

The Social and Economic Origins of the Vale of Evesham Market Gardening Industry

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NEW importance has been given by the writings of Dr Thirsk to the cultivation of 'special' crops in early Modern England. Her fresh appraisal has bestowed on them an important role within the English economy.¹ Nevertheless, except for tobacco, little is known in detail about such crops. The present piece looks therefore at the origins of the gardening industry in one of its principal locations, the Vale of Evesham. Here the peasantry of the adjoining Vales of Tewkesbury and Evesham, freed from the constraining influence of watchful landlords, sought their livelihood, says Dr Thirsk, in pursuits which exploited their main asset — their own hands. Labour-intensive crops of fruit and vegetables as well as of tobacco enabled them to hold their own, and to survive into the present century. Nevertheless, the rise of such vigorous peasant communities has attracted little attention from the outside world.² Only one article on the local market gardening industry has appeared in recent times.³ This piece outlined its main phases of growth, giving prominent attention to the town of Evesham. Virtually no use was made by this writer, however, of probate, parish register, taxation, or census records which cast interesting light on individual Vale communities. A piece which does exploit such sources is a recent article on

Bedfordshire gardening, here used as a source of comparative information on the infant industry.⁴

I

One aspect of the present work which calls for comment is the attention given to Pershore. This was a very modest country-town of only 2812 inhabitants in 1841, but was nevertheless destined to become one of the two principal centres of the Vale industry in the nineteenth century. Its occupational and social structure was less complex than that of Evesham, and it thus offers a better insight into the socio-economic climate in which the early industry laid down its roots in the century after 1750.

Some of the principal Pershore families connected with the post-1850 expansion of gardening activity can be shown to have been already working garden ground during the early eighteenth century. Of course here, as in Bedfordshire and South Staffordshire, the phase of more rapid growth got under way somewhat later.⁵ The period of the French Wars and their immediate aftermath was certainly a time of expansion. A stimulus was provided at that time by major road schemes connecting the Vale with growing centres of population (touched on below). Parish registers and other sources show that by the 1820s gardeners were widely spread throughout the neighbourhood of Pershore, as well as in the two main

¹ J Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, Oxford, 1978, pp 2-5; 'Projects for Gentlemen, Jobs for the Poor: Mutual Aid in the Vale of Tewkesbury 1600-1630' in P McGrath and J Cannon, eds, *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History*, Bristol, 1976, p 159; 'New Crops and their Diffusion: Tobacco Growing in Seventeenth-Century England' in C W Chalklin and M A Havinden, eds, *Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500-1800*, 1974, pp 76-8.

² *Ibid.*, pp 90-1.

³ R Sidwell, 'A Short History of Commercial Horticulture in the Vale of Evesham', *Vale of Evesham Historical Society Research Paper*, II, 1969, pp 43-50.

⁴ F Beavington, 'The Development of Market Gardening in Bedfordshire 1799-1939', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXIII, 1, 1975, pp 23-47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 27-8; for Staffs see produce of 41 acres of Fisherwick Park Gardens, 1809-13, *Elford Hall Collection*, Birmingham Reference Library, cat nos 771, 197, 820; also H Thorpe, 'Lichfield: Growth and Function', *Historical Collections for Staffordshire*, 1950-1, p 200.

towns.⁶ Other distinctive features showed themselves at an early date. Thus some of the earliest gardening parishes like Ripple and the two Pershore parishes were composed of numerous scattered hamlets and abundant commons.⁷ Both in Pershore and in certain adjoining parishes, all later gardening strongholds, the Dean and Chapter of Westminster owned large estates.⁸ Here the villager tended to be his own man, fortified by a striking fragmentation of land and property amongst a medley of Westminster tenants and under-tenants. The leasehold arrangements which overlay this minute division of property in Pershore finds frequent mention in the probate records. Early Vale gardeners were drawn, judging by their inventory wealth, largely from the ranks of the labouring and lesser trade sections of the community. Thus initially vegetables, like tobacco after 1620, were in Dr Thirsk's phrase 'a poor man's crop'.⁹ A key to this gardening activity appears to have been the large amount of house-property with garden ground and orchards attached which found its way in Pershore into the hands of the lowest strata of society (even today vegetable allotments continue to occupy a large area of land close to the centre of the town). The Vale's knitting and gardening pursuits must have sprung out of a need for employment locally during the eighteenth century.¹⁰ For while tobacco growing had ceased, population rose sharply in and around Pershore after 1750. At the same time the extensive tracts of heavy soils

were being put down to grass for sheep.¹¹ For humble men the attraction of gardening was that, like tobacco-growing, it utilized what lay to hand: access to garden property and commons, family labour, and time. The mid-nineteenth-century censuses serve to illuminate the dependence on family labour; and along with tithe schedules and directories yield information on the incidence of dual occupations, the size of holdings and the pace of expansion in the industry.

II

It might be useful to begin by taking a stand at around 1820, a time when records first became reasonably plentiful. The rising commercial importance of the Vale at that time is well illustrated by the new road construction schemes which established direct links with the principal urban centres of the region: with Cheltenham, a rising spa town in 1811; then via Telford's arch over the Severn at Tewkesbury, with the new industrial centres of South Wales; and finally in 1825 by a direct link across country (cutting out Worcester) with Birmingham and the Black Country.¹² By 1834 the Vale growers were said to serve six markets, 'all within easy reach'.

As a result of these improvements in communication the requirement for certain Vale products appears at first to have outrun supply. Local newspaper reports show that both potatoes and fruit fetched high prices in certain of the post-Napoleonic war years despite the large acreages given over to these two products in the Vale.¹³ It seems that production was expanded in response to this demand, and as a result the price of, for

⁶The registers of Holy Cross and St Andrew, Pershore, Birlingham, Eckington, Ripple, Welland, and Defford were consulted in Worcester and Hereford Joint Record Office (henceforth CRO), St Helens, Worcester; directories included: Anon, *The Worcestershire Directory*, Worcester, 1820; T Bentley, *History, Gazetteer and Directory for Worcestershire*, I, Birmingham, 1841; Hunt's *City of Gloucester and Cheltenham Directory*, Gloucester, 1847; one £10 freeholder list survives for each parish for year 1822, CRO Acc 201/180.

⁷Ripple for instance contained some eight villages and hamlets.

⁸The character of Westminster land was illustrated in numerous property notices: see for example the estate in hand of G Perrot, *Berrows Worcester Journal* (henceforth BWJ) 19 March 1807, spread over the villages of Eckington, Wick, Elmley and Bishampton.

⁹'Projects for Gentlemen', *op cit*, p 159.

¹⁰For the Pershore and Evesham woollen knitting industry in 1744 see: *HJCJ*, XXIV, pp 830, 842.

¹¹See: A Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England*, III, 2nd ed 1771, p 307; Report of Select Committee on Agriculture, BPP 1833, V, pp 83, 90; J D Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, V, 1953, p 328.

¹²The 'new road from Evesham to Cheltenham' passed near an estate at Aston, *BWJ*, 2 May 1811; the notice for a farm at Kempsey commented on the 'projected new road from Pershore direct to Birmingham' coupled with the widening of the Worcester turnpike: *BWJ*, 12 August 1825.

¹³For the price of apples 1819-39, *BWJ*, 19 March 1840; for price of potatoes, *Gloucester Journal*, 15 May 1826, 11 May 1833.

example, Vale apples fell sharply from 10s to 2s 4d per bushel in the twenty years after 1819.

What effect did rising market demand have on land use? Both Young writing in the 1770s and Pitt forty years later commented on the spread of gardening in the town of Evesham, but the numbers springing up elsewhere have hitherto gone unrecorded. Numerous property advertisements illuminate the traditional popularity of fruit orchards in the Vale. Small farmers like J Checketts of Eckington, with only nine acres, would normally have an acre or two under fruit. Other small men like S Smith of Birlingham managed to combine, in his case three acres of fruit with crops of wheat and garden produce including potatoes, onions, cabbages, peas and turnip seed.¹⁴ Potatoes, onions and cabbages are the vegetables encountered most frequently in early-nineteenth-century advertisements. One six-acre garden at Ashchurch had storage space in 1813 for 100 pots of potatoes and 200 bushels of onions. Another garden at Upton contained 250 pots of potatoes, forty pots of onions, and some 300,000 early cabbage plants.¹⁵ As in Dorset, the emphasis on potato growing probably helped to compensate for the fall-off after 1815 in home-grown hemp and flax. Bounties paid from 1782 to encourage cultivation of the latter may well have also assisted the early spread of vegetable growing. They did after all require similar soils and dressing techniques. And gardening dynasties like the Andrews family of Pershore also figured prominently in the eighteenth century as flaxgrowers. Furthermore, the neighbourhood around Pershore formed the principal area of hemp and flax cultivation in the county.¹⁶

¹⁴ BWJ, 15 January 1806; 9 July 1801.

¹⁵ *Gloucester Journal*, 24 May 1813; 22 January 1848.

¹⁶ B Kerr, *Bound to the Soil: a Social History of Dorset 1750-1918*, 1968, p. 32; for the effect of the bounties in fostering cultivation around Pershore and Evesham see J Noakes, *Notes and Queries for Worcestershire*, 1856, pp. 102-3; for combination of horticultural pursuits with flaxgrowing see register of Holy Cross, Pershore and wills of W Cosnett 25 June 1808, S Andrews 5 April 1820.

Whatever the cause, the post-war decades were obviously significant for the development of gardening.¹⁷ The registers of the two Pershore parishes recorded fifty-two gardening households between 1813 and 1819, which compares with the fifty-five gardeners found in Sandy, the main Bedfordshire location in the years 1813-31.¹⁸ The same decade saw gardeners springing up in a number of riverside villages. For example the parishes of Birlingham, Eckington and Ripple all recorded upwards of five gardeners apiece by 1820. In 1841 gardeners were appearing in all the villages of the Avon valley below Pershore, and in the neighbouring Severnside parishes of Ripple, Upton and Kempsey. By that date all these parishes could boast between ten and twenty gardening households each.

Behind this expansion into the catchment area of the future industry lay a growing awareness of its profitability. This was reflected in an astronomical rise in the rental value of garden ground in the Vale. Young had noted in the 1770s that the Evesham gardens let for between 50s and £3. By 1807 Pitt was claiming that every country labourer in the Vale could afford to give as much, or more than the farmer in rent per acre (this was also true of allotments let out to labourers by philanthropic landlords). Later on in 1834 an advertisement claimed that the conversion of pasture to garden ground in the 'Golden Vale of Evesham' had served to raise the rental value from £5 to £10 per acre, a figure confirmed later by the Evesham historian, May, writing in 1845.¹⁹

The pattern of land occupation found here was also consistent with the spread of

¹⁷ In the Evesham neighbourhood the 300-400 acres of the 1770s had risen, by 1845, to 594 acres; Young, *op cit*, p. 314; May quoted by Sidwell, *op cit*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Some 12 per cent of infants baptized in Sandy were born to gardeners, 1813-19, compared to 6 and 4 per cent in the sprawling parishes of St Andrews and Holy Cross, Pershore; Beavington, *op cit*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Young, *op cit*, p. 314; W Pitt, *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Worcester*, 1813, p. 147; Beavington quotes £2-£3 per acre for Beds in 1808, *op cit*, p. 24; for allotments see *Gloucestershire Journal*, 12 February 1831, 11 May 1833; estate of G Day, Esq, BWJ, 3 April 1834.

small-scale intensive cultivation. Thus the number of occupied units recorded in the land tax returns of a sample of twenty contiguous Avon valley villages was 354 in 1790, and 349 in 1825. But at the same time those units on which between 4s and £1 was paid rose from 117 (33 per cent) to 140 (40 per cent). Significantly this rise occurred between 1815 and 1825 rather than earlier. At the end of the period, in 1825, it also appeared that half (sixty-nine) of the occupied units were still owner-occupied.

III

It is clear from the above account that by the 1820s gardening was, as in Bedfordshire, already well advanced in the Vale. And by the 1840s there were in aggregate probably as many gardeners in the smaller Vale communities as in Evesham itself. At the same time it is clear that the industry pre-dated the nineteenth century. Here the town of Pershore is worth closer study since it casts useful light on the social and economic climate in which the infant industry flourished, and sprang to national importance after 1820.

For nearly a decade after 1698 the registers of St Andrew and Holy Cross (which between them cover the whole town) record the occupations of all male adults. The picture which emerges is of a very poor community. Some 143 (43 per cent) of 326 individuals were described as mere labourers, while only fifteen (4 per cent) were gentlemen, yeomen, or professionals; nearly one-third of the 107 trade and craftsmen were involved in the traditional wool and leather trades, a significant detail in the light of the general decline of the cloth industry.²⁰ A recent historian of the Vale found that the mean value of inventory wealth was substantially lower here, both for labourers and for the trade and craft

elements, than in the Diocese of Worcester as a whole, during the years 1702-8. He also noted that 'underemployment was characteristic of the period'. The soil in the neighbourhood Young found to be 'all of the heavy kind, either clay or loam'. Consequently there was much conversion of the heavier soils to permanent pasture. Later observers like Cobbett enthused over the large flocks and herds to be seen around Pershore.²¹

It was in such conditions as these that by-industries like stocking manufacture, in the words of Dr Thirsk, 'took up the slack in the early eighteenth century [while] further employment was found in market gardening'. The historian of the hosiery industry also noticed a link between poor populous communities, perhaps attracted initially by abundant commons, and the spread of the knitting industry.²² Pershore, like other Midland towns, was surrounded by its common meadows where 'open-tide extends over at least half of the year'. And by 1744 the Evesham and Pershore hosiery industry was said to employ many hundreds whose products were exported largely to Germany, a reflection perhaps of their inferior quality and precarious existence.²³

It was, as we show below, from the poorer section of the community that the early gardeners were apparently recruited. In order, therefore, to look more closely at this group, all Pershore inventories valued at under £25 were examined for the period 1695-1759. Such inventories related for the most part to labourers and to the lesser trades and crafts element.²⁴ It appeared that half of the total of forty-two testators disposed of house and garden property in Pershore. The

²⁰ The decline of the cloth industry in the contiguous vales of Tewkesbury and Evesham was specifically linked to the appearance there of new occupations in J Thirsk, 'New Crops', *op cit*, p 91.

²¹ J A Johnston, 'The Vale of Evesham 1702-8: the Evidence from Probate Inventories and Wills', *Vale of Evesham Historical Research Papers*, IV, 1973, p 88; Young, *op cit*, p 307.

²² Thirsk, 'New Crops', *op cit*, p 91; D M Smith, 'The British Hosiery Industry at the Middle of the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Study in Economic Geography', reprinted in A Baker, J Hampshire and J Langton, eds, *Geographical Interpretations of Historical Sources*, pp 363-9.

²³ *HCF*, XXIV, p 562; *ibid*, p 830.

²⁴ Diocesan probate records are classified under 008.7 in CRO.

volume of such property tended to increase over time. During the years 1730-59, for example, some twenty-two individuals left inventories valued at under £25. In aggregate the property these men disposed of amounted to twenty-seven houses and gardens, plus four additional parcels of garden ground. Few local inventories survive for the period after 1760. Nevertheless, eleven Pershore wills were made out in the years 1765-9. All of these disposed of some house property, amounting in aggregate to a further twenty-four houses and gardens.²⁵

The early gardeners, judging by their inventory wealth, were drawn largely from the ranks of this humble class of property owner. Six of seven local gardeners, for instance, left inventories in the range £3-£19. However, the amount of house property they transmitted to their heirs was frequently in contrast to this modest level of personal wealth. Thus T Powell, a gardener of Pershore, left only £3 11s 9d, but in his will bequeathed a parcel of garden ground 'bought of Mr Bullin of Evesham'. Another, J Blizzard, also of Pershore, left only £5 18s, but in his will passed on no less than three houses with their gardens at Newlands (near the centre of the town), along with various other parcels situated in the Binholme Fields (owned by the Chapter of Westminster) 'late purchased of T Ashfield, Gent'.²⁶ Altogether, six Pershore and Evesham gardeners disposed of eleven houses and gardens in wills drawn up in the years 1733-67, while four of them also left additional parcels of garden ground (a seventh gardener made no mention of property).

The widespread dispersal of house and garden property was accompanied by a

remarkable pattern of fragmented land occupation. The manor of Binholme, which extended over most of the town of Pershore, and was owned by the Chapter of Westminster, exemplified this tendency most strikingly. A survey of *circa* 1740 illuminates the prevailing pattern of leasehold tenure, with ownership under the Chapter widely dispersed amongst a large number of individuals.²⁷ This was a pattern which did not diminish over time. The land tax documents record the names of the leaseholders, their tenants and under-tenants. In the township of St Andrews in Pershore some sixty-eight of seventy-nine units of ownership under the Chapter (86 per cent) on which 5s or more was paid in the years 1787-96, contributed between 5s and £1. In the adjoining township of Holy Cross (covering the remainder of the town) this figure was forty-eight of sixty-three units (76 per cent). Owner occupation, as in the Avon valley villages mentioned earlier, was still significant in Pershore, accounting for 44 and 33 per cent respectively of all occupied units.

Later on, in the 1840s, tithe documents covering the whole of the principal township of St Andrews suggest that the earlier pattern of ownership prevailed still.²⁸ One sees here the effect of fruit and garden culture in shaping and perpetuating the patterns of a century earlier. Thus if Tidsley Wood (231 acres) is excluded from the total of 814 acres, then some thirty gardeners (half of the total of sixty occupiers) were in possession of 288 acres, or roughly half of the remaining acreage in St Andrews. The average size of their holdings was thus 9.6 acres. However, at the time of the survey only 134 acres were recorded as actually under garden cultivation of above half an acre in extent. The average size of the twenty-nine which fell into this category was a mere 4.6 acres

²⁵ In the principal gardening parish in Evesham (St Lawrence) houses were also 'in many different hands'; in the other inner parish (All Saints) the land was 'much divided'; in the outer parish of Bengworth there were 'many occupiers': *Report for Inquiring into the State of the Poor Laws* (1834): Answers to Rural Questions, appendix B I, BPP 1834, XXX, p 584.

²⁶ Wills dated 15 February 1748, 7 October 1757.

²⁷ Survey made by J West who leased the Manor under the Dean and Chapter: original in Warwick CRO Acc 1639/B/123/113.

²⁸ Land tax returns for Holy Cross, CRO, QS 823/1/152; St Andrews, QS 1631/3; St Andrews parish tithe schedule, CRO, APs/760/521/BA/1572.

(median 2.5 acres). This figure was much lower than that of 8.5 acres quoted by Professor Beavington for Sandy, the principal Bedfordshire location, in 1841. Some twenty-two of the thirty Pershore gardeners had the whole of their holdings under garden culture, and five of the remaining eight were in possession of only small additional acreages of orcharding or meadow-land. Five of the thirty gardeners worked their own land, and the rest were mere occupiers (often under-tenants). The acreage given over to garden ground in 1842 was apparently three times as much as that under fruit. Occasional glimpses of land-use patterns in the previous century leave the impression of many smallholdings in the manor of Binholme under cherry and apple orchards. It suggests that the balance as between fruit and vegetables may have been different in the earlier period, with more emphasis then on fruit growing.

Bound up with the pattern of fragmented occupancies were other features of landholding in Pershore which favoured the interests of the eighteenth-century gardener. The widely scattered Westminster estates, already referred to, perpetuated an archaic form of life-leasehold in Pershore which reminds one of the copyhold tenure prevalent in the town of Shipston-on-Stour (on the Warwickshire border) belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Worcester. In both towns this form of tenure was associated with a fragmentation of land and property which persisted into the nineteenth century. In Pershore it was also linked to a proliferation of tenancies and under-tenancies. The principal characteristics of this tenure are best illustrated by quoting examples. J Millington, woolwinder, disposed of parcels of leasehold land in Binholme (partly in the hand of an under-tenant) held, in 1745, on a twenty-one-year lease of J West, farmer of the manor under the Chapter. In 1769 S Wade requested that his wife insert the life of his son into the lease of his cottage and six acres in such a

manner that 'he may be entitled to possession unlimited'. Other wills spoke frequently of the 'tenant right of renewing', the term of their Westminster leases which had been granted 'to their heirs forever'.²⁹ Was this the source of similar rights enjoyed in around 1850 by the Vale gardeners? One cannot say for certain, although a writer of the 1930s claimed that the 'Evesham' custom of the Victorian period certainly originated from some earlier epoch. Forms of tenant custom have, of course, turned up elsewhere. The effect in the Vale was to reduce the role of the landlord to that of a mere receiver of rents. And it created a security of tenure which was seen as a pillar of the nineteenth-century gardening industry.³⁰ It is interesting to note that local leasehold land of the previous century was also regarded as an extremely valuable asset. Its value is recorded in eight Pershore inventories of the period 1695-1759; in aggregate it amounted to £387 (31 per cent) of £1244 total inventory wealth. And it appears to have been worth nearly as much as freehold land: £5 and £3 per acre were quoted in early eighteenth-century Pershore compared to £8 for freehold land in Bengworth (adjoining Evesham). It is also significant, in this context, that the Pershore land tax returns record the names of both leaseholders and those of their tenants and under-tenants.

IV

Leaving aside the question of landholding arrangements, there were numerous other influences in and around Pershore which favoured the infant gardening industry. In the two Pershore parishes and in Ripple, all

²⁹ Dr Thirsk noted the traditionally permissive attitude of Westminster towards the subdivision of land and the payment of rent: 'New Crops', *op cit*, p 90; wills of Millington, Wade, Washbourn, Ganderton, dated: 15 November 1745, 4 November 1769, 26 April 1758, 4 April 1753.

³⁰ Gardiner, *op cit*, p 347; some leasehold was said to bestow 'in effect hereditary tenure': C Clay, 'Life Leasehold in the Western Counties of England 1650-1750', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXIX, 2, 1981, p 94; J Perkins, 'Tenure, Tenant Right and Agricultural Progress in Lindsey 1780-1850', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXIII, 1, 1975, p 10.

containing early gardening communities, one finds the clearest examples of the characteristic landscape of numerous, scattered hamlets and abundant commons. The latter included both meadow-land, much divided, as at Pershore and Birlingham, and rough grazing on the higher ground at Defford and Ripple. Consequently the gardening industry grew up alongside a system of both small- and large-scale farming in which animals were prominent. And links existed between these activities. Vale gardeners, like those in Bedfordshire, depended on farmers for their dung. Young, amongst others, mentions that the latter was got in vast quantities by early gardeners for forming their 'fine flexible loams' on clayey soils like those of the Vale, and also for creating their hot-beds.³¹ Most Vale gardeners apparently lacked the resources to engage in farming on any scale, but on the other hand, some small farmers were active in both fruit and garden production. Thus Sam Smith of Birlingham, dying in 1801, was the first of three generations of his family occupied in both traditional and garden production. Later on between 1820 and 1841, Francis worked twenty-six acres, and by 1861 his son Henry had thirty-six acres, mostly under garden cultivation.

The attractiveness of gardening pursuits lay, as Dr Thirsk has said, in their utilization of assets like family labour which lay conveniently to hand. Prevailing demographic tendencies here assisted their spread. In the town of Pershore numbers expanded by one-third between 1756 and 1801, and by a further 47 per cent to 1841. This rate of increase was roughly equalled in adjoining villages like Defford, Birlingham, and Eckington. The mid-century census schedules throw some light on the structure of this labour force. In 1841 half of the male gardeners heading households were over fifty years of age in Pershore and Bengworth

(Evesham), and a high incidence of adult children was recorded in both parishes. Resident offspring of over ten years of age were twice as numerous as, for example, amongst agricultural labourers, a very much more youthful group. By 1861, for the first time in this locality, the occupations of all family members were recorded accurately. In Pershore there were then some sixty-three households headed by gardeners, and they contained a further forty-one relatives (including thirty-two sons of over ten years) also described as gardeners. This suggests that nearly 40 per cent of the individuals specifically described as gardeners in fact lived in the household and belonged to the family of other gardeners.³² By contrast the 1861 census recorded only three 'working' gardeners and six gardeners' labourers resident in Pershore. Even twenty years later, in 1881, when Pershore boasted eighty-six gardening households, still only ten contained any gardeners' labourers so described. Taken together with a marked absence of lodgers and servants (a mere seventeen per 100 households) this evidence does serve to confirm that most gardening labour came in Pershore from within the family.

Gardening was also easily absorbed into the network of dual occupations found throughout the Vale. In the eighteenth century at least, references to full-time gardeners are quite rare. It seems likely that in its early phase gardening more often than not provided an ancillary occupation for labourers and lesser trades and craftsmen.³³ The probate records yield numerous examples of the dual nature of gardening: men like J Allen, maltster, who left two acres of leasehold land in Pershore, along with crops of hops, french beans, and fruit; or J Wicket, labourer, who bequeathed to his wife no less

³¹ A Young, *Six Months Tour through the Southern Counties of England and Wales*, I, 3rd ed, 1772, p 193; for hot-beds and glass-bells see Sir J Hill, *The Gardeners New Kalender*, 1758, p 137.

³² PRO, RG 9/2103-4: this figure does not include 'wives' as such.

³³ Like knitting which, as Young noted, was the employment of the poor in Evesham and Pershore: *Tour through which the North of England*, *op cit*, p 314.

than six houses with their gardens situated in Lovewell Street (Persnore).³⁴ During the nineteenth century, despite the presence by then of more full-time gardeners, dual occupations remained still a strong feature of economic life in Persnore and its neighbourhood. All the records throw up examples of the practice. The St Andrew tithe schedule for instance records the names of several tradesmen who occupied garden ground in the town: men like T Ganderton and T Birch, both woolstaplers, and T Collins, shopkeeper. In all at least forty of the 139 individual male household heads (28 per cent) appearing in one or other of the two Persnore parishes who recorded their occupation as market gardener in one or other of the three censuses 1841, 1861 or 1881 also combined this with some other calling. The cross-checking of names with local directories demonstrates that this was certainly an underestimate of the true figure.

The largest group appearing in the censuses were the fourteen who combined gardening with shopkeeping, while a further six individuals retailed beer. Others were engaged in some specialist form of small-holding production like pig dealing. No less than eleven men were variously described as brickman or labourer, which says something for the continuing social mobility of gardeners. At Defford, next door to Persnore, gardening was combined with shoemaking, carrying, thatching, and shopkeeping. Also, whole dynasties dealing in special products appear to have taken root by 1861. Men like the Prossers of Persnore were already established by 1841, and became large-scale fruit dealers between 1861 and 1881. Dual occupations may, in fact, have been a factor in the stability of some gardening families. The Andrews family, for instance, produced a line of gardeners and flaxdressers in the second half of the eighteenth century, while for forty years between 1841 and 1881 three members of the

family carried on gardening in Persnore alongside baking and malting.

The wide division of garden property in Evesham and Persnore might also have fostered the pursuit of dual occupations. In Evesham such property was described by the 1832 Poor Law commissioner as residing 'in many hands'. This fact and the highly developed transport facilities must have encouraged all those with access to garden ground to explore their opportunities to the full.

The question of the size of Vale gardens is not an easy one to answer. Professor Beavington quotes averages of 12 and 8.5 acres for his two main Bedfordshire locations in the 1840s, but the Evesham and Persnore town gardens may have been somewhat smaller than this. The only comprehensive evidence comes from the 1841 tithe schedule for St Andrews Persnore, which yields an average of 4.4 acres actually under garden ground at the time of the survey. For the two inner Evesham parishes the contemporary historian, May, records a figure of 459 acres of garden ground in 1845, which when divided by the 106 'gardeners' appearing in the 1841 census yields an average of 4.3 acres. This estimate could have been too low, however, since there is some evidence that in Evesham gardeners' labourers were not always distinguished in 1841 from those renting or owning gardens. For Bengworth, the outer of the three Evesham parishes, May records 135 acres of garden ground. Correlation with the 1841 census households yields a high average here of 11.2 acres per gardener. Similar high average acreages, much nearer to the figures quoted for Bedfordshire, have also been gleaned from the later census schedules. Very few acreages were recorded for Evesham before 1871, but twenty gardeners did so in each of the 1871 and 1881 censuses, yielding means of 8.3 and 8.7 acres respectively (medians of 7.2 and 6.5 acres). Some twenty-nine Persnore gardeners also recorded their acreages in one or other of the

³⁴ Inventory of Allen, 13 September 1703; will of Wickett, 4 April 1748.

censuses between 1851 and 1881, and twelve gardeners did so for four neighbouring parishes over the same period, yielding means of 13.3 and 12.3 acres respectively (medians of 6.5 and 5.0 acres). Five further cultivators recorded their occupations in Evesham and Pershore as farmer and market gardener, and recorded a mean of 83.2 acres. The pattern tentatively suggested is of many small gardens situated in the inner urban areas merging into a landscape of larger holdings spread over the outlying townships and villages. The inclusion of larger than average gardens situated in outlying townships would tend to push up the average size, so that there is not necessarily a conflict between the evidence of May and that derived from the mid-century censuses. This apparent army of small producers must have benefited greatly from the long-established marketing facilities of the Vale. Pitt claimed that the eighteenth-century road improvements had allowed the despatch of sixty to eighty pack horses in a single day from Evesham, directed mainly northwards into the Midlands. Local road improvement Acts dating from 1713 had resulted in some twenty-three miles of carriage-way around Evesham under construction by 1728. Pershore benefited from similar schemes, and by 1763 the town was described as a 'considerable Thoroughfare in the Lower Road from London to Worcester'.³⁵ When Young came to the Vale in 1771 the principal manufacture of the Vale towns remained that of stockings, caps and the like. One suspects that initially it was the pressure from the substantial hose and bodice manufacturers, with their widely flung markets, which facilitated this expansion of road communications. The later substitution of wheeled waggons for pack horses was accompanied by further major advances in road facilities, culminating after

1800 in the projects mentioned earlier on. Similar influences can be seen at work elsewhere in the economic catchment area of Birmingham. Thus the Fisherwick Park gardens near Lichfield despatched regular quantities of cabbage, broccoli, asparagus and fruit to Birmingham and London between 1809 and 1813. By 1845 the sixty-eight market gardeners of Lichfield were claiming that they delivered the produce of 1310 acres of garden ground by horse and cart to the neighbouring Black Country markets.³⁶

V

We might conclude this discussion by taking stock of the gardening industry as it stood poised on the threshold of a new phase of railway-influenced expansion around 1851. The first point to note is that the local industry may have been substantially larger in the 1840s than the Bedfordshire one. There were some 800-1000 acres of garden ground and roughly 150 gardening households in Evesham and Pershore, at least forty-three market gardeners in business in the nearby towns of Cheltenham and Gloucester, and many more springing up in the Vale villages.³⁷

Nevertheless, a salient feature of the mid-century industry was the apparently modest pace of further expansion. In Pershore, for instance, households headed by gardeners rose from forty-one in 1841 to sixty-three in 1861 and eighty-six by 1881. In Evesham May spoke of depressed garden workers in the mid-1840s, and numbers stagnated here between 1841 and 1861. Thus there were 110 households headed by gardeners in 1841, 103 in 1861, and 153 by 1881. Surprisingly few gardeners' labourers showed up in either town until after 1861. Between 1861 and 1881, however, the

³⁵ Pitt, quoted in Sidwell, *op cit*, p 45; HCJ, XXIV, p 390 for the Petition of trustees of the Act; T Cox, *Magna Britannia et Hibernia*, VI, 1731, p 217; B Martin, *The Natural History of England*, II, 1763, p 148.

³⁶ Fisherwick Park Garden receipts, Elford Hall MS, *loc cit*, cat nos 771, 797, 820; H Thorpe, *op cit*, p 200.

³⁷ For the latter towns see Hunt's *Directory*, *op cit*, pp 38, 119.

number of households headed by identifiable gardeners' labourers rose in Evesham from nineteen to eighty, and in Pershore from four to ten.

The industry of the Victorian era continued to recruit from a wide social spectrum, often, as we saw earlier, from the lesser trades and labouring classes. Individuals of very modest means appeared out of the ranks of the most ancient of the gardening dynasties. Thus, at his death W Cosnett left only his freehold house, while J Dufty and G Ewins bequeathed estates valued at under £20 and £100 respectively. Other men, as in the previous century, left much property, but very little personal estate. W Dudfield of Pershore for example transmitted an impressive amount of house and garden property, but his inventory wealth amounted, in 1847, to a mere £39.³⁸

If, in 1850, the gardening industry still contained many small men, nevertheless one can, at the same time, discern a nucleus of family dynasties active both in Pershore and Evesham from at least the mid eighteenth century. Thus the six families of Beard, Cosnett, Collins, Blizzard, Dufty, and Andrews all supplied gardeners who were present in Pershore by about 1750 (Beard, Cosnett, and Collins by 1700). Later the six dynasties furnished a third of the gardening families (eighteen of fifty-two) recorded in Pershore during the years 1813-20, and a further forty-eight noted in the censuses of 1841-81. The latter included thirty-one (22 per cent) of 139 gardening household heads recorded at the census dates 1841, 1861 or 1881. Individual members of these family dynasties displayed substantial disparities in wealth, a reflection of the wider social framework of the gardening industry. At the same time, with land and know-how

passing down from father to son over the course of a century, there was obviously some degree of continuity also. In fact the ancient families retained an impressive hold over the garden ground worked in Pershore: eleven men belonging to one or other of the six dynasties occupied a total of eighty-six acres of garden land (two-thirds of the whole) recorded in the 1842 tithe schedule for St Andrews. The average size of their holdings was roughly twice that of all holdings in Pershore.

Perhaps not surprisingly the six ancient dynasties threw up a number of individuals who turned gardening into a large-scale business concern. Andrew Dufty, for instance, was a 26-year-old gardener renting a house and 8½ acres in 1841, but by 1881 was working forty-four acres of ground. James, the eldest son of Joseph Cosnett, who had occupied 5½ acres of garden land between 1841 and 1851, was cultivating fifty acres, and employing eight men by 1881. Other individuals like Joseph Blizzard went on to combine gardening with tenant farming. Four descendants of the six families, namely William and Andrew Dufty, James Cosnett and William Andrews, all gardeners, boasted some 202 acres in aggregate at the mid-century.³⁹ Such men were, perhaps, well-placed to experiment with new products, endowed as they were with a century of horticultural expertise. The celebrated Pershore Egg plum was a case in point. It was discovered in Tidsley Wood in about 1833 by Thomas Crook.⁴⁰ He was styled gardener, seedsman, and shopkeeper of Church Street in the years 1813-41, and his father was found occupying fruit orchards in the town in 1790.

³⁸ Wills of W Cosnett, J Dufty, G Ewins and W Dudfield dated respectively 25 June 1808, 21 April 1813, 9 March 1850, and 27 November 1847.

³⁹ Their parents' generation appear usually to have cultivated rather smaller holdings: see the wills of Sam Andrews and Stephen Blizzard dated 5 April 1820, and 20 May 1844.

⁴⁰ Sidwell notes Crook's discovery, *op cit*, p 47; for the earlier Thomas Crook see will of P Green, 13 September 1790.