterprises serving the rest of the Feldon. Farmstock advertisements in local newspapers demonstrate that the period of the French Wars also saw the beginning of a purchasing switch by the new gentleman farmer away from the products of the ordinary village craftsmen in favour of more specialized or new-fangled machinery.⁵⁵ One or two of the more populous communities — Brailes in the east Feldon was one example — thus gained the opportunity to satisfy some of this demand.

Behind all the changes stood the new class of tenant farmer. Enclosure was sometimes the occasion for noticeable alterations in tenancy arrangements. Thus after the 1769 award at Grandborough a notice appeared in the *Northampton Mercury* inviting bids for the tenancy of a 390 acre farm, all laid to pasture. Elsewhere old farming dynasties, long-established in the locality, took the opportunity to extend their hold over the former common-field parishes. One such was the Middleton family who, occupying tenancies in the estate parishes of the Earl of Northampton and R Child, a banker, went on after enclosure to occupy the principal

⁵³ Suit rolls covering the parishes of Eatington and Oxhill (1833) in Shirley Estate papers, CRO, CR 229, box 3/1.

⁵⁴ Kerr, *op cit*, p 133.

⁵⁵ See J M Martin, 'Warwickshire and the Parliamentary Enclosure Movement', unpubl. PhD thesis, Birmingham, 1966, I, p 68.

tenancies in a block of parishes surrounding Tysoe.⁵⁶

Not one among a host of commentators who ranged from the Earl of Warwick speaking at the turn of the century, to Henry Evershed writing in the calmer days of High Farming had so much as a good word for this new class of farmer.⁵⁷ Separated physically as well as socially, farmers, petty tradesmen and labourers harboured a strong mutual antipathy remarked upon by all. These new distances are illuminated by the records. At Hillmorton the farmers appear almost to have withdrawn from acts of public ceremony, so that over the years 1837-51, of 184 marriage-partners entering their names in the registers, no more than six involved the sons or daughters of farmers. Only at Napton, unusual in that quite a few small

farmers survived, did some 34 of 163 entries (20 per cent) refer to the offspring of farmers. At the same time marriage into farming families was virtually unknown in either parish. The main connection of the trade and craft element was downwards: one third of the grooms drawn from these classes married into labouring families in both parishes.

The debate over the fate of the small landowner has not given due weight, perhaps, to the amazing variety and complexity of English rural life in the eighteenth century. But if one had to generalize it might be more true to say that the old society crumbled in the Feldon with the passing away of the village trades and crafts rather than with the destruction of the small landowner class as such. This it was, perhaps, that determined the character of the new order. Across the void left by the disappearance of many village traders, farmer and labourer faced up to each other in mutual antipathy and low regard.

⁵⁶ *Northampton Mercury*, 26 February 1770; for outcry against the engrossing of tenancies see *Parliamentary History*, 32, 1795, col 236.

⁵⁷ Evershed repeats Murray's comment of 1815, 'a sly jealous set': 'The Farming of Warwickshire', *JRASE*, XVII, 1856, p 493.



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