

Land and People in Northamptonshire: Great Oakley, c 1750–1850

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Abstract

Through the study of a single parish this article seeks to contribute to the continuing debate surrounding the survival of the small owner/occupier in the nineteenth-century countryside. Within the context of a livestock-dominated economy, open-field tenants of Great Oakley had access to a number of enclosed grazing pastures, together with extensive common grazing in the forest of Rockingham, and the relative importance of the latter is discussed in some detail. Following enclosure in 1784 and 1829 there was some dislocation among the cottager population, yet there remained available numerous parcels of land for the smaller occupiers. Whereas there was a tendency for smaller freeholds to be purchased by large landowners before enclosure, this was by no means a prelude to dispossession, since many of those selling held rented land in adjacent parishes and may have viewed sales as a means of releasing capital for reinvestment. If the smaller occupier, usually employing family labour only, contributed only modestly to the national economy, his significance at the local level was of some importance both from a commercial and social standpoint.

SINCE the early years of the present century when the Hammonds penned their sombre picture of the effects of enclosure on the fate of the small freeholder, much intellectual effort has been expended in debating both the timing and the effects of the decline of this group in the English countryside. The course of the debate has waxed and waned over the decades according to changing views as to the definition of 'peasantry' and 'yeomanry', and the extent to which loss of customary rights delivered the hammer blow leading to the virtual elimination of the small freeholder. More recent reviews have highlighted the complexity of the issue, particularly with regard to regional variations, while Ginter has raised serious objections to the methodology employed in many of the earlier land-tax-based studies.¹ Although there was undoubtedly post-enclosure dislocation in some areas, there is a growing consensus that economic and technical factors set into motion the decline

of the small freeholder in the century or so prior to 1780 so that in many cases enclosure played little or no part in the process. Nevertheless, the small owner had by no means 'disappeared' by the later eighteenth century, and where financial stringency could be circumvented by combining farming with a variety of other occupations it was possible to avoid the pressure to sell.² Again, even where they did sell out their freeholds, they may often have done so in response to investment opportunities elsewhere.

In the parish of Great Oakley, located on the intractable clays of north-east Northamptonshire, there were no small freeholders in the later eighteenth century, the parish being dominated by a single landowning family. On the other hand a considerable proportion of occupiers of land held freehold and copyhold tenure within adjacent parishes and the effects of

¹ J V Beckett, 'The decline of the small landowner in eighteenth and nineteenth century England: some regional considerations', *AHR*, 30, 1982, pp 93–9; D E Ginter, 'Measuring the decline of the small landowner', in B A Holderness and M Turner, eds, *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700–1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay*, 1991, pp 34–8.

² J M Martin, 'The small landowner and parliamentary enclosure in Warwickshire', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, 32, 1979, pp 328–43; G E Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 1968, pp 16, 30; J V Beckett, 'The decline of the small landowner', in F M L Thompson, ed, *Landowners, Capitalists and Entrepreneurs: Essays for Sir John Habakkuk*, 1994, pp 111–12; M Reed, 'The peasantry of nineteenth-century England: a neglected class?', *History Workshop*, 18, 1984, pp 53–76.

enclosure on these properties will be considered below. However, the main concern of the present article (beyond contributing to the history of Great Oakley itself, nearly all of which has disappeared beneath the bricks and mortar of the expanding town of Corby) is with the small *occupier* who has received little attention in the historiography of the countryside. Whereas the enclosure of the Great Oakley open fields in 1784 had led to the creation of five farms varying in size from 100 to 150 acres, by the late 1850s three further holdings averaging 121 acres had been brought into being by combining existing enclosed fields with land won from the clearance of forest. By this later date, meanwhile, there still remained numerous closes which came under the tenancy of occupiers engaged in a variety of by-employments. Thus it will be argued throughout that whatever may have been the case in the predominantly arable areas of England, in this overwhelmingly pastoral economy sufficient land was available to contribute to the income of many who would not necessarily have defined themselves as 'farmers'. Indeed, the 1784 enclosure and the Rockingham Forest Inclosure of 1829 actually *increased* the number of parcels of land for the use of small-scale part-time cultivators. For this reason, perhaps, neither enclosure appears to have provoked the hostility of the denizens of Great Oakley, a fact which calls into question the value of the pre-existing forest commons. In reality these were probably of marginal importance to the majority of the community except in seasons where the availability of grazing and forage in the common fields and commonable grazing areas was limited by climatic factors. The Great Oakley evidence, moreover, does little to advance the case of those who would argue that small owners unable to resist the temptation to sell their freeholds in advance of enclosure inevitably joined the ranks of the landless. Since a significant proportion of Great Oakley ten-

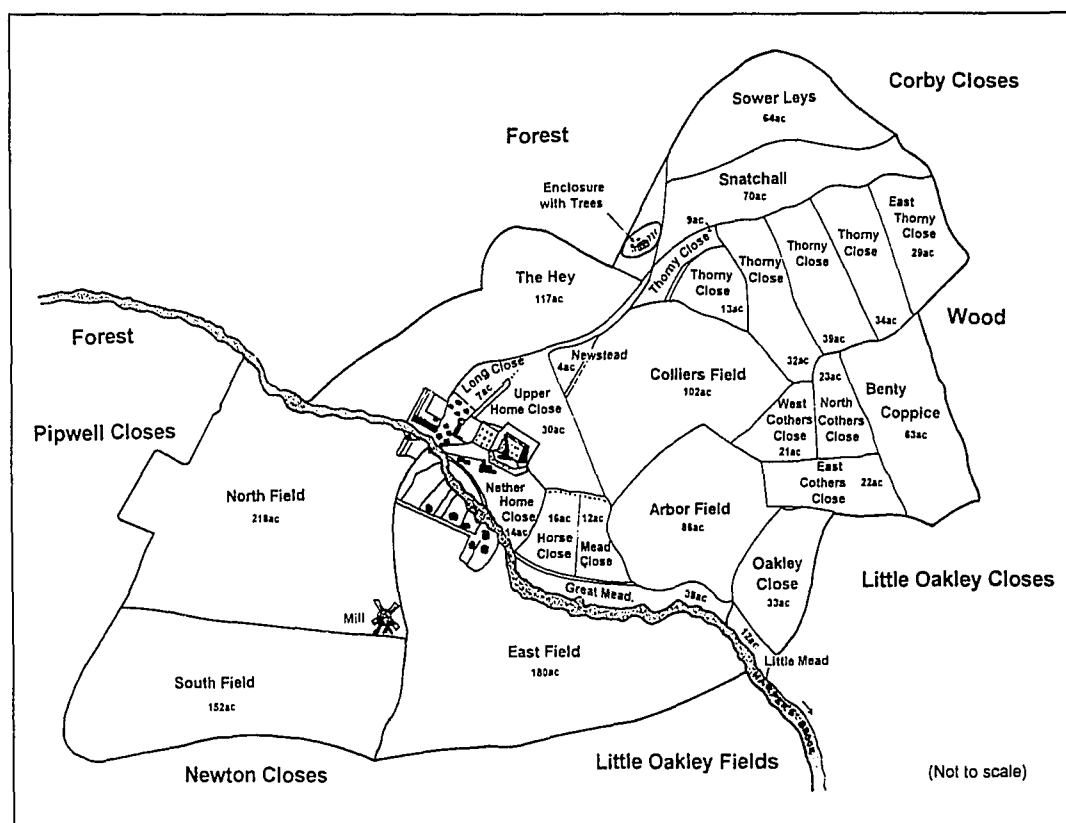
ants also held freeholds in adjacent parishes, often some distance from their main holdings, the sale of these to release capital for investment either in their tenanted farms or even in non-agricultural enterprises would seem perfectly rational in strictly economic terms. In emphasizing these points and considering a variety of aspects of the wood-pasture economy, the present article, albeit focused narrowly on a single parish, is offered as a contribution to the continuing debate surrounding the survival of the small owner/occupier in the nineteenth-century countryside.

I

Clustered around the stream of Harper's Brook to the south of what remained of the ancient forest of Rockingham, the village of Great Oakley continued to be dominated by an open-field economy until the penultimate decade of the eighteenth century (Fig 1). In 1780 the village comprised 48 dwellings wherein 144 individuals lived in well-ordered routine under the watchful eye of the court leet whose rules and orders regulated village life in time-honoured manner. Whether concerned with the conduct of the village bull, the behaviour of gleaners, the prevention of the fouling of water courses by geese, or the organization of the commons, the influence of the court impinged upon virtually all aspects of daily life.³ On the face of it, then, Great Oakley was little different from dozens of villages in and around the Rockingham Forest or, for that matter, the Weald of Kent, where wood-pasture economies were heavily reliant on both statutory and customary rights of common.⁴ Apart from four houses occupied by single men or women, the remaining dwellings accommodated families, the heads of which

³ Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO), Brooke of Oakley, B 125, Great Oakley Court Books.

⁴ B Short, 'The evolution of contrasting communities within rural England', in B Short, ed, *The Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, 1992, p 27.



1777 with the census enumerators books and Kelly's Directory of 1854, for example, reveals that although the three Great Oakley handloom weavers had disappeared from the reckoning, the village continued to support two inns, a carpenter, a shoemaker, a blacksmith and a wheelwright together with a miller and a veterinary surgeon by the latter date.⁷ Throughout the same period, total population changed but marginally, and although the census for 1851 returns only forty households, the population, at 197, was a mere eight souls more than the occupants of forty-nine houses in 1801.

⁶ J M Martin, 'Village traders and the emergence of a proletariat in south Warwickshire, 1750-1861', *AHR*, 32, 1984, p. 184.

⁷ V A Hatley, ed, *Northamptonshire Militia Lists*, Northants Record Society, 1973. Boots were last made in Great Oakley by the Woolston family in 1948, thereby bringing to an end two hundred years of shoemaking in the village: *Recollections of Gertrude Bagshaw*, typescript in Corby Public Library.

Apart from some 350 acres, the property of the dukes of Buccleuch, the whole of the two-thousand-acre parish was owned by the de Capell Brooke family whose stately late Elizabethan house nestled comfortably within its enclosed park by the church.⁸ The Brookes had originally risen to gentry status at Astwell, near Brackley. However, following the exchange of the manor of Astwell with that of Great Oakley in 1472 they accumulated property in the latter village, Rushton, Stanion, Little Oakley and Newton. Subsequently much outlying land was sold and as this was reinvested by way of purchase of a proportion of the dissolved abbey of Pipewell, the nucleus of the Brooke estate was established in Great Oakley.⁹ With the death of an unmarried life tenant in 1762, the estate passed to a brother whose daughter married Richard Supple of Aghadoe, Co Cork, by which means extensive lands in Ireland came under the control of the Brooke family. The Supple's son, another Richard, took on the name and arms of de Capell Brooke and, in 1803, shortly after he inherited the family property, he was created baronet.¹⁰

While the surviving manuscript material provides few clues as to the efficiency with which the eighteenth-century Brookes managed their patrimony, many documents cast interesting light on land occupation and aspects of tenancies within the open-field village. In the 1780s, for example, cottage tenants were expected to pay the parish rates on their dwellings and to meet the full cost of repairs for both two-room and four-room cottages let, respectively, at £1 5s and £2 2s per year. A garden was available for a further guinea,

but since all villagers enjoyed right of common in one or another guise, they may have viewed a garden as a luxury rather than an absolute necessity.¹¹ In addition to having access to a range of common grazings as described below, individual cottagers occupied a variety of quite separate closes of land, most of them in the form of permanent pasture.¹² Indeed, by the end of the Napoleonic Wars at least twelve villagers specifically described as cottagers held parcels of land from 1 to 9 acres in area together with gardens, orchards and quarter-acre allotments in the parish hay meadows. Thomas Humphrey, for example, was paying £3 5s for a house and cottage, and £13 10s for a 9-acre close, while Thomas Croxon held Parson's Close at £1 10s.¹³ Elsewhere John Shaw rented the village osier bed for £5 5s in addition to his cottage and garden. These examples apart, a further fifteen tenants, not specified as farmers, occupied more substantial acreages to supplement their hayfield allotments. Besides his house, garden and mill, for which he paid £15 in rent, Joseph Tebbott held a brickyard and closes of land valued at £38 10s annually.¹⁴ His neighbour Joseph Crabtree rented three enclosures adjoining his inn while Samuel Woolston, whose house and barn near Harper's Brook were valued at £5 8s per year, held 18 acres at a yearly rent of £25. Both Crabtree and Woolston were anxious to expand their holdings, and like Joseph Cooper who supplemented his 19 acres with a further 3 acres in 1831, they went

¹¹ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112.

¹² With reference to Laxton, John Beckett has drawn attention to the seemingly random use of the term 'cottager' in surveys and inventories, in the sense that a man might appear as a 'cottager' in one survey or as a 'labourer' or 'farmer' in another. This problem does not occur in Great Oakley with only the titles 'husbandman' and 'yeoman' being mutually interchangeable in pre-1800 documentary material: J V Beckett, 'The disappearance of the cottager and the squatter from the English countryside: the Hammonds revisited', in Holderness and Turner, *Land, Labour and Agriculture*, p 60.

¹³ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112.

¹⁴ Local readers will note that the claypits for the brickyard were located close to the present-day 'Field Cottages'.

⁸ Where it still remains, despite the loss of the majority of the estate to iron-ore extraction and subsequently the expansion of nearby Corby.

⁹ J Bridges, *The History and Antiquities of Northamptonshire*, II, 1791, p 325.

¹⁰ 'Sir Edward de Capell Brooke, Bart, CBE: Obituary', *Northants Past and Present*, 4, 1968, p 138. Sir Richard's son, Arthur, the author of several books including *A Winter in the North Cape*, was eventually elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society.

to some lengths to rent extra closes when such became available.¹⁵ This sort of evidence lends strength to the view that by the close of the eighteenth century opportunities were afforded for both cottagers and (for want of a better description) 'mid-dling tenants' to expand their economic base. Occupation of enclosed fields and the availability of forage from the hay meadows meant that even where they enjoyed no rights in the open fields, villagers could supplement their incomes as labourers or craftsmen with agricultural produce. The extent to which farming their closes was the primary, as opposed to supplementary, source of income for these smaller landholders would depend in large degree on individual attitudes and aspirations and technical competence. It is, after all, a fact of agricultural life that an able and enthusiastic farmer will often derive more profit from a small area of indifferent land than his incompetent neighbour with access to broad acres of productive soil. In any event, a basis for rural pluriactivity was established within the parish.¹⁶

Within the Rockingham Forest area generally, arable farming had long given way to an essentially livestock economy both in the open fields and on the old enclosures. Indeed, in the hundred of Corby alone, sheep numbers had advanced almost fourfold from 1000 to 4830 between 1547 and 1564.¹⁷ Over the next two centuries the area had evolved specialized systems of livestock farming based upon permanent pasture to the extent that the Board of Agriculture's reporter was able to confirm that of the 227 Northamptonshire parishes, more than one hundred were laid down to grass, many of them in 'old

enclosures'.¹⁸ In effect, then, farmers and holders of closes in Great Oakley between 1750 and 1850 would, in general, have directed their efforts towards the livestock economy thereby capitalizing on the growing local and national demand for meat and dairy products. Farming permanent pastures on the heavy, ill-drained soils typical of the parish would have been by no means easy and would have raised technical and management problems of some complexity. But the reverse, that of attempting to establish productive leys would have been equally problematic, besides which, a tenantry employed in permanent pasture farming required less buildings, a fact which may have commended the system to the Great Oakley estate.¹⁹ In reality, despite the objections of Stapledon and other detractors in the 1920s, the annual productivity of a permanent pasture for both feeding and dairying is, given careful attention to stocking levels and manuring, often higher than that of indifferently-established medium and longer-term leys.²⁰

II

As far as the parish of Great Oakley was concerned, most of the closes and pasture fields occupied by late eighteenth-century tenants had been in existence for at least a century if not considerably longer. The 102-acre Collier's Field is delineated on early seventeenth-century plans as are Robinson's Close, Arnesby's Close and several other ring-fenced parcels of land within the parish fields.²¹ In like manner, Benty Coppice and the Thorney Closes, covering in excess of 200 acres, represented relict

¹⁵ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, 313/3.

¹⁶ The situation is broadly comparable to that in the medieval Forest of Arden where common field was limited in area and there was an abundance of closes held in severality by inhabitants pursuing by-occupations: A Watkins, 'Cattle grazing in the Forest of Arden in the later Middle Ages', *AHR*, 33, 1989, p. 13.

¹⁷ J M Martin, 'Sheep and enclosure in sixteenth century Northamptonshire', *AHR*, 36, 1988, p. 43.

¹⁸ J Donaldson, *General View of the Agriculture ... of Northamptonshire*, 1794, p. 24.

¹⁹ J Broad, 'Alternate husbandry and permanent pasture in the Midlands', *AHR*, 28, 1980, p. 81.

²⁰ A H Charles and R J Haggard, eds, *Changes in Sward Composition and Productivity*, British Grassland Society Symposium 10, 1979, *passim*.

²¹ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 53. A clue to the antiquity of Arnesby's Close lays in the single reference to the christening of one Francis Arnesby in 1564: NRO, *Transcript and Index of Registers, 1562-1710*.

forest which had been converted to pasture in the 1650s and, by 1780, was under the tenancy of the farmers Joseph Smith and Thomas Clitheroe.²² Laying between Oderfield (a purlieu wood subsequently converted into pasture) and the edge of the open forest was a piece of land which was eventually to become known as the East Frett Meadow. This had been enclosed for pasture by the Great Oakley copyholder William Downhall, under whose will, dated 1670, it was left to trustees charged with the duty of ensuring that its profits be directed towards the upkeep of Cottingham Church and the benefit of the poor of Cottingham. Rented for generations by tenants of the de Capell Brooke estate, this enclosure remained outside the Brooke property until it was exchanged for land in Middleton after the Rockingham Forest Inclosure in the late 1820s.²³

In effect, the eighteenth-century open-field tenants of Great Oakley had access to a number of enclosed pastures provided that, like Fisher, Wright and Gascoigne, joint tenants of Collier's Field in 1780 at £53 5s per year, they could raise the necessary rent. Enclosed pastures apart, the parish boasted two other grazing resources in addition to open-field grazing and commonable browse in Rockingham Forest. The first of these was the 70-acre Snatchill Plain, mentioned as a commonable Sheepwalk in 1612 with rights enjoyed by Great Oakley tenants in accordance with the scale of their open-field holdings. Since it was open to the forest and thus subject to the depredations of deer, the Plain was probably of limited value, and even this would have been reduced in the mid-seventeenth century when a rabbit warren was established over much of its area. Whatever the case, rights of common seem to have elapsed in the 1750s when the whole Plain came under the tenure of

Richard Berry and William Frisbey.²⁴ The Hay (Hey), 117 acres of land 'anciently enclosed' from Rockingham Forest was quite another matter. Originally in arable cultivation, the Hay had been securely fenced in the 1750s to exclude the deer, after which it was divided into a series of pasture paddocks common at the will of the landlord.²⁵ The stocking of the Hay was determined by a complex procedure monitored by the court leet and supervised on a daily basis by the fieldman who was responsible for ensuring that the pasture was utilized efficiently and remained in good heart. Whereas grazing rights associated with cottages meant that at specified times 473 sheep could feed on the open fields, sheep stocking on the Hay was strictly limited to fifteen cottage commons each with a stint of five animals. The grazing of cattle, meanwhile, was the preserve of specified farmers occupying 15-acre yardlands in the open fields, one animal being permitted on the hay for each yardland held.²⁶ By the early 1780s yardlands were occupied by William Collis (5), Jonathan Cooper (3½), William Gascoigne (5), John Lewin (5), Jonathan Moore (5), John Wright (6) and Robert Wright (4½) who thereby between them grazed 34 cows on the Hay. Of these farmers, Wright, Gascoigne, Lewin and Moore also enjoyed 25 cow commons in the open fields, and as with William Fisher and William Clitheroe who held eleven such commons these rights were not associated with yardland holdings.²⁷

In view of the importance of these various grazing resources both to individ-

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, 318/10.

²⁶ Throughout the country as a whole the yardland varied widely in area. Some Northamptonshire yardlands were in excess of 20 acres of arable and pasture although the Great Oakley yardland was fixed at 15 acres: for details see I Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms: A Glossary for Historical Geography*, IBG, 1976.

²⁷ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 53. Some copyholders perceived cow commons to be a tradeable commodity to be let out to other members of the community when not required. John Wright, for example, let one of his cow commons to Jonathan Little between May and Michaelmas 1780, receiving one guinea in return.

²² NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112.

²³ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 163.

uals and to the community as a whole, there is every reason to believe that they would be managed with the greatest of care and that every effort would be made both to control livestock breeding and to limit the spread of disease. The Great Oakley court books lend eloquent testimony to the lengths taken to monitor the quality of bulls and rams entering areas of common grazing, while strict regulations as to the times of entry and exit of stock to both the Hay and the open fields ensured the protection of crucial pasturelands. Meanwhile, pigs were to be ringed, cows were to be branded and have their horns tipped with wood, and the fieldsman was to be apprised of all association between the village bull and tenants' cows.²⁸ If nothing more, the last regulation hints at the possibility of some sort of record of matings being kept, perhaps as an aid to a localized programme of selective breeding. Given the importance of livestock in this wood-pasture economy, it would be naive to accept the traditional view that random matings between undernourished and even diseased stock occurred with monotonous regularity. In fact, the opposite was probably the case, and any livestock improvement taking place in a particular locality could be facilitated just as effectively in a well-controlled open-field context as in a fully enclosed system.

III

As suggested above, many Great Oakley villagers in the last half of the eighteenth century occupied closes of land which had been enclosed from the forest generations previously. They would, moreover, continue to enjoy extensive common grazing within and around adjacent stretches of the forest of Rockingham until parliamentary enclosure in 1829 finally extinguished shared use rights. Even then, as will be shown later in this article, the fact that a

significant proportion of small occupiers not only retained but even expanded their holdings in the 1830s and 1840s suggests that within this particular community the impact of parliamentary enclosure was relatively untraumatic. It is even possible that, in stark contrast to their Corby neighbours, who steadfastly resisted moves towards the Rockingham Forest Inclosure, the people of Great Oakley were largely indifferent to the prospect of losing what remained of their common rights. Even the copyholders of the manor of Corby were prepared, in 1725, to surrender their common rights in the coppices of Upper and Nether Shrub to the earl of Cardigan on condition that he would grub out the timber and create a cow pasture for which they would pay an agreed rent.²⁹ Undoubtedly squatters and residents who regarded themselves as holding extra-judicial rights of common would have maintained vigorous opposition to any infringement, but legal holders of such rights were sometimes more amenable to the surrender of commons provided reasonable terms could be negotiated.³⁰

This line of argument raises questions as to the significance of common rights in areas like the forest of Rockingham where arable farming played only a limited role in the agrarian economy. Forest commons would, of course, contribute to the human diet by providing a ready supply of nuts, berries, fungi, crab-apples and so on, and although these would be a welcome seasonal bonus they would provide little towards maintenance requirements beyond a minor contribution to vitamin and mineral status. It is conventionally argued that forest and moorland commons were important sources of fuel for the open-field community. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that from the standpoint of

²⁹ J Wake and D Webster, eds, *The Letters of Daniel Eaton, 1725-1732*, NRO, 1971, p 44.

³⁰ For opposition to enclosure in Northamptonshire see, for example, J M Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820*, 1993, p 62; B Bellamy, *Ceddington Chase: The History of a Wood*, Irthlingborough, 1986, pp 50-1.

²⁸ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 125.

the human time budget, fuel gathering is extremely costly with, for example, some contemporary Mexican communities absorbing up to 25 per cent of their day gathering wood for heating and cooking purposes.³¹ The experience of the present author, possessed of extensive woodlands, a modest physique and a bow saw, suggests that approximately one hour is required to harvest and transport by hand a distance of 100 m the 40 kg of wood required for ten-hours firing of a woodburning stove. The commoner, obliged to collect fallen timber, and normally prohibited from removing growing material, would need to devote considerably more time to achieve the same objective. The landless cottager would, in many cases, have little alternative but to resort to the woodlands for his fuel, whatever the cost may be to his cash-earning activities as a labourer, craftsman or village trader. To the occupier of closes and allotments within the open fields however, there would be a heavy opportunity cost associated with fuel gathering unless this could be accomplished by other family members. Time devoted to collecting fuel would essentially be time lost in husbandry pursuits. Accordingly, like today's East African cultivator, he would need to come to some carefully considered judgement over the degree to which time spent working his fields would generate sufficient cash to enable him to purchase brushwood and other timber for fuel. In other words, if he could intensify his pastoral farming activities, the commons, as a fuel source, might be of little real utility.

Of what value were woodland grazing and forage rights to this small occupier? These, presumably, would vary according to the amount of grazing available in the open fields or in enclosures held in severalty, and upon the density of stocking therein. Where a small landholder attempted to maximize his agricultural

income by intensifying his acreage (at the expense, perhaps of spending less time at his by-employment), forest grazing would be an invaluable resource when summer grass was in short supply. Of even greater significance was the woodland as a pool of winter forage. Given the notoriously fickle English summer, reliance on the hay crop was (and continues to be) something of an act of faith, while in areas like Rockingham Forest locally-available straw would have been difficult to come by. In this context a ready supply of browse in the form of holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), ivy (*Hedera helix* L) and gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) was undoubtedly a valuable bonus.³² Other species too would have extended the subsistence base in late summer and autumn, with cattle, sheep and horses being prepared to eat both the leaves and bark of hazel, oak, alder and ash when other forages are scarce. The nutritional value of browse would, of course, vary seasonally while individual leaves on a given tree would be at various stages of senescence. Nevertheless, random samples of leaves and bark of the above species collected by the present author in late July and August 1992 provided crude protein and energy supplies in many cases equivalent to those of medium quality hay.³³ Since there is ample evidence in the archaeological record for the winter foddering of housed livestock with tree browse, there is no reason to doubt that those enjoying common rights in the Rockingham Forest in the later eighteenth century would on occasions carry browse from the woods for both inwintered and outwintered ruminants on their enclosures.³⁴

³² J Birrell, 'Deer and deer farming in medieval England', *AHR*, 40, 1992; J Radley, 'Holly as a winter feed', *AHR*, 9, 1961; M Spray, 'Holly as a fodder in England', *AHR*, 29, 1981; S Ely, 'On the cultivation of gorse as a feed for cattle', *JRASE*, 6, 1848.

³³ R J Moore-Colyer, 'The horse in prehistory: some speculations', *Archaeol Jnl*, 151, 1994, pp 1-15.

³⁴ P Rasmussen, 'Analysis of goat/sheep faeces from Egozswil 3, Switzerland; evidence for branch and twig foddering in the Neolithic', *Journ Anth Science*, 20, 1993, pp 491-3; D Robinson and P Rasmussen, 'Leaf hay and cereals, as animal fodder', in A Milles et al, eds, *The Beginnings of Agriculture*, BAR International Series 496, 1989, p 528.

³¹ See, for example, P Harrison, *The Third Revolution*, 1991, *passim*; P Smith, *The World at the Crossroads*, 1991, p 80.

A competent small landholder, well-versed in his trade or by-employment, could in theory at least accumulate a modest capital reserve to invest in livestock or infrastructural improvement to his closes so that over time the contribution of his landholding to total income would increase. In this sort of situation, common rights and access to forest browse would become less significant or even unnecessary. Given the ready availability of grazing closes in Great Oakley, neither private nor parliamentary enclosure would enforce the more efficient of the population to shuffle, in Turner's phrase 'inexorably down the agricultural ladder'.³⁵

IV

The modest impact of the Rockingham Forest Inclosure of 1829 on the parish of Great Oakley was further cushioned by the earlier experience of the enclosure of the 550 acres of parish open fields and the 117-acre Hay in 1784. Details of this enclosure are contained in a remarkably interesting notebook compiled by Sir Richard de Capell Brooke from the context of which it is clear that the measure was undertaken by common consent of the parishioners.³⁶ Brooke's general plan was to create a number of self-contained farms while concurrently satisfying the requests of 'the Persons who want closes', presumably individuals who had applied to him in advance of the enclosure proposal. These included Austen, the Little Oakley shoemaker, Sargeant the tailor, who wanted 5 acres of grassland and Jones, the butcher of Geddington who was keen to secure several closes of accommodation land. Among the more substantial requests were those of Perkins (20 acres), John Jones of Weekley

(14 acres), and Austen of Rothwell, a farmer of some substance and a cousin of the Great Oakley farmer William Gascoigne, who required 100 acres and a barn. Lists of Great Oakley tenants from the 1820s and 1840s suggest that with the single exception of Perkins, these external applicants were unsuccessful and that although some closes were let to new arrivals, the newly-created farms were granted to long-term residents of the parish. Brooke was of the view that the interest of the estate would best be served by the creation of three enclosed farms occupied by tenants of proven ability, although he was prepared to accommodate the wishes of villagers by carving out additional holdings. However, being only too aware that this policy would involve considerable expense in the longer term, he stipulated that tenants of the new holdings be obliged to meet their own repair costs, besides complying with a whole complex of regulations designed to keep their holdings in good tenantable condition. These included the usual stipulations as to rotations and subletting, along with restrictions on the cutting of trees and foraging of pigs in the newly-enclosed fields. Moreover, by way of supplementing parish rules laid down by the court leet, tenants of these new enclosures were forbidden from working on Good Friday and were to be fined a crown for allowing beasts into the churchyard or 'for Boys suffered to play there'.

Prior to the enclosure itself, a great deal of preliminary work was undertaken, including some 7500 yards of ditching in the South and East Fields. Concurrently thirty 'great gates' and ten handgates were made, all of which were carefully coated with tar oil, while quickset hawthorn for hedgerows was ordered from Spalding and Wisbeach. In the autumn of 1784 planting began in earnest and as quicksets were rooted along future hedgelines, close attention was paid to protecting them with rails

³⁵ J Sheppard, 'Small farmers in a Sussex Weald parish, 1800-1860', *AHR*, 40, 1992, p 141; M Turner, 'Economic protest and rural society: opposition to parliamentary enclosure in Buckinghamshire', *J Southern History*, 10, 1988, p 144.

³⁶ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 53.

or cut thorn bushes. While this was going on, hedgerow trees, primarily oak and crab-apple, were inserted at intervals in pre-dug holes lined with rotted turf. In the meantime, as oak and crab saplings were removed from Sowerleys Wood, labourers collected acorns and crab-apples for nursery planting, thereby to secure future supplies of replacement trees. Occasionally other planting materials were used. 'On Mr Gascoigne's land' beside the Willow Brook, for example, hedgerows of furze interspersed with elder bushes were planted, with the centre of the double ditch dug around the Hay being embellished with beech and fir. Besides hedgerow planting, the enterprise entailed the construction of an extensive network of trackways for which material was dug from the limestone outcrops on the Snatchill Plain. A total of 750 tons of stone, each load advancing an 11-foot wide road by 3 feet, were absorbed at a cost of $3\frac{1}{2}d$ per load, adding to the 34s per acre expended on hedgerow planting materials. In view of the extensive infrastructural improvements to the newly-enclosed land, more especially ditching, stone removal and alterations to farmhouses and buildings, the total cost of the enclosure cannot be accurately assessed. The net result, however, was the creation of five self-contained farms together with a variety of separate closes. Tenancy agreements drawn up between January and December 1783 indicate that the new holdings were let for an average of 15s per acre, although this concealed a wide variation both between and within farms according to land quality. Land on the Hay, for example, was valued at between 10 and 12s, whereas enclosure in the old North Field let for up to 14s and those in the East Field 18s per acre³⁷ (Fig 2).

Beyond increasing the capital value and income-generating potential of the two-thousand acre Great Oakley estate, enclos-

ure of the open fields and the Hay probably had little effect on the farming economy in the short to medium term. In an animal husbandry context, the simple expedient of dividing grazing land into paddocks would offer few advantages to what was already a well-regulated pastoral economy, albeit one operating in an agriculturally backward part of the country.³⁸ The Rockingham Forest area was generally held to harbour the 'more inferior' grasslands of Northamptonshire whose ill-drained acres were a morass of rushes, moss, thistles and molehills which had been suffered 'to drag out a profitless existence and to become less productive'.³⁹ If true, this equally applied to the land to the north and west of Great Oakley village and in the Snatchill/Sowerleys area which was eventually enclosed under the provisions of the Rockingham Forest Inclosure and which remained for the most part undrained before the 1860s.⁴⁰ That adverse contemporary comment regarding the productivity of these woodland pastures was more than a little hyperbolic is borne out by the apparent level of demand for farms and closes both before and after each enclosure. After all, why bother to yoke oneself to the agricultural treadmill if the result would be 'a profitless existence'? There must have been profits to be made by occupiers large and small, although the influence of enclosure *per se* on the realization of these profits was probably minimal. While the 1784 enclosure may have conferred some minor benefits to occupiers of the limited acreage of arable land, its effects on pastoral farming practice would have been of little significance compared to its

³⁸ J P Dodd, 'Aspects of the agriculture of Northamptonshire in the first half of the nineteenth century', *Northants Past and Present*, 7, 1988-9, p 428.

³⁹ W Bearn, 'On the agriculture of Northamptonshire', *JRASE*, 13, 1852, pp 78-81.

⁴⁰ 2 and 3 Will IV c 22, An Act for Disafforesting and Inclosing so much of the Forest of Rockingham as is situate within the Bailiwick of Rockingham, and for Inclosing open and common field lands in Grettton, all within the Country of Northampton.

³⁷ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112.

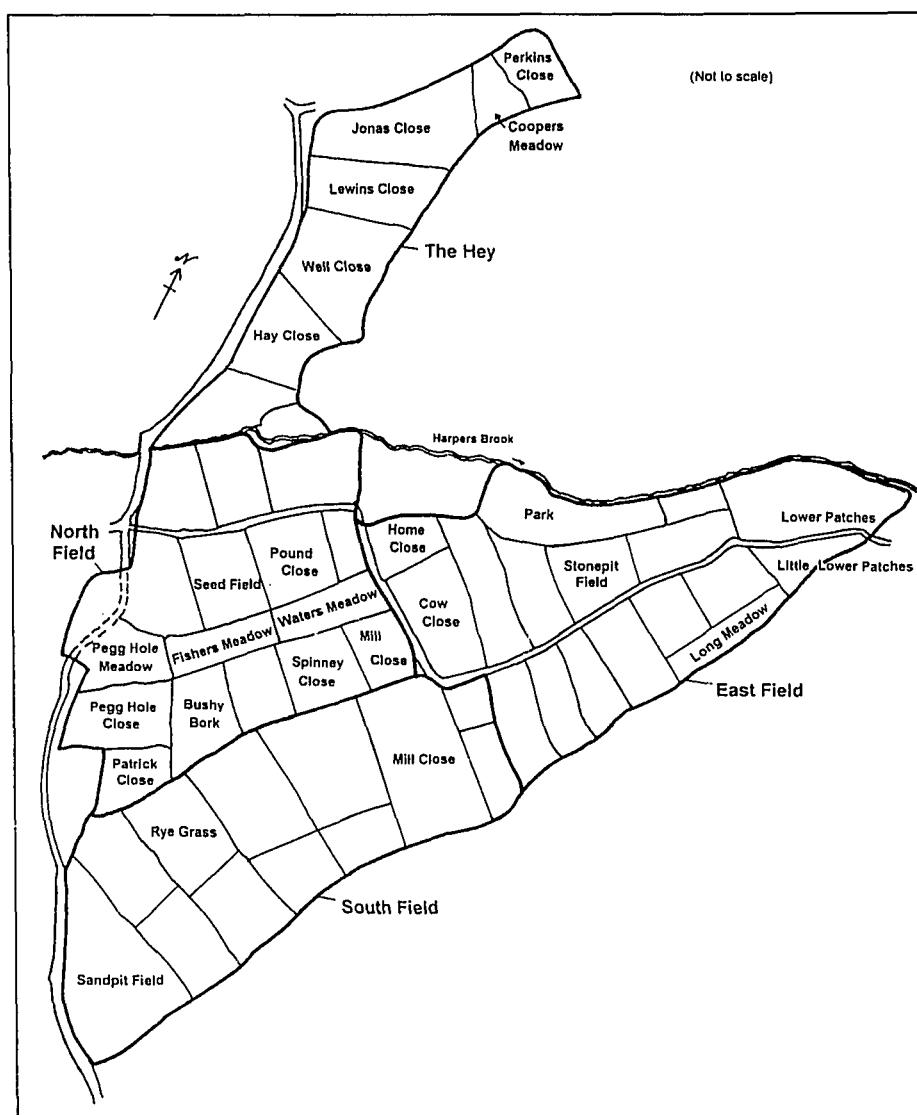


FIGURE 2
The enclosure of the Great Oakley open fields and the Hey, 1784.

influence on landholding patterns within the community.

V

Comparison of lists of heads of households in Great Oakley in 1780 and 1844 reveals that by the latter date a mere 30 per cent of the 1780 inhabitants remained in the parish. For example, of the tenants William Fisher, Samuel Gascoigne, John Lewin,

Francis Waters and Joseph Moore who occupied the holdings newly-created in 1784, only the descendants of Joseph Moore were living in the village sixty years later.⁴¹ Although some names would have disappeared as a result of male line

⁴¹ Among other families, the Tebbotts, prominent in the village in the sixteenth century, remained until the middle years of the 1960s, while the Colyers, who eventually became established as substantial freeholders in Corby, held copyholds in Great Oakley in the 1560s and continued to farm as tenants in the parish until 1962: NRO, *Transcript and Index of Registers, 1562-1710*.

failure, the lists convey the overwhelming impression that the bulk of disappearances was within the cottager population with some 60 per cent of 1780 cottagers having been replaced by 1844.⁴² There is no reason, of course, to assume that these disappearances were necessarily directly associated with the 1784 or 1829 enclosures, and emigration, either to nearby communities or further afield may have been occasioned by a variety of factors. In any event, a period of stability followed the 1840s and by 1865, when the population of the village stood at 195, the names on the list of heads of households remained much the same as twenty years previously.⁴³ It is clear, moreover, that subsequent to the enclosures of 1784 and 1829, more than 40 per cent of Great Oakley villagers, *not specifically identified as farmers*, continued to occupy areas of land varying from 1 to 30 acres, with an average of slightly more than 10 acres per household. It would seem that these particular enclosure works, besides leading to the creation of self-contained farms for letting to capitalist tenants, amplified the stock of pre-existing closes available for the use of craftsmen, labourers and others. If the smaller occupiers of the 1840s were not always descendants of those holding closes a generation or so previously, the fact remains that there had been an addition to, rather than a diminution of, parcels of land appropriate to part-time, small-scale farming. To men like John Patrick (10 acres), John Woolston (5 acres), William Brown (13 acres), and James Riddle (9 acres), occupation of such land offered an opportunity of avoiding the risks and uncertainties inherent in the lot of the day labourer. The land provided a safety valve, a buffer against periodic unemployment, a certain status within the community and the confidence born of a sense of belonging.

Although there were no small *owners* of land within the bounds of the parish of Great Oakley, adjacent parishes within the Rockingham Forest contained numerous small parcels of land under copyhold or freehold occupation, some held by tenant farmers of the Great Oakley estate. Where these small freeholds, often a mere handful of acres, abutted onto a more substantial acreage of tenanted land, they might well have proven of considerable value by facilitating the spreading of fixed costs. If, on the other hand, they were in remote locations difficult of access, their value as agricultural units was probably marginal. In such cases the temptation to sell out and thereby to raise capital for stocking tenanted land, to buy into business, or generally to enhance economic status would often prove irresistible.

In 1815 Sir Richard de Capell Brooke of Great Oakley purchased almost 1000 acres of land to the north of his existing estate, most of it in the parishes of Middleton, Cottingham and Corby (Fig 3). This comprised a combination of mature timber, scrub, open grazing land and a number of early enclosures between which were interspersed numerous assarts and closes under freehold and copyhold tenure. By 1830, the rights of Sir Arthur de Capell Brooke, who had now succeeded his father to the Great Oakley estate, were confirmed by the terms of the Rockingham Forest Inclosure and a long-awaited opportunity to make full use of the woodlands could be exploited. Essentially the plan involved clear-felling and conversion to pasture, a commodity in short supply on a national scale and necessary for the burgeoning livestock economy.⁴⁴ To prepare for this eventuality Sir Richard and Sir Arthur had for some years adopted a vigorous policy of buying up the allotments of copyhold tenants awarded as compensation for the

⁴² NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112; B 250.

⁴³ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, 313/1.

⁴⁴ J Chapman, 'The extent and nature of parliamentary enclosure', *AHR*, 35, 1985.

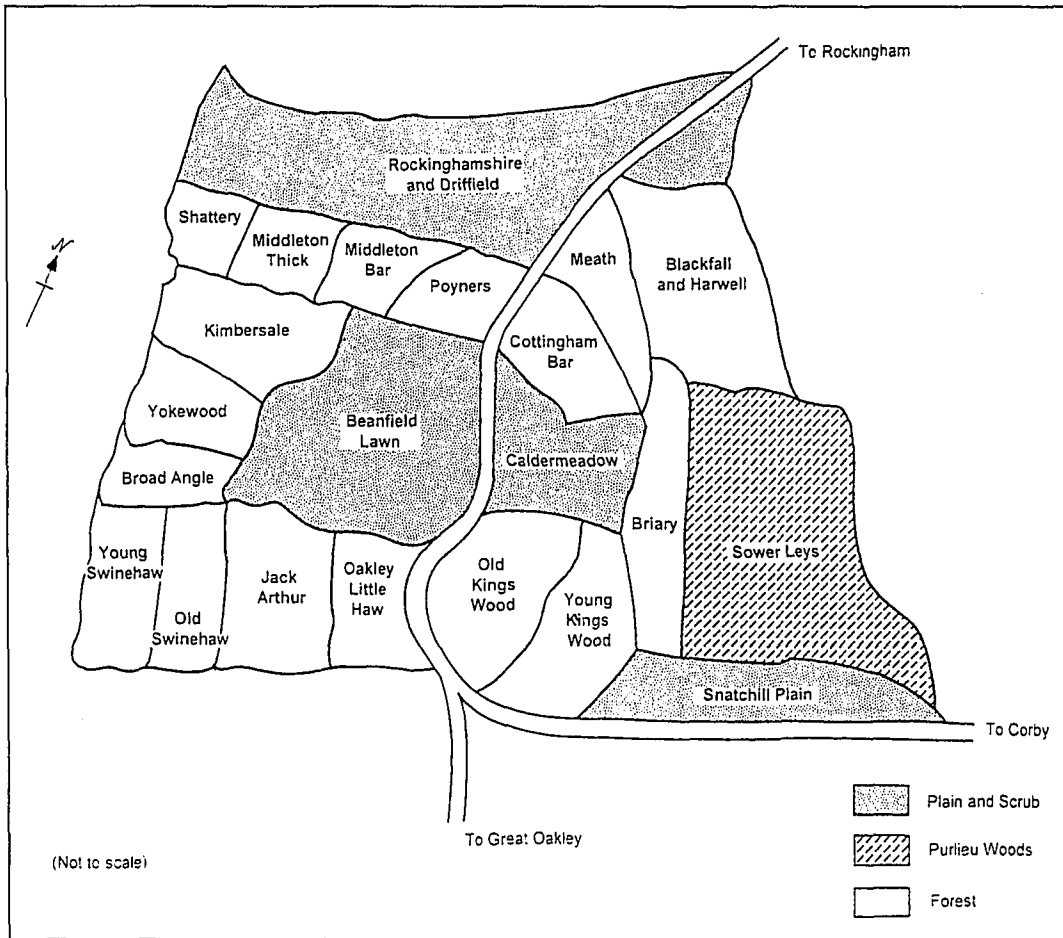


FIGURE 3
Rockingham Forest in the western bailiwick, c 1700.

loss of common rights at inclosure of the Rockingham Forest, or of freeholds held by small owners for many generations. For example, John Cannam, a copyholder with 41 acres in Poyners Coppice and Middleton Thick was unable to resist Sir Arthur's advances when offered £742 for his birth-right. In total no less than forty-two freeholds/copyholds covering 167 acres and in the hands of twenty-one owners were purchased by way of removing obstacles to the development of the forest.⁴⁵ Of these

twenty-one owners, more than half held rented land in one or more of the parishes of Cottingham, Middleton, Corby and Great Oakley, which suggests that far from being dispossessed, they were realizing capital previously tied up in physically and economically marginal land holdings. The remainder disappeared into the shadows. Proof of whether or not they, or their fellows in other parts of the country, descended into pauperism must await the results of careful and detailed research at parish level over a wide geographical area.

⁴⁵ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, 319/3.

VI

Of the small landholding group mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, the chronology of the Tebbott family provides a typical example.⁴⁶ In the 1780s there were no less than four heads of households bearing the Tebbott name, all of whom, apart from Miller Tebbott, were cottagers or labouring folk.⁴⁷ By the early 1830s the miller's son Joseph had succeeded his father and in addition was in occupation of the local brickyard, a house, garden and close (for which he paid £34 in rent) and 15 acres of land valued at £19 5s. Meanwhile his brother Jonathan, described as a veterinary surgeon, held 12 acres along with his house and garden, eventually passing on his professional business to his son William who continued to occupy the 12 acres of closes until his death in 1890. The third of the old miller's sons traded as the village blacksmith, paying £14 14s annually for his premises and a further £26 4s 2d for 24 acres in Forest Close and Darn Slade, all of which he handed on to his son William some time after 1841.⁴⁸ Both the smith's wife, and his unmarried sister Maria who lived with them, supplemented the family income with dressmaking. Back at the mill, Joseph Tebbott remained in harness until he died at the age of eighty-one in 1858, continuing to occupy 30 acres of land at his death.⁴⁹ In his declining years, Tebbott had been assisted by James Pain, scion of another Great Oakley family who eventually took over the management of the mill, brickyard and agricultural land.⁵⁰ Mrs Pain died in 1867, but not before she and her husband had founded the Particular Baptist

Chapel in Kettering.⁵¹ Pain himself passed away in his seventy-seventh year in 1891, by which time he had retired from the mill whose profits had yielded sufficient to allow him to purchase 9 acres of land in Corby parish.⁵² Thus, from modest origins had James Pain established himself on the lower rungs of the landowning ladder.⁵³

Testamentary and other documentary material upholds the view that despite the absence of legal security of tenure, farms held at will in Great Oakley tended to remain within the occupation of a single family for several generations.⁵⁴ Jonathan Moore, who held the 20-acre Robinson's Close in 1759 was succeeded by his son Joseph who left his farming stock to his son Joseph when he died in 1791. In turn, Joseph's son Jonathan took on the tenancy of a 156-acre farm created under the 1784 enclosure, which continued to be occupied by family members until the death of an unmarried descendant in 1904.⁵⁵ In drawing up his will in 1834, the year before he died, Jonathan Moore ensured the continuity of his farming business by leaving his stock-in-trade in trust for his wife Anne.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Details are to be found in the census enumerators books: PRO, HO 107/798, HO 107/1744, HO RG 9/958, HO RG 10/1053, HO RG 11/1575, HO RG 12/1219.

⁴⁷ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 112.

⁴⁸ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 122.

⁴⁹ Dates of death are taken from inscriptions in Great Oakley churchyard.

⁵⁰ The post-mill, consisting entirely of timber, stood to the south of the village on the western side of the road leading to Little Oakley. It does not appear on Eyre's 1779 map, but is prominently featured on the OS 1 inch map of 1834. It was pulled down in a decrepit state in 1895: *Northants Notes and Queries*, ns(4), 1912, p 84.

⁵¹ Despite being almost entirely owned by a churchman landowner, there was a strong tradition of nonconformity in Great Oakley. Thus the wills of William Collis (1762) and Ann Little (1821) refer to money in trust for the support of 'a lecture' in the village: NRO, *Index of Peterborough Wills*. Preachers from Toller Church in Kettering provided services in the ample kitchen of the Coales family farmhouse before it was pulled down in the 1930s. The Coales' had been to the forefront of Great Oakley nonconformity since their arrival in the village from Aldwinkle in 1831: NRO, Village memories, Mrs E V Palmer, b 1896; Mr William Coales, Biographical details, reprinted in P Hill, *A History of Great Oakley in Northamptonshire*, privately printed, 1991.

⁵² BPP, 1874, LXXII, *Return of Owners of Land in England and Wales*, 1873.

⁵³ An entrepreneur of some flair, Pain lived at Bridge Farm and developed the local claypits in addition to working the mill. His son James began the ironstone workings at Corby which were eventually to create in that town one of Europe's most extensive steelworks: F Scopes, *The Development of Corby Works*, Stewarts and Lloyds, 1968.

⁵⁴ See, for example, G E Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England*, Stroud, 1990, p 48.

⁵⁵ NRO, *Index of Peterborough Wills*; NRO, Brooke of Oakley, 313/1.

⁵⁶ J A Johnston has shown that by the later eighteenth century wills reflected less concern than previously with the community (in the sense of legacies for the church and the poor) than with future family security: J A Johnston, 'Family, kin and community, 1567-1800', *Rural History*, 6, 1995, pp 189-91.

In common with numerous Great Oakley residents, be they farmers, small occupiers or tradesmen, Jonathan Moore also bequeathed property in other parishes, thereby emphasizing the fact that although a man may have been a tenant at will in one parish, he could be a freeholder or copyholder in another. Moore himself left a copyhold cottage and meeting house in Rushden, while Henry Colyer, farmer of Great Oakley Lodge (d 1851), willed his personal property, sworn at £450, to his son Thomas, along with freehold and copyhold property in the manor of Corby. In like manner William Mitchell, wheelwright (d 1783) left copyhold tenements in the parish of Middleton, while the yeomen William Collis and George Gascoigne who died in 1762 and 1781 respectively, bequeathed land and property in the villages of Doddington, Desborough and Rothwell which were to be sold to discharge legacies.

Comparing the occupational details contained in wills with those set out in estate and parish documents urges some caution among historians drawing up lists of trades and employments at parish level. Take, for example, the case of Thomas Clitheroe whose will of 1779 describes him as a farmer and, fortunately for his two nephews, a bachelor. To his nephew Robert, mentioned in the 1777 militia list as a labourer, he gave two milch cows, eight lambs and the produce of the close called Benty Coppice. Thomas's second nephew William, a waggoner paying £60 annually in rent in 1783, received four milch cows and fifty-seven sheep, but this was relatively trivial compared with the twelve draught horses and associated waggons and equipment in his uncle's bequest. This clearly infers that Thomas Clitheroe, nominally described as a farmer, probably earned a high proportion of his living as a waggoner. Interestingly enough, William Clitheroe's son John, for all his father's good fortune, was returned as a labourer holding a house,

garden and 3 acres in 1832.⁵⁷ The Clitheroes, who had lived in Great Oakley since the seventeenth century, disappear from the local record after this date.

Indeed, beyond glimpses in the decennial census and documents cited in this article, the imprints of men like the Clitheroes on the physical and social map of Great Oakley have all but disappeared. The seemingly inexorable spread of Corby, even in its post-industrial phase, has eliminated the fields and farms which sustained this small pastoral community, although the nucleus of the old village remains.

Yet the survival of small land occupying families like the Clitheroes into Georgian and Victorian times raises a number of general issues concerning the contemporary rural economy. Given the limitations often imposed by tenancy agreements on the grazing of horses, how significant was the occupation of pasture closes in the conduct of, for example, Thomas Clitheroe's waggoning business? The carefully drafted strictures on stocking embodied in agreements for the larger farms on the Great Oakley estate suggest that the estate office would have taken a dim view of twelve draft horses treading their ponderous way through the pastures, with the clear implication that Clitheroe would have had to seek their maintenance elsewhere. Again, what was the contribution of these small landholdings to household income or, equally important, to the local economy? It is not difficult to envisage a situation wherein the principal breadwinner engaged in a by-employment while other family members, more especially the women, were involved in fieldwork to cultivate products either for household consumption or for sale. The census returns are often equivocal regarding women's occupations and although, for example, some wives in Great Oakley are identified as 'dressmakers' or 'seamstresses',

⁵⁷ NRO, Brooke of Oakley, B 122.

this does not preclude the possibility of seasonal land work. Elsewhere in England, where market conditions and soil type permitted, small-scale vegetable and soft fruit production could well have proven a profitable option yielding a high return to intensive labour input. Whether such work was undertaken by the occupier himself or by members of his family, it would call for considerable inputs in terms of fertilizing materials. The limited numbers of livestock sustainable on these small acreages would restrict the production of farmyard manure, thereby creating demand for other sources of plant nutrients. These might include such noisome items as tannery waste, household refuse, and night soil, and in purchasing (or perhaps bartering?) these materials, the small occupier would contribute, albeit in a minor way, to the local economy. More significantly, his husbandry activities would frequently necessitate the services of the miller, the

wheelwright, the carpenter and other local craftsmen. In the overall context of the parish economy then, the smaller occupier would have complemented the full-time farmer in sustaining these important elements of the community before their ultimate disappearance later in the nineteenth century.

These brief concluding remarks, of course, raise more questions than they provide answers. On the other hand, they emphasize the importance of further research towards a clearer definition both of the numerical and economic significance of the smaller land occupier in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. Both locally and regionally there are likely to be significant differences in numbers and rôles, yet taken overall the contribution of this humble class to the rural economy of England may have been greater than that accorded them in the historiography.

Comment

IN Andrew Watkins' paper, 'Landowners and their estates in the forest of Arden in the fifteenth century', which appeared in the last issue of the *Agricultural History Review* (volume 45, part 1, 1997, pp 18–33), the document mentioned on p 28 in footnote 34, and from which an excerpt was given in the text, was discovered recently in Chetham's Library, Manchester, and is the largest collection of letters of the fifteenth-century English gentry to

have been found since the Paston, Stonor and Plumpton correspondences. The letters were mostly written or received by members of a minor gentry family, whose landed interests were concentrated principally in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire and Essex. The manuscript had been edited, with a full introduction, by Dr Christine Carpenter of Cambridge University, and will be published by Boydell and Brewer in 1998.