

Essex Agriculture in the 'Golden Age', 1850-73

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Abstract

By investigation of agriculture in one county, Essex, this paper reviews broader debate on farm incomes, investment, methods, and output during the so-called 'golden age'. In several respects, particularly the extent of investment and 'high farming', the Essex experience offers scant support for traditional interpretations. Landlords' and farmers' response to price changes receives particular attention. It is argued that Essex farming was characterized by continuity in methods and output: milk and meat production in 1873 were scarcely less subservient to corn than they had been in 1850. But there were good reasons why this was so.

UNTIL the 1950s accounts of agriculture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, in Essex as in England, were reassuringly unequivocal.* This was, in Lord Ernle's familiar description, a 'golden age', the triumphal successor to a transitional recovery following the 'blackest day' depression of 1815-37.¹ This halcyon-age of prosperity, 'high farming', enterprise and investment was then swept aside by an avalanche of American grain inaugurating the 'great agricultural depression' of 1874-96. More recently, of course, each of these certainties has been questioned: did the so-called 'golden age' acquire its lustre when agriculturalists looked back nostalgically from the succeeding depression? Were not some of the celebrated achievements of 'scientific farming' rather like Concorde, technically splendid but economically suspect? Such questioning has not deprived the period of its historical cohesion. Few doubt that the

'golden age' was a better time for landlords and farmers than preceding or succeeding decades or that incomes and confidence were sufficient to encourage investment and innovation. But the extent and consequences of these and other variables are now debated.

'High farming' is a case in point. Did this period, as many claim, witness exceptional expenditure on farm buildings, drainage, machinery, fertilizer and animal feed, and which of these investments was most increased?² 'High farming' has been variously interpreted as entailing a continued commitment to corn at a time when price signals were urging the opposite, and as having been directed no less towards increasing the livestock element within mixed farming.³ Whereas most interpretations assume that the wheat acreage fell significantly, and E L Jones has further claimed that the chief source of prosperity in the 'golden age' was not cereal production but livestock husbandry, others claim that the wheat acreage was constant

* The authors are indebted to Dr E J T Collins, Dr P A Johnson, and Professor G E Mingay who kindly commented upon an earlier version of this article.

¹ R E Prothero (Lord Ernle) *English Farming Past and Present*, 6th ed, 1961. Prothero, in fact, reserved this accolade for the years 1852-63. More commonly, as here, the 'golden age' is considered to coincide with the more general 'mid-Victorian boom'. F M L Thompson's 'golden age' (1853-73, in *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963), like Prothero's, recognizes low grain prices in the early 1850s.

² 'Taken as a whole, there was probably much more landlord's capital sunk in farm improvements in the middle years of the nineteenth century than in any comparable period': J D Chambers and G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880*, 1966, p 163; 'Money was poured into land', Prothero, *English Farming*, p 375.

³ Thompson, *Landed Society*, pp 254-6; E L Jones, *Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution*, Oxford, 1974, chap. 9.

or increasing.⁴ Moreover, because some have claimed that structural change in English agriculture was less than the market called-for, or that much of the change that occurred was misdirected, the landlords' reputation for dynamism and enterprise at this time has also been challenged.⁵

One obvious approach to the investigation of these issues is through regional analysis. This article attempts to contribute towards an overall evaluation of English agriculture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century by examining the characteristics of farming in Essex, a county where we might expect to find evidence of an agrarian 'golden age'. Essex at mid-century contained extensive arable acreage, its farms were larger than the average, and it appeared well-placed to benefit from any stimulus emanating from London and the metropolitan markets.

I

In two respects, landownership and farm size, Essex agriculture witnessed little change of consequence in the third quarter of the century. Land was bought and sold of course; there was a steady trickle of monied-men from nearby London and some landlords were active in buying-up land adjoining their estates while disposing of more distant farms.⁶ But there was little evidence of large estates either being assembled or dissolved and figures calculated from the tithe awards for the early 1840s and those from the 'New Domesday

Survey' of 1872-3 show no marked change in patterns of landownership.⁷ Nor was Essex a county dominated by great landowners. In the early 1870s estates of over 3000 acres accounted for some 28 per cent and 41 per cent of farmed land in Essex and in England and Wales respectively.⁸

Reliable and comprehensive statistics of farm-size were not collected until 1875 but it was widely assumed that Essex farms were larger than average and this was certainly so by 1875 when, according to the agricultural returns, the proportion of acreage in holdings in excess of 300 acres was 36 per cent in Essex and 28 per cent in England and Wales.⁹ Evidence of changes in farm size on individual Essex estates is probably a reasonable indicator of trends in the county as a whole before 1875, and on six out of ten estates examined there was virtually no change in this respect.¹⁰ On the remaining four estates there was a modest increase in average farm size: Lord Petre's 18,000 acre Thorndon estate, for example, had 49 tenants in 1860 and 47 in 1870.¹¹ While such estate evidence may not reveal all changes of significance, including more numerous smallholdings, it is unlikely to underestimate increases in farm size significantly. Thus at a time when increasing farm size was regarded as one of the characteristics

⁴ Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p 183; S Fairlie, 'The Corn Laws and British wheat production, 1829-76', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXII, 1969, pp 88-116; L Drescher, 'The development of agricultural production in Great Britain and Ireland from the early nineteenth century', *Manchester School*, XXIII, 1955, p 155; Jones, *Agriculture*, chap 9; J C Morton, *Handbook of Farm Labour*, 1868, p 72; M Olsen and C C Harris, 'Free trade in corn: a statistical study of the prices and production of wheat in Great Britain from 1873 to 1914', *Quart Jnl Econ*, LXXIII, 1959, p 145.

⁵ Thompson, *Landed Society*, chap IX; Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p 168.

⁶ The exchange of farms by Lord Petre and Arthur Pryor in 1869 to consolidate estate boundaries northwest of Chelmsford is an example of this kind: Essex Record Office (hereafter ERO), Petre MSS, Accounts D/DP A365, p 30.

⁷ Thompson, *Landed Society*, pp 122-7. The number of Essex landowners with over 1000 acres was remarkably stable. About 97.5 per cent of Essex is covered by the tithe awards.

⁸ J Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland*, 4th ed, 1883. Essex was particularly lacking in estates of over 10,000 acres and not far from the average in the proportion of land occupied by estates of between 3000 and 10,000 acres.

⁹ BPP, 1875, LXXIX, *Agricultural Returns* (1875), pp 25-31. Statistics in the 1851 census are not reliable. In particular, small farms and market gardening are significantly under-enumerated and problems arise concerning the enumeration of multiple holdings.

¹⁰ Namely, Benyon, Bonnell, Neave, St John's College, Cambridge, St Thomas's Hospital, and Wingfield Baker. The other estates examined were: the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, Lord Petre, St Bartholomew's Hospital, Tower. The authors are grateful to the Master, Fellows and Scholars of St John's College, Cambridge, for permission to examine the St John's records.

¹¹ ERO, Petre MSS, Tenant ledgers, D/DP A364-8. Census returns of Essex 'farmers and graziers' (4421 in 1851 and 3925 in 1871) are beset by problems of definition but are broadly compatible with a clear, but modest, long-term increase in farm size.

of 'high farming', change of this kind in Essex was hardly more than perceptible.

What was produced on Essex farms at mid-century and how did output change by the 1870s? Evidence to answer these questions comes mainly from the tithe files (c 1840s), from the 1861 county rate returns, from the parish summaries of the official agricultural returns (available from 1866), from estate and farm accounts, and from R Baker's 1845 prize essay 'On the farming of Essex'.¹² Each of the sources has its shortcomings but together they are sufficient to reveal the main features of Essex farming and any significant changes that occurred. At mid-century over three-quarters of Essex farmland was arable and in only 7 out of almost 300 parishes for which tithe file evidence survives was arable acreage exceeded by pasture.¹³ Wheat was the main cash crop, accounting for between 20 and 30 per cent of the arable acreage, about the same as the area under barley and oats combined. No other English county was more dependent upon cereals.¹⁴ A surviving crop book covering several farms, amounting to 3000 acres, on Lord Petre's Thorndon estate in 1857-9 reproduces the main patterns in Essex agriculture: 78 per cent was arable and almost a third of the arable was wheat.¹⁵ Here, as on most of the county's heavy soils, turnips were of little importance and fallowing was extensive.¹⁶

Tithe file evidence suggests that on the eve of the 'golden age' about a quarter of Essex farmland was pasture. Livestock may

have been of more consequence than this proportion suggests: Baker, writing in the mid-1840s and anxious to portray Essex agriculture in a favourable light, claimed that cattle were commonly bought in the autumn, yard-fed in winter, folded on fallow land in the summer and fattened for sale the following year.¹⁷ Some of the 1840s tithe files noted increasing numbers of sheep on the clays. By this time too, the new railways were tapping fresh sources for London's milk beyond the immediate fringes of the metropolis: St Thomas's Hospital, for example, was supplied from a Romford farm by 1846.¹⁸ However, the overwhelming impression remains that on most Essex farms at mid-century livestock husbandry was hardly more than peripheral. As late as 1853 only 5 per cent of London's milk supply came from country districts.¹⁹ Caird, concluding his observations on Essex in 1851-2 and urging more attention to livestock, particularly to milk production, wrote 'hitherto the chief dependence of the farmer has been on his corn crops, cattle being kept for manure, but not generally as a source of profit'.²⁰

How much had Caird's advice been heeded twenty years later? Essex in 1870 displayed very few signs of that extensive conversion to pasture said to have been in progress by the 1860s: the balance between arable and pasture appears to have altered remarkably little.²¹ A minority of Essex farmers had converted to pasture: John Youngerson, for example, near Chelmsford, converted 155 acres in the mid-1860s 'on account of the high price

¹² The tithe files and the parish summaries of the agricultural returns are in the PRO (IR 18 series; MAF 68 series); the 1861 county rate return and estate and farm accounts are in ERO, Q/FR 19/1; Baker's prize essay appeared in *JRASE*, V, 1845, pp 1-43.

¹³ The proportion of farmland that was arable is calculated from surviving tithe file evidence and award lists in the ERO that together cover c 87 per cent of acreage and provide cropping details on c 72 per cent of acreage.

¹⁴ R J P Kain, *An Atlas and Index of the Tithe Files of mid-Nineteenth Century England and Wales*, 1986, p 29 and county summaries.

¹⁵ ERO, Petre MSS, Crop book, D/DP E67.

¹⁶ Most Essex soils were unsuitable for turnips. Clay soils were liable to 'poach' (become sodden and trampled) in wet weather if sheep were allowed on them or when turnips were lifted.

¹⁷ Baker, 'Farming of Essex', p 15.

¹⁸ G Dodd, *The Food of London*, 1856, p 122. Before 1830 dairying was common only within an 8-mile radius of the city. Mr Main [sic], 'Some account of the mode of fattening calves in the neighbourhood of London,' *Qily Jul Ag*, V, 1835, p 608.

¹⁹ South Essex provided most of the rail-carried milk: P J Atkins, 'The growth of London's railway milk trade, c. 1845-1914', *Journal of Transport History*, new ser, IV, 1978, p 209. St Bartholomew's Hospital was still supplied with milk from nearby Islington until 1860: St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, London, Governors' minutes, Ha/1/21-23.

²⁰ J Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, 2nd ed, 1852, p 142.

²¹ Jones, *Agriculture*, pp 200, 202.

of stock and the increased cost of agricultural labour'.²² Such cases, however, must have been exceptional because the proportion of Essex farmland that was pasture appears to have *fallen* from c 27 per cent in 1840 to c 20 per cent in 1870.²³ These figures, admittedly, are based on incomplete tithe evidence (covering about 97 per cent of the county) and the acreage under grain in 1870 may have been influenced by high grain prices in 1867 and 1868. But the evidence is sufficiently robust to preclude the possibility that pasture increased by much. Moreover, farm accounts of conversion to pasture are more than matched by similar accounts of ploughing-up, including for example that at Althorne Hall on the Dengie peninsula (25 acres of arable in 1858, 117 acres by 1869) and the conversion of marsh pasture at Chadwell in 1852.²⁴ A later commentator (T S Dymond, 1901) described 'most of the good old grassland on the heavy clay soil of south east Essex' being broken-up in the 1850s.²⁵

Of course, reduced grass acreage does not necessarily indicate increased cereal production nor fewer livestock. Some arable land, probably an increasing proportion, was devoted to fodder, and market gardening almost certainly was expanding. Evidence on the livestock population, in fact, does suggest increasing numbers although by no means on the scale that Caird would have advised. Comparison of the somewhat meagre tithe file evidence on stock-keeping in the 1840s and the parish agricultural returns of 1870 gives the impression of a small overall increase in stocking with con-

siderable variety between locations.²⁶ Individual farm accounts and estate records likewise show only modest increases in stock-keeping: on farms at Audley End (near Saffron Walden) and Great Henny (close to the Suffolk border), for example, and there was no increase at all on the Tabor farms in north-central Essex.²⁷ And while dairying had expanded it was still far too restricted to have much impact on the general character of Essex farming except along the London-Chelmsford railway and in a few other localities: in 1870-2 dairying accounted for less than 5 per cent of Essex farm output.²⁸ Low levels of investment in farm buildings (below) is likewise consistent with no more than very limited increases in livestock keeping during the 'golden age'.

In most parts of Essex, therefore, arable farming lost little of its importance despite a tentatively increased emphasis on meat and dairy output.²⁹ The importance of wheat, the main cash crop, appears to have been more than maintained: wheat accounted for an estimated 20 per cent of Essex farmland in 1840 and about 24 per cent in 1870-2 by which time it occupied only around 14 per cent of the total English acreage.³⁰ A surviving crop book for Great Henny farm (321 acres) gives a similar impression: there wheat acreage was 65 in 1847-8, 81 in 1861-2, and 88 in 1871-2.³¹ The contribution of Essex evidence to debate on whether or not wheat acreage declined significantly in the 'golden age',

²² M Evans and T Bowstead, 'Report on laying down land to permanent pasture', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, XI, 1875, p 489.

²³ Tithe files; BPP, 1870, LXVIII, *Agricultural Returns (GB) 1870*, pp 28-9.

²⁴ St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, Almoner's reports, 1858-69, Eo8/6; Church Commission, Ecclesiastical Commissioners MSS, London cathedral surveys S1, Biggins Manor estate report, pp 294-315.

²⁵ T S Dymond, 'Manuring of Essex pastures', *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, VIII, 1901-2, p 347.

²⁶ For comment on the accuracy of the agricultural returns with regard to livestock numbers see S J Pam, 'Essex agriculture, 1850-1914', forthcoming London University PhD thesis, chap 3.

²⁷ ERO, Braybrooke MSS, Audley End home farm accounts, D/DBY A 267-70; Misc farm accounts, Great Henny, D/DU 441/54-68; Tabor MSS, D/DTa A77.

²⁸ This is an estimate. Essex farm output in 1870-2 is calculated in Pam, 'Essex agriculture', chap 5, using the methods E M Ojala followed to calculate national agricultural output.

²⁹ The Thurrock district, where cereal acreage after 1840 'ceased to expand ... but nowhere significantly diminished', provides another example: E J T Collins, *A History of the Orsett Estate, 1743-1914*, Thurrock, 1978, p 54.

³⁰ Tithe files; BPP, 1870, LXVIII; 1871, LXIX; 1872, LXIII *Agricultural Returns (1870-2)*.

³¹ ERO, Misc farm accounts, Great Henny D/DU 441/54, 55, 59, 64, 66.

and whether livestock expanded at the expense of cereals, is therefore unequivocal. Essex wheat and cereal output, like Essex landownership and farm size, was characterized by continuity. As late as 1867 one of the allegedly more enlightened Essex farmers, J J Mechi, described livestock farming in terms that echoed Caird's mid-century comment (above) on its traditionally peripheral role in corn country: animals, wrote Mechi, failed to 'pay market price for their food' but were necessary as 'providers of the best and cheapest manure'.³² Despite price trends in favour of livestock and much publicity for 'high farming', the primacy of corn was not yet seriously challenged.

II

Was continuity in landownership and output composition accompanied by sufficient improvement in Essex agrarian fortunes to justify the 'golden' epithet conventionally attached to these years?³³ While a minority of Essex landlords enjoyed considerable non-agricultural incomes, the great majority derived most of their income from farm rents.³⁴ Thus their fortunes were closely related to those of local farming. Evidence on Essex rents comes from two main sources: the Income Tax Schedule A (Lands Only) Assessments and from surviving rent-rolls for individual farms on thirteen Essex estates.³⁵ The taxation records are comprehensive and represent a useful,

if only approximate, guide to long-term changes in landlords' rental income.³⁶ Estate rent rolls provide complementary evidence of rent movements on specific Essex farms. Unfortunately, rent-roll evidence from the very beginning of the period is available for only three estates, although other estates have continuous records from the time when rents began to rise in the mid-1850s.

In Essex, as elsewhere in England, rents fell in the first four years of the 'golden age' and continued to rise for four or five years after 1873. Between 1850-2 and 1870-2 Essex rents, according to the income tax assessments, rose by about a quarter. Estate rent evidence is broadly compatible with that taken from the taxation returns, but the estate records also illustrate great variety in rent, and in rent increases, within the county: rents of land suitable for livestock or market-gardening and well-placed to take advantage of growing markets or transport improvement were above average in 1850 and at an increasing premium throughout the 'golden age'.³⁷ On Lord Petre's Thorndon estate, for example, rent on Bacons and Dagness farms, on good mixed soils in the Mountnessing district close to the Chelmsford to London railway, rose by 24 per cent between 1859 and 1874. At the latter date rent per acre on these farms was over 70 per cent higher than that on the London Clay Tillingham Hall farm (near East Horndon and some distance from a

³² *Chester Courant*, 16 October 1867.

³³ It is, of course, the incomes of landlords and farmers that have been so fulsomely described. Labourers' real incomes rose in the 'golden age', but they rose more rapidly in the succeeding 'agricultural depression' and even then were hardly 'golden'.

³⁴ Sir Thomas Maryon Wilson, for example, had city interests and land in Hampstead and Blackheath: Maryon Wilson MSS, in ERO and Greater London Record Office (hereafter GLRO).

³⁵ PRO, IR 16 series. Estates and period of surviving rents evidence: Belhus, Aveley, from 1857 (Sir T B Lennard); Good Easter and Dengie, from 1853 (Bonnell); Thorndon, from 1859 (Lord Petre); Guy's Hospital, from 1855; St Bartholomew's Hospital, from 1850; Dagness, Romford, from 1855 (Sir T Neave); South Weald, Brentwood, from 1866 (C J Tower); St John's College, Cambridge, from 1851; North Ockendon, from 1858 (R Benyon); St Thomas's Hospital, from 1855; North Benfleet, from 1863 (Ecclesiastical Commissioners); Bower Hall Estate, from 1850; Orsett, from 1854 (Wingfield-Baker).

³⁶ They refer to parks and gardens as well as agricultural land, take no account of temporary rent remissions or abatements, were slow to incorporate changes in rents, and improved administration in the mid-1860s increased the amount of tax collected by more than rentals were increased. J C Stamp, *British Incomes and Property*, 1916, discusses taxation assessment.

³⁷ For 20 farms scattered across the 18,000 acre Thorndon estate between 1859 and 1874 rents increased by 16 per cent, a little less than the county increase suggested by the taxation assessment over the same period (20 per cent): ERO, Petre MSS, Thorndon estate, Annual accounts D/DP A326-60. On the smaller Bower Hall and St Bartholomew's Hospital estates, average rent per acre between 1850 and 1874 increased by the same proportion as the county increase indicated by taxation evidence. ERO, Bower Hall MSS, D/DHf; St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, General A/C 1850-74, F.D.1.

railway) where rent had increased only 9 per cent since 1859.³⁸ On the south-Essex Belhus estate, of mainly fertile, well-drained, soils suitable for market gardening, rents increased by more than three-quarters between 1857 and 1874.³⁹ Given relative price movements before and during the 'golden age', higher and more rapidly rising rents on land suitable for livestock or market gardening is hardly surprising, but the tardiness of structural change in Essex farming noted above appears the more remarkable. Farmers perhaps were encouraged to maintain grain output because adverse price movements were partially compensated by lower rents. Landlords appear to have had more reason to reduce dependence on cereals, although whether the incentive was sufficient to repay investment in conversion is another question.

How average rent increases translated into changes in landlords' real income varied at different times. In the first half of the 1850s, when rents fell, landlords could hardly have been aware that a 'golden age' had begun. The 1860s, when rents generally pushed ahead of prices, were more conducive to landlords' well-being, but over the whole of the 'golden age' era (1850-2 to 1870-2) prices (according to Rousseaux's figures) increased by 26 per cent, about as much as the increase of Essex rents.⁴⁰ The comparison is approximate of course: comparing different years produces different answers and doubtless the average Essex landlord disposed of his income in ways not faithfully reflected in Rousseaux's index. But the most optimistic generalization about Essex landlords' rental incomes in the 'golden age' is that, in real terms, they increased modestly. Naturally in some places, like the Belhus

estate or Bacons farm and Dagness farm (above), rent increases were more compatible with the description 'golden age'. But there were also, of course, examples like Tillingham Hall farm (above), or the Essex lands of the St Thomas's Hospital estates where real rent/acre appears to have fallen.⁴¹

There is scant evidence of outstanding prosperity for Essex farmers either, although they seem to have fared rather better than landlords. Their fortunes seem likely to have depended considerably on what they produced. All farm prices fluctuated from year to year but there is no doubt that over the period wheat prices rose less than beef prices and not much more than non-farm prices. Comparing three-year averages at the beginning and end of the period (1850-52 and 1870-72) wheat prices rose by 34 per cent when prices generally rose 26 per cent according to the Rousseaux index and by 32 per cent according to the Sauerbeck-Statist index. Barley prices rose by 41 per cent over this period, and those of prime beef and mutton, according to reports in the *Essex County Standard*, by 55 and 35 per cent.⁴²

Over a period when average rents increased by about a quarter and when the cost of labour per acre was rising, corn farmers would have needed to increase productivity substantially to secure more than modest prosperity.⁴³ Productivity was

³⁸ ERO, Petre MSS, Thorndon account ledger, D/DP A359 and tenants' ledgers, D/DP A366. Caird, of course, had noted such differences in 1850 when he compared average rentals of 20s to 30s per acre in fertile north-east Essex with rents as low as 10s to 15s on the stiff clays: Caird, *English Agriculture*, p 136.

³⁹ ERO, Barrett-Lennard MSS, Correspondence, DDL C67, 68.

⁴⁰ B R Mitchell and P Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, 1962, pp 472-4; the Sauerbeck-Statist index shows a somewhat greater price rise over this period (32 per cent).

⁴¹ The St Thomas's estate archives (GLRO) indicate rent increase per acre of only 14 per cent between 1850 and 1874.

⁴² Mitchell and Deane, *British Historical Statistics*, pp 472-4, 488-9. Market returns show that Essex grain prices followed the national pattern. Whetham's figures show less divergence between changes in mutton and beef prices but increases of broadly the same order as those suggested by the *Essex County Standard*. Her figures also suggest that movements in the prices of 'middling beef' and 'prime beef' were near identical: E H Whetham, 'Livestock prices in Britain, 1851-93', *Ag Hist Rev*, XI, 1963, p 29.

⁴³ Rising labour costs are evident in three surviving accounts of farms in different parts of Essex and in the accounts of another Essex farm analysed by F C Danvers in 1897. At Great Henny Farm, for example, the total labour bill rose by 38 per cent between 1850 and the mid-1870s and wages increased in importance relative to other farm inputs. ERO, Misc farm accounts, Great Henny farm D/DU 441, 53-78; Braybrooke MSS, Home farm accounts D/DBy A267-70; Reading University Library, Doggetts Hall farm accounts, ESS 18/2/1/-46; F C Danvers, 'Agriculture in Essex during the past fifty years as exemplified by the records of one farm,' *Jnl Roy Stat Soc*, LX, 1897, p 263.

rising and returns on tenants' capital investments were satisfactory.⁴⁴ Differentiated rent increases helped also, in effect transferring part of the consequences of relatively low grain prices to landlords. Thus there were few signs of farmers in distress. Some tenants quit as a consequence of financial difficulties and some became bankrupt but far fewer than those affected after 1872 when signs of hardship multiplied. On five Essex estates where this change can be measured the percentage of quittings ascribed to serious financial losses or bankruptcy was 16 per cent between 1850 and 1873 and 36 per cent between 1873 and 1900.⁴⁵ The *Essex County Standard* recorded just seven farmer-bankrupts in 1870-2 but fifty-three in 1880-2. There is Essex evidence (below) also that lends at least some credence to the *Punch* stereotype 'golden-age' farmer who spent extravagantly on home, family and entertainment. Without doubt then there was reason why farmers should later look back fondly upon the 1850s and 1860s. But the final impression is of modest comfort rather than of unprecedented prosperity. This must have been especially the case for the majority of Essex farmers whose livelihoods depended much upon sales of grain.

III

Absence of anything beyond modest prosperity for many Essex farmers and most Essex landlords, and the prominence of those least dependent upon wheat among the more prosperous, focuses attention again on the remarkably slow pace of structural change in Essex at a time when landlords are said to have been eager to

invest and innovate. How important was 'high farming' in Essex and what changes did it introduce? What evidence can Essex offer to debate on the existence (or absence) of a golden-age 'agricultural revolution on the English clays'.⁴⁶

As indicated earlier, 'high farming' is somewhat of a portmanteau description: most commonly it describes systems of mixed farming in which greater output was achieved by increased investment, especially upon draining. Typically, increased grain production is understood to have occurred alongside reduced fallowing and an expanded output of turnips and other fodder crops that provided 'high feeding' for sheep and cattle. 'High farming', associated also with large farms and large estates, usually entailed additional buildings, especially to house cattle; farm-grown fodder might be supplemented by increased purchases of enriched animal food; and arable productivity was stimulated by greater use of fertilizers and machinery, including the much-publicized steam-ploughing. As a system it was both capital-intensive and labour-intensive and, while dairying and pasture were not precluded, the emphasis in livestock husbandry was high-feeding to maximize production of meat and manure from folded or stall-fed animals. Many accounts, like those of F M L Thompson and R W Sturgess, regard 'high farming' after 1850 as, in essence, the application to newly-drained heavy soils of techniques already successfully employed on the lighter soils.⁴⁷ Others, however, have questioned both claims of massive investment at this time and the applicability of 'high-farming'

⁴⁴ Surviving farm accounts for this period suggest that Essex tenants could expect returns of 10 per cent or more on working capital: ERO, Braybrooke MSS, Home farm accounts D/DBy, A267-9; Misc farm accounts, Great Henny farm D/DU 441/55-75.

⁴⁵ Estate archives for St Bartholomew's Hospital, Benyon, Ecclesiastical Commissioners, St John's College, Cambridge and St Thomas's Hospital.

⁴⁶ R W Sturgess, 'The agricultural revolution on the English clays', *Ag Hist Rev*, XIV, 1966, pp 104-21. Responding to Sturgess, E J T Collins and E L Jones, 'Sectoral advance in English agriculture, 1850-80', *Ag Hist Rev*, XV, 1967, pp 65-81, suggested that on much English clayland investment was neither extensive nor noticeably successful. Replying, Sturgess argued that with regard to south-eastern claylands his views and those of Collins and Jones were not far apart.

⁴⁷ Sturgess, 'Agricultural revolution'; Thompson, *Landed Society*, p 246.

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techniques to the more-recalcitrant clays.⁴⁸ The London Clays that comprised perhaps a third of Essex farmland were particularly unrewarding. Essex Boulder Clays, which covered another quarter of the county, also required careful management, especially in wet weather.⁴⁹

The earlier evidence on the unchanging balance between arable and pasture is not necessarily incompatible with widespread high-farming in Essex because reduced fallowing, and greater numbers of folded and stall-fed animals, together with more manuring, could result in increased output of both livestock and grain with pasture acreage unchanged. However, the tithe files, the later parish agricultural returns, and estate records also indicate that except on the fringes of London, along the railways, and on less-heavy soils in a few other places, livestock numbers increased very little. If 'high farming' made much impression across Essex as a whole, therefore, it must have been 'high farming' of the kind subsequently criticized for giving first priority to maximizing corn output when market indicators signalled greater concentration upon livestock.⁵⁰ Disparaging comment on the place of livestock in mixed farming by the best-known Essex advocate of 'high farming', J J Mechi (above), is certainly consistent with such an interpretation.

Mechi was a businessman-turned-farmer

and owner-occupier of Tiptree Hall, a 170 acre heavy-soil farm in east-central Essex. He invested lavishly and, according to Caird, kept the whole farm 'in constant tillage'.⁵¹ But how representative was he of Essex agriculturalists and what evidence is there of other landowners taking part in a great mid-century investment extravaganza? There is some evidence of this kind: Richard Benyon (1565 acres, Ockendon), for example, was a textbook improving landlord. He invested heavily in the 1840s, spent a further £8000 on drainage in the 1850s and 1860s, and never hesitated to erect new farm buildings or cottages as the need arose. Lord Petre re-invested 15 per cent of the Thorndon estate (18,000 acres) rents; the governors of St Bartholomew's re-invested a similar proportion of their Essex rents in the 1860s; St Thomas's lands in Essex were considerably improved also; and C J Tower (2481 acres, South Weald), W Bower-Smyth (2819 acres, Theydon), and the earl of Essex (3090 acres, Rayne) were other Essex landlords dedicated to improvement via substantial investment.⁵²

These examples, however, are not representative of landlord activity in Essex as a whole. Other estate evidence and material from surviving land company ledgers suggests strongly that capital investment in 'golden age' Essex was far less than most general accounts imply. Few Essex landowners (or tenants) are listed as borrowers in the surviving land company ledgers, or in the records of loans made under the Public Money Drainage and Improvement

⁴⁸ Contrast the views of, for example, F M L Thompson ('great schemes of agricultural investment ... great landowners pouring money into their estates') *Landed Society*, pp 246-7, 253 or that of Chambers and Mingay cited above (n2) with those of Collins and Jones, 'Sectoral advance', pp 68-9. The suitability of 'high farming' techniques on the clays is discussed below.

⁴⁹ There was, of course, a variety of soils in Essex, as elsewhere, but the county's distinguishing pedological feature was the preponderance (over 60 per cent) of heavy soils. One Dengie farmer described his sub-soil as 'stiff, tough, numb, dumb and impervious': BPP, 1894, XVI, pt 1, *Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression: Report of R H Pringle*, pp 36-7. Pringle commented, 'To plough it three horses are required. In the best of seasons it is expensive to work. It cannot be touched in wet weather.' For details of Essex soil types see Pam, 'Essex agriculture', chap 1.

⁵⁰ Thompson (*Landed Society*, pp 253, 255) refers to landlords 'held in thrall by corn' and 'improvements all too often ... directed towards encouraging good corn farming when the trend of the times favoured animal husbandry'.

⁵¹ Caird, *English Agriculture*, p 141. Farmer Prout, who used superphosphate and nitrate of soda to grow continuous crops of wheat and barley on his stockless 450 acre clay farm on the Essex-Herts border, provides a similar example: R Brigden, *Victorian Farms*, Ramsbury, 1986, pp 232-3.

⁵² ERO, Benyon MSS, D/DBc. E42, 46, 15, 44, 55, 57, 66; Petre MSS, Thorndon estate accounts, D/DP, A309-326, 341-50; St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, Almoner's reports, 1869-87, ED 8/6; Minutes of the Board of Governors, Ha/1/20-3; Rentals ED 16; General account 1850-70, FD1; GLRO, St Thomas's Hospital MSS, County estates log book, HI/ST/E18; Clerk's rental HI/ST/E30/7-20, 27; 'Notes on estate improvement, 1800-40', HI/ST/E60/17; ERO, Tower MSS, Letter D/D Tw A6; PRO, Drainage loan ledgers, MAF 66/1, 2, 3, 11; IR 3/3.

of Land Acts, and the amounts they borrowed were small: one of the largest of the land companies, the General Land Drainage Company, lent only £23,922 to Essex owners between 1851 and 1870.⁵³ From these sources it appears that the total borrowed for drainage alone between 1847 and 1874 was unlikely to have much exceeded £30,000.⁵⁴ If we accept A D M Phillips' recent estimate that loan-capital commonly constituted about one-fifth of total drainage outlay, then investment under this heading in Essex during the 'golden age' was sufficient to drain only some 25,000 acres, or not much over 3 per cent of Essex farmland.⁵⁵ Loans for new farm buildings and cottages amounted to about £28,250 over the same period, and if we again assume that four-fifths of investment was (like drainage) privately financed, investment under this heading was only about £17 per 100 acres over twenty-seven years.⁵⁶ These, of course, are rough estimates but their implication is confirmed in the accounts of several Essex estates: on the Belhus estate (3700 acres) a mere 3 per cent of rents was reinvested between 1867 and 1876; the proportion reinvested was even lower on the Bonnell estate (1945 acres), and at Bower Hall (1158 acres) was barely 1 per cent between 1850 and 1862. Very little improvement, other than necessary repairs, appears to have been carried out on Guy's Hospital land in the 1850s

and only 2 per cent of rent went on improvement in the following decade. The fellows of St John's College, Cambridge, were similarly parsimonious with less than two per cent ploughed back on improvements in the 1850s and not much more (3¼ per cent) in the 1860s.⁵⁷ There is also a great deal of piecemeal evidence that reinforces these accounts of sparse investment: surveys undertaken by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (1852-73), for example, refer repeatedly to inadequate and poorly maintained farm buildings on properties held by beneficial lease holders, and much the same was said of the Essex farms bought by St Bartholomew's Hospital. Likewise, a report of 1869 on the earl of Verulam's Messing estate (1120 acres) noted a 'considerable acreage requires drainage' and complained of farm buildings 'old and considerably out of repair'.⁵⁸ A later (1886) account of the Orsett estate includes a plea that new buildings and drainage 'should not be neglected any longer' and Pringle emphasized lack of investment in Essex during the 'golden age' among the causes of the succeeding depression.⁵⁹

This evidence of decidedly modest investment on most Essex farms is obviously compatible with what was said earlier

⁵³ Two other companies lent £15,547 in the 1860s: PRO, Drainage loan ledgers, MAF 66 series; PRO, General Land Drainage Company, Ledger 1, 1851-1868, Ledger 2, 1868-96, MAF 66/1-2; Land Improvement Company, Ledger 1861-69, MAF 66/3; Land Loan and Enfranchisement Company, Ledger 1, 1861-78, MAF 66/4.

⁵⁴ Calculated from evidence in A D M Phillips, *The Underdraining of Farmland in England during the Nineteenth Century*, 1989.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117. Contemporary estimates put the cost of drainage at around £6 per acre. See, for example, Caird in *Select Committee ... on the Improvement of Land* (BPP, 1873, XVI), qq 4127-8; Phillips, *Underdraining of Farmland*, p. 86; Thompson, *Landed Society*, p. 248.

⁵⁶ A new cattle shed at this time cost, typically, around £150: see, for examples, St John's College, Cambridge, MSS, Accounts SB4, Rentals (new cattle sheds, Rawreth 1862, 1863); GLRO, St Thomas's Hospital MSS, Accounts HI/ST/A6113 (new cowshed, Aveley 1856); ERO, Bonnell MSS, D/DHn E4, 'Particulars of old leases and present leases and money spent on repairs on Essex farms', Skinnernwick, 1869.

⁵⁷ ERO, Barrett-Lennard MSS, Correspondence D/DL; Bonnell MSS, D/DHn E4, 'Particulars of old leases'; BPP, 1894, XVI, pt 1, p. 425; St John's College, Cambridge, MSS, Rentals 1850-70, S.B. 4; Senior bursar's statement on the audit, 1893, D100.70. Other, similar, evidence includes that from St Osyth estate where expenditure on repairs and improvement combined amounted to 4 per cent of rents in the early and mid-1850s, and from Tyrell's Boreham estate (1854-6) and the Rev A W Buller's Rettendon farms (1850s) where this expenditure was between two and three per cent of rents: ERO, Tyrell MSS, D/Dke A9; ERO, D/DSw A1, Cashbook of Rettendon properties.

⁵⁸ Church Commissioners, Ecclesiastical Commissioners MSS, London cathedral, London bishopric and London chapter surveys, S1, pp 294-315; S3, pp 357-415; S4, pp 231-75; St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, Surveyors' reports, E08/1; General account 1850-70, FDI; Hertfordshire Record Office, Earl of Verulam MSS, Messing estate valuation (1869), xi, 122, Box 64.

⁵⁹ ERO, Whitmore MSS, Drivers report p. 4. See also the 1879 survey of the Eastern Lodge estate (c. 8600 acres) with details of buildings in need of urgent repair: ERO, Eastern Lodge Estate MSS, Surveys and suggestions on repairs (1879), DIDMg, E27-36; BPP, 1894, XVI, pt 1, pp 39, 58-9 and qq 8765-6; Collins, *Orsett Estate*, pp 26, 51, 55.

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on the absence of significant changes in farm size, estate size, and livestock holdings. Other evidence on high farming is more fragmentary but none was found that significantly modifies the emerging impression that Essex took little part in mid-century agrarian innovation. Farm sale catalogues indicate increased use of farm machinery, including iron ploughs, oilcake breakers, mangold pulpers, horse hoes, scarifiers, mowers and rollers. Such change, however, was no more than incremental: one report noted barley still being hand-thrashed in the 1870s and despite considerable local advertising Essex boasted only two operational sets of steam ploughing tackle in 1866.⁶⁰ In 1870 turnips and swedes still occupied a mere 2 per cent of clayland parishes, significantly less than the acreage under fallow.⁶¹ Similarly with intensive manuring and fertilizing: surviving farm accounts and railway company carriage records testify to some increased use of purchased fertilizer, such practices were commonplace in a few parishes and evident also on the farms of enlightened or eccentric individuals throughout the county.⁶² But here also the extent of change was too modest to substantiate claims that 'high farming' had become widespread.

It is clear that while a minority of Essex landlords invested with textbook open-handedness, the majority were less extravagant and some were parsimonious. The tithe files suggest that at the beginning of the 'golden age' high farming was extensively practised in fewer than a tenth of the county's parishes, most of them near to London: 'high farming' at that time was

'the exception rather than the rule'.⁶³ All the subsequent evidence indicates no more than a gradual and limited expansion of such practices in the following twenty-five years and very little that substantiates textbook accounts of massive investment, new crops, new machinery and methods. Essex was a corn county in 1850 and hardly less so in 1873. By and large, corn was still produced by methods not radically different from those Caird witnessed in his mid-century tour: without much more reliance on complementary stock and fodder, and without greatly increased use of fertilizer and machinery. Farming in Essex thus appears not entirely compatible with either of the interpretations of third-quarter agricultural trends offered by E L Jones and F M L Thompson. Jones' suggestion (above) that the main source of farm prosperity in the 'golden age' was not cereals but livestock hardly applies to Essex because dependence on livestock there was so slight.⁶⁴ And whatever their importance elsewhere, F M L Thompson's 'great schemes of agricultural investment ... to render the clay farms as like the turnip farms as possible', were not much evident in Essex.⁶⁵

IV

If the Essex experience offers little support for the once conventional view of agriculture having prospered in the third quarter of the century, with prosperity spurring attempts to maximize output, does it perhaps lend greater support to quite different, and more recently fashionable, interpretations that emphasize how little was changed in English agriculture at this time despite prevailing price signals and the

⁶⁰ I Mead, *The Story of an Essex Lad Written by Himself*, Chelmsford, 1923, p 32; G E Fussell, 'Essex farming, 1840-80', *Essex Farmers' Journal*, 1947, p 324.

⁶¹ About 12 per cent of Boulder Clayland, and 7 per cent of London Clayland was under fallow: PRO, MAF 68/240, Parish summary of the agricultural returns for 1870, Essex.

⁶² Farmer Prout's preference for chemicals over rotation and dung was mentioned above. Farmer Hutley treated his Witham fields with starfish as well as guano and chalk: BPP, 1866, VI, *Select Committee on Agricultural Customs*, qq 2133, 2140.

⁶³ E A Cox, 'An agricultural geography of Essex c1840', unpublished London University MA thesis, 1963, p 155.

⁶⁴ Jones might retort that Essex prosperity was slight also. He could add that what has been said of Essex farming here is entirely compatible with the arguments he and Collins advanced in their 'Sectoral advance'.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Landed Society*, p 246.

forthright advocacy of those, like James Caird, who urged adaptation to a world of freer trade and falling freight rates?⁶⁶ From this latter perspective landlords and farmers, complacent and apathetic, are accused of dissipating the long breathing-space between corn-law repeal and the main onslaught of new-world cereals in the 1870s. Caird himself, on the eve of the 'golden age', accused Essex landlords of 'complete indifference to agricultural enterprise' and urged the county's farmers to respond to the almost boundless metropolitan demand for milk.⁶⁷

What has been said of modest investment and dilatory change in Essex farming practices is obviously broadly consistent with this more critical appraisal. And there is further evidence of similar implication, especially with regard to the landlords' performance. One aspect of the general disinclination of many landlords to invest in the 'golden age' appears to have been that investment initiatives now came more often from their tenants who drew attention to neglected opportunities or even raised loans to undertake investment themselves. None of this was new: tenants traditionally provided working-capital and undertook considerable maintenance and running repairs. But there now occurred a subtle shifting of the boundary between landlords' and farmers' responsibilities, partly in response to easier market conditions that increased the attractiveness of tenancies, eased landlord fears of farmers quitting, and discouraged insistence that landlords fulfil their share of repairs. Essex estate accounts for this period list many grants of tiles to tenants, indicating that landlords preferred to drain individual fields or farms on a 'materials only' basis rather than finance a major drainage pro-

gramme.⁶⁸ On the Guy's Hospital estates between 1853 and the 1870s most heavy-soil drainage was financed by tenants who also paid for improvement such as altering hedges, straightening fences, enclosing waste and making repairs of a kind once undertaken by landlords.⁶⁹

A minority of Essex landlords, Col Bramson of Skreens for example and G Capel Cure (Ongar), engaged in day-to-day estate management and some provided more dynamic leadership, pioneering new methods and urging improvements upon their tenants.⁷⁰ But the majority appear to have been content to delegate extensively to agents of varying competence. Certainly there is a contrast between their indifferent leadership and the robust entrepreneurship of eighteenth-century East Anglian landlords.⁷¹ In their defence it can be said that landlords remained active in initiating and running those county and local agricultural improvement societies that arranged lectures, shows, ploughing matches and visits to model farms. A group of leading Essex landowners lobbied successfully to host the Royal Agricultural Society's annual show at Chelmsford in 1856 and landowners were active members of both the Essex Agricultural Association (begun in the wake of the Chelmsford show) and the

⁶⁶ See, for example, G E Mingay, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales VI. 1750-1850*, 1989, pp 126-7.

⁶⁷ Caird, *English Agriculture*, pp 134, 142.

⁶⁸ In 1867, for example, G Capel Cure was supplying pipes and tiles at Bovington Hall and Ongar Park farms while tenants dug the drains: ERO, Capel Cure MSS, D/DCc E5.

⁶⁹ ERO, Guy's Hospital MSS, Receiver's reports for the Essex estate, D/DGh E7. Cressing farm (Porter estate), 'much improved by the tenant', and the Birch estate near Colchester provide further examples: ERO, Porter MSS, D/DPo E11; Round MSS, D/DR E16. One Essex farmer, in evidence to the *Select Committee on Agricultural Customs* (BPP, 1847-8, VII, p 125) claimed there was hardly a tenant in the county who dare ask his landlord to build him anything.

⁷⁰ W Fisher Hobbs, for example, who bred shire horses and pigs and was a founder-member of the Royal Agricultural Society: R G E Wood, *SEAX 7: Agriculture in Essex, 1840-1900*, ERO Publications, Chelmsford, 1975, no 12.

⁷¹ A F J Brown, *Essex at Work, 1700-1815*, Chelmsford, 1969, p 33. S Wilmot's recent account includes several references suggestive of lack-lustre landlord performance, *The Business of Improvement: Agriculture and Scientific Culture in Britain, c 1700-c 1870*, Historical Geography Research Series, 24, 1990.

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Essex Chamber of Agriculture (1867).⁷² None of this, however, was done with conspicuous panache; it amounts to hardly more than would be expected even of apathetic landlords. Tenant farmers became openly critical of such leadership in the 1840s, especially in responding to the Anti-Corn Law League, and mounted a minor but significant challenge by initiating the Essex Agricultural Protection Society, 'organized by farmers for farmers'.⁷³ Muted opposition to the League might, of course, be interpreted as prudent foresight and this evidence is perhaps no more damaging to the landlords' reputation than the perennial accounts of estates being neglected to over-indulge in public service or personal dissipation.⁷⁴ But there was certainly no diminution in complaints of this kind either, and failure to persuade tenants of the appropriate response to the Anti-Corn Law League is perhaps further evidence of a partial retreat from the landowners' traditional leadership role.

If the reputation of Essex farmers emerges better from such examination than that of landlords it is more because they manifested fewer shortcomings than because they displayed particular managerial skills. Landlords transferred some of their responsibilities to tenants, but the

burden was taken up without noticeable enthusiasm or innovation because tenants too preferred incremental change. Few Essex farmers could be described as scientific agriculturalists and few showed much interest in agricultural education. Like the landlords they were frequently accused of social extravagance, of neglecting their farms, and there was perhaps substance to such complaints. Some left much of the day-to-day management to a farm foreman. One local commentator judged the comfortable lifestyle of certain Orsett farmers beyond the reach of the local doctor, and a surviving farmer's diary (1871) records a hectic social life of concerts, dances, card parties, hunting and steeple-chasing. The eventual consequences of such indulgence, and reluctance to adjust to harder times after 1873, have been frequently mentioned in accounts of the succeeding depression in East Anglia, not least in comparisons between the fortunes of local farmers and those of the more abstemious, hard-grafting, incomers from Scotland and Lancashire.⁷⁵ One particular manifestation of tenant (and landlord) conservatism was continued indifference to what happened to their produce beyond the farm gate. Only a handful of Essex men participated in the transformation of London food markets that occurred at this time.⁷⁶ Local newspapers and the records of the Essex Chamber of Agriculture contain very few complaints or comments on marketing arrangements and there appears

⁷² Wood, *SEAX7: Agriculture in Essex*, no 9; *Essex Chamber of Agriculture Minute Book, 1869-80*, Writtle Agricultural College Historical Collection.

⁷³ *Essex County Standard*, 15 December 1843; T L Crosby, *English Farmers and the Politics of Protection, 1815-52*, Hassocks, Sussex, 1977, pp 127, 130-1.

⁷⁴ Richard Wingfield-Baker (Orsett, 8545 acres), for example, was, at various times, Liberal MP for south Essex, High Sheriff, chairman of the county quarter sessions, local magistrate, and Captain Commandant of the Second Essex Volunteers. He also erected the Orsett Institute and financed the restoration of two local churches. Wingfield-Baker employed three gamekeepers and four grooms, invited the local community to celebrate his son's coming-of-age, and in 1878 hosted a dinner for the Volunteers and allotment holders. The diaries of Sir Thomas Barrett-Lennard (3691 acres, Belhus) indicate numerous visits to London, the coast and abroad. A hunting, shooting man, his sporting interests included breeding horses, harriers, beagles, greyhounds, deer, and keeping the South Essex pack: Collins, *Orsett Estate*, pp 25-6; ERO, Barrett-Lennard MSS, Diaries D/DL F179, 21/9, 230, C68; ERO, Whitmore MSS, Suggestions as to reducing expenditure at Orsett Hall (1883), D/DWt/S; I G Sparkes, ed, *Belhus and the Barrett-Lennard Family*, Upminster, 1964, pp 50-2.

⁷⁵ E H Rowley, 'Further extracts from the memoirs of the late E H Rowley, Esq' *Panorama*, VI, 1961, p 4; *idem*, 'Their very life and existence', unpublished work (nd), Thurrock Public Library, CR 11730, Box 4, pp 60-2; L Thompson, 'How an Orsett farmer enjoyed himself in 1871', *Essex Countryside*, IX, No 46, 1960, pp 24-5; *Preston Guardian*, 26 October 1896, alleged that Essex farmers had been slow to innovate and resistant to change not only in the depression but also in the preceding 'golden age'. See also the evidence of Essex land agent, A Darby, to the 1894-7 *Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression*, (BPP, 1896, XVII, qq 59074, 59250-1): 'Dozens of men lived well and attended Chelmsford and other markets in the course of the week when they need not have attended one; they have dined well and enjoyed themselves and gone home comfortable. Well, that is not farming; that is spending money'.

⁷⁶ For details see Pam, 'Essex Agriculture', chap 3.

to have been no attempt to initiate co-operative marketing, or any other kind of farm co-operation.

V

Thus it is possible to construct a seemingly damning indictment against landlords and farmers alike. Further evidence, however, exonerates, or partly exonerates, Essex men from several of these charges. The case for their defence must begin with the vigorous critique of 'high farming' that depicts much of it as massive over-investment in 'state-of-the-art' agriculture, impressive in scale and ingenuity but decidedly unimpressive when judged by economic criteria. Consequently, we are told, many activities barely paid even on soils for which they were best-suited, which is why so much 'high farming' was abandoned when the 'golden' years yielded to depression. Where lavish investment was targeted upon cereal yields, it is said to have been doubly foolish because cereal production was already threatened by imports. From this perspective it was perhaps as well that Essex boasted relatively few high-farming apostles like Prout and Mechi (above), whose farm accounts were frequently challenged by more conservative Essex tenants.⁷⁷ If there was, as Thompson argues, a 'last, expensive, homage to king corn', Essex men, although loyal to corn, avoided most of the expense.⁷⁸ This by no means is to claim that they were exceptionally competent, or well-informed, that each potential investment had been carefully appraised before rejection. Merely that they should not be castigated for failing to exploit investment opportunities that were likely to have proved spurious.

Not all opportunities were spurious of

course. To what extent were worthwhile investment opportunities foregone out of apathy or shortsightedness? Drainage is customarily given prominence among investment of this kind: yet investment under this heading in Essex was very modest. One reason for this was the belief that extensive drainage on the clays, while undoubtably beneficial, was not sufficiently worthwhile to repay the considerable expense. Certain mid-century enthusiasts had proclaimed drainage the sovereign remedy for heavy soils.⁷⁹ The new mass-produced clay drainpipes, they claimed, could transform once-soggy fields, break the long stranglehold of naked fallows, allow the introduction of green (fodder) crops and thus increased cattle and sheep, and generally facilitate successful 'stock and corn' farming on traditional wheat and bean lands.⁸⁰ In fact, within the technical constraints of the time, much clayland was not nearly so adaptable. Not only were turnips, other fodder crops and barley unlikely to flourish on the heavier soils, no matter how expensively drained, much other Essex land required considerable supplementary investment in marling and manuring, and the sustained co-operation of tenants, to create anything resembling the classic 'stock and corn' regime.⁸¹ Bare fallows remained essential to clean and rest the heavier land. Moreover, much of Essex was already tolerably drained. R. Baker, in 1843, described hollow-drain underdraining, much of it in place since the mid-eighteenth century, extending over some two-thirds of the county. Baker maintained that hollow drains were durable and on Essex soils might prove more successful than the newer (and more expensive) tile or pipe drains which, unless covered with gravel and cockle shells, 'do not answer

⁷⁷ Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p. 175, cite Mechi's claims uncritically but many Essex farmers maintained that his methods were uneconomic on the clays: *Essex County Standard*, 19, 26 December, 1851; 30 March 1860; ERO, T/2 20/35, 114/1-2.

⁷⁸ Thompson, *Landed Society*, p. 246.

⁷⁹ For example, J. J. Mechi, *Letters on Agricultural Improvement*, 1845, and J. R. Dent (1860), cited in Sturgess, 'Agricultural revolution', p. 119.

⁸⁰ Thompson, *Landed Society*, p. 248.

⁸¹ Collins and Jones, 'Sectoral advance', pp. 70-1.

well'.⁸² The tithe file reports indicated that much drainage had been undertaken on the Boulder Clays in the 1830s and noted a need for additional drainage in only 39 parishes.⁸³ Of course, traditional methods, of limited effectiveness with surface water, were never more than a partial solution to draining the heavy clays but the new pipe and tile technology offered only limited further advantage. The fundamental difficulty was cost: effective drainage of heavy land was inordinately expensive. One recent commentator estimated that converting Essex clays to pasture cost over three times as much as conversion in Cheshire or Staffordshire and also required several more years to produce good grazing turf. It was calculations of this kind more than unthinking conservatism, the logic of high costs and poor returns, that led Essex farmers to declare that land still undrained in 1870 was not worth draining.⁸⁴

Expenditure on machinery, particularly steam cultivation, was everywhere less successful than investment in drainage and Essex farmers had reason to appraise this aspect of 'high farming' with particular caution. Machinery economized on labour but savings were likely to be marginal where wages were as low, and labour as plentiful, as they were in much of Essex. So plentiful was labour that a man displaced by machinery might leave his employer with higher poor rates besides a bad conscience. Clearly this was less likely to occur on the metropolitan fringes of Essex (where 'high farming', as well as high wages, were more commonplace) but to the east and north of London the wage contours were closely-spaced: the mid-century *Morning*

Chronicle survey recorded north Essex wages 'extremely low', the labourers too poor to afford meat.⁸⁵ Another local characteristic that discouraged investment, especially for conversion to pasture, was climate. Low rainfall, like the warm Essex summers, was far more a handicap to pasture farming than to arable: 'in the dry east and south of the country permanent pasture was a precarious crop'.⁸⁶ In reasonable years, in fact, neither too wet nor dry, much of Essex produced excellent cereal crops and even the heavier clays, unsuitable for fodder crops, produced a satisfactory wheat harvest.

In these circumstances, a cautious and sceptical response to advocates of 'high farming' and dairying, is certainly defensible. It would have required unequivocal and sustained price signals to induce rational men to abandon farming that was suited to local soil and climate and, in most years, producing adequate returns. On the heavy Essex soils significantly reduced dependence on cereals entailed prodigious expenditure, several years of reduced income, and commitment to unfamiliar farming that might prove no less precarious, and no more profitable, than the time-honoured wheat and bean cultivation. Were market indicators, despite these manifold impediments to change, sufficiently emphatic to indicate what F M L Thompson called the 'proper' adjustment of farming to the marketing possibilities of the 'golden age'? If incentives to restructure were insufficiently compelling, continuity

⁸² In Philip Pusey, ed, 'Evidence on the antiquity, cheapness and efficacy of thorough draining or land ditching', *JRASE*, IV, 1843, pp 35-49. See also Prothero, *English Farming*, pp 358, 366; Phillips, *Underdraining of Farmland*, p 44. One reason expensive clay drainage did not 'answer well' was an early enthusiasm for excessively deep drains. N Goddard, 'Information and innovation in early-Victorian farming systems', in B A Holderness and M Turner, eds, *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920*, 1991, pp 185-9.

⁸³ Tithe files: PRO, IR 18 series.

⁸⁴ Sturgess, 'Agricultural revolution', pp 112-13.

⁸⁵ E H Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914*, 1973, p 10. At mid-century poor relief per head in Essex exceeded that in all but four other counties and labourers' wages were some 16 per cent below the average for England: Caird, *English Agriculture*, pp 512, 514. On labour abundance in southern England see E H Hunt, 'Labour productivity in English agriculture, 1850-1914', *Ec Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XX, 1967, pp 280-92; E J T Collins, 'The rationality of "surplus" agricultural labour: mechanization in English agriculture in the nineteenth century', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXV, 1987, pp 36-46.

⁸⁶ Sturgess, 'Agricultural revolution', p 112. 'On a great deal of the land ... permanent pasture does not flourish on account of the dryness of the climate': W E Bear, 'Advantages in agricultural production', *JRASE*, 3rd ser, V, 1894, p 263. Root crops too were less likely to flourish in the drier areas.



FIGURE 1

Wheat and milk prices, 1848-74 (Sources: Mitchell and Deane, *British Historical Statistics*, pp. 488-9; St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, London, Governors' minutes, HA/1/21-9)

possibly owed more to prudence than to apathy. According to Thompson, wheat prices, after their recovery in 1853-5, 'settled down to a slowly declining trend' while 'the prices of animal products continued to rise steadily'.⁸⁷ In fact, neither trend was so clear. In the five years leading up to Corn Law repeal wheat prices had hovered between 50s and 58s a quarter.⁸⁸ They were very high in the following year (69s 9d) and then fell to a miserable 38s 6d in 1851. Caird's booklet advocating 'high farming' as the best substitute for protection had recently appeared and the calamitous price sequence appeared to vindicate both the gloomy prophecies voiced at the time of corn law repeal and Caird's recommended remedy. If Essex farmers and landlords were not at that time contemplating how their heavy corn-land might be coaxed into producing grass and fodder, they richly deserve all the opprobrium

subsequently heaped upon them.⁸⁹ But 1851 was the nadir: wheat was not to be so cheap again until the mid-1880s. By 1853 its price was back above 50s a quarter and then, for two years, moved higher than at any time since 1819. The subsequent fall was shortlived and, after further fluctuations, wheat prices in the early seventies were on a par with levels in the 1840s and quite high enough for viable production on the Essex clays. This sequence is consistent with a relative decline in wheat prices having occurred, but claims that prices fell absolutely in the 'golden age' are unwarranted.

As noted earlier, meat prices were indeed more buoyant than wheat prices and their relative increase, although gradual and intermittent, should perhaps have prompted Essex landlords and farmers at least to investigate the feasibility and cost

⁸⁷ Thompson, *Landed Society*, pp 245, 255.

⁸⁸ Mitchell and Deane, *British Historical Statistics*, pp 488-9.

⁸⁹ However, those whose contemplation extended to a careful reading of Caird's preface may have noticed a reservation about the suitability of 'high farming' on the stiffer clays that tended to be overlooked in the ensuing publicity: *High Farming under Liberal Covenants: The Best Substitute for Protection*, 1849. There were eight editions.

of increased stocking.⁹⁰ Milk prices, however, appear to lend less support to common suppositions about price trends for animal products and the nature of 'proper adjustment'. Initial investigation of milk prices in the London area, using the records of St Bartholomew's Hospital (Fig 1), shows the price steady between 1849 and 1855 around 10d a gallon.⁹¹ Subsequently the price fluctuated, reaching as much as 1s 1d at the time of the cattle plague (1865-7), but remaining below 10d for most of the period 1864-73. Better evidence, particularly on prices received in Essex in the 1850s, is required,⁹² but on

the basis of the evidence presently available there was very little incentive for Essex men to turn to dairying as the much-lauded migrant Scots farmers were to do later in the century.

The course of milk prices during the 'golden age' is both interesting and unanticipated: most commentators have assumed that rising population and incomes, income-elastic demand, and the absence of overseas competition, were conducive to rising milk prices: Caird, in 1868, claimed dairy produce prices had increased by half since 1850.⁹³ Possibly Essex and London milk prices fell relative to those received by dairy farmers more distant from the capital.⁹⁴ At mid-century Essex supplied most of London's rail-milk. As railway expansion opened up this market, and as rail tariffs were adjusted to the advantage of distant suppliers, the advantage of proximity was diminished, perhaps reducing the differential between London and provincial milk prices at the same time.⁹⁵ While this intriguing possibility remains to be explored, the evidence already cited helps to explain, and justify, the very slow expansion of dairy farming in Essex. Farmers in traditional dairying areas, producing cheese and butter, could switch to supplying liquid milk with relative ease, little expense, and considerable financial advantage.⁹⁶ Improving transport likewise exposed Essex meat producers to greater competition from distant counties that were more suited to stock raising. Some of the cattle and sheep at one time seen in Essex were there only because they needed to replenish weight lost on the long trek from upland Britain. In carrying animals (or country-

⁹⁰ Note, however, that the relative increase in beef prices occurred mainly after the mid-1860s: D Taylor, 'The development of English dairy farming, c. 1860-1930', unpublished Oxford University DPhil thesis, 1971, p 39. If the sale of ex-milkers and surplus calves exceeded the cost of buying-in new milkers, buoyant meat prices should have encouraged a similar appraisal of dairying, as should relative decline in the cost of purchased animal feed. But milk prices were the prime consideration in such appraisals.

⁹¹ St Bartholomew's Hospital MSS, Governors' minutes 1849/50-1913/14, Ha/1/21-29. Until 1860 the hospital obtained most of its milk locally. Subsequently it was supplied from South Weald (near Brentwood) in Essex. The figures that follow therefore combined London prices and Brentwood prices: the course of milk prices in Brentwood over the whole period may have been a little more buoyant than the following account suggests. St Thomas's Hospital obtained milk from the Romford district as early as 1846 but no evidence of its price has been found prior to 1855. Figures for St Thomas's published in BPP, 1903, LXVIII, *Report on Wholesale and Retail Prices*, p 137, are broadly consistent with those for St Bartholomew's.

⁹² There is a dearth of good quality information on milk prices, probably because the market for so perishable a product was highly fragmented. The formidable statistical appendix to Vol VI of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* contains information on the prices of produce as esoteric as cider and grass-seed but no milk prices. Elsewhere in the literature references to dairy produce prices are usually based on butter and cheese prices. Atkins provides a useful series of London retail prices which, like the St Bartholomew's series, shows long periods when prices were unchanged and no evidence of any persistent rise: P J Atkins, 'The retail milk trade in London, c. 1790-1914', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXIII, 1980, p 532. Collins and Jones ('Sectoral Advance', p 79), citing evidence from the *Report on Wholesale and Retail Prices* pp 136-7, claim there was a clear long-term rise in milk prices between 1851-5 and 1871-5. However, their claim appears to rest mainly on evidence from only one of the two price series in the 1903 report, that of the Royal Bethlem Hospital, London. The St Thomas's figures (beginning in 1855) show milk prices after the mid-1860s distinctly below the Royal Bethlem prices, while the Royal Bethlem figures for the beginning of the 'golden age' are equally clearly below those paid by St Bartholomew's Hospital (Fig 1). The level and movement of the St Thomas's and St Bartholomew's series are broadly similar and together raise serious doubts about the reliability of the Royal Bethlem series. Between 1855-9 and 1870-4 the Royal Bethlem figures indicate that milk prices rose by 31 per cent whereas the St Bartholomew's and St Thomas's series indicate price falls of 13 per cent and 3 per cent.

⁹³ Cited in Jones, *Agriculture*, p 198.

⁹⁴ T W Fletcher (in P J Perry, ed, *British Agriculture, 1875-1914*, 1973, p 87) suggests milk prices in Lancashire may have risen in the 1860s and 1870s.

⁹⁵ Atkins, 'London's railway milk trade', pp 208-9, 213-4, 222. The mid-1860s cattle plague removed half of London's cows and the consequent milk scarcity further encouraged provision from distant counties: Taylor, 'English dairy farming', pp 104, 111.

⁹⁶ Taylor, 'English dairy farming', p 230a, shows the relative profitability of cheese and milk production.

killed meat) direct to London markets rapidly and with little weight-loss, railways reduced the importance of home-county fattening and thus help to explain why rising meat prices during the 'golden age' were accompanied by only modestly increased stock-keeping.⁹⁷ With regard to both milk and meat, therefore, the consequences for Essex farming of greater inter-regional competition were contrary to those more-widely recognized influences of growing international competition that shaped Caird's analysis: improved transport on the prairies and north Atlantic encouraged English farmers to abandon corn, but improved internal transport encouraged many Essex farmers to do exactly the opposite.

VI

The most remarkable feature of Essex farming during the 'golden age' was how little it changed. Here, as we have seen, the textbook high-farming, high-spending, landlords were a rare minority and the so-called 'golden age' was not particularly prosperous. Some change occurred of course, but in 1870 farming practice in Essex was recognizably what it had been at mid-century, milk and meat production scarcely less subservient to corn.

Essex evidence therefore offers scant support for the traditional interpretation of the 'golden age'. But neither does it endorse more recent interpretations that emphasize the tardiness of response to market pressures, allegedly through apathy or because landlords and farmers devoted too much of their high-farming energy to increasing cereal yields. Essex agriculturalists cannot be exonerated from all charges of ignorance, indolence, and inertia: doubt-

less some opportunities were missed.⁹⁸ However, the criticism has been overdone because whilst modest investment and hesitant structural change may appear to be consistent with conservatism, it was, no less, the strategy indicated by rational appraisal. In Essex, that is, conservatism and enlightenment were fortuitously in harmony. The correct course may sometimes have been followed for the wrong reasons, but it would be churlish to suggest that informed, or intuitive, assessment of the costs and benefits of innovation was not equally important in explaining why landlords and farmers acted as they did.

It has been argued that the Essex preference for continuity over radical change was rational for three main reasons. Firstly, because drainage and many other high-farming innovations were particularly unrewarding on the Essex clays. Poor returns were especially likely when investment was directed at converting arable land to pasture, and the Essex climate and plentiful labour were further disincentives to innovation. Secondly, market indicators, usually assumed to have been urging greater emphasis on mixed farming or pasture, were by no means so unequivocal. Long-term trends in the price of milk hardly amounted to a proclamation that arable should be laid to grass, and wheat prices fluctuated around levels that produced tolerable (even if not 'golden') returns in most years and offered no sustained indication that it was unwise to

⁹⁷ The traditional distinction between rearing and fattening counties derived from several considerations and was by no means eradicated by railways.

⁹⁸ Whether the landlords or the farmers have been the less-unfairly castigated is debated. Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p. 163 and Thompson, *Landed Society*, p. 255 incline towards portraying landlords in the more sympathetic light with emphasis on short-sighted tenants declining to adopt improvements that landlords would willingly finance. For Essex, however, it was suggested above that such evidence can at least be matched by accounts of similar shortcomings among landlords. The landlords, after all, should have been more aware of costs, opportunities and long-term market trends; they should have read more, kept better accounts, and alerted farmers to the potential benefits of co-operation. Even the more impecunious among them could normally raise loans for improvements, and worthwhile improvements were reflected in rent returns. For tenant farmers, by contrast, differential rents provided another disincentive to innovation by neutralizing price trends that favoured livestock.

persist in patterns of farming well-adapted to the Essex environment. Thirdly, throughout the 'golden age' improving transport eroded the advantages of proximity that Essex once enjoyed in supplying milk and meat to London. Mounting competition from regions where soil and climate gave comparative advantage to pasture and mixed farming caused market indicators favouring milk and meat to be more muted in Essex than elsewhere. In cereals Essex still retained a comparative advantage over most of England, even if its advantage over the American prairies was under challenge. And so Essex farmers and landlords invested modestly, moved only very tentatively towards milk and meat, and continued to produce traditional crops by traditional methods.

To what extent these Essex findings should influence understanding of English agriculture as a whole in the 'golden age' cannot be ascertained from this investigation alone. Certainly Essex was not unique: other studies have unearthed tantalizing hints that much of what has been said here might apply no less to certain other places, particularly to other heavy-soil areas in the south and east. Evidence of maintained or expanded arable acreage, for example, has been found for Sussex, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Northants, Wiltshire and Derbyshire.⁹⁹ Likewise,

levels of expenditure on drainage in Norfolk, Suffolk, Sussex, Berkshire and Hampshire seem likely, as in Essex, to have been incompatible with textbook accounts of landlord extravagance.¹⁰⁰ Holderness found little evidence of exceptional expenditure on farm buildings anywhere in Norfolk and Suffolk, and when the senior bursar of St John's College, Cambridge later complained of insufficient investment in the 'golden age' the college's Essex farms were not distinguished from those in other counties.¹⁰¹ At the very least, there appears to be widespread, if still fragmentary, support for Collins and Jones' suggestion that innovation and investment on the claylands during the 'golden age' was far less than that which transformed farming on the lighter soils in the first half of the century. One obvious response to the Essex evidence might be to observe that any detailed investigation is bound to discover deviations from the textbook stereotypes. The contention here, however, is that because the Essex experience differed so significantly from that depicted in generalized accounts, because Essex represents a sizeable exception to any such generalization, and because Essex farming had some aspects in common with farming elsewhere, the familiar interpretations of English agriculture in the 'golden age' may require yet more qualification.

⁹⁹ R. J. P. Kain and H. C. Prince, *The Tithe Surveys of England and Wales*, 1985, p. 173; R. Perren, 'The landlord and agricultural transformation, 1870-1900', *Ag Hist Rev*, XVIII, 1970, p. 50; F. M. L. Thompson in *Victorian County History of Wiltshire*, IV, 1959, p. 97; A. D. M. Phillips, 'Agricultural land use on a Northamptonshire estate (1849-99) as revealed by cropping books', *East Midland Geog*, VIII, 1983, pp. 75-7.

¹⁰⁰ Phillips, *Underdraining of Farmland*, Table 3.4, p. 81.

¹⁰¹ B. A. Holderness, 'Landlord's capital formation in East Anglia, 1750-1870', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser. XXV, 1972, Table 2, p. 439; St John's College, Cambridge, MSS, Senior bursar's statement on the audit, 1893, D100-70. The college estates are detailed in H. F. Howard, *The Finances of St John's College, Cambridge, 1511-1926*, 1935, end map.