

Dearth and the Marketing of Agricultural Produce: Oxfordshire c.1750-1800

By W THWAITES

A MAJOR problem for anyone contemplating a local study of marketing and internal trade is to find a significant collection of source material. In fact, almost no evidence at all is available from periods of good or average harvests, moderate prices and adequate supplies. When staple items were reaching the consumers at prices they could largely afford to pay, very few people ever bothered to analyse such everyday concerns as the sale, purchase and consumption of food. Thus, N S B Gras suggested that the 'people' failed to recognize the value of the corn middlemen, 'because in times of plenty they do not consider the matter at all'.¹ It seems that only when the system was unable to achieve its task of satisfying the needs of the consumer was serious attention paid to the process of marketing and internal trade. It is consequently to periods of harvest failure and supply difficulties that one must look for the principal data on which to base studies of marketing, particularly the marketing of corn.

Much of the material which proved most useful in my study of the marketing of agricultural produce in the inland, food-producing county of Oxfordshire² was produced during the four major periods of dearth in the second half of the eighteenth century, 1756-7, 1766-8, 1794-6, and 1800-01. The aims of this article are two-fold. The first is to examine the types of material surviving from these periods and

to indicate how it can be used to reveal patterns in marketing and trade prevailing in non-crisis periods. The second is to point out when the evidence may not be representative of normal times, by showing the role which scarcity itself played in influencing marketing and trading practices. Dearth will be seen to have had not only a radical short-term impact on marketing and trading practices but also a possible longer term effect, providing a stimulus to new developments while causing neglected practices to be re-established.

I

The range of evidence surviving from periods of scarcity is considerable. At the national level each crisis witnessed the publication of numerous books and pamphlets offering analyses of the causes of the scarcity and possible remedies. While these are usually too general to be of value in a local study, it is nevertheless almost always possible to find one or two using evidence from the particular area one is researching. Thus, J S Girdler, whose *Observations on the Pernicious Consequences of Forestalling, Regrating and Ingrossing* was published in 1800, lived at Hare Hatch, near Maidenhead and used examples to illustrate his points from the nearby town of Henley on Thames. There is, for example, a description of what might be termed an inverted corn riot, when in 1796, Girdler attended Henley market to buy oats and was attacked by farmers and mealmen over his attempts to enforce

¹ N S B Gras, *The Evolution of the English Corn Market, from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1915, p 206.

² W Thwaites, 'The Marketing of Agricultural Produce in Eighteenth Century Oxfordshire'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1980.

traditional laws for consumer protection.³ Also included is a detailed account of a case of regrating at Henley, when Richard Jemmett was convicted for buying wheat at 85 shillings per quarter and selling it in the same market on the same day for 100 shillings.⁴ Central government bodies investigating dearth likewise drew evidence from all parts of the country. The *Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Enquire into the Scarcity of Provisions Sessions 1765*,⁵ for example, collected some valuable data on the size of the corn measures used in Oxfordshire markets. This is essential information for anyone contemplating an analysis of price series.

The several Public Record Office collections normally used in studies of popular disturbances are also informative. Classified under Assizes, Home Office, Privy Council, War Office and Rail⁶ one finds much of the legal data and correspondence generated by food shortages. Letters are available on riots and on local authority responses to the difficulties; on attempts by the major urban and industrial areas to procure supplies; on the protection demanded by millers, farmers, dealers and wharf supervisors; and on dietary habits. All such documents throw at least as much light on the operation of marketing and trade as they do on the behaviour, composition and suppression of the eighteenth-century crowd.

At the local level newspapers always turned their attention to marketing and trade during dearth. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* contains very full accounts of the mid-century food riots and while more circumspect in its reporting of disturbances by the 1790s still includes, during the later crisis years, letters on a whole range of

subjects connected with food prices and supplies. Details of local authority measures to deal with the crises, accounts of prosecutions for marketing offences and descriptions of the operation of charitable schemes to relieve the poor are also always available. With the exception of the correspondence, Quarter Sessions bundles and record books contain a similar range of material.

A number of individual market towns are generally well-documented. The borough records of Henley on Thames, for example, contain detailed accounts of changes made in the physical arrangements of the market.⁷ Once again, however, a greater range and quantity of evidence survives from periods of dearth. Henley's records include a detailed opinion on purchasing corn outside the market place written in 1768,⁸ an account of a case of forestalling pigs in 1800,⁹ and a bundle of twenty papers on a variety of subjects relating to the high price of bread and provisions in the years 1795, 1799 and 1800.¹⁰

II

While all the evidence detailed above was produced in what were essentially abnormal circumstances, it is nevertheless possible to deduce much about the normal situation and standard practices from it. A few examples will suffice to show this.

First, it is not easy to discover the exact location of food dealing in the eighteenth century: were corn sales still centred on the market place or had they, as many writers suggest, shifted to the inns and wharfs with their superior facilities and valued privacy? An examination of the location of riots and

³ JS Girdler, *Observations on the Pernicious Consequences of Forestalling, Regrating and Ingrossing* . . . 1800, p 210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 214.

⁵ 'Papers and Letters of the Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Enquire into the Scarcity of Provisions Sessions 1765', House of Lords Record Office.

⁶ For the records of the Oxford Canal Company.

⁷ 'Henley Borough Assembly 1722-1799', Oxfordshire Record Office (ORO), Ms D D Henley A V 8.

⁸ 'Mr Hayes Opinion about Forestalling', ORO, Ms D D Henley A XXII 3.

⁹ 'Town of Henley upon Thames. Case of Forestalling Pigs', ORO, Ms D D Henley A XV 11/1.

¹⁰ 'Bundle of Twenty Papers Relating to the High Price of Bread and Provisions 1795, 1799 and 1800', ORO, Ms D D Henley C IV 7.

the specific targets of riotous crowds can help to pinpoint the changes which took place. Thus, riots which occurred in Oxford in 1693 were centred firmly on the market place.¹¹ However, in 1757 a riotous crowd in the city visited three inns, the King's Head, where they seized two loads of wheat, the Mitre and the Star.¹² In conjunction with the evidence that a notable corn dealer, Richard Williams, was master of the King's Head from 1772,¹³ this would suggest that by the mid eighteenth century City inns had definitely come to play a central role in Oxford's corn trade. Again, during the Banbury riots of 1800, the Red Lion inn, occupied by the corn dealer William Pratt, was set on fire by, 'a Mob of (the) Town joined by Boatmen of the Canal'.¹⁴ This would suggest that the inn, certainly the centre of corn dealing in Banbury in the nineteenth century,¹⁵ was already by the late eighteenth century closely connected with the town's corn trade.

The organization of the long-distance corn trade is another subject for which evidence is not normally available. However, in the 1790s persistent rumours among a disturbed populace that local mealmen and dealers were engaged in exporting corn to France forced several of them to defend themselves by issuing denials of the charges in the newspapers. These statements provide important insights into the normal business dealings of local food processors and dealers. In 1795, for example, an Oxford corn chandler, John Borlase, declared, 'my Dealings in Corn, Grain, or Flour, were and have been with Persons who resided within the Distance of Coventry, Birmingham and Dudley'.¹⁶ William Atkins, a Chipping

Norton mealman, produced a similar statement swearing that his dealings, 'are and were with those in this Part of the Country and with Bakers within the Distance of Birmingham and Coventry'.¹⁷ Finally, demonstrating that even in this period there were still dealers concerned solely with their own localities, Thomas Hudson, a mealman of Wood Green near Witney, declared that so far from being concerned with exporting, his trade has been confined to Witney and its vicinity.¹⁸ Statements made by Atkins and by Hudson concerning their dealings with bakers also help to illustrate the declining role being played by the baker in the late eighteenth-century corn market.

Finally, an analysis of the foodstuffs which rioting crowds either seized or regulated in price can be very revealing of changes in the dietary habits and purchasing behaviour of the poor. For example, in all food riot years between 1693 and 1766 crowds in Oxford and the County's other towns appropriated wheat or fixed the price at which it was to be sold to the poor. On the other hand, in all food riot years from 1766 onwards rioting crowds fixed the prices at which bread, flour and meal were to be sold or seized these products in addition to or instead of corn.¹⁹ Moreover, several periods of disturbance from 1710 onwards saw moves to ensure that bakers, as well as consumers, were provided with corn and from 1767 onwards witnessed attempts by the poor to influence the setting of the assize of bread.²⁰ This shift in the interest of the urban crowd from unground corn to wheat derivatives by the disturbances of the 1760s is almost certainly indicative of a change in their purchasing behaviour during normal times and is much the most useful data available to suggest the period in which poor consumers ceased to be purchasers of wheat.

¹¹ Thwaites, *op cit.*, pp 468-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 474-9. During the same riots the wharfs were also visited.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 317.

¹⁴ 'David Hughes to Duke of Portland, 15 September 1800', Public Record Office (PRO) Home Office HO 42:51, 154.

¹⁵ A Crossley (Ed), *The Victoria History of the County of Oxford*, X, Banbury Hundred, Oxford, 1972, p 60.

¹⁶ Jackson's *Oxford Journal* (JOJ) 11 July 1795.

¹⁷ JOJ 1 August 1795.

¹⁸ JOJ 8 August 1795.

¹⁹ Thwaites, *op cit.*, p 213.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 211-12.

In the examples outlined above it is almost certain that the picture revealed during the period of dearth was the one which prevailed at normal times. The information is too incidental to have been the product of the manipulative reporting so common during scarcity. The emotions and moral considerations to which dearth gave rise are most unlikely to have distorted witnesses' perceptions of the location of riots or the foodstuffs seized during disturbances. Moreover the patterns in marketing and trade found to have prevailed in Oxfordshire are much the same as the patterns described in regional and national studies. It is also possible to find occasional extra data from non-dearth periods to support the arguments.

However, it is equally certain that not all of the evidence surviving from periods of scarcity can be used to indicate normal practices and attitudes. Thus, the very conditions which caused people to investigate the subject of the food supply may have been causing a distortion of normal patterns. Dearth was exceptional and the behaviour it produced must often have been exceptional also.

There is much evidence that marketing and internal trade did operate along different lines during a period of high prices and food shortages. Many contemporaries believed that crop failures and food shortages had no real existence. This view was doubtless unduly cynical. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that scarcity, by acting both to encourage and to facilitate various types of speculative activity, did acquire an artificial element. Berthold Brecht's comment, 'Famines do not occur, they are organized by the grain trade',²¹ illustrates clearly the view, as relevant in the eighteenth as in the twentieth century, that scarcity can be exploited for profit. Crude attempts might be made to keep up or enhance already inflated prices. For

example, in 1800 a case of conspiracy to enhance the price of wheat was brought before the County Quarter Sessions after a yeoman had tried to persuade a vendor of corn at Bampton fair to raise his asking price from 35 to 40 pounds the load.²² Rumours of farmers and dealers holding back corn from the market in the hope of generating further price rises or maximizing profits by offloading as prices peaked, were also rife, although firm documentary evidence of speculative hoarding is difficult to find. In fact, when the Earl of Guilford required the steward of his estate at Wroxton to discover if the crisis of 1767 had encouraged his tenants to hold back corn in the hope of increasing the price, the steward reported that there was no evidence of hoarding.²³ However, a reference to a sale of 'old' wheat in Oxford market in February 1757 suggests that in that particular crisis some farmers had waited eighteen months and for prices in excess of eight shillings per bushel before they sold.²⁴

Better documented is the way in which dearth conditions produced an extension in the area which looked to Oxfordshire for supplies of foodstuffs. In 1795, for example, not merely was there greatly increased demand for corn from Birmingham, Warwickshire and Staffordshire but there is also evidence of the acquisition of Oxfordshire corn for Derbyshire and Lancashire with which trade seldom normally took place. Thus, Christopher Willoughby, a county Justice, referred to the 'vast export of grain' from Oxfordshire to Lancashire and Derbyshire²⁵ and complained that, 'A great deal of *our* wheat has

²² 'Quarter Sessions Bundles, Michaelmas 1800' ORO.

²³ 'Letters from Stewards of Estates 2. 1765-1800', Bodleian MS North d 3, p88.

²⁴ 'Corn Book of the Clerks of the Market 1751-1767', Oxford University Archives MR 3/5/2. I am indebted to the Keeper of the University Archives for permission to refer to this material. Further research on farm accounts might reveal more on the extent to which farmers held back their corn from market.

²⁵ 'Christopher Willoughby to Duke of Portland, 29 June 1795' PRO. Privy Council PC 1:26 A 51.

²¹ Quoted in S George, *How the Other Half Dies. The Real Reasons for World Hunger*, Harmondsworth, 1977, p 46.

lately been purchased for Liverpool',²⁶ his emphasis suggesting that this was an unusual threat to local supplies. Accompanying complaints of upsurges in demand for Oxfordshire corn were references to the activities of dealers or jobbers. An analysis of the clientele of Oxford City market for the period 1692–1800 shows a corn market dominated by the local community. City food processors, particularly bakers, formed easily the majority of the purchasers.²⁷ However, in 1757 we find a reference to the 'locusts' buying corn in Oxford market and preventing local bakers from purchasing.²⁸ Again, from June 1795 we have the comment by Christopher Willoughby, 'Wheat is 10/6 the bushel and Dealers from Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire etc etc now attend our Markets and will give the Farmers their own price'.²⁹ He provided the stress on the word now, making it clear the problem was exceptional. Not merely was it felt that the open markets were threatened by the dealers but it was also firmly believed that these non-local dealers and factors were buying corn at the farm gate and making contracts for crops still growing in the fields. In 1795 Willoughby reported that it was a '*positive fact*' that dealers from the Midlands and North, 'buy up all our wheat from the Farmers *at their own price and without taking it to Market*'.³⁰ Even if the anxiety aroused by famine caused some exaggeration and unreliability in reporting, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that dearth conditions led to greatly increased pressure on local resources and an upsurge in speculative activity.

This shift to more aggressive and competitive marketing techniques was counter-balanced by a return by the authorities to a

policy of enforcing the old regulations for consumer protection. Regulation had, in fact, been very largely a response to dearth from the sixteenth century onwards. Thus, A Everitt suggests that even in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries little restraint was imposed on the activities of private traders in times of plenty.³¹ Moreover, N S B Gras,³² J Chartres,³³ and J Walter and K Wrightson³⁴ all indicate that the enforcement of regulations to control marketing and internal trade in the Tudor period and the seventeenth century was primarily a response to dearth. Eighteenth-century Oxfordshire magistrates seem on the whole automatically to have followed the approach which had been evolved during the previous two centuries.

The authorities did not always require the spur of scarcity before enforcing the law, however.³⁵ Commitments to ensuring minimum standards of honesty from traders and hygiene and good order in the market place were very largely unrelated to price levels. The assize of bread continued to be set regularly throughout the period in Oxford and in Henley no pattern is visible in prosecutions for offences connected with the sale of bread. Moreover, the Committee responsible for the control of the covered provisions market in Oxford seems always to have possessed a firm commitment to public marketing institutions; an antagonistic attitude towards speculation and even a belief that the concept of a 'just price' might have a permanent validity.

Nevertheless, the enforcement or attempted enforcement of most types of

³¹ A Everitt, 'The Marketing of Agricultural Produce' in J Thirsk (Ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500–1640*, Cambridge, 1967, pp 579, 581.

³² Gras, *op cit*, p 229.

³³ J A Chartres, *Internal Trade in England 1500–1700*, 1977, pp 60–4.

³⁴ J Walter and K Wrightson, 'Dearth and the social order in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 71, May 1976, pp 37–42.

³⁵ These conclusions have been drawn by using tables illustrating the chronological pattern in the enforcement of various types of law and regulation in conjunction with tables of Oxfordshire corn prices. For the tables see Thwaites, *op cit*, pp 398–466; Appendices, Oxfordshire Corn Price Material.

²⁶ 'Christopher Willoughby to Duke of Portland, 5 July 1795', PRO, HO 42:35, 93.

²⁷ Thwaites, *op cit*, pp 183–8.

²⁸ JOJ 18 June 1757.

²⁹ 'Christopher Willoughby to John King, 28 June 1795', PRO, HO 42:35, 54.

³⁰ 'Christopher Willoughby to Duke of Portland, 29 June 1795', PRO, PC 1:26 A 51.

regulation was almost entirely dearth related. Thus moves to enforce the statute, 5 and 6 Edward VI c 14, repealed in 1772, and to prevent the common law offences of forestalling, engrossing and regrating or in C R Fay's phrase 'the unpopular manipulation, in time or place, of the people's food',³⁶ were made in response to scarcity. In addition, the reintroduction of measures for the protection of the local consumer and the restoration of the 'just' price of the type detailed in the *Book of Orders*,³⁷ was also closely related to food crises.

However, the statement that regulation was a response to dearth is incomplete. Thus, there is no evidence of a return to regulation in Oxfordshire during the crisis of 1740-1. In fact, for law enforcement to take place the presence of an additional pressure was usually required, the compelling one of popular disturbance.

Under three sets of circumstances it would appear that it was the food riot rather than scarcity *per se* which precipitated the return to regulation: first, when the authorities actually admitted that their measures were to appease rioters; second, when the announcement of law enforcement was accompanied by a commitment to prevent riots; and third, when an attack on marketing abuses occurred, after an outbreak of rioting, in an area in which regulation was otherwise wholly exceptional.³⁸

Disturbances and crowd pressure must then bear responsibility for a whole series of measures. Thus, almost all announcements from 1757 onwards that the authorities were intending to suppress speculative dealings in corn or to restrict the trade in corn to the market place were made in response to outbreaks of rioting. Two attempts to protect the interests of

local consumers and the supplies of the local community in 1766 were also designed to appease the crowd. Again, except perhaps in Oxford,³⁹ attacks made in 1800 on the forestalling, engrossing and regrating of all types of provisions seem to have resulted from disturbances. All announcements of measures to reduce prices made in 1766, 1795 and 1800, almost the only years in the eighteenth century which witnessed attempts to bring about price reductions, appear to have been made at the instigation of food rioters. Moreover, and perhaps most unexpectedly, moves to ensure that correct weights and measures were employed in the towns of Woodstock and Witney in 1800 seem to have been a concession to the crowd. Finally, a sudden upsurge in prosecutions for assize of bread offences in 1757-8 may have been influenced at the very least, by disturbances in Bicester. Thus, five of the ten prosecutions which were at county level took place in Ploughley Hundred of which Bicester was a part and one of those who gave evidence was almost certainly the wife of a Bicester food rioter. It is also possible that the pro-consumer slant given to the assize of bread in dearth years was partly an attempt to appease riotous crowds and there is no doubt that the crowd was able to influence the assize by bringing about reductions in the price of wheat on which it was set.

III

Hitherto it has been suggested that the patterns in marketing and trade revealed during a dearth period can be regarded as either standard or very specific to the scarcity period itself. Other patterns which emerge are much less easy to interpret in either of these two ways. Under two sets of circumstances more caution is required

³⁶ C R Fay, *The Corn Laws and Social England*, Cambridge, 1932, p 54.

³⁷ According to N S B Gras the *Book of Orders* consolidated in one document, 'the regulations embodying the Tudor policy of restraint'. Gras provides a summary of the 'Book'. Gras, *op cit*, pp 237-40.

³⁸ For evidence on these points see Thwaites, *op cit*, pp 522-4.

³⁹ The more complex relationship between crowd action and measures by the authorities to control marketing and internal trade in Oxford is discussed in Thwaites, *op cit*, pp 499-504.

in handling the material surviving from a dearth period. The first is when the earliest evidence on a particular process or development comes from a scarcity period but when the pattern continues to be found after the crisis subsides. The second is when a specific pattern in marketing or trade which had apparently been abandoned re-emerges during a crisis and, unlike the measures which were definitely dearth-related, continues to prevail after the problems of scarcity have been overcome. The first type of developments will be called progressive because they were new and forward-looking. The second type will be called retrogressive because they looked back to past models rather than breaking new ground. In this context retrogressive does not necessarily mean backward-looking in the sense of merely old-fashioned or inappropriate.

Several examples show progressive changes being recorded initially in a period of dearth. Thus, our first evidence on the canal-borne corn trade with the West Midlands comes from 1795, although the canal was opened from Banbury to Warwickshire in 1778 and from Oxford in 1790. The trade continued to be mentioned after 1795. Again, the period May–October 1795 provides four reports that short-weight butter had been seized in Oxford. Further cases appear in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* between 1796 and 1798,⁴⁰ and there is considerable evidence that short-weight butter was seized by the Clerks of the Market in the early nineteenth century.⁴¹ Before 1795, however, only one case was recorded, in March 1783, itself a high price period. Moreover, the earliest Oxfordshire evidence on practices generally thought to have become prevalent in the eighteenth century is frequently found in a period of scarcity. Thus, the first unequivocal

account of an urban tradesman purchasing at the farm-gate on a casual basis occurs in *Mr Hayes Opinion about Forestalling* in 1768: 'One Pitman, a Maltster in Henley went to a Farmer's House at Shiplake and at his Barn Door purchased sixteen quarters of Barley'.⁴² Again, the first eighteenth-century account of the speculative purchase of growing crops comes from J S Girdler, who recorded the purchase by a maltster and farmer of Benson of eleven acres of wheat growing on a farm at Roke during the crisis of 1795.⁴³

There are a number of ways in which the evidence might be explained. For example, we may simply be seeing the effects of the publicity which standard and well-established marketing and trading practices suddenly received in dearth. Thus, no one may have thought it necessary to comment on the development of the canal-borne trade with the West Midlands while that trade was having no significant impact upon local consumers. However, once the trade appeared for the first time to threaten supplies required in the locality, public attention became focused upon it. Interest and emotions were perhaps seldom stirred until the adverse side-effects of a new development became apparent. Certainly, an Oxfordshire farmer who mentioned the canal trade in 1795 did so in tones suggesting that it had become established before the crisis of that year: 'Some corn has certainly been purchased within these few years for the use of Birmingham, and the various manufacturing places in Staffordshire and its neighbourhood, more particularly since a communication has been opened by a canal to those countries'.⁴⁴

The publicity given to the long-distance

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 411–13.

⁴¹ 'Perambulations of the Clerks of the Market, 1808–1828', Bodleian Ms Top Oxon f 2. 'Papers relating to the Clerks of the Market and their Work, 1821–1851', Bodleian Ms Top Oxon c 98.

⁴² 'Mr Hayes Opinion about Forestalling', ORO, Ms D D Henley A XXII 3.

⁴³ Girdler, *op cit.*, p 289.

⁴⁴ An Oxfordshire Farmer, *A Reply to the Instructions given by the Common Council of Oxford to F Burton and A Amesley Esqrs their Representatives in Parliament, on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* . . ., 1795, p 12.

corn trade was likely to exacerbate popular discontent. To counter this, local authorities may sometimes have decided to publicize equally standard procedures which operated in the interests of consumers. This may provide the explanation for other apparently new developments. Thus, seizures of short weight butter may have been a normal occurrence in eighteenth-century Oxford, reported in the newspapers in years of high prices, not because they were unusual but because of their possible soothing effect on an outraged public.

However, it is possible that dearth may sometimes have had a greater impact than simply helping to focus attention on normality. It may also have provided a challenge to old-established methods of conducting business and a stimulus to look for new and more efficient ways of organizing marketing and internal trade. Like war it may have played an active role in generating change. In our present state of knowledge it is not really possible to say. Nevertheless, it is conceivable with both farm-gate selling and the pre-harvest contractual sale that dearth did do more than simply encourage an ignorant populace to interpret normal and acceptable business practices as sinister and amoral. It may well have acted as a spur to a relative increase in these private sales techniques. J S Girdler, for example, certainly felt that there was a considerable increase in the practice of buying growing crops between the crises of 1795 and 1800.⁴⁵ Moreover, if the pressures of scarcity encouraged tradesmen and dealers to explore new markets and new trading techniques there is little likelihood these would have been discarded had they proved profitable or convenient.

In addition to its effects on the commercial community, dearth may also have influenced local authorities to pursue progressive change. Thus, we have evidence

that the authorities in Oxfordshire only implemented certain new and forward-looking laws several years after they were passed and during the next period of scarcity subsequent to their passage. For example, the Act requiring the appointment of Inspectors of Corn Returns was passed in 1791 but it was not until September 1795 that an inspector was appointed for the City of Oxford.⁴⁶

Turning to retrogressive change, we again find several examples of this type of development recorded during scarcity periods. Thus, attempts to revive decayed open markets were rare in eighteenth-century Oxfordshire. Apart from two moves to re-establish a cattle market in Oxford, only three other revival attempts were recorded, at Charlbury in September 1800 and at Bampton in both November 1766 and October 1800. The notice concerning Bampton in 1766 declared,

Whereas the Market at Bampton . . . hath for some Years been discontinued This is to inform the Publick that the said Market is now going to be revived, and will be kept every Wednesday for Corn, Cheese, Butter, Eggs, Fish, Poultry and all other Provisions,⁴⁷

showing clearly that a traditional, local, open market was envisaged. It cannot be coincidental that the only recorded attempts to restore the old open market ideal were contemporary with the most difficult periods of two of the major food crises of the eighteenth century. Moreover, in support of the view that we cannot afford to regard such measures as necessarily inappropriate, we may note that R Dumont and N Cohen in *The Growth of Hunger*, concerned with an appropriate agriculture for the 1980s, suggest 'local markets selling local goods',⁴⁸ as one acceptable solution to the problems. The market revivals in Oxfordshire were prob-

⁴⁵ Girdler, *op cit*, p 289.

⁴⁶ *JOJ* 12 September 1795.

⁴⁷ *JOJ* 8 November 1766.

⁴⁸ R Dumont and N Cohen, *The Growth of Hunger. A New Politics of Agriculture*, 1980, p 198.

ably only marginally successful although both Charlbury and Bampton did retain the remnants of their markets throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Again, on the whole, the eighteenth century witnessed a decline in the old pitched markets, to which farmers had taken all their corn to sell in bulk and saw their replacement by sample markets, to which farmers took only purses filled with wheat, disposing of entire crops on the strength of these examples.

In Oxford, which had certainly possessed a pitched market in the 1740s, sample-selling must have begun by 1755, when corn dealers using the City's market declared their opposition to the practice.⁴⁹ Their action appears to have had little impact, however, for by the crisis of 1757 the development was again arousing hostility. During the Oxford riots of that year a crowd in the City stopped a waggon outside Trinity College and, alleging that the wheat the waggon contained had been illegally bought up by sample, shared out the contents.⁵⁰ After a quiet period, the crisis of 1766 brought revived opposition to the sample markets. Persons interested in the corn trade declared their determination, 'not to suffer Wheat or other Grain to be sold as formerly, by Sample, in the several Markets of (Oxfordshire) and the adjacent Counties',⁵¹ and in January 1768 the authorities in Henley expressed the fear that, 'if persons are allowed to buy at Barn-Doors and by sample, Henley will only have the name of a market Town without the Use or Profit of it'.⁵²

In spite of the severity of the problem, however, bulk sales continued at Oxford until approximately 1780⁵³ and Henley retained a large and notable pitched market into the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Under these

circumstances, it seems likely that the adverse publicity received by sample-selling during the crises of the mid-fifties and mid-sixties had helped to ensure that the final extinction of bulk-selling was postponed.

Finally, it is possible, that the dearth of 1757 may have led to a revival in the enforcement of the laws requiring the licensing of provisions dealers, corn badgers and cattle drovers. This cannot be stated with certainty because licence data are not always easy to interpret.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, while there is little evidence to suggest that the laws were enforced between 1696 and 1757, they were certainly observed in Oxfordshire throughout the 1760s and until their repeal in 1772.⁵⁶

In conclusion, unlike the progressive developments which seem, at the most, to have been accelerated by the pressure of scarcity, retrogressive changes may well not have taken place at all without the influence of dearth. Scarcity appears to have made consumers and local market authorities very aware of the changes which had gradually been taking place in their relationship with the business community. Brought up sharply against the erosion of traditional rights and protections, which had occurred virtually unnoticed in previous years, they were occasionally able to restore aspects of the old system and so stave off for a few years the growth of a more impersonal economy.

IV

The final question to examine is whether the implementation of crisis measures and interventionist policies was appropriate in the peculiarly difficult circumstances of dearth or whether a return to restraint involved damaging and unacceptable interference with perfectly reasonable business practices.

⁴⁹ *JOJ* 18 October 1755.

⁵⁰ *JOJ* 18 June 1757.

⁵¹ *JOJ* 18 October 1766.

⁵² 'Mr Hayes Opinion about Forestalling', ORO, Ms D D Henley A XXII 3.

⁵³ Thwaites, *op cit*, pp 252-3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp 40-1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp 391-4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp 430-8.

While doubts about the value of traditional measures for consumer protection were definitely beginning to be expressed by the mid-eighteenth century, it nevertheless remained the policy of the central government to recommend the enforcement of the sixteenth-century protectionist statutes up to the dearth of 1766. It was only after the repeal of the laws in 1772 that the authorities in Oxfordshire and most notably in the City of Oxford found that their attitudes were no longer necessarily in accord with government thinking. This discussion is therefore confined to the period when the views of central and local authorities had diverged and the question of which policies were the most beneficial for Oxfordshire is a relevant one.⁵⁷

The first point is the rather obvious one that the most serious dearth years, 1795 and 1800, witnessed genuine local crises. There was considerably increased demand for Oxfordshire corn, particularly in 1795, and this when crops had already fallen short.⁵⁸ Prices were vastly inflated. Food riots were widespread. In 1795 Oxford, Henley, Burford, Banbury, Deddington, Bloxham, Witney and Long Hanborough were all affected. In 1800 disturbances occurred or were threatened at Oxford, Henley, Woodstock, Weston-on-the-Green, Bicester, Burford, Banbury, Witney, Charlbury and Fawler. Not only were the forces of law and order inadequate but magistrates were also aware that they could not afford to suppress disturbances too harshly when they had to continue to live in the community afterwards. Given this combination of circumstances it was obvious that, as John Bohstedt declared

over Devon, 'social peace required a durable solution of popular grievances'.⁵⁹

Central government guidelines were clear. First, it was openly admitted by a Home Office representative to an Oxfordshire magistrate in 1795 that the government was not really in a position to assist an inland county like Oxfordshire:

It is difficult to know in what manner to convey any quantity of wheat for the use of the more interior parts of the kingdom — the expence of the carriage and the time which it will require to convey it to distant places by land, or by canals would render this relief both uncertain and difficult.⁶⁰

In spite of this, however, it was expected that Oxfordshire magistrates should protect those removing grain from the county. Thus in 1800 the Duke of Portland criticized the Mayor of Oxford for permitting a crowd to enter the canal wharf when it was his duty, 'to have protected the free progress of grain and other provisions, from one part of the country to the other'.⁶¹

Second, the government produced an emphatic denunciation of the paternalist view. After rioting had died down in Oxfordshire in 1800 the Duke of Portland declared to the Vice-Chancellor:

I incline to hope . . . that the people in general begin to be convinced that perfect security of property and the discouragement of those pernicious and destructive opinions which attribute the dearness of Provisions to engrossers and forestallers etc are absolutely and indispensably necessary to ensure a tolerable supply of the Markets.⁶²

It was also stressed that all attempts to influence price levels were unjust, foolish or illegal.⁶³

A major problem with these government guidelines was that the crowd found

⁵⁷ For more general accounts of changing attitudes see, E P Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, 50, February 1971. A W Coats, 'Debates. Contrary moralities: Plebs, paternalists and political economists', *Past and Present*, 54, February 1972. E F Genovese, 'Debate. The many faces of moral economy. A contribution to a Debate', *Past and Present*, 58, February 1973. D E Williams, 'English Hunger Riots in 1766', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wales, 1978.

⁵⁸ Letters concerning the shortfall in the crops of 1794 and 1795 can be found in PRO Home Office 42:36.

⁵⁹ J Bohstedt, 'Devon Food Riots and the Politics of Community Conflict ca. 1800', unpublished paper, p 48. I should like to thank Dr J Bohstedt for allowing me to use this paper.

⁶⁰ John King to Christopher Willoughby, 3 July 1795, PRO, HO 43:6, 507.

⁶¹ 'Duke of Portland to David Durrell, 19 September 1800', PRO, HO 43:12, 144.

⁶² 'Duke of Portland to Vice-Chancellor, 4 October 1800', University of Nottingham, 3rd Duke of Portland. Copies of Private Letters July 1797-1801, PWV III.

⁶³ JOJ 1 November 1800.

them unintelligible. Thus, in 1800 David Hughes of Jesus College confided to Portland a remark he had overheard in Oxford, 'the House of Commons despaired of doing any good with the farmers — so we must do it ourselves — Mr. Pitt had said so — Mr. Pitt had said everything must be left to find its own level'.⁶⁴ Moreover, Cyril Jackson, the influential Dean of Christchurch felt that such confusion was not unreasonable. He complained to the Home Office that, 'Government is strongly remiss in informing the publick mind', and that, 'They seem to me not given to know the importance of doing so'.⁶⁵

Of course, even had the crowd been able to understand the government viewpoint it is most unlikely they could have accepted it. Thus, riots were in part about adequate food supplies and an insistence on the free movement of grain and that the activities of the engrosser were essential if markets were to be supplied could not be acceptable in a county like Oxfordshire where the implementation of such a policy in dearth would ensure that corn *needed* by the local community would be sent away to feed distant consumers. As Christopher Willoughby declared very simply in 1795: 'If Government had wished to have had corn from this country, care should have (been) taken in the beginning to satisfy the inhabitants that sufficient was left for their own consumption'.⁶⁶ Moreover, Warwickshire magistrates who were suffering through the protectionism in the neighbouring county could, at least, appreciate this point of view:

I cannot believe the Country Gentlemen in Oxfordshire will act heartily in protecting Corn or Flour sending out of their neighbourhood whilst the price is so high as very much to distress their own Poor.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ 'David Hughes to Duke of Portland, 7 September 1800', PRO, HO 42:51, 60.

⁶⁵ 'Cyril Jackson to Home Office, 21 October 1800', PRO, HO 42:52, 202.

⁶⁶ 'Christopher Willoughby to Thomas Carter, 7 August 1795', PRO, HO 42:35, 368-9.

⁶⁷ 'Samuel Garbett to Heneage Legge, 29 July 1795', PRO, PC 1:29, A 64.

Riots were also about prices and the right and need of the poor to be able to afford sufficient food to avoid hunger. Under these circumstances it cannot be supposed that the view that the farmer should be allowed to charge whatever he wished for his corn would have been appreciated by the crowd. Commitments to the ideal of the 'just' price may not necessarily have brought long-term advantage but in serious crises short-term price reductions were often sufficient to pacify the poor until charitable schemes for their relief could take over the task of feeding them. Thus, in 1800, ultimately even those who concurred in government thinking finally acceded to crowd demands. For example, in Banbury, where the Mayor was apparently in agreement with the Duke of Portland, rioting did not actually subside until the free market economy had ceased to operate and farmers had agreed to sell their wheat at the reduced price of ten shillings per bushel.⁶⁸

Coupled with the desire for food at prices they could afford, was the idea of justice, E P Thompson's 'moral economy' of the crowd. The poor expected to see the authorities preventing the exploitation of dearth conditions and if the officials failed to suppress market 'abuses' no alternative philosophy on marketing would dissuade the crowd from regulating the markets for themselves.

So on the purely practical grounds that it helped to restore order while preserving good relationships within the community a return to the old protectionist regulations was necessary.

More complex an issue is whether it had a deeper justification. A decisive answer would be difficult, but there are a number of points which might be made.

First, if as has been suggested, marketing and trade operated differently in dearth,

⁶⁸ 'R Bignell to Charles Butler, 16 September 1800', enclosure in, 'George Isted to John King, 17 September 1800', PRO, HO 42:51, 230.

with an upsurge in speculation and profiteering, it was perhaps not inappropriate that different policies should have been applied to these crisis periods. Moreover, in times of rapid inflation, it is possible that the offences which the old protectionist legislation operated to prevent did, in fact, lead to price increases. Thus, in 1795 the Oxford Market Committee stated categorically that regrating had been responsible for an increase in the price of meat.⁶⁹

Second, central government seems to have been at fault in two ways. Less seriously it almost certainly over-reacted to the dangers both of riots and of the enforcement of protectionist legislation. They do not seem, as was suggested, to have discouraged agricultural investment.⁷⁰ Moreover, the farmers and even to some extent the commercial community who presumably preferred the principle that their profits and activities should not be restricted seem nevertheless to have been prepared to go along with the view that in dearth their prices should be reduced and their produce dispersed through the local markets. Sometimes, indeed, such groups actually appear to have taken the initiative in the reintroduction of protectionist measures, as in 1795 when farmers around Burford agreed to sell their corn only to mealmen and bakers consuming the corn locally and not to supply dealers sending corn from the county.⁷¹ More seriously, central government seems to have taken insufficient care to protect the interests of consumers in producing counties. Underlying their attitudes was the dangerous principle that, if necessary, the urban, industrial consumers should feed at the expense of the rural, agricultural workers.

Arising from this last point is the question of whether leaving agricultural prod-

ucts to a free market economy and treating them as 'commodities in the interest of profit',⁷² is a morally defensible policy. It was seen in the eighteenth century, as now, that *laissez-faire* both permitted the commercial communities to profit from necessity and prejudiced automatically in favour of the wealthier, more influential consumers. As Barbara Ward declared recently, 'Leave grain to an uncontrolled market and only the rich will eat'.⁷³ For many in the eighteenth century these factors rendered the idea of a free market for food in a period of scarcity morally unacceptable. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that one is still looking at an ethical problem.⁷⁴

Finally, it should perhaps be noted that, in Oxfordshire, there may not have been a full commitment to the free-market economy even in times of reasonable prices and adequate supplies. Thus, it has already been suggested that Oxford's covered market was very carefully regulated and, as late as 1824, one can find the market committee attempting to prevent forestalling, engrossing and regrating.⁷⁵ Moreover, in other towns, authorities were sometimes prepared to offer farmers incentives in the form of toll abolition, the construction of new market buildings or premiums on the sale of certain commodities, to persuade them to use public marketing institutions. Perhaps where authorities found it practicable to continue with the old methods of conducting marketing and trade there was an acceptance that this was still desirable.

V

In conclusion, unless we are simply the victims of the way in which evidence has survived, dearth and developments in marketing, internal trade and market regu-

⁶⁹ 'The Book of the Oxford Market Committee, 1771-1835', Oxford City Archives (OCA) FF 2.1a, pp 99-100.

⁷⁰ Thwaites, *op cit*, p 516.

⁷¹ JOF 4 July 1795.

⁷² Dumont and Cohen, *op cit*, p 44.

⁷³ Quoted in *ibid*, p 44.

⁷⁴ C Tudge, *The Famine Business*, Harmondsworth, 1979, p 9.

⁷⁵ 'Papers of the Market Committee, 1774-1824', OCA D3 11 (26).

lation were related to each other in a complex and significant way. We do not see simply a smooth transition to the free market economy interrupted by short periods when consumer action caused a repressive straitjacket to be placed on the activities of farming and commercial communities. Dearth was, in fact, a time during which both consumers and market authorities became conscious of the organization of marketing and trade and how changes in organization had affected them. Farmers and commercial communities were made aware of the social implications of their marketing and trading policies and were expected to face the moral as well as the material aspect of food sales. The building blocks of which marketing and trade were made were taken apart and examined and when the crisis was over they were rarely reassembled in precisely the same way. A new consensus had developed. Apparently old-fashioned and unacceptably rigid practices were given a new lease of life. The need for more modern consumer protection was brought home to the authorities. Farming and

commercial communities were given the challenge of exploiting new markets and finding quicker and more efficient means of supplying distant population centres while simultaneously having to accept their duties to the people amongst whom they lived. A period of dearth should not therefore be seen as wholly negative in effect or as wholly against the normal flow of events but as a time in which awareness developed, changes were assimilated or rejected and future patterns were thrashed out.

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to Dr J Thirsk for inviting me to read an earlier draft of this paper at Oxford in May 1982 and to Dr E J Evans for all his encouragement over this work. I am also indebted to the members of the University of Birmingham Social History seminar for their interest and advice; Mr E P Thompson for first introducing me to many of the sources and Dr M Prior for drawing my attention to Rail.

Notes and Comments

SPRING CONFERENCE, 1986

The Society's Spring Conference is to be held at Scale-Hayne College of Agriculture, Newton Abbot, from 7-9 April 1986. The full programme and booking forms will appear in the next issue of the *Review* but the Conference will feature a discussion of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume V, 1640-1750* in addition to at least five other papers and an excursion to some farms owned by the Duchy of Cornwall.

SEMINAR ON LATE MEDIEVAL ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

This meeting, to be held from 25-28 July 1986, is

organized under the aegis of the Historical Geography Research Group and is a sequel to the Exeter Conference convened on the same theme in July 1983. It is conceived as a discussion forum for those with active research interests in this period. As the emphasis will be upon the presentation of substantial papers in seminar format attendance will be limited to 50. Papers will be given by Dr Alan Carter, Dr Paul Glennie, Dr John Langdon, Dr Christopher Dyer, Dr Derek Keene, and Dr Richard Smith. Professor Guy Bois will give a guest lecture. Booking forms will be available in April 1986 from the Convenor, Dr Bruce Campbell, Department of Geography, Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN.

(continued on page 146)