

Small Farms in a Sussex Weald Parish 1800–60

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Abstract

The Sussex Weald is an area where many small farms survived into the nineteenth century, and their fate in Chiddingfold parish between 1800 and 1860 is explored. They thrived up to 1815; between 1816 and 1842, nearly half were lost, many of the remainder changed from owner-occupancy to tenancy, and a few additional ones appeared on newly-enclosed land; after 1842, changes were few. The timing points to the post-Napoleonic agricultural depression as the fundamental cause of change, mediated by a range of personal and holding characteristics that resulted in varying ability to withstand economic pressure. Changes were greater during this depression, than during those of the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, because the small farmer's cash outgoings, especially in paying his poor rates, frequently exceeded his income.

THERE HAS long been an interest in the timing and circumstances of the decline in numbers of small farms in England, manifested in studies that range in scale from national through regional to local.¹ It is now accepted that the arable farming areas of eastern and southern England saw the earliest and most severe decline, starting in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, whilst in western and northern England the decrease did not start until the follow-

ing century and was less rapid.² Within this broad regional pattern, however, there was much local diversity of timing, and about this we are far from fully informed, on account of the patchy cover of existing studies. One area for which more detail is required is the Weald of south-east England, for despite the existence of several general and numerous small-scale studies dealing with its agrarian history, there is little work specifically concerned with small farms.³

The limitation of our present knowledge to only certain districts may result in an incomplete understanding of the reasons for the decline. Further studies are unlikely to alter the view that the fundamental factor was the need to adapt to an expanding capitalist economy. But economic pressure was everywhere mediated or augmented by a range of lesser influences that varied considerably from place

¹ H Levy, *Large and Small Holdings: a study of English agricultural economics*, Cambridge 1911; G E Mingay, 'The size of farms in the eighteenth century', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser XXIV 1961–2, pp 469–88; D Grigg, 'Small and large farms in England and Wales', *Geography*, XLVIII, 1963, pp 268–79; F M L Thompson, 'Landownership and economic growth in England in the eighteenth century', in E L Jones and S J Woolf, eds, *Agrarian Change and Economic Development*, 1969, pp 41–60; David Grigg, 'Farm size in England and Wales from early Victorian times to the present', *Ag Hist Rev*, 35, 1987, pp 179–89; E Davies, 'The small landowner, 1780–1832, in the light of land tax assessments', *Econ Hist Rev*, 1, 1927, pp 87–113; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, Cambridge, 1974, Part 1; M E Turner, 'Parliamentary enclosure and landownership change in Buckinghamshire', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser XXVIII, 1975, pp 565–581; J R Walton, 'The residential mobility of farmers and its relationship to the Parliamentary enclosure movement in Oxfordshire', in A D M Phillips and B J Turton, eds, *Environment, Man and Economic Change*, 1975, pp 238–252; J M Martin, 'The small landowner and Parliamentary enclosure in Warwickshire', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser XXXII, 1979, pp 328–343; J A Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure in England 1450–1850*, 1977, Ch 6; Dennis Mills, 'Early land tax assessments explored: (1) Rutland, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire', in Michael Turner and Dennis Mills, eds, *Land and Property: the English land tax 1692–1832*, Gloucester, 1986.

² C G A Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700 Vol I*, Cambridge, 1984, pp 92–99; J V Beckett, *The Agricultural Revolution*, Oxford, 1990, pp 48–53.

³ Julian Cornwall, 'Farming in Sussex, 1560–1640', *Sussex Arch Coll*, 92, 1954, pp 48–91; Brian M Short, 'The changing rural society and economy of Sussex 1750–1945', Ch 8 in *Sussex: Environment, Landscape and Society*, Gloucester, 1983; Brian M Short, 'The south-east: Kent, Surrey and Sussex', in Joan Thirsk, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales V i*, Cambridge, 1985, Ch 8; Peter Brandon and Brian Short, *The South East from AD 1000*, 1990, pp 170–85, 203, 212–26, 322–30.

to place. Beckett has detailed these for Cumbria, several authors have discussed the role of enclosure in the Midlands, and Wordie has examined the part played by policy decisions in one large estate.⁴ It is probable, however, that in other localities there existed other factors as yet unrecognized.

Among the mediating factors about which relatively little is known are the characteristics of individual farmers and holdings. We may postulate that the personal factors included the farmer's age and temperament, and the size and composition of his family, and that holding variables encompassed size, layout, and tenure, but it is difficult to know precisely how these operated. Detailed local studies are needed to evaluate their influence, but so far as the earlier stages of small farm decline are concerned, relevant data have rarely survived in sufficient quantity to support reliable conclusions. It is not as a rule until the nineteenth century that extant records naming individual farms and farmers occur in sufficient abundance to warrant analysis of the role of personal and holding variables, but by this time small farms had already disappeared from many regions of England. In the Weald, however, many such farms survived into the twentieth century, making the choice of a parish in this region appropriate. The aims of the study that follows are to identify all the small farms in the chosen parish, together with the changes they experienced during the first six decades of the nineteenth century, to explore the reasons why many farms disappeared at this time, and to throw light on the personal and holding characteristics that influenced the response of individual farm families to economic difficulties.

⁴ J V Beckett, 'The decline of the small landowner in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England: some regional considerations', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXX, 1982, pp 97-111; J R Wordie, 'Social change on the Leveson-Gower estates 1714-1832', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser XXVII, 1974, pp 593-609; Turner, *op cit*; Martin, *op cit*; Yelling, *op cit*.

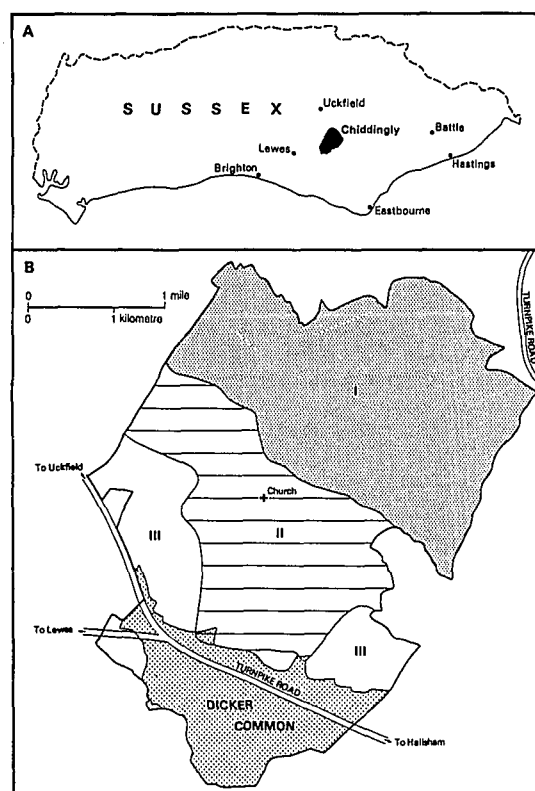


FIGURE 1
Chiddingly parish: A. location; B. broad divisions and turnpike roads

I
The parish chosen for this study is Chiddingly in Sussex, about eight miles (13 km) east of Lewes; its 4477 acres (1812 ha) straddle the junction of the High and Low Weald (Fig. 1). The choice of this parish was determined by the possession of a corpus of data collected for a different purpose, but Chiddingly appears to have been reasonably representative of the farming practices of the Sussex Weald. The northern part of the parish (I on Fig. 1B) has the least favourable environment, with steep slopes, poor acidic soils and an extensive woodland cover. The south and south-west (III) is low-lying with heavy and poorly-drained soils derived from Weald Clay. Between lies a belt of somewhat more favourable undulating country (II) with soils ranging from medium loams

to silty clays.⁵ Prior to an 1817 Enclosure Award, tracks widened here and there into small irregularly-shaped greens that attracted squatter settlement, while an extensive common known as the Dicker covered much of the Weald Clay tract in the south.

In addition to having to cope with relatively unfavourable soils, Chiddingly farmers had problems of access to market, since many had to negotiate some of the notoriously narrow, winding, and muddy Sussex lanes, described by Young as among the worst in the country.⁶ Two turnpike roads offered easier movement once reached (Fig. 1B). One crossed the northern fringes of Dicker common, linking the parish westwards to Lewes and Uckfield, and eastwards to Hailsham and Battle. The other ran north-south just beyond the eastern boundary of the parish. No railway has ever penetrated Chiddingly territory, and the nearest station during the period under consideration was at Berwick, on the line opened in 1846 from Lewes to Eastbourne, and about three miles (5 km) beyond the southern boundary of the parish.

Like most of its Wealden neighbours, Chiddingly was an 'open' parish with many landowners.⁷ The 1839 tithe survey listed ninety-nine owners, nine of whom, each with between 250 and 500 acres, owned about two-thirds of the parish. Excluding woodland, seven of these nine properties comprised a single large farm (plus in most instances a few smaller holdings), with three of the owners occupying their own farm; one other owner-occupier possessed one tenant farm in addition to his own holding; while the remaining owner had two medium-sized tenant farms. Almost all the remaining

land of the parish was divided among eighty-nine properties of under 75 acres (twenty between 20 and 75 acres, and sixty-nine under 20 acres). Some of the smaller owners were Chiddingly residents, while others lived in neighbouring parishes or in Lewes.

This ownership pattern was reflected closely by the farm size distribution, with a small number of what were locally considered to be large farms alongside a large number of smaller holdings. The definition of small farms suggested by Grigg and Mingay, i.e., those between 20 and 100 acres (8 and 40 ha), has been adopted to ensure comparability with other work, although in practice virtually all had fewer than 75 acres (30 ha).⁸ The appropriateness of the 20-acre lower limit is open to question, in that it cuts across a continuum of holding sizes, but it does appear to correspond roughly with the point on the continuum below which farming was never the main source of family income. Some small farms had already disappeared before 1800, nevertheless the survivors still occupied around 30 per cent of Chiddingly's enclosed farm land in the early years of the nineteenth century.

II

Before changes are examined, it is useful to start with a snapshot of the situation c 1840, the one occasion during the six decades for which there is comprehensive evidence relating to acreages, tenures, and farm family composition, derived from the tithe survey of 1839 and the census enumerators' books for 1841.⁹

In 1839, there were twenty-eight holdings in Chiddingly that met the 20-acre

⁵ M G Jarvis et al, *Soils and their Use in South-East England*, Soil Survey of England and Wales, Bulletin No 15, Harpenden, 1984; R D Lake et al, *The Geology of the Country around Lewes*, 1987.

⁶ Revd A Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Sussex*, 2nd Edition, 1813, reprinted Newton Abbot, 1970, p 417.

⁷ Short, *op cit*, 1983, p 155; Brandon and Short, *op cit*, p 318.

⁸ Grigg, *op cit*, 1963; G E Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farm in the Age of the Agricultural Revolution*, 1968.

⁹ Chiddingly Tithe Map and Award 1839, PRO, IR 35/59 and East Sussex Record Office (ESRO), TD/E 105; 1841 Census Enumerators' Books, PRO, HO 107/1118.

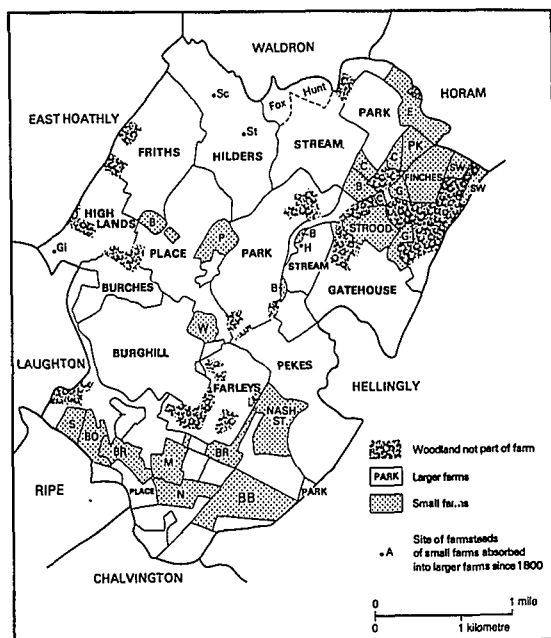


FIGURE 2

Chiddingly farms in 1839. Small farms: B = Beards; BB = Black Barn; BO = Broad Oak; BR = Brays; C = Charity; E = Easterfields; G = Gun; M = Millhouse; N = New House; P = Parsonage; PK = Pickhill; S = Stuckles; SW = Swansbrook; W = Willetts. Small farms absorbed: Gi = Gildridge; H = Hale; Sc = Scotland; St = Stockers

minimum to qualify as a farm. One, which was in effect part of a large farm in the adjoining parish of Chalvington, has been discounted, and woodland has been excluded from the acreages of the remaining twenty-seven. This leaves seven farms with between 200 and 330 acres, four with between 100 and 200 acres, and seventeen with between 20 and 100 acres. The large farms occupied roughly 48 per cent and the small farms 19 per cent of the non-wooded land of the parish. Farms in the 100–200 acre group covered a proportion of the parish (17 per cent) similar to that occupied by the 115 holdings of less than 20 acres (16 per cent). Comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows that most of the small farms were located in the zones of least favourable soils, either in the north-east of the parish, or around the former Dicker common. Four were

being worked with an adjacent larger unit, and two (with a combined area of 58 acres) were held by the same person, leaving twelve independent small farms. Of these, three can be classed as owner-occupied, six were tenanted, and three had a nucleus of owned land supplemented by rented plots.¹⁰

The tithe award indicates that farms of all sizes had between 50 and 85 per cent of their land under arable, with the single exception of a 31-acre holding with 32 per cent. The typical arable rotation was fallow, wheat, oats, and seeds (clover and ryegrass), left down for two or three years. The majority of farms in zones I and II, but none in zone III, had a small hop field which in certain years could be the source of considerable profit. Most of the remaining land comprised poor quality permanent grassland which provided summer grazing for cattle, whilst in winter downland sheep might be agisted. The traditional Wealden cattle-farming system, which involved the retention of all male calves, their use as plough oxen between the ages of three and six, followed by fattening for the butcher, may still have been practised, c 1840, on some of the larger farms in the northern part of Chiddingly parish. These farmers found the abundant supplies of manure which the winter stall-fed cattle provided very beneficial for their hop fields. By this date, however, horses had replaced oxen as plough animals on many farms and the emphasis of the cattle economy had shifted

¹⁰ Charity Farm has been included among the wholly rented independent units, although this status lasted only from 1838 to 1841; Chiddingly Highways Account Book 1835–50, ESRO, PAR 292/39/1. The owner-occupied category includes farms being worked by a member of the family other than the owner, and those where the owner was elderly and the land was worked by an unrelated small farmer. In a few instances, land in a neighbouring parish may have been worked along with a Chiddingly farm, but records need to be checked thoroughly before it can be assumed that identical names referred to the same individual. The author initially assumed that William Guy of Chiddingly and William Guy of Laughton, whose lands adjoined and who rented from the same landowner, were one person, but later discovered this was not the case.

towards rearing and dairying. Wheat, hops, store cattle, and butter were thus the principal cash products on the large commercial farms.¹¹

These basic products were supplemented or replaced on many small farms by clover seed, table poultry, and eggs.¹² In addition, many small farmers and their families would have undertaken seasonal or occasional paid employment for larger farmers (both local and in other regions like the South Downs), or in the wood-coppice industries.¹³ In the three instances where the 1841 census enumerators' books record an additional occupation (blacksmith, brickmaker, and innkeeper), this no doubt brought in a large share of the family income. Farmers with small acreages were thus not necessarily those with the smallest incomes, and some at least are likely to have adopted a capitalist economy. On the other hand, others retained an essentially peasant way of life, selling or bartering what they could, but otherwise subsisting on their own produce.¹⁴

Table I represents an attempt to classify all occupied small farms in Chiddingly c 1840, according to their social and economic characteristics. The three farmers with known non-agricultural occupations, together with David Guy of Parsonage Farm, who also shared in the running of his father's 232-acre Place

Farm, have characteristics commensurate with reasonable prosperity and a place in a capitalist society; all four heads were young or middle-aged, they had households of between seven and eleven persons, and most of their land was rented. The remaining nine farmers with no specified non-agricultural sources of income had households of six or fewer persons. This group appears to subdivide with the age of the farmer: the seven with heads aged 50 or over are those most likely to have retained a peasant economy, but the economic status of the remaining two, with farmers in their twenties or early thirties, remains uncertain.

III

In spite of some shortcomings, land-tax records provide the best evidence for year-by-year changes between 1800 and 1860 in the number and tenure of Chiddingly's small farms.¹⁵ Assessment lists are available for every year during the period, apart from 1839, 1843, and 1850-58, and except during the years 1840-45 these covered all properties, including those where the tax had been redeemed. From 1816 onwards, most farms are named, and almost all can be traced back before 1816 by their unchanged rentals and assessments. However, one (Stuckles) could not be identified before 1810, a second (Beards) comprised two blocks in 1839 that were difficult to identify earlier, and a further four were partly or wholly omitted from the lists either on account of charity status (Charity) or because they occupied land on the former Dicker common which appears never to have been subject to land tax (Black Barn, Brays, and New House).¹⁶ The latter five farms

¹¹ Chiddingly tithe file, PRO, IR 18/0283; John Farncombe, prize report 'On the farming of Sussex', *JRASE*, XI, 1850, pp 81-85; Young, *op cit*, pp 70, 226-250; James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, 1852, 2nd edition, 1968, pp 123-127; J P Boxall, 'The Sussex breed of cattle in the nineteenth century' *Ag Hist Rev*, XX, 1972, pp 19-22; S Hawes, 'Notes on the Wealden Clay of Sussex and its cultivation', *JRASE*, XIX, 1858, pp 182-198.

¹² Hawes, *op cit*, p 198; B Short, 'The art and craft of chicken cramming; poultry in the Weald of Sussex 1850-1950', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXX, 1982, pp 17-30; BPP 1836, VIII, Select Committee on Agriculture, second report, p 6.

¹³ M Reed, 'The peasantry of nineteenth-century England: a neglected class?' *History Workshop J*, XVIII, 1984, p 63; W A Armstrong, 'Labour I: rural population growth, systems of employment, and incomes', in G E Mingay, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI, Cambridge, 1989, pp 678-9.

¹⁴ Reed, *op cit*, 1984, pp 33-76; M Reed, "'Gnawing it out": a new look at economic relations in nineteenth-century rural England', *Rural Hist*, I, 1, 1990, pp 83-94.

¹⁵ ESRO, LT Chiddingly and LLT Chiddingly; Michael Turner 'The land tax, land and property: old debates and new horizons', in Turner and Mills, *op cit*, Ch 1.

¹⁶ For the exemption of charity land see John Broad, 'The land tax and the study of village communities', in Turner and Mills, *op cit*, p 62.

TABLE 1
Small farms and their households c 1840

Farms	Acreage farmed in Chiddingly 1839		Additional sources of of income	Farmer's age 1841	Household size 1841
	owned	rented			
Millhouse	—	31	brickworks	54	7
Gun	—	32	inn, hops*	45-49	8
Willetts	2	22	smithy†	47	11
Parsonage	—	36	joint tenancy of Place Farm	26	9
Easterfields with Pickhill	38	18	hops	58	6
Strood	—	47	hops	50-54	6
Finches	61	—	hops	58	4
Beards	31	—	poultry	63	6
Broad Oak	30	—	—	55-59	5
Nash Street	—	68	‡	60-64	6
New House	—	37	—	60-64	2
Brays	18	45	§	24	6
Black Barn	—	75	—	30-34	1

* possibly additional land in Hellingly.

† rent from 1.5 acres.

‡ farmed with a larger unit in 1839, but separate by 1841.

§ rent from 11 acres.

had therefore to be omitted from this part of the analysis, leaving seventeen for which it is possible to identify tenurial changes (Fig. 3). The approximate size of farms that had disappeared before 1839 was estimated from tithe award evidence.

The changes can be conveniently grouped by three phases of differing agricultural prosperity.

1800-1815: Details are available in 1800 for sixteen farms; seven were independent tenanted units, while nine were occupied by their owners. Among the tenanted farms, two (Parsonage and Foxhunt) saw no significant tenurial changes during this period; three (Willetts, Gildridge, and Nash Street) were purchased by their tenants, and a fourth (Scotland) was acquired by a local man who allowed the sitting tenant to remain until 1811, when the owner began to farm it himself; the remaining one (Stockers) was purchased by the owner of the adjacent large farm

(Hilders), and absorbed into the larger holding. Of the nine owner-occupied farms, seven saw no significant changes, whilst Hale and Swansbrook were acquired by an absentee landlord in 1811 but continued to be occupied by local families. The overall picture thus mirrors trends noted in earlier studies, with small farmers flourishing and owner-occupancy increasing.¹⁷

1816-1842: The period of agricultural distress that followed the Napoleonic wars lingered on in the unfavourable environment of the Weald until the 1840s (1842 was selected as the arbitrary terminal date for this period in order to encompass all changes of similar type). Figure 3 reveals

¹⁷ David Grigg, *The Agricultural Revolution in South Lincolnshire*, Cambridge, 1966, pp 85-88; J V Beckett, 'Landownership and estate management', in Mingay (ed), *op cit*, Ch 6, p 558; A H John, 'Farming in wartime', in E L Jones and G E Mingay, eds, *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution, 1967*, pp 44-5; E J Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1969, p 33.

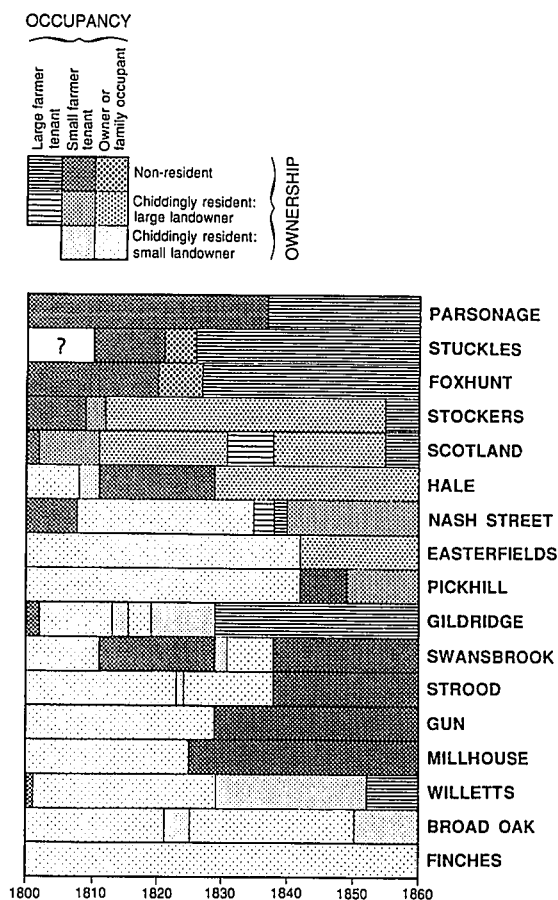


FIGURE 3

Chiddingly small farms: tenurial changes 1800 to 1860

that this was the time of greatest change. It is also a reminder that the c 1840 description of the previous section relates to the situation after most changes.

The three small tenant farms that still survived in 1815 all saw their tenants depart between 1819 and 1825, and only one (Parsonage) had a replacement tenant who lasted until 1836. The other two (Foxhunt and Stuckles) remained unlet for several years, reflecting the difficulty of attracting tenants during a time of depression; they were subsequently leased to adjacent large farmers.¹⁸ Parsonage experienced a somewhat similar fate from

1837, when it was leased to David Guy, who also shared the working of his father's Placc Farm. Changes among the eleven owner-occupied farms of 1815 started rather later, in 1824. In five instances, owner-occupancy was replaced by leasing from an absentee landlord; two farms were acquired by the owner-occupier of a large Chiddingly farm (Robert Reeves of Stream), who worked nearby Easterfields himself until 1860 but leased Nash Street back to its 1839 owners; Gildridge, after some vicissitudes, was acquired by the Earl of Chichester and incorporated into his adjacent 130-acre tenant farm of Highlands. Thus by 1842, of the seventeen small farms covered by Figure 3, eight had been absorbed by (or linked with) an adjacent large farm, six survived as independent but tenanted units, and three (compared with eleven in 1815) remained the property of owner-occupying families.

1843-1860: During this final phase, when the economic environment was improving, changes were few. One of the three surviving owner-occupied farms (Willetts) was sold during the 1850s to an absentee owner who leased the land to a nearby large farmer.¹⁹ By 1860 only two small farms were owner-occupied and only Finches was worked by the same family as in 1800.

To sum up, all seventeen farms under consideration (except possibly Stuckles) were independent units during the first decade of the century. By 1860, nine remained independent, of which only two were owner-occupied, compared with thirteen at the peak date for this tenure in 1809. In the process of these changes, the role of peasant farming in Chiddingly's economy was inevitably reduced.

Attention must now turn to farms omitted from Figure 3 because they escaped the land tax. A private Act of Parliament in 1813 sanctioned the enclos-

¹⁸ G E Fussell, *op cit*, p 90; G E Mingay, *op cit*, 1961-2, p 475; B Short, 'The turnover of tenants on the Ashburnham estate 1830-1850', *Sussex Arch Coll*, CXIII, 1975, pp 157-174.

¹⁹ ESRO, RAF 74.

ure of 790 acres of common waste in Laughton manor, among which the most extensive tract was the Dicker common in Chiddingly parish. The common had previously been used for grazing livestock by tenants of Laughton manor in Laughton, Chiddingly, East Hoathly, Waldron, Chalvington, and Ripe parishes, some of whom lived up to five miles away. The enclosure award of 1817 allocated several sizeable parcels to the lord of the manor and a few large freeholders, but the majority of the land was granted to the remaining hundred or so claimants in the form of plots of under five acres in size.²⁰ It was no doubt small size and large numbers that militated against the inclusion of these plots in the land-tax valuation.

The creation of so many small plots remote from their parent holdings provided an opportunity for the exchange, sale, and leasing of land, which in turn led to the expansion of some former fringe smallholdings, and the establishment of some completely new farms. A comparison of maps for 1822 and 1839 shows that this process had made considerable progress in the interval.²¹ Short-time renting and sub-renting, however, allowed considerable fluctuations in farm boundaries from year to year; smallholdings expanded and then contracted again, making the precise number of small Dicker farms at any date other than 1839 very difficult to establish. Probably four or five was the usual number, suggesting that only half as many new farms were added on the Dicker, as were lost on the old-enclosed land of the parish through absorption into larger units. Nevertheless, the Dicker was the part of the parish where the ethos of peasant farming survived most strongly

during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.²²

IV

It is generally recognized that the post-Napoleonic agricultural depression was a feature especially of areas of heavy clay soils in eastern England, including the Weald.²³ Wealden farmers by this time depended on wheat for a considerable part of their cash income, and when wheat prices fell more sharply than costs in the post-war years their prosperity evaporated.²⁴ The problem arose primarily from the intractable soils which made it difficult to achieve the improvements leading to increased yields that were taking place in other districts. Income from other products was less volatile, and the evidence of distress offered to Parliamentary Select Committees may have been exaggerated.²⁵ Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the whole period from 1816 to c 1840 was a time of difficulty for Wealden farmers, with the two phases of particularly low wheat prices in 1821–23 and 1833–36 being especially testing.²⁶ It is against this background that the contemporary changes among the small farms of Chiddingly parish need to be set. Explanation requires consideration of both the general trend, and the variety of response in individual cases.

Small tenant farms succumbed mainly during the earlier of the two phases of low wheat prices, no doubt because several

²⁰ ESRO, CHR 1/15, 16.

²¹ MS map of Laughton Manor 1822, surveyor Walter Figg, ESRO, SAS A1/4/30; Tithe map of Chiddingly 1839, PRO, IR 35/59, and ESRO TD/E 105.

²² T Horsfield, *The History, Antiquities and Topography of the County of Sussex*, 1835, Vol I, p 355; Reed, *op cit*, 1984, p 57.

²³ J D Chambers and G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750–1880*, 1966, pp 127–8; B A Holderness, 'Prices, productivity and output' in G E Mingay, ed, *op cit*, 1989, Ch 2, p 102.

²⁴ BPP, 1821, IX, 1, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Distressed State of Agriculture, p 51; H G Hunt, 'Agricultural rent in South-East England, 1788–1825', *Ag Hist Rev*, VII 1959, pp 98–108; A H John, 'Statistical appendix', in G E Mingay, ed, *op cit*, 1989, pp 975, 999.

²⁵ J Phillip Dodd, 'Agriculture in Sussex and the Corn Law lobby', *Southern History*, 11, 1989, pp 53–68.

²⁶ Chambers and Mingay, *op cit*, pp 110 and 127; John, *op cit*, 1989, pp 794–5.

years of successive loss had left their occupants badly in arrears with rent. Unless there was a mortgage on the property, the average owner-occupier would have had smaller outgoings than a tenant farmer, but more capital tied up in the farm itself. He could therefore survive a longer spell of unfavourable prices by cutting down on repairs and maintenance, increasing the level of family self-sufficiency, and making greater use of credit and barter.²⁷ For essential cash payments such as rates and taxes he might be able to draw on savings accumulated during earlier years of prosperity. It is therefore not surprising to find change delayed until somewhat later among small owner-occupied properties, with the precise timing showing no obvious correlation with wheat prices.

On the Dicker, enclosure during the early years of the depression favoured small farms. The many new plots that became available for leasing at a time when demand was depressed must have encouraged the setting of low rents, thereby providing opportunities for smallholders round the fringes of the former common to acquire extra plots. Even the two entirely new Dicker farms were modest in size, and one still lacked a farmhouse in 1839. The Dicker thus remained an oasis of small farms and smallholdings up to 1860 and later.

Within this broad pattern of reactions to agricultural depression, however, the variety of individual responses, particularly among owner-occupiers, suggests the existence of mediating factors to which attention must now turn. Two sets of factors need consideration: first, the characteristics of the farmer himself, including the timing of his career in relation to the onset of depression, the size of his family in association with local customs of inheritance, and his skills and

initiative; and secondly, the attitudes of other members of the community and outside purchasers towards small farms. Evidence on these matters is not as full as might be wished, but there are some clues.

Most of Chiddingly's owner-occupying small farmers survived to old age and had sizeable families.²⁸ It was usual for one son to inherit the farm, with all remaining property being divided more or less equally among all the children, except in cases where they had received an equivalent portion earlier. Large families thus resulted in the son who inherited the farm starting with only small capital reserves. As farms went through a cycle of capital accumulation and dissipation, each in turn became especially vulnerable to outside economic influences at the time when ownership had recently passed from one generation to the next. The fewer the offspring, the smaller the danger, with the ideal being one or two surviving children, including one son ready to take over the farm. At the other extreme, childlessness or the absence of an heir willing to take over gave rise to the sale of the property on retirement or death. Hence in families at both extremes of size, change was most likely to occur at or within a few years of the death of the head of the family.

These relationships can be illustrated from several Chiddingly small farms. Finches, the only farm that was retained throughout the whole period by the same family, demonstrates the advantages of few offspring. John Holman owned and farmed it until 1810, when recently-married Samuel Holman became tenant at the age of twenty-seven, with John remaining owner until 1832. Samuel's family comprised just two sons, of whom

²⁷ Reed, *op cit*, 1984.

²⁸ Where not otherwise noted, this section is based on (i) census listings for 1821 (ESRO, PAR292/37/1), 1841 (PRO, HO107/1118), 1851 (PRO, HO107/638), and 1861 (PRO, RG 9/569); (ii) Chiddingly Parish Registers, ESRO, PAR292/1/2/1, PAR292/1/3/1, PAR292/1/5/1; (iii) Land Tax Assessments, ESRO, LT and LLT Chiddingly; (iv) Chiddingly Tithe Map and Award 1839, PRO, IR 35/59 and ESRO, TD/E 105.

the younger was trained as a shoemaker, while the elder, David, joined his father in running Finches from 1843, and became owner after his father's death in the 1850s. Since Samuel's wife was only twenty-three when her younger son was born, we appear to have here an instance of family limitation; was this perhaps with an eye to inheritance? The fact that David Holman too had a small and well-spaced family of two daughters followed by two sons increases the suspicion. Survival may also have been aided by the timing of family events; Samuel had been farming for a few years before depression struck, while David took over when the economic environment was improving.

An apparently childless small farmer was Richard Pelling, who owned and occupied Strood from 1824 to 1838. In the latter year, when he was sixty-three, he retired with his wife to the nearby village of East Hoathly and sold the farm to an outsider, though he retained the lease of a second farm, twenty-six acre Charity, until 1841. Thomas Davies of Willetts was not childless, but the only son of whom there is evidence had moved away from Chiddingly. Davies retired from farming in 1830, at the age of sixty-five, when he continued to occupy the same house but leased the land to his blacksmith neighbour. The property was inherited by Davies's absentee son in 1845, and sold by him in the 1850s, after the death of the lessee.²⁹

Two examples of farms sold soon after the death of the head of family can be examined. Strood (the same farm that childless Richard Pelling subsequently acquired) was owned and farmed by John Barnes until his death in 1818. There followed a brief occupancy by his widow before the property passed to their youngest son Richard, aged thirty-two in 1821. John Barnes's will reveals that all his pos-

sessions apart from the farm and its implements were to be shared in the traditional way amongst his nine children.³⁰ Richard Barnes thus started to farm Strood with relatively limited financial backing during the worst phase of the depression, when he would almost certainly have been forced to draw on capital. A requirement in the will that he should pay his eldest sister an annuity of £17 10s must have seemed the last straw. It is not surprising that he was forced to quit in 1824.

No will has been located for the second example, Easterfields, but the circumstances appear to have been similar. James Funnell, senior, owned and farmed Easterfields until 1829 when his son James Funnell, junior, took over the management. James senior remained the owner, and also continued to farm adjacent Pickhill jointly with John Funnell, perhaps a brother. Both James senior and John died in 1837. Pickhill was sold immediately to a Hellingly family, with James Funnell junior becoming tenant, while at the same time he now owned as well as occupied Easterfields. The size of James Funnell senior's family is not known, but it is likely to have been sufficiently large to have left James junior short of capital; his own outgoings on his eleven children, including several apprenticed to craftsmen, must have been substantial. It is therefore no surprise to find Easterfields passing in 1842 into the hands of a large neighbour, Robert Reeves of Stream. James Funnell junior survived as tenant of Pickhill for a few more years, before finally disappearing from the Chiddingly scene.

Investigation along these lines for all of the owner-occupied small farms of Chiddingly is not feasible, but such evidence as is available supports the contention that most changes followed the death of the family head. Each farm would have experi-

²⁹ ESRO, RAF74.

³⁰ ESRO, A73, p 309.

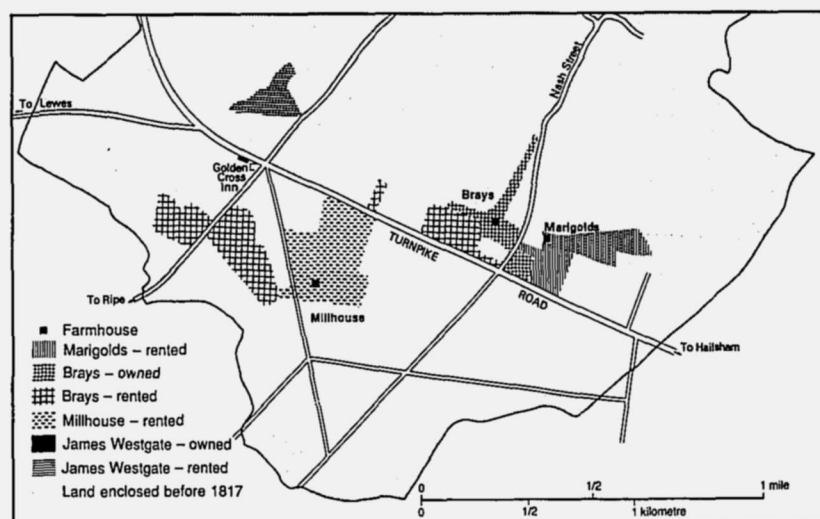


FIGURE 4

Former Dicker Common: selected small holdings and small farms, 1839

enced the potentially dangerous stage in the family cycle once a generation, and since different families were at different stages of their cycles, the changes among Chiddingly owner-occupied farms were not surprisingly spread throughout the eighteen-year period from 1824 to 1842.

Although personal ability and initiative must have played some part in determining the fate of particular farm families, evidence for its role is extremely difficult to identify. Since the Dicker was the district that offered most scope for initiative, the most promising approach is to look for evidence among men who acquired land there. Thomas King became the owner of the eighteen-acre smallholding called Brays in 1833, when, assuming that his age as recorded in the 1851 census was accurate, he was sixteen years old; by 1839 he was renting an additional forty-five acres of Dicker land in Chiddingly, plus a few acres in Ripe (Fig. 4). We glimpse here a young man who had sufficient success on the bottom rung of the farming ladder to move on to a larger farm, for the census enumerators' books for 1851 recorded him as living on a 110-acre farm in Hellingly. William Thorpe

(b. 1793), the illegitimate grandson of a prosperous Chiddingly shoemaker, was described in the early 1820s as an agricultural labourer. After two years as governor of the parish workhouse, he appears in the 1827 land-tax assessment as tenant of the nineteen-acre smallholding known as Marigolds (Fig. 4).³¹ By 1835 he was paying highway rates for a much larger acreage, almost certainly the result of renting an additional forty or fifty acres on the Dicker.³² He too must have flourished, for in 1839 he moved to the 114-acre Burches Farm. James Westgate, in 1841 aged forty, and a carrier from the Golden Cross Inn to Lewes, was in 1839 renting just six acres of land (Fig. 4). By 1851 he was described as farmer of forty acres, and by 1861 he was also the innkeeper.

Such men could not have flourished without ability and business acumen, but possession of a certain amount of capital may have been just as significant. William Thorpe had received a fourteenth share of his grandfather's estate in 1819; James Westgate no doubt invested the profits

³¹ Chiddingly Vestry Minute Book, ESRO, PAR292/12/1.

³² Chiddingly Highways Account Book 1835-50, ESRO, PAR292/39/1.

from his carrying business; and young Thomas King must surely have started with an inheritance or parental backing.³³ Who can say whether other Dicker-fringe smallholders like Thomas Townshend of Deanland or John Richardson of Holmes Hill might not have flourished equally if they had possessed comparable financial resources? By bringing into their small farms capital generated outside the farming economy, King, Thorpe and Westgate would have been able to invest in enough improvements to allow their holdings to pay their way. In contrast, the majority of smallholders and small farmers lacked capital and had no means of escaping from the traditional semi-subsistence economy – even if they had wanted to. Personal qualities alone were not sufficient to ensure success, or even survival.

Turning now to the second set of mediating factors, attitudes towards small farms are equally difficult to evaluate in the absence of direct comment, but assumptions can be drawn from indirect evidence. Prior to 1815, any small farm put up for sale had found a ready market among the non-inheriting sons of local farming families. During the first decade of the depression, some such purchasers still existed, encouraged no doubt by low prices. Richard Pelling, who acquired Strood in 1824, probably came from such a background. In the same year, Edward Weston, son of a Chiddingly millwright, purchased Broad Oak, where Westons remained for the next quarter century. By the late 1820s, however, this source of purchasers had dried up, and all subsequent new owners were either large local landowners or non-resident investors. Those investors whose place of residence can be identified lived either in nearby rural parishes or in towns like Lewes and Brighton. The impression is that many became owners by default,

when a mortgager was unable to service his debt, a good example being Millhouse, where a Lewes solicitor became the owner in 1825.³⁴ No doubt such new owners were prepared to accept a regular rent income as a substitute for mortgage payments, hence they acquiesced to their new role, while probably taking little positive interest in the property.

Except in the case of Gildridge, the landowners who acquired small farms were all Chiddingly owner-occupiers. During the earlier part of the period, owners of some middle-sized holdings acquired adjacent small farms in order to reach a more economic size; Hilders for instance grew from about 180 acres in 1812, to 284 acres in 1839 by absorbing Stockers and Scotland. But once a large farm had reached what appears to have been the local optimum of around 250–300 acres, the owner's attitude to the fate of the remaining small farms may have changed. Robert Reeves of Stream Farm (278 acres) became the owner of Hale in 1830, which he incorporated into Stream to give him a total of 353 acres (including 52 acres of woodland) in the 1839 tithe award. In 1842 he became owner of Nash Street and Easterfields, and in the 1850s of Pickhill, but Nash Street and Pickhill continued as independent tenant holdings, while Easterfields was restored to tenant status in 1860, after Reeves had farmed it himself for eighteen years. Little is known about how large and small farms normally interacted in the Weald, but work in other regions has revealed reciprocal arrangements that may well have had parallels in this district.³⁵ Large Chiddingly farmers like Reeves may therefore have viewed the survival of at least some small local farms as conducive

³³ ESRO, A73, p 547.

³⁴ Laughton Manor Court Book, ESRO, A2327/1/10, pp 14, 58.

³⁵ Daniel Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Cardiff, 1971; Ian Carter, *Farmlife in Northeast Scotland 1840–1914*, Edinburgh, 1979; Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers*, Oxford, 1990.

to their own prosperity, whether as sources of labour, young cattle, or some other product that could be obtained most cheaply and conveniently this way.³⁶

The impression as a whole is thus not of aggressive action on the part of the new owners of small farms, but rather of somewhat reluctant involvement, by default or perhaps in the process of attempting to help a small neighbour.

V

The conclusion that the post-Napoleonic depression was the occasion for major changes among the small farms of Chiddingly parish raises further questions. It is reasonable to assume that any period of low prices for agricultural products would provide testing conditions for small farmers requiring cash for rent, taxes and essential purchases. So, how did Wealden small farms fare during other periods of depression, notably those of the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries? If changes were more modest than those in Chiddingly between 1815 and 1842, what was it that made the early nineteenth century a time of greater vulnerability?

Evidence for a decline in the number of small farms in one part of the Weald during the eighteenth century is provided by Grover's study of seven parishes located in Hastings Rape.³⁷ His tables, based on early land-tax records, indicate that the number of occupiers assessed at between £2 and £10 (roughly corresponding to small farms as defined in this article) fell by 33 per cent between 1702 and 1781, while the number of proprietors in the same assessment range declined by 20 per cent. This points to a greater loss of small tenant farms than of small owner-

occupied properties. Grover's work does not tell us precisely when the changes occurred, hence we do not know whether they were concentrated into the main depression years of 1725 to 1750.³⁸ Even if they were, a decline of 33 per cent in 25 years would still have been less severe than the Chiddingly decline of 47 per cent between 1815 and 1842. Far more detailed work is necessary before the precise impact of the eighteenth-century depression can be evaluated, but this limited comparison suggests that its overall effect on Chiddingly's small farms was probably smaller than that of its early nineteenth-century counterpart. It is interesting to note however that where evidence has been encountered for pre-1800 losses in Chiddingly, the farms concerned were located mainly on the somewhat better soils of zone II.

The differing impact on small farms of the two periods of depression seems likely to have been a corollary of the increasing market orientation of Wealden farming with the passage of time. The eighteenth-century decline of small farms on the better soils of Chiddingly's zone II may signify an infiltration of capitalist farming into the more attractive parts of the Weald, whilst a peasant economy survived on soils less amenable to improvement. The late eighteenth-century price rises led to an even deeper penetration of market forces along with an expansion of the acreage devoted to wheat; this generated on the one hand renewed interest in engrossment among larger landowners, and on the other a greater reliance on produce for sale amongst small farmers. But whilst the small farmer's cash income rose, so too did his outgoings in the form of rent or mortgage payments, essential

³⁶ Beckett, *op cit*, 1990, p 52.

³⁷ R Grover, 'Early land tax assessments explored: (2) Kent and Sussex', in Turner and Mills, eds, *op cit*, pp 204-18.

³⁸ Joan Thirsk, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales V i*, 'Introduction', p xxii. Mingay, *op cit*, 1961-2, p 482, note 2, quotes evidence that in Laughton manor, which included part of Chiddingly parish, the main period when farms increased in size was between 1740 and 1760.

purchases, rates, and taxes. Most significant was the steady rise in poor rates after c 1750; in Chiddingly the rate exceeded 12s per pound of assessment every year between 1809 and 1833, rising to a peak of 22s in 1819.³⁹ Some farm and household needs, and sometimes even rent, could be paid for in kind or by barter, but rates and taxes had to be paid in *cash*. A small farmer during the early eighteenth-century depression needed only small amounts of cash for this purpose, at a time when the prices he was receiving for the products he took to market – butter, cheese, eggs, the occasional animal – fell only modestly.⁴⁰ His counterpart living through the post-Napoleonic depression required several times more cash, in absolute terms, when his income, derived from much the same products as earlier, plus wheat, may have been at best only twice that of c 1750. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that small farms were far more vulnerable to change during the second of the two depressions.

The secondary literature contains little information on how small farms fared during the late nineteenth-century depression, and it is difficult to tell precisely how those of the Weald were affected. By 1924, holdings between 5 and 100 acres in the whole of south-eastern England occupied a slightly larger percentage of the total area of crops and grass than in 1885, but the regional figure may disguise significant local variations.⁴¹ A detailed study of size and tenurial changes in the Weald is required before definite conclusions can be drawn; in the meantime, the continued survival of many small farms into the twentieth century suggests that late nine-

teenth-century losses were minimal.⁴² Discussion will proceed on this assumption.

The problems of the late 1870s and the 1880s affected principally cereal growers. Prices had been falling steadily, especially for wheat, and the situation was exacerbated for farmers in areas like the Weald, where little underdraining had been undertaken, by a series of wet seasons.⁴³ Many of the larger Wealden farmers, who still relied on wheat for a sizeable proportion of their cash income, saw their returns so seriously reduced as to lead to some relinquishment of farms and bankruptcy.⁴⁴ Small farmers were better placed to survive as they were more dependent on dairy and poultry products, fruit, and hops, for which demand was rising and market organization improving, hence their modest incomes experienced less fluctuation.⁴⁵ At the same time, there was no significant increase in outgoings, and even some rent reductions.⁴⁶ The result seems to have been considerable resilience, ensuring small farm survival.

Such evidence as is available thus appears to support the view that the post-Napoleonic depression saw greater changes among small farms than occurred during the other two periods considered. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most small Wealden farmers sold only as much produce as was necessary to support their simple life-style, and they

³⁹ Chiddingly Vestry Minute Book, ESRO, PAR292/12/2, Nov 1835, list of Overseers and poor rates from 1804 to 1835.

⁴⁰ Peter J Bowden, Appendix III 'Statistics', in Joan Thirsk, ed., *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V ii, 1985.

⁴¹ Grigg, *op cit*, 1987, p 187.

⁴² A D Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming*, 1913, pp 47–8; J D Sykes and G P Wibberley, *Profits and Problems of Farming in South-East England*, Wye College Department of Agricultural Economics, 1956, p 13; Ian G Reid, *The Small Farm on Heavy Land*, Wye College Department of Agricultural Economics, 1958, p 6.

⁴³ C S Orwin and E H Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1846–1914*, 1964, p 266 and Chart V; A D Hall and E J Russell, *A Report on the Agriculture and Soils of Kent, Surrey and Sussex*, 1911, p 128; A D M Phillips, *The Underdraining of Farmland in England during the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1989, especially p 119.

⁴⁴ P J Perry, 'Where was the "Great Agricultural Depression"? a geography of agricultural bankruptcy in late Victorian England and Wales', *Ag Hist Rev*, 20, 1972, pp 30–45; Boxall, *op cit*, p 19.

⁴⁵ Hall, *op cit*, p 47; Brandon and Short, *op cit*, p 327.

⁴⁶ Charity Farm in Chiddingly provides an example of rent reduction: from £30 per annum in 1875, it had fallen to £18 18s by 1898, ESRO, PAR254/24/3.

could normally withstand a period of lower prices by adopting a range of well-trying strategies – so long as cash outgoings did not increase. What made the post-Napoleonic depression exceptionally testing for them was the requirement to pay regularly, in cash, the high poor rates that then prevailed. Wealden parishes, like most open parishes in southern England, had seen a marked growth in the number of persons dependent on parish relief during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with a corresponding increase in poor rates.⁴⁷ The charge fell on all occupiers of land roughly in proportion to the acreage held, so small farmers paid less than large ones. However, the larger farmers were in a sense also beneficiaries, for many of them employed each summer a number of casual labourers whom they could leave the parish to support during the winter.⁴⁸ Small farms worked largely by family labour gained little from this pool of casual labour, yet were still required to contribute to parish relief.⁴⁹ Year after year, the small farmer's cash and savings were drained away, and his traditional resilience undermined. Blaug's view, that it is impossible to separate the burden of poor rates from the many other difficulties that afflicted smallholders in the years of deflation after Waterloo seems unduly cautious, for it was almost certainly this special feature of the post-Napoleonic period that made the small farms of Chiddingly more vulnerable to change at this time than during other periods of depression.⁵⁰

VI

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, it confirms the need in any consideration of small farm survival to take into account the role of unavoidable cash outgoings, since the average small farmer had insufficient financial flexibility to enable him to withstand a heavy outlay for more than a few years. This factor is likely to have had a significant influence in those parishes of southern England, particularly subject to high poor rates during the early nineteenth century, but needs to be included among the range of possible influences in all studies of small farm decline. Secondly, the principal mediating factors that determined a farm family's resilience were the amount of capital or supplementary income available, the stage in the family cycle, and, when the family head died, the number of children among whom the inheritance needed to be divided. These mediating factors are likely to be of general application, supplemented by others particular to their place and time.

Further work is required to set the analysis presented here in its wider temporal and spatial context. The early nineteenth century has been revealed as a major period of change in Chiddingly, but a study covering a longer period of time is needed before its comparative significance can be accurately measured. Furthermore, since no parish is a perfect microcosm of its region, there is room for a more general analysis of the history and character of the small farms of the Weald. But for such temporal and spatial studies alike, the experience of Chiddingly's small farms between 1800 and 1860 provides a yardstick against which other changes can be evaluated.

⁴⁷ D A Baugh, 'The cost of poor relief in south-east England, 1790-1834', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser XXVIII, 1975, pp 50-68; J P Huzel, 'The labourer and the Poor Law 1750-1880', in Mingay, ed, *op cit*, 1989, pp 760-69; both are concerned with per capita expenditure rather than poor rates *per se*.

⁴⁸ N Gash, 'Rural unemployment, 1815-34', *Econ Hist Rev*, VI, 1935, pp 90-93; R Wells, 'Rural rebels in southern England in the 1830s', in C Emsley and J Walvin, eds, *Artisans, Peasants and Proletarians 1760-1860*, 1985, p 130.

⁴⁹ BPP 1834, HC XLIV, Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, Vol III, evidence for Chiddingly Parish.

⁵⁰ M Blaug, 'The myth of the old Poor Law and the making of the New', *J Econ Hist*, 23, 1963, reprinted in M W Flinn and T C Smout, eds, *Essays in Social History*, Oxford, 1974, p 142.