

The Critical Century?

The Agrarian History of England and Wales

1750-1850*

By MARK OVERTON

THE CENTURY after 1750 is perhaps the most famous in the historiography of British agriculture, for this is the period first designated as one in which agrarian developments amounted to an 'agricultural revolution'. The designation has not, of course, gone unchallenged, although for all the debates over the meaning and use of the term, the century is still regarded as a period of outstanding significance in the progress of British agriculture. But was there an 'agricultural revolution'? The publication of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* Volume VI, 1750-1850, which its editor hopes is an 'authoritative, comprehensive, and judicious survey', might be expected to settle the matter once and for all.¹ The search for the answer is not for the faint-hearted (or for those with weak wrists) since the sheer bulk of the book (1215 pages with contributions from twenty authors) makes it rather a daunting prospect. If the reader is not put off, and perseveres to page 953 they will find Professor Mingay's verdict, which might come as a surprise to those familiar with his past writing on the subject.²

Given the many persistent obstacles which lay in the path of agricultural progress, the achievements of the hundred years after 1750 were remarkable. It could hardly be said that they amounted to an agricultural revolution . . .³

The argument has a slightly whiggish tone for the final sentence of his conclusion to the book considers that:

In many ways the hundred years that ended in 1850 may be seen as a base, or rather a preparation, a limited but essential preparation, for the greater changes yet to come.⁴

Certainly if we judge the period by the standards of late twentieth-century agriculture then this verdict is correct. In whatever ways we measure output and yields before reliable statistics start to appear in the late nineteenth century, it is clear that the period since 1950 has seen by far the greatest rates of growth.

But if we look back rather than forward one of the most striking features of the century after 1750 is that for the first time in English history there was no longer a direct relationship between population and food prices. Just as Malthus was pursuing the pessimistic implications of this relationship, which he accepted as an inevitable lesson of history, the link between population and prices was broken. For the first time growth in population did not lead (in the end) to a rise in prices which would eventually check that growth. In other words agricultural output kept up (just about) with a rising population.⁵

But something else was happening too. Not only did agricultural output keep up with population, but a falling proportion of the workforce was able to produce it. For the first time rising output was achieved without intensifying labour inputs. In other words labour productivity was rising as output rose. The importance of this is beyond question. If an industrial revolution is defined as an increase in the proportion of the labour force working in non-agricultural occupations, it follows that a decreasing proportion of the labour force must be employed in feeding the population (unless food imports increase). Thus judging the century after 1750 (perhaps actually 1700) with any previous period in English history makes it exceptional in two fundamental ways.⁶

The task of measuring changes in yields and output, which is a particularly difficult one for the century covered by this volume, falls to BA Holderness. Probate inventories, which constitute one of the main

* A review article of G E Mingay, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume VI, 1700-1850*, CUP, 1989. xxii + 1215, £90.

¹ p 5.

² For example in G E Mingay, 'The agricultural revolution in English History: a reconsideration', *Agricultural History*, 26, 1963, p 123.

³ p 953.

⁴ p 971.

⁵ This is clearly demonstrated by E A Wrigley and R S Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871*, 1981, p 405.

⁶ This is recognized by Mingay (p 953) but he rather downplays its significance.

TABLE I
English population, agricultural population, and exports 1700–1850

Date	Population	Agricultural population	Net imports	Labour productivity		
				low	mid	upper
1701	5.06	2.78	–2	1.95	1.86	1.77
1751	5.77	2.64	–12	2.56	2.45	2.34
1801	8.63	3.12	+10	2.63	2.49	2.35
1831	13.28	3.38	+12	3.65	3.46	3.34
1851	16.74	3.84	+16	3.88	3.66	3.44

sources of information for the early modern period cease to survive in quantity after the mid-eighteenth century, and national agricultural statistics were not collected until 1866. Instead there are scraps of information from a variety of sources, and one sympathizes with Holderness's conclusion, given at the end of an extremely thorough and scholarly assessment of available material, that his findings read like 'a litany for sceptics'.⁷ His verdict is that agricultural output doubled between 1750 and 1850.

This accords with an attempt to measure agricultural output from a different perspective. Table I, based on original work by E A Wrigley,⁸ shows the population of England, an estimate of the proportion of that proportion employed in agriculture, and the percentage of the consumption of agricultural products accounted for by imports. Population tripled from 1750–1850, net imports rose roughly by a third, and, assuming a more or less constant consumption per head, output must have doubled or a little more. The estimates for the proportion of the population in agriculture are crude, and the import figures cruder still, but even allowing for substantial margins of error, the order of magnitude remains the same. Three indications of 'labour productivity' are given, which are simply calculated as the ratio of the total population to the proportion of the population employed in agriculture; the one labelled 'mid' uses the import figure shown in the table, and the other two columns assume the proportion of imports to be 5 per cent below and 5 per cent above this figure.

How was the increase in output achieved? The sections on farming techniques are generally excellent (particularly the sections on sheep and cattle) but, perhaps as a consequence of dividing the material between five authors, there is no single comprehensive analysis of exactly *how* output doubled. Agricultural

output can increase in four principal ways: by extending the area under cultivation; by increasing farm inputs (such as seed, labour, and fertilizers but also capital); through regional specialization and associated changes in land use; and finally through technological change, whereby output will increase while the level of inputs stays the same.⁹ Evidence for all four strategies is scattered throughout the book, though given the nature of the evidence it is impossible to weight their relative importance. Most surprising is the absence of proper assessment of the likely impact of those technological changes which hitherto have rather obsessed agricultural historians: the introduction of new crops, new rotations, new breeds of livestock, and new farm tools.

Land productivity influences the productivity of labour since a rise in the former can lead to a rise in the latter. The crude approximations in Table I indicate that the first thirty years of the nineteenth century saw a sharp rise in labour productivity. Yet crop yields at this time seem to have been static. For twenty English counties the yield per acre of wheat remained roughly constant between 1800 and 1830 at around twenty-two bushels per acre. Barley yields may have fallen slightly from thirty-two to thirty bushels per acre.¹⁰ A rise in labour productivity between 1800 and the 1830s seems all the more surprising since after the Napoleonic Wars wages

⁹ Cf. Mingay's discussion p 970. The relationships between output and productivity are discussed in Mark Overton and Bruce M S Campbell, 'Productivity change in European agricultural development', in Bruce M S Campbell and Mark Overton, eds, *Land, labour and livestock: historical studies in European agricultural productivity*, forthcoming, Manchester, 1991.

¹⁰ Comparing the yield estimates for circa 1800 in Michael Turner, 'Agricultural productivity in England in the eighteenth century: evidence from crop yields', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXV, 1982, pp 489–510 with evidence from the tithe files for 1829–35 in R J P Kain and H C Prince, *The Tithe Surveys of England and Wales*, Cambridge 1985, pp 226–8. Unfortunately Kain and Prince's results were not available when Holderness was writing his chapter, nor were the maps of yield and output in Mark Overton, 'Agriculture', in J Langton, and R Morris, eds, *An Atlas of Industrializing Britain 1780–1914*, 1986, pp 34–53.

⁷ p 174.

⁸ E A Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the continent in the early modern period', *Jnl Interdisc Hist*, 15, 1985, pp 683–728, reprinted in R I Rotberg and T K Rabb, eds, *Population and economy*, Cambridge, 1986, pp 123–68.

were low and there appears to have been an excess supply of labour. Mingay concludes:

To some extent, at least, the productive achievements of this period were secured at the expense of the hardship and deprivation of the more than 900,000 workers who laboured on the farms of England and Wales for meagre rewards.¹¹

If this judgement is correct, and if labour productivity in fact did rise as Table 1 suggests (although by what means we are not yet in a position to say) perhaps the labourers were simply not rewarded for their extra effort.

Some might regard the figures in Table 1 as another example of a 'litany for sceptics'. National estimates of the cultivated area, agricultural output, crop and livestock productivity, and so on, have been pushed to the limit, indeed perhaps beyond. The way forward therefore, on some of the most fundamental questions in the agrarian history of this period, is by more detailed locally-based research.

One of the most striking contrasts between this volume of the *Agrarian History* and the preceding volumes IV and V, lies in the nature of the source material employed.¹² The earlier volumes are dominated by manuscript evidence; but with some exceptions volume VI relies on published secondary material. Of course some primary sources such as inventories dry up after 1750, and contemporary published material becomes much more reliable, but a good dose of primary sources, especially farm accounts, would have given some chapters more authority and made them read less like exhaustive surveys of existing literature. The chapter on prices, productivity and output goes so far as to deliberately ignore manuscript material.¹³ One wishes that N Goddard, in an excellent chapter on agricultural literature, could have devoted some space to discussing the value of such material as an historical source, given the reliance of his co-contributors on it. Even the comprehensive statistical appendix is mostly based on secondary material (much of it in parliamentary papers) and, unlike volumes IV and V contains relatively little new material gleaned from the archives. Nevertheless the gathering of so much statistical material in one place, together with Dr Holderness's summary tables of agricultural output is an immensely useful service for historians.

There are other contrasts with the preceding two volumes. Several themes neglected in volume V, especially the fortunes of the rural labourer and social

conditions in the countryside, are dealt with at length in this one. Labourers are considered in two chapters by W A Armstrong and J P Huzel. These are prime examples of cautious and judicious surveys of available literature (mostly up to about 1980) and will prove useful to students. 'Even-handed' is probably a better description than 'judicious', since decisive judgements are hard to find. As a consequence the chapters lack the passion that characterizes debates about the social impact of enclosure, living standards, the poor law, and, most of all, rural riots. As one might expect, J V Beckett handles landownership and estate management with assurance¹⁴ and a final chapter on rural society as a whole is contributed by R Porter.

One would not expect each volume in the series of *Agrarian Histories* to cover exactly the same ground, if only because each historical period produces its own particular problems. Thus volume VI has 160 pages devoted to the agricultural servicing and processing industries (covering corn milling, country trades, leather, coppice and underwood, malting, and agricultural engineering), each written by a different author. These are some of the most interesting pages of the book since they deal with important yet relatively neglected topics, and are mostly well researched and well written. The same can be said for the section on the development of agricultural societies by N Goddard.

Some themes covered in previous volumes are not dealt with in this one. Rural housing is not included, but the most startling omission is a chapter on parliamentary enclosure. Admittedly the topic was covered in two books published while the volume was in preparation, and many contributors make reference to the causes and consequences of enclosure, but the absence of a systematic treatment seriously undermines the claim that the volume is comprehensive.¹⁵ Students will therefore have to turn elsewhere for a survey of enclosure (unless they use the index), as they will for a discussion of the impact of the Corn Laws, or for the effects of the Napoleonic Wars, neither of which receive much attention.

One of the more serious failings of the book as far as this reviewer is concerned is the lack of a more comprehensive bibliography, which one would expect to find in a volume such as this. There is a 'select' bibliography and, as with all such bibliographies, Murphy's Law usually operates when one attempts to use it to find a particular reference. The search involves guessing which chapter is most likely to mention the reference, and then picking through footnotes in the hope that it might be there. Another

¹¹ p 961.

¹² J Thirsk, ed, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume IV 1500-1640*, Cambridge, 1967, and J Thirsk ed, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales V, 1640-1750*, Cambridge, 1984-5.

¹³ Some general references are made to primary sources (eg on p 128 note 37) but no reference is made to actual documents which scholars can follow up.

¹⁴ Much the same ground is covered in his book; J V Beckett, *The Aristocracy in England 1660-1914*, Oxford, 1987.

¹⁵ J A Yelling, *Common field and enclosure in England 1450-1850*, 1977, and M E Turner, *English Parliamentary Enclosure: its Historical Geography and Economic History*, Folkestone, 1980.

thirty-eight pages could easily have been found for an enlarged bibliography by cutting the section on weights and measures, which is reproduced verbatim from a volume of parliamentary papers. Such material is useful, but without comment or criticism offers nothing that a xerox of the original could not provide.¹⁶

The editor refers in the introduction to the chequered history of the volume and one does not envy his twenty-nine year journey from the original synopsis meeting in 1960 to publication in 1989. Difficulties along the way are no doubt responsible for the fact that many of the chapters read as independent contributions, seemingly written in ignorance of the other contributions. Even the editor's conclusion cites more recent work in preference to some of the findings of his contributors. Inevitably, therefore, there are inconsistencies and contradictions between chapters. This is no bad thing if the inconsistencies are highlighted to prompt further debate, but that opportunity has been missed. Some of the inconsistencies arise, not from differing historical interpretations, but simply because the chapters were written at different periods. For example, some authors use Wrigley and Schofield's population estimates while others must have finished their contribution before they were available.¹⁷ Incidentally, those figures refer to England alone, and have to be modified to include the total for Wales.¹⁸

Some of the divisions of responsibility between chapters are hard to understand. It is surely illogical to divorce the analysis of prices (Holderness in chapter 2) from the discussion on markets and marketing (Perren in chapter 3). Both chapters look at the movement of regional price series using different collections of prices. The graphs in both chapters show that prices move together in harmony (except for years of dearth and hiatus). Holderness suggests this might indicate the presence of a national market, but Perren does not address the issue and so misses the opportunity to continue the story where Chartres left off in the previous volume.¹⁹

The chapter by H C Prince on changing rural landscapes has no shortage of maps, but they fail to shed much light on this particular issue. Instead we are provided with a series of contemporary views of

the regional patterns of English (and not Welsh) farming from the *General Views* and the *prize essays* from the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*. These are interesting, but are not really comparable with the farming regions constructed for volumes IV and V which were regions of farming practice derived from primary material. The other maps in the chapter are rather a mixed bag, and include a map of root crops c.1800, which tells us more about the varying enthusiasm of Board of Agriculture Reporters for turnips than it does about the distribution of the crop.²⁰

In fact, this volume of the *Agrarian Histories* displays a very different attitude to regional differences in comparison with the previous two volumes. The assumption underlying the regional sections in volumes IV and V is that there was a series of distinct farming regions with fairly uniform farming practices, and these farming practices determined or influenced the distribution of a much wider range of social and economic factors – ranging from industry to religion and sport. Such was the importance of these regions that volume V devoted a whole book to them. What happened to them after 1750? Did agricultural specialization increase as the national market integrated, thus making regional identities more pronounced? Or did the integration of the economy break down regional differences?²¹

A more explicit consideration of the varying experience of particular regions helps to prevent bland national generalizations, which, because they are national, lose their meaning. It makes sense for economists to talk about the national economy, as in the performance of the agricultural sector in the national economy for example, but it is difficult to talk about the typical or average condition of the farm labourer when such an 'average' condition was not the typical experience. For example, the editor states:

The great majority of farmers in both England and the Principality employed either no paid labourers at all, or, if any, seldom more than two or three. Farming was not, therefore, a capitalist activity.²²

The word 'capitalist' has a multitude of meanings but if we look at the social relations of production then it seems that some areas were distinctly capitalist. The ratio of labourers (the 'agricultural proletariat') to farmers not employing labour ('peasants') in 1831 averaged about four to one. However, in the south-east of England it averaged more than fifteen to one, and in Essex rose to forty-three to one. In some districts it was higher than this. Conditions were very

¹⁶ There is no mention of R E Zupko, *A Dictionary of English Weights and Measures: from Anglo-Saxon times to the nineteenth century*, Madison, 1968. Xeroxing the original Parliamentary Paper would also be cheaper per page in comparison with the *Agrarian History* if copying costs were under about 12.7 pence per copy.

¹⁷ They were published in 1981 but had been available for several years before.

¹⁸ Compare Perren's use of them (p 192) with that of Holderness (p 91).

¹⁹ J A Chartres, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VII; 1640-1750: Agrarian Change*, pp 406-502.

²⁰ p 42.

²¹ J Langton, 'The industrial revolution and the regional geography of England' *Trans Inst Brit Geog*, ns 9, 1984, 145-67.

²² p 954, yet elsewhere he speaks of growing alienation amongst social classes in the countryside, p 963.

different in the north-west; the average for Lancashire for example was only two to one.²³

This raises a question about the scale at which we should investigate regional or local differences. The unit of analysis in early modern England, for both agricultural and social change, is taken to be the farming region. In the nineteenth century the parish is seen as the appropriate unit, exemplified in models of open and close parishes for example. The difference is probably simply one of historiographic convention, but exploration of the inconsistency would probably help in understanding regional differences in both periods.

Thus volume vi is clearly not the last word on the agrarian history of England between 1750 and 1850;

²³ Mark Overton, 'Agricultural revolution? England, 1540-1850', pp 9-21 of Anne Digby and Charles Feinstein, eds, *New Directions in Economic and Social History*, 1989, p 18.

one does not imagine that the editor or his contributors would wish it to be so. In conclusion, to use Mingay's criteria, is it an 'authoritative, comprehensive, and judicious survey'? It is judicious, although excessive caution and qualification give it an equivocal air, which does not make for exciting reading. Its intimidating bulk does not by itself make it authoritative, and several conclusions really need more empirical evidence before they can be accepted. It is not comprehensive; one wonders how a single volume possibly could be, but one suspects circumstance is as much to blame for some omissions as editorial judgement. On the whole the volume does live up to the high standards set by the others in the series. Above all, albeit with some limitations, it will prove extremely useful for both teaching and research, and remain the standard point of departure for both the undergraduate essay and the new research project.