

Sir Henry Hobart: A New Hero of Norfolk Agriculture?¹

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Abstract

This article challenges the pre-eminent role attributed to west Norfolk landowners in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and argues the case for east Norfolk landowners and their prior contribution to the development of Norfolk agriculture and estate management in the seventeenth century. Their personal involvement and sustained commitment to the idea of improvement started in the 1600s and lasted until the end of the century. This 'century of improvement' divided into four stages: the selection and reorganization of properties as a pre-condition to improvement from the 1600s to the 1620s; the consolidation and expansion of estates and enterprises which lasted until the mid-1640s; the period of reconstruction and experimentation which followed the Civil War and continued through the long recession until the mid-1690s; and finally, the standardization and simplification of estate management which was completed by the 1720s. These stages reveal the significance of organizational, political and cultural factors on the development of estates and agriculture. This paper will focus on the first two stages, and most particularly the achievements of Sir Henry Hobart of Blickling, between 1596 and 1625, who emerges as a 'new hero of Norfolk agriculture'.

THREE of the heroes of the eighteenth-century agricultural revolution, Coke, Townshend and Walpole, came from the good sand region of west Norfolk, and are still much celebrated in popular accounts. Little notice has been taken of the claim made by William Marshall that their practices were simply an extension of standard routines long known on the fertile loamy soils of east Norfolk. 'The largest fortunes' wrote Marshall, 'have been made ... in West Norfolk, but not by any superior system of management [but because] the district had been subjected to the management of East Norfolk ... Viewing the state of husbandry in West Norfolk collectively, it is much beneath that of the District here described'. In short, the scale of improvement achieved in west Norfolk in the eighteenth century was impressive, but in

Marshall's opinion, nothing was new or revolutionary about the methods adopted.²

Marshall's idea of a transfer of methods from the more fertile and populated parts of the county to the sandy and less accessible interior was shared by Nathaniel Kent and has gradually received more support from historians, although much of their evidence comes from those west Norfolk estates.³ Work on the Walpole and

² William Marshall, *The Rural Economy of Norfolk*, 1787, responding to Arthur Young *The Farmer's Tour Through the East of England*, 1775. Marshall defined Norfolk husbandry as a farming system which included grass and roots in a four, five or six course rotation.

³ N Kent, *General View of the Agriculture of Norfolk*, 1796, claimed that only farmers in the highly fertile area around the Norfolk Broads (Broadland on the map) 'could carry on a four course shift of wheat, turnips, barley and clover'. Elsewhere they incorporated a clover ley of two or three years, and on the poorest soils grew oats, rye and meslin as alternative grains. He reiterated Marshall's high regard for east Norfolk 'The prime parts of the county lie north and north east of Norwich ... equal in value to ... the Austrian Netherlands. It is unlucky for the credit of Norfolk, that this part ... is less known than any other part'. West Norfolk, described by Arthur Young in his first *Norfolk Tour* on account of three great houses, Holkham, Houghton and Raynham, is the part strangers are most acquainted with (p 9). Ignoring the combined experience of these renowned local agriculturists, Young wrote his *General View of the Agriculture of Norfolk*, 1804, as an ode to T W Coke: 'he is the fairest where many are fair ...' (p 32). E Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution*, 1967, pp 81-85, 272-3; Naomi Riches, *The Agricultural Revolution in Norfolk*, 1937, pp 38-42; B A Holderness, 'East Anglia and the Fens', in J Thirk, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales: V (i), 1640-1750*, 1984, pp 197-238.

¹ Elizabeth Griffiths, 'The management of two east Norfolk estates in the seventeenth century: Blickling and Felbrigg 1596-1717', unpublished University of East Anglia PhD thesis, 1987. I wish to thank Joan Thirk for her encouragement and assistance with this article, and Richard Hoyle for his helpful suggestions.

Townshend papers, whose estates lay wholly in west Norfolk, has shown that from the 1660s heathland and open field arable were enclosed to fatten lambs more efficiently for the Kings Lynn and Norwich markets.⁴ Fodder crops – turnips and clover leys – were used to support higher stocking rates, which increased fertility and permitted the use of more intensive rotation. The owners implemented this system, expensive in terms of hedges, ditches, ‘stubbing out firs’ and additional labour, where it was worthwhile and as capital would allow. By raising corn yields, diversifying into alternative products, streamlining farms and management procedures, Col Robert Walpole and Viscount Horatio Townshend maintained and actually increased the profitability of their estates, during the prolonged period of depressed corn prices. It is now accepted that investment by estate owners and the improvements they effected in the second half of the seventeenth century laid the foundation for the expansion of agricultural production in the eighteenth century.⁵

Apart from a few scattered references, we know very little about east Norfolk landowners. What role if any did they play in the transfer of ideas from east to west? Marshall attributed the ‘superior system’ of husbandry in east Norfolk to the activities of ‘independent yeomen’ on their comparatively small farms ‘inclosed, marled and plowed time immemorial’. If so, how did their methods become estate policy throughout the county? Marshall bemoaned the influence of landowners and

the disappearance of those ‘numerous little places of the yeomanry having fallen into the hands of men of fortune and being now incorporated with their extended estates are laid out into farms of such sizes as best suit the interest or the convenience of the present proprietors’. But was the contribution of these ‘men of fortune’ wholly negative? Marshall himself distinguished between those ‘inclosed’ parts of east Norfolk, where ‘there are many ring-fence farms’ and the husbandry was ‘good’ and ‘very good’, and the parishes with ‘common fields’ and ‘intermixtures’, where it was poor and ‘middling’.⁶ Is it not possible that landowners accelerated the process of exchange and enclosure, which enabled husbandmen to improve their methods?⁷ No study has been made of estates in the region, and no leading figures have been identified to compare with the Cokes and their west Norfolk circle. Can this gap be filled? Are new heroes waiting to be discovered, to explain more fully the course of change in the seventeenth century, which established Norfolk as the foremost agricultural county?

I

Scarcity of material bedevils any study of east Norfolk estates. Unlike their west Norfolk counterparts, those in east Norfolk were relatively small, fragmented and, particularly in the vicinity of Norwich and Great Yarmouth, changed hands frequently. High land values increased the temptation to buy and sell with the result that possession seldom remained within one family for more than three generations. The paucity of material accounts for the continuing bias towards large west Norfolk estates, with their huge archives and the more easily perceived record of their

⁴ J H Plumb, ‘Sir Robert Walpole and Norfolk husbandry’, *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, V, 1952, pp 86–89; H W Saunders, ‘Estate management in Raynham in the years 1661 to 1686 and 1706’, *Norfolk Archaeol*, XIX, 1945, pp 39–66; K J Allison, ‘Sheep corn husbandry in Norfolk and Suffolk in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ *AHR*, V, 1957, pp 12–30; *idem*, ‘Norfolk farming in transition’ *Agriculture*, 64, 1957, pp 184–87; J Spratt, ‘The agrarian conditions in Norfolk and Suffolk 1600–1750’, unpublished London University MA thesis, 1939.

⁵ C G A Clay *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1750*, I, 1984, pp 81–91, 130–135; *idem* ‘Landlords and estate management in England’, in Thirsk, *Agrarian History, 1640–1750*, pp 162–251.

⁶ Marshall, *Rural Economy of Norfolk*, I, pp 2, 9; II, p 271.

⁷ Marshall praised the enclosure undertaken by William Wyndham III at Felbrigg: *Rural Economy of Norfolk*, II, pp 365–71.

Imaginative reform and heavy investment were not confined to the post-Restoration period, nor were they undertaken simply as a desperate measure to keep afloat in a period of falling prices. From the 1600s the Hobarts and Windhams were clearly committed to the idea of improvement. This was most evident from the surviving material for the purchase of Sir Henry Hobart's estate, but it was also apparent after Felbrigg changed hands with the family in 1608. On both estates, the owners carried out extensive surveys, reorganized holdings and drew up imaginative leases to promote improvement. The second generation built on these foundations, consolidating, expanding and developing new activities, such as bullock fattening. During the Civil War and Interregnum, the Blickling and Felbrigg estates, although they were unaffected by the hostilities and their owners fully supported the Parliamentary cause, suffered a long period of decline, with mounting debts and arrears. The reforms from the mid-1660s were as much about reconstruction as raising yields and diversifying to counter falling prices for corn. The fact that this recovery was achieved quickly and successfully, and that the owners were able to finance costly new ventures, including dairy farming on an extensive scale, point to the significance of the improvements effected in the first half of seventeenth century. Despite serious financial difficulties and the distraction of politics, the Hobarts continued to invest and innovate at Blickling throughout the recurrent crises of the 1670s and 1680s; for William Windham at Felbrigg the management of his estate was the centrepiece of his life. However, in the 1700s a century of personal involvement came to an end; it was most marked at Felbrigg where William and Katherine Windham had exercised the closest control over day-to-day management. The quality of records declined as standardized procedures became the norm. 'Particulars of every farme' were

replaced by lists of tenants, kept by the full-time steward, Stephen Legge, as Ashe Windham disengaged himself from running the estate.¹⁰ An overriding impression emerges from all the archives examined that a process which had started in the 1600s had been accomplished by the 1720s. Within that period c. 1600–1720 four quite distinct stages of improvement can be discerned.

During the first phase of 'acquisition and reorganization', from about 1600 to 1625, properties were selected for their suitability for restructuring into commercial farms and units. The process continued into a second phase of 'consolidation and expansion' which lasted until the mid-1640s, when confidence petered out. Activity was not resumed until the mid-1660s, when the slide in corn prices and the neglect over the previous twenty years made further reforms a necessity. Landowners were forced to experiment with new farming and management systems. The success of this phase of 'recession and experimentation', which stretched to the 1690s, led to a fourth phase of 'standardization and simplification', which allowed landowners to delegate routine management and withdraw to a more leisured lifestyle. By the 1720s, the mechanism of a well organized, efficiently administered and highly capitalized estate was firmly in place ready to respond to the demands of the eighteenth century. Underpinning this edifice were the structural reforms undertaken in the opening decades of the seventeenth century.

These stages of improvement support Robert Brenner's thesis that the agricultural revolution was, in the first instance, about institutional and organizational changes, which facilitated massive capital investment by landowners and engineered a revolution in agricultural productivity by the late eighteenth century. But while Brenner

¹⁰ From William Windham's Green Book: NRO, WKC 5/152 400 x.

offers a useful perspective to the mechanics of agricultural change, and it is hard to challenge his general proposition, he does not answer all the questions that need asking.¹¹ Why, for example, did landowners pursue the idea of improvement with such zeal in the 1600s? We are given a picture of landowners responding to prices, but little consideration as to how they made their judgements about prices in a period when information of that kind was not readily available. The evidence shows that many other factors were at work and need to be considered. As Mark Overton says, 'Mentalities and attitudes change, and while the market provided the essential stimulus to agrarian change, attitudes and expectations also had to change'.¹² The evidence from the Blickling and Felbrigg estates shows that this process started to happen from the 1600s. This paper will not attempt to cover all four stages; the emphasis will be on the first two phases of estate building, and the achievements of Sir Henry Hobart.

II

Sir Henry Hobart in his life, career and business affairs embodied the spirit of improvement. Born in 1560, he was the great-grandson of Sir James Hobart, Attorney General to Henry VII, who had migrated to Norfolk in the 1470s and established his family at Hales Hall, near Loddon.¹³ Sir James settled his sons on small estates in the vicinity: Walter at Morley and Miles at Plumstead. Miles divided his estate between his heirs, but his elder son, Thomas, left both his share and his wife's small estate at Beeston to his

eldest son; his younger son, Henry, receiving no landed inheritance, made the law his career. As a lawyer, Henry Hobart proved outstandingly successful. He served as Recorder of Great Yarmouth (1588-1603) and Steward of the City of Norwich (1596-1604) and represented both boroughs in Parliament: Yarmouth (1596-1604) and Norwich (1604-1610). In 1609, following his appointment as Attorney-General, the corporation of Norwich granted him the lease of Chapelfield House, in recognition of his services to the city. In 1613 he succeeded his neighbour in the county, Sir Edward Coke, as Lord Chief Justice of Common Pleas and in 1616, he followed another Norfolk man, Sir Francis Bacon, as Chancellor to the Prince of Wales, and assumed responsibility for the estates of the Duchy of Cornwall, working with such notable land reformers as John Norden. Through his public life Sir Henry would have been acquainted with current developments in the land market and the latest management techniques. However, although he enjoyed undoubted advantages and the enviable opportunities afforded to a man in his position, Sir Henry remained loyal to the Norwich area and retained his reputation for 'fairness and modesty'.¹⁴ In 1614 he stated his desire to have his estate 'within the compasse of one shire for ease of management'.¹⁵ Only in the 1620s did he venture outside Norfolk to purchase land in Lincolnshire on which to settle his fourth son, James. Overall, between 1596 and 1625 Sir Henry spent roughly £65,000 on land and built an estate worth £5350 (for details see Appendix).¹⁶ In comparison Sir Edward Coke expended £100,000 on

¹¹ R. Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70, 1976; *idem*, 'Agrarian roots of European capitalism', *Past and Present*, 97, 1982.

¹² Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, 1996, pp 202-6.

¹³ J. Gairdner, ed, *The Paston Letters*, 1983, v, 311: letter from John Paston to Margery at Swainsthorpe, 3 Feb 1478, 'for he purposeth henceforth during hys lyff to be a Norfolk man, and to lie within ii myle of Loddon'.

¹⁴ E. Foss, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Judges of England 1066-1870*, 1870, p 348; *Norfolk Official Lists*, 1890, pp 128, 141, 170, 180.

¹⁵ NRS, 12970 27F5, Declaration of trust (1614).

¹⁶ Between 1618 and 1625 Sir Henry spent £11,420 on rebuilding Blickling Hall. Between 1622 and 1625, he also laid out £3400 on estate repairs; granted loans of £6667; saved £4442; repaid debts of £1752 for his eldest son; purchased East India stock worth £1500; supported a family of 16 children, and houses in Norwich, London and Norfolk.

properties scattered across the Midlands, around his wife's estate in Suffolk, as well as his native Norfolk.¹⁷ Sir Henry's exclusive approach offers a rare insight into the working of the land market in Norfolk, at that time, by a man with unusual skills and experience.

Unlike the famously avaricious Coke, Sir Henry was extremely circumspect and deliberate when it came to making acquisitions. Despite ample opportunity, adequate means and an intricate knowledge of the local land market, no evidence exists to show that he purchased any land before 1596 at the age of thirty-seven, when rising corn prices should have made land an attractive proposition.¹⁸ Furthermore, his first purchase was not a small Broadland estate, as one might well have expected, but the major portion of Sir William Gresham's estate at Intwood, a few miles south of Norwich, where soils were light and land values low. The estate, however, had already been divided up into compact holdings; the extensive heathland offered much scope for improvement, and there existed the prospect of acquiring more of the estate in neighbouring parishes. In contrast, the Broadland region although very fertile and productive was plagued by fragmentation and intermixed ownership which made expansion and development difficult.

Sir Henry had an acute appreciation of the relative value of different types of property and made his selections with the utmost care. He directed his attorneys to survey possible acquisitions, and carry out searches into the nature of titles and tenures, identifying legal impediments and

obstacles to improvement. He consulted local agents as to their viability and potential. On their replies he scribbled comments in the margins indicating his priorities and preferences: price and methods of purchase were crucial considerations, but most important was 'the scope for improvement' to which he constantly referred. Sir Henry also made a distinction between those properties purchased for 'profite' and those acquired 'for ornament and conveyance', for which he was prepared to pay above the normal rate: prestige had its value too.¹⁹ Not all Sir Henry's acquisitions met his criteria. As a major officeholder and recipient of crown lands his portfolio included properties which were less than ideal. Crown lands administered by local agents and often the subject of disputes by rival tenants led to dereliction, encroachments and fragmented ownership.²⁰ Lands received in repayment of loans and mortgages from family and friends, sometimes situated in Broadland, often possessed little potential. The principal properties which Sir Henry had chosen – Intwood and Keswick, Langley, Hevingham and Saxthorpe, Horsham St Faith's, Blickling, Wymondham and Weybourne – received the greatest attention. For these estates supporting material, dating back to the early sixteenth century in many cases, included surveys, valuations, details of earlier transfers and leases. The relative importance attached to the different acquisitions is further demonstrated by the subsequent management policy. The most careful leases were constructed for Intwood Hall, Langley Abbey and the new farms at

¹⁹ Blickling: NRS, 8898 21F6.

²⁰ Just this situation had developed in Cawston, where disputes over grazing led to much litigation, and a unique set of maps drawn in the 1590s to support the various claims. These were the earliest visual surveys found during the research. An early seventeenth-century plan of Clement Heme's park at Haveringland shows the layout of a capital messuage with orchard, garden, hopground, dovehouse and a few closes surrounding the house, with the park situated further off, illustrating the type of arrangement Sir Henry sought to establish on his principal holdings: NRS, 27229 361 x 3; NRO, Ms 4521, Map Box E; NRS, 21404; NRS, 21399 Map Box A Haveringland; NRO, 29BCH.

¹⁷ C W James, *Chief Justice Coke: His Family and Descendants at Holkham*, 1929, app 1, pp 304–306, includes reference to James I and his insistence that Coke should buy no more land; Coke's petition to buy 'one more acre' led to him acquiring the earl of Exeter's estate at Castle Acre!

¹⁸ Sir Henry's entry into the land market may have been influenced by his marriage in 1590 to Dorothy Bell, daughter of Sir Robert Bell, Chief Baron of the Exchequer; her dowry of £500 was a pittance compared to the wealth of Coke's two wives, and by 1596 they had four sons to provide for.

Hevingham and Blickling Hall, while those for the Broadland properties contained only the most basic clauses. Clearly, Sir Henry devised a long term strategy for the former, while the latter were simply held as short term capital investments.

A brief analysis of the Intwood estate shows the type of improvement to which Sir Henry aspired. Intwood Hall and its land had been leased as a commercial unit since 1575, when Sir Thomas Gresham granted a twenty-one year lease to his kinsman William Reede of Beccles.²¹ He divided the estate into two holdings, the hall with part of the demesne, and a farm based on 'the newe house called the Deyrey House' with a 'new barn, stables and oke-yard' and 710 acres. This included 400 acres of heathland, 161 acres in four closes, 34 acres of enclosed pasture and meadow, 64 acres of arable, sub-let to eight tenants, and 48 acres of woodland. Sir Henry took possession in 1596, and by 1606 when he leased the estate to his cousin Roger Hobart further improvements had taken place. The Great Heath had been reduced to 150 acres; twenty-four named closes had been created averaging 25 acres in size; a dovehouse and malthouse were built; and the rent had increased fivefold from £48 to £230 a year, or from an average of 8d to 5s per acre.²² The 1606 lease included clauses designed to protect and develop the structure of the holding, mainly through the planting of woodland, and the laying down of pasture. A late 'hand over' meant that Sir Henry had to be compensated for the cost of husbandry undertaken, including, 'tyllinge, seedinge, muckinge, tathing and losse of profettes of somerlaies and new breakes to and for 120 acres ... sowed with rye and wheat this year'. The detailed costings and cropping arrangement for these four closes show the high level of management that could be achieved on

well organized properties. When a dressing of muck doubled the cost of cultivation, expenditure had to be carefully weighed; on compact holding these calculations were more easily made, which reduced the risk and therefore increased the likelihood of investment in the first place. These four closes, receptive to capital investment, commanded improved rents of 6s 8d per acre.²³

When Roger Hobart died in 1612 the estate, which by then amounted to some 1545 acres, was reorganized into four commercial farms – Intwood Hall (430 acres), Intwood Farm (257½ acres), Keswick Hall (630 acres), Colbyes Farm, Swardeston (181 acres), with the remainder divided between Swardeston rectory, Keswick Mill and a few bits and pieces leased by the bailiff 'year by year'. By 1655 the Swardeston lands had been grouped together in a single farm, the Intwood holdings amalgamated, and a further farm acquired in Keswick. This arrangement, neat and compact, can still be seen on the estate map of 1729.²⁴ But how successfully did this property perform? Between 1622 and 1655 rents continued to rise from £410 to £503, which included £66 10s 0d for the newly purchased lands. However, progress faltered in the early 1640s, and more seriously from the mid-1650s. Intwood, as with the other light soiled properties acquired by Sir Henry, succumbed quickly to any fall in corn prices or withdrawal of investment. The actual returns at Intwood in the late 1650s were amongst the lowest on the estate.²⁵ In the mid-1660s, however, when Sir John assumed a more active policy to counter a repeated collapse in corn prices, the simplified landholding structure with its well organized farms permitted a swift management response, which included enlarging the dairy enterprise, using turnips

²¹ Intwood: NRS, 17811 41C3.

²² NRS, 17190 32E6.

²³ NRS, 17190 32E6; see Griffiths, 'Norfolk estates', table 2.16, p. 99.

²⁴ NRO, BCH 3.

²⁵ Estate accounts: NRS, 10191 25A1, 1622–25; NRS, 18147 33A3, 1632–41; NRS, 18145 33A3, 1641–47.

to compensate for limited pasture and soil fertility, and marling to improve soil texture. Although reform and investment did not prevent a decline in rents – for the amalgamated Intwood holding the rent fell from £175 to £125 by 1679 – the reorganization undertaken by Sir Henry Hobart created an estate of high capital value, which ensured its long term success. Intwood and Keswick were the last off-lying properties to be sold by the Hobarts in 1793, very profitably to Norwich businessmen and bankers – the Unthinks and the Gurneys.²⁶

Intwood and Keswick show the level of improvement possible of poor soils with well planned capital investment. Sir Henry's experience with his Broadland properties explains why the Hobarts deserted the most easterly – and fertile – parts of Norfolk. Sir Henry had acquired a collection of these properties, including quite substantial estates at Martham and Somerton from the crown, and church leases – at ancient rents – of the rectories at Barton, Neatishead, Hoveton and Ashmanagh. He also received in repayment of loans his brother's estate at Beeston and the earl of Arundel's manor in Acle.²⁷ A map of Acle, drawn in 1633, highlights the problem facing improving landowners. It shows a modest holding of 95 acres, with a few closes around the manor site, but the greatest proportion widely scattered in the open fields, presenting a major obstacle to further enclosure and innovation.²⁸ A lease of 1617, for a 15½ acre farm in five pieces, simply states that the land should be 'mucked and somerlayed according to the custom of those fields'.²⁹ The situation at Martham showed, however, that even when a degree of rationalization had been achieved improvement proved elusive. The estate amounted to 452 acres, mainly leased

in two holdings. The first consisted of the manor site with 100 acres in closes, 67 acres in 'fenne and great lands' and the rest in 'pieces'; and the second 200 acres in 'pieces'. Both holdings were leased to the same tenants for £118 each. In 1623, despite investment in building and repairs, the rent for both farms was rounded down to £200. At Somerton, Sir Henry made some attempt to develop the principal holdings, investing in a new granary for East Somerton Farm; nevertheless, the farm failed in 1639. Between 1623 and 1639 the total rental for these two estates declined from £708 to £620: the four main holdings were entirely responsible.³⁰

Why did rents decline at Martham and Somerton in the 1620s and 1630s, when other properties prospered at this time? The evidence suggests that, in the Broadland area, the investment of capital and amalgamation of farms beyond an optimum size was counterproductive. A basic problem facing large tenants in this region was that farming practices were labour rather than capital intensive. Once holdings exceeded a certain size the larger farmer was penalized by labour costs which on smaller holdings could be absorbed by the family unit. The fragmented nature of the holdings meant that larger owners gained little advantage from new buildings. The only solution was to embark on a programme of piecemeal purchase, but the very high land values made this an uneconomic proposition. Furthermore, large landowners with scattered possessions and professional commitments were doubly disadvantaged as they relied heavily on their principal tenants, who often served as bailiffs, to maintain high rent levels, which were based on sophisticated forms of husbandry.³¹ As a native of the region, Sir Henry would have appreciated this dilemma. The Broadland properties were

²⁶ Griffiths, 'Norfolk estates', table 5.21, p. 436.

²⁷ See Appendix.

²⁸ NRO, MS 4513/1, Cab II: Acle map, 1633.

²⁹ NRS, 8646 21C4.

³⁰ See note 25.

³¹ Rents for arable pieces ranged from 7s 6d to 10s per acre; enclosures 12s 6d; meadow 13s 4d.

worthwhile as they had been obtained at bargain basement prices and could be used to endow younger sons, supplement jointures and dowries, and raise capital, but they were never the focus of serious management. Sir John Hobart disposed of them in the 1630s and 1640s to finance consolidation at Blickling and other more profitable ventures, including the purchase of the Wood Dalling estate, ten miles west of Blickling, and a large area of fenland at Stow Bardolph, which provided winter grazing for the Hobarts' bullock fattening enterprise in the late 1630s and early 1640s.

Sir Henry did not ignore the more fertile and established farming regions of the county; one of his most successful acquisitions was the Langley estate, south-east of Norwich in the dairying area much praised by Eric Kerridge. The Langley estate map of 1633 shows a large area of scattered strips in mixed ownership, but more than counterbalanced by the major portion of the estate which was enclosed and divided into two large holdings, the Abbey and the Grange.³² The Hobarts enjoyed a long association with Langley, which borders their seat at Hales Hall, Loddon. During the sixteenth century, they had intermarried frequently with the Barneys who had owned Langley since the 1560s; Richard Barney from whom Sir Henry acquired the estate in 1608 was married to his cousin Elizabeth Hobart. The transfer, Sir Henry noted, was 'not a mere purchase, but in part out of Barney's good affection a gift'; Barney surrendered the estate in return for annuities for himself, his wife and three childless brothers.³³

The Barney's financial difficulties originated in the long leases granted in the 1540s and 1550s.³⁴ In the late 1580s and early 1590s, Richard Barney purchased the remainder of the terms and re-let the estate

on a fully commercial basis. In view of his later involvement, it is likely that he engaged Sir Henry's assistance at this stage. The estate amounted to some 970 acres, with 748½ acres divided between the two main holdings; four smaller holdings consisting mainly of blocks of marshland; a mill and a few tiny tenancies made up the rest. They leased the Abbey in 1592,³⁵ followed by the Grange in 1599.³⁶ The account for the Court of Augmentations shows that in 1539 the rent for these holdings, plus 80 acres of marsh, was £27 13s 4d or 8d per acre.³⁷ The new rent for the Abbey (304 acres) was fixed at £86 or 5s 6d per acre, and the Grange (444½ acres) at £100 or 4s 6d per acre. The 1592 lease included very detailed arrangements for the leasing and management of a dairy herd of '20 Northerne milche neat and 1 Bull' at 52s 6d each; and the requirement to leave 'sufficient fodder and wynter stover for the wyntering of sd 20 milche neat and 1 Bull'. In 1607 another dairy was established on 60 acres of marshland 'newlie enclosed'; the house called 'the Deyrehill' still survives on Langley Marshes.³⁸

When Sir Henry took possession in 1603 he raised the rents still further to £115 for the Abbey or 7s 6d per acre, and £134 for the Grange or 6s per acre, and lengthened the term from three to twenty-one years.³⁹ As at Intwood, Sir Henry devoted his attention to reorganization and developing the infrastructure of the estate as a basis for further improvement. He paid for new buildings, but tenants undertook to repair and maintain them, as well as attending to fences, gardens, orchards and waters; they also agreed to protect pasture, plant trees and manage existing woodland. Noteworthy is the care with which Sir Henry chose his tenants. While he leased

³² NRS, 21407 A, Blickling Mss; Langley map, 1630.

³³ The Hobarts sold Langley back to the Barneys in 1721: NRO, BEA, 2/33 433 x 2.

³⁴ NRS, 19978-84 43B6.

³⁵ NRS, 18346 33B4.

³⁶ NRS, 27319 387 x 8.

³⁷ NRO, Ms 20993 47C5.

³⁸ NRS, 19397 42A6.

³⁹ NRS, 19894 43B2.

Intwood to Roger Hobart, whose small estate at Morley and Deopham he had acquired, he assigned Langley Abbey to another cousin Edward Hobart, while Margaret Hobart took the lease of Hoveton rectory. Other principal holdings were leased by men of stature, often modest landowners in their own right, including the Dennys of Mettingham and Earsham who leased Langley Grange in the 1590s, and the Woods of Braconash and Pickerills of Cringleford who succeeded Roger Hobart. With 'honest and able' tenants Sir Henry did not need to specify farming operations; these could be safely left to their discretion.

Langley's performance repaid investment handsomely. Rents rose strongly from £394 in 1624 to £515 in 1641. By 1647 they had edged back to £494, reflecting the down turn in corn prices in the early 1640s, but through the Civil War and the recession which followed, rents and receipts held up comparatively well. The valuation of 1686 gives a figure of £450 which rose to £475 by 1696.⁴⁰ Plainly, this property proved resilient, and Langley withstood the economic adversity from the early 1660s more successfully than any other property on the estate. The crucial factor was the preponderance of pasture which could support profitable livestock enterprises, but even more important was its arrangement into enclosed and well established holdings. By the 1650s there were just three commercial units at Langley – the Abbey (385 acres) which had absorbed most of the small tenancies, the Grange (504 acres) and the 'new' dairy farm (129 acres). In 1651 Lady Frances Hobart paid for the rebuilding of the farmhouse in brick to supplement the investment in the barn and cowsheds made in 1607.⁴¹ These three well-equipped, capitalized and organized farms provided the

basis for a flexible and innovative husbandry. Indeed, from the late 1660s, methods, including the cultivation of turnips, long used at Langley to support the dairy and livestock enterprises were adopted at Intwood and on other light soiled properties, such as Horsham St Faith's, in an attempt to raise yields and facilitate diversification into dairying.

The evidence for this progression of ideas from well developed fertile holdings in east Norfolk, to less fertile holdings further west comes from a handful of agreements and leases drawn up in the late 1660s. The first document is the plan 'for the aby (Langley) to answer a profit in lieu of rent' devised by Robert Dey, Lady Frances Hobart's attorney in 1666.⁴² It included leasing a dairy herd of 30 cows at 45s each, with 102 acres allowed for their maintenance; in other words 3 acres for each cow, plus '12 acres of meadow for their Hay for their winter feed besides straw'. 'In tillage' Dey listed in order, 30 acres of wintercorn, 18 acres of pease, 33 acres of oats, 52 acres of barley, 16 acres of turnepps, 20 acres of somerlay' leaving 89 acres for 'mowing, keeping horses ... and young cattle ...'. There was also 'a full stock of Cattle uppon ye ground and 12 beasts at stake wth turnepps. All wch will make a great proportion of compost agaynst next seed time, in order to the well disposing thereof there shall be a large sumerly and ye other grounds left soe that they may fall in husbandly course wth severall grains according to the qualities and natures of the soil'. In this remarkable document we can see turnips being used, without comment, in rotation with corn crops as a preparation for winter wheat. Interestingly, the lease for the Abbey in 1669 does not refer to turnips, although leases for the Abbey at Horsham St Faith's (1666) and Swardeston Farm, both light soiled proper-

⁴⁰ See note 25; Griffiths, 'Norfolk estates', table 5.16, p. 401.

⁴¹ NRS, 20052 43C1.

⁴² NRS, 10379 25A6. Dey stressed that the tenant had failed 'not by misfortune of the tymes, or ye illness of the penniworth ... but by unhappy encumbrances'.

ties, include detailed instructions as to their cultivation.⁴³ On the back of the Swardeston lease, the young agent, John Brewster scribbled a list of crops grown at Langley that year, and referred to 'The Turnepp Close 15 acres'. The fact that instructions were not included in the Langley lease, although we know turnips were used extensively, suggests that turnip culture was not an innovation at Langley, but it was at Horsham and Swardeston.⁴⁴ A further point: this policy was implemented by men like Robert Dey and John Brewster, both farmers in their own right. This shows how farmers, acting as attorneys, agents and tenants could influence the nature of the husbandry practised on great estates. The Hobarts, as lawyers and active politicians on the national stage, relied on these men to farm and administer their properties, which meant on this estate at least that their influence was pervasive. In the first half of the seventeenth century they pursued their own ideas as tenants on an individual and discretionary basis. In the second half of the century, often serving as agents, they implemented those methods as estate policy. Once these methods became policy they had to be enforced through leases and accounts. This encourages the false belief that methods, such as turnip cultivation, originated at that stage, when in fact the real innovation in the late 1660s was a new style of estate management which focused on more intricate record keeping and intervention in farming operations as a way of increasing efficiency, yields and profits.

Following the acquisition of Langley, which was probably an isolated stroke of good fortune, Sir Henry turned his attention once more to cheap, low grade land which offered more 'scope for improvement'. As his career progressed, Sir Henry's approach became much more ambitious

and assertive. Hitherto he had been careful to select estates which, although they had potential, were already well organized and partially improved, but from 1608 he actively sought out neglected, unimproved and even derelict properties. This strategy may reflect a tightening of the land market, but it also reflected a strong philosophical conviction and a growing practical confidence in his ability to turn them into profitable concerns.⁴⁵ His plans came to centre around the Blickling estate, the ancient and disintegrating home of the Boleyn family, part of which had been inherited by Sir Edward Clere, whose fortunes were declining rapidly. The remainder had passed to Elizabeth I through her mother Anne Boleyn and was at the disposal of James I. With his contacts in the highest circles Sir Henry was in a strong position to pick these ripe plums. He also directed his agents to identify other properties in the area with a view to purchase. In this way Sir Henry acquired a string of properties on the sandy and heathland soils which stretch northward from Norwich to Holt.

Thomas Thetford's estate at Hevingham and Saxthorpe was the first of those purchased through the offices of another cousin John Hobart of Spitalfields. But while the former proved a success, the latter was a disaster; in theory it should have been the other way round. The Hevingham sale particulars (1608) show 905½ acres leased in 45 holdings, which suggest fragmentation on a massive scale.⁴⁶ However, three manor sites, including Rippon Hall, and four usefully sized hold-

⁴³ NRS, 16023 31F10 (referred to by Holderness, 'East Anglia', p 222); NRS, 21135 74X2.

⁴⁴ NRS, 3131 13B3.

⁴⁵ Sir Henry's desire to improve neglected land was not unique. Thirk argues that the influence of classical authors and agricultural writers created a fashion for searching out derelict land in the early seventeenth century: J Thirk, 'Making a fresh start: sixteenth century agriculture and the classical inspiration', in M Leslie and T Raylor, eds, *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England*, 1992, pp 20-24. Norden endorsed this trend by claiming that 'there is not a place so rude and unlikely, but diligence and discretion may convert it to some profitable end': J Thirk and J P Cooper, *Seventeenth Century Economic Documents*, 1972, p 110.

⁴⁶ NRS, 1224 27C3.

ings, each with their core of enclosure – pasture, meadow and arable – accounted for 512 acres and provided the nuclei for further development.⁴⁷ In fact, the particular exaggerated the acreage by 105 acres as well as the number of holdings which paid a commercial rent, so the proportion of land contained within useful holdings was already quite high. By 1622 these farms, accounting for 583 acres, were divided as follows: 207½, 110, 90, 34, 33 and 20 acres, while the long tail of small holdings had been reduced to twenty-two. The total rental of £300 averaged 7s 6d per acre, but this figure conceals a wide variation, with meadow and pasture commanding up to 11s 6d.⁴⁸ Sir Henry took great care with the leases for these modest farms, ensuring that pasture was protected and extended – as at Intwood – and insisting as ever on the planting of trees. At Dudwick's farm 'a newe orchard' was to be planted with 'verie good frute trees ... where and when Sir Henry shall appoint'.⁴⁹ In the 1630s Sir John continued the process of improvement, cutting back the tail still further, buying pieces to consolidate existing holdings and raising rents to £357.⁵⁰ Sir Henry's judgement proved correct as Hevingham continued to perform as well as Langley through the 1650s and 1660s: the rent peaked at £305.⁵¹ But from that time rents fell back to £291; the main casualty was the principal holding Rippon Hall, which suggests that the tenant, who served as Sir John Hobart's steward between 1654 and

1665, may have overfarmed the holding.⁵² As we have seen at Intwood, these light-soiled properties required careful management if they were to remain successful. The delicate balance between pasture and arable had to be maintained; holdings quickly declined if tenants ignored covenants and good husbandry practices. Supervision was more likely within the framework of an effectively managed estate, but during the Civil War and Interregnum a weakening of control occurred on several properties, particularly those administered by John Tolke.

Saxthorpe provides the example of an estate where the delicate balance had been completely lost by oversimplifying the structure: in 1608 the entire holding of 828 acres was leased to a single tenant.⁵³ Attempts to break it up met with little success as rents never matched the 1608 valuation. In the sixteenth century it had formed part of Sir Christopher Heydon's sheep grazing empire before being turned over to arable: this process appears to have annihilated the type of structure still evident at Hevingham. The result was that there were no nuclei of enclosed pasture, meadow and arable around which to build new versatile farms. Nevertheless, the Hobarts persevered with Saxthorpe paying for new barns, repairs and marling in the 1670s; its value lay in its proximity to Blickling and it continued to supply the household with oats and barley.⁵⁴

The properties bordering on heathland – Horsham St Faith's purchased from Sir Charles Cornwallis, and the crown lands at Cawston and Hevingham Park – posed

⁴⁷ N Kent occupied the principal site, Rippon Hall, where he wrote *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, 1776, and *General View of the Agriculture of Norfolk*, 1796. He offered an advisory service to landowners including William Windham III at Felbrigg, and Robert Marsham of Stratton Strawless and T W Coke. Sir John Hobart sold 'Strattonhall', another Hevingham site, to the Marshams in 1686. See R. W. Ketton-Cremer, *Felbrigg: The Story of a House*, 1962, pp 172–76.

⁴⁸ NRS, 10191 25A1.

⁴⁹ NRS, 27299/60 385 × 8.

⁵⁰ NRS, 8898 21F6.

⁵¹ NRS, 18147 33A3; NRS, 18145 33A3; NRS, 10135 22F7.

⁵² NRS, 8543 21B5. In 1647 on the death of Sir John Hobart, second baronet, the estate was divided between his daughter, Phillipa, who married her cousin John Hobart of Intwood, the third baronet, and his widow, Lady Frances Hobart, who survived until 1665. When the estate was re-united, Sir John appointed Robert Dey and John Brewster, who had managed Lady Frances' jointure of Langley, Wood Dalling and Wymondham, to manage the entire estate.

⁵³ Richard Burton estimated the acreage at 670 acres in 1622: NRS, 10191 25A1.

⁵⁴ NRS, 16019 31F10.

further problems. Grazing rights had been, and continued to be, the subject of various legal disputes, but in fact this added to their attraction as Sir Henry commented during the proposed purchase of Horsford Park, which lay adjacent to Horsham St Faith's, 'That it is fitte for me makes it less fitte for others'.⁵⁵ Sir Henry declined to make a purchase, sixteen years being too great a price, which suggests his awareness of the limitations of these properties, and particularly the difficulty of obtaining precise valuations. Cawston, in addition to disputes over grazing rights, had suffered through the negligence of crown agents. Tenants had been allowed to assert possession over their copyhold land and enclose pieces of bruery and open field at will, to the detriment of the demesne, and the possibilities for improvement.⁵⁶ Once the Hobarts started to encounter serious financial difficulties in the 1650s, these light-soiled properties, despite their proximity to Blickling, were the first to be sacrificed and by 1686 they had all been sold, an indication of perceptions at that time of their relative value.

Sir Henry's purchase of the neglected estate and dilapidated mansion house at Blickling proved to be his most ambitious venture. No other acquisition illustrates more forcibly his commitment to the idea of improvement. For this prestigious property, Sir Henry set aside all restraint, paying the vendor Lady Agnes Clere a capital sum of £5500, in addition to an annuity of £400, 'though it was more than she could make of it or he can'.⁵⁷ The structure of the estate was especially problematic, as much of the open-field arable had been lost to tenants on fixed copyhold rents at

8d per acre. Of the 950½ acres, the park and demesne accounted for 201 acres, the foldcourse and warren 400 acres, and depleted woodland 95 acres. In fact the only commercial holding was the alehouse leased with 132 acres. The remaining acres were leased in fifteen small tenancies some rented as low as 2s per acre.⁵⁸ The area enjoyed by the copyhold tenants – many of them textile workers living in Aylsham – amounted to over 1000 acres on the Aylsham side of the parish. This fragmentation proved very difficult and expensive to correct. In 1625 Sir Henry wrote to Sir James Fullerton, another member of the Prince's council, to petition the King on his behalf for the grant for Aylsham Lancaster 'lying next ... to my house in Norfolk'. It consisted wholly of 'rents copy and free whtout land soe yt that there can be noe improvement made of it'. He was prepared to pay 'what pence they shall set upon it for I seek it not for profytte but for ornament and conveyance'.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, his death stopped the transaction and his son had to fight a long and costly battle against the tenants of Aylsham before the manor was secured. But it proved worthwhile as the estate continued to exert control and influence the development of the town. Sir John also had to expend huge sums buying up strips and holdings to enlarge the park on the Aylsham side. Not until the eighteenth century was a measure of success achieved, but even then the public road continued to pass in front of the house, which would have been as embarrassment to the newly ennobled Lord Hobart competing with his fellow peers at Houghton, Holkham and Raynham.⁶⁰ In addition to the problems with the estate, Sir Henry had to rebuild and refurnish the old medieval house,

⁵⁵ Horsham St Faith's: NRS, 12910 27E6; Hevingham Park and Marsham: NRS, 13718 28D; Cawston: NRS, 2599 12B1; Cawston Church: NRS, 23798 84 X 2; Horsford: NRS, 11122 25E5.

⁵⁶ Clement Herne, a substantial copyholder in Cawston, went to law to prove that fines were 'certayne' rather than 'arbitrable'; by this means he acquired portions of the Cawston estate, lying adjacent to his own estate at Haveringland: NRS, 27218 361 X 3.

⁵⁷ NRS, 11260 26A3.

⁵⁸ NRS, 16391 32C4.

⁵⁹ NRS, 8898 21F6.

⁶⁰ In 1730 Lord Hobart commissioned a map showing 'The Principall seats of the Gentry' with Blickling prominently displayed alongside the estates of Sir Robert Walpole, Viscount Townshend and Lord Lovell: NRO, BL 72, Cab III.

which cost him over £11,000. In 1624 he acquired more land to ensure its maintenance, and noted, 'Money I cannot give heere, but I give him [John] the Manner of Olton'.⁶¹ At Blickling commercial principles did not enter Sir Henry's calculations: the improvement of this ancient estate, with its royal connections, set the seal on his achievement, and for this he was prepared to stretch his finances to the limit.

III

The situation Sir John Wyndham encountered when he inherited Felbrigg was very different. As early as the fourteenth century, the Felbrigg demesne had been one of the largest and most compact in Norfolk, and clearly had no requirement for Sir Henry's heroic style of management.⁶² In 1608 the demesne extended to 648 acres of which 556 acres were enclosed arable, pasture and meadow, with only 90½ remaining in scattered 'pieces'. Sir John entrusted the estate to his steward, John Blinham until his son Thomas took possession in 1616. Blinham's accounts show the wide range of activities possible on such a flexible holding – corn, wool, lambs, bullocks, dairying, pigs, not forgetting the surplus from the beehives and the dovecote – and the level of profits achieved by such enterprises. Bullock fattening, for example, yielded 20s per acre compared to 9s for corn. These figures help to explain landowners' eagerness to reorganize the structure of their holdings, which would facilitate the retention of more livestock and the adoption of more flexible systems.⁶³

However, despite the favourable conditions at Felbrigg, Sir John instructed John Blinham, to carry out a thorough survey.

He was particularly concerned to ascertain the nature of the copyhold rents on the off-lying properties in Banningham, Colby and Tuttington, and on the Dilham estate, which lies further east on grade 1 agricultural land in Broadland. The accounts and leases show that, once again, careful distinctions were made. They concentrated management on those holdings where rents were unfixed, while copyhold land with fixed rents – much of Banningham – they effectively wrote off. Attention focused on those parts of the estate, principally the demesne and its peripheries, where no legal impediment obstructed improvement. The aim was, once again, to create large blocks of land which could be enclosed, planted, stocked, dunged and systematically rotated. In the 1620s and 1630s, Thomas Windham drew up leases with the most specific directions as to ploughing and laying down of pasture, implementing a system of up and down husbandry tailor-made to the requirements of particular holdings. Penalties of up to £3 per acre were imposed for overploughing.⁶⁴ When it came to making purchases, Thomas Windham pursued the same strategy as the Hobarts, consolidating around the core, paying almost any price for small farms and pieces. Unlike the Hobarts, the Windhams did not ignore their east Norfolk properties, buying up family farms of 40–50 acres as they became available. They directed major investment to large properties with potential, including the Beckham estate, west of Felbrigg, and off-lying estates in Suffolk and Essex.

IV

The Hobarts and Windhams⁶⁵ shared a desire to improve their estates and a general

⁶¹ NRS, 12891 27E6; NRO, MC, 3/43–48 466X, MC, 3/51–53 466X; NRS, 10191 25A1.

⁶² B M S Campbell, 'Field systems in eastern Norfolk during the Middle Ages: a study with particular reference to the demographic and agrarian changes of the fourteenth century', unpublished Cambridge University PhD thesis, 1975.

⁶³ NRO, WKC, 5/419 X.

⁶⁴ Many examples survive, but the leases for the East Beckham estate, purchased by TW in 1628 are particularly noteworthy: NRO, WKC, 5/30–45.

⁶⁵ Thomas Windham spelt his name with an 'I' rather than a 'y'; the Felbrigg Windhams continued with this style, but other branches of the family persisted with the old spelling.

appreciation that the first step in this process was the reorganization of their holdings. On both estates this was accompanied by costly building and planting programmes, as they developed parks and gardens to provide the setting for the new and vastly improved houses. Both families embraced a vision of aesthetic as well as commercial improvement. Their interest in the design of new farms, with their neat closes, hedgerows and copses, shows that they made little distinction between amenity and commercial land; indeed, the profitable and efficient management of farmland was perceived as the essence of the ideology of improvement. Thomas Windham showed how improvement was accomplished by a resident landowner supervising proceedings on a well established estate and on a relatively modest scale, while Sir Henry showed what could be achieved with ingenuity, appropriate skill and ample capital. Their zeal and commitment to the idea of improvement at this time was extraordinary and demands explanation. Why did the 1600s witness this flowering of interest and determination to modernize and reform landed estates? And why did Sir Henry's approach become so much more explicit after 1608?

It is unrealistic to detach Sir Henry's policy on his own estates from his experience as a crown official. Both were so closely associated and fertilized each other. Sir Henry had been involved for some time with schemes for land reform and improvement in a wider world than Norfolk. As a senior law officer he served on the Exchequer commissions, set up by James I and Robert Cecil as part of their efforts to reorganize the crown lands. These commissions carried out surveys and tried to establish proper valuations with a view to realizing the commercial potential of the estates. They had to enquire into 'concealments', which meant discovering defective titles, decayed rents, lost revenues and encroachments, which often led to contro-

versy. In 1612 Sir Henry criticized the methods used for searching out encroachments on commons and waste, which he clearly regarded as symptomatic of the increasing ruthlessness of the Exchequer's approach. However, it did not prevent his appointment as Chancellor to Charles, when Prince of Wales, which gave him overall responsibility for the estates of the Duchy of Cornwall. The Duchy of Cornwall, reconstituted by Cecil as a separate entity in 1603, quickly gained a reputation for innovative management. In 1605 John Norden was engaged to carry out a comprehensive survey of the estates, and continued as Surveyor-General to influence the work of the duchy until 1625. Sir Henry served as Chancellor from 1616 to his death in 1625.⁶⁶ Indeed, it is possible that he enjoyed an earlier connection with the duchy, having served as MP for St Ives, one of the duchy boroughs in 1588, and that his expertise in land management was long established and widely recognized.

The approach of the early Stuarts to the management of the crown lands differed from that of Elizabeth I who had hesitated for political reasons to exploit the commercial potential of her estates. Burghley and Mildmay had considered it a virtue to live off 'old rents' and 'at peace with their tenants'.⁶⁷ James I, Henry, Prince of Wales, and Charles, in contrast, employed an army of lawyers, surveyors, local agents and projectors to modernize their estates. The crown itself rarely had the funds to invest in improvement; its role was to strip away the feudal restrictions and legal impediments and then sell the land with the prospect of improvement. Effectively the crown licensed landowners to do the same thing. Moderate men, like Sir Henry Hobart could now argue that reform was

⁶⁶ Graham Haslam, 'Jacobean Phoenix: the Duchy of Cornwall in the principates of Henry Frederick and Charles' in R. W. Hoyle, ed., *The Estates of the English Crown 1558-1640*, 1992, pp. 263-96.

⁶⁷ R. W. Hoyle, 'Reflections on the history of the crown lands', in Hoyle, *Estates of the Crown 1558-1640*, p. 436.

in the national interest and follow the example of their monarch. Many landowners had been evicting tenants, enclosing sheepwalks and taking advantage of copyhold tenants since the fifteenth century, but such action did not win approval. Roger Wyndham was ostracized for his behaviour at Felbrigg from the 1570s to the 1590s. 'Litigious to the point of mania', he brought scores of actions against copyholders challenging their titles and their nature although he met with little success. By the 1600s the climate had become more sympathetic to landowners; they could proceed with their surveys, acquisitions and reorganization in a thoroughly professional way, and in the full knowledge that their actions were in accordance with the prevailing ethos of the court. Although, none of our landowners proceeded against their copyhold tenants, preferring to 'write them off', buy them out – as Sir John did at Blickling – or select property where copyholders did not predominate as more realistic options for their purchases. Nevertheless, the crown's action in reforming its estates so explicitly at this time gave political leadership to the full scale commercialization of land management. In a hierarchical society, which fostered an emulative culture, the impact of this leadership on the mindset of English landowners was crucial.⁶⁸

The message of improvement, advanced by the court, was reinforced by the literature of the 1590s and 1600s. Increasingly, writers, poets and scholars espoused and justified the case for agrarian reform. Anthony Low in his book, *The Georgic Revolution*, argues that the translation of Virgil's work in 1589, dramatically changed attitudes to agriculture. Edmund Spenser,

through his poetry, revised the aristocratic ideal of leisure and grace to one that valued effort, persistence and hard won achievement. Virtue was equated with productive labour: vice was economic parasitism. In the context of the war with Spain he presented the agricultural reformer as hero and patriot, the saviour of the imperial homeland. He stressed the civilizing power of agriculture in taming empty and uncultivated lands, and the need for right minded Protestants to lead the British people to a new and better society.⁶⁹ Spenser's descendants developed the genre of the 'country house poem' to express these sentiments. Ben Johnson's 'To Penshurst', the most famous example, was a blatant attack on the vulgarity of the court and their prodigy houses, and a celebration of the virtues of country life. King James added his support, not only by issuing proclamations ordering landowners to return to the countryside and cultivate their estates, but by writing his own poetry. The estate poem could be used to advance a courtly or anti-court such was the potency of the Georgical message.⁷⁰ The Hobarts were very much part of this world. Sir Henry's eldest son, John, married Phillippa Sidney, daughter of Robert, second earl of Leicester to whom Johnson dedicated his poem, and in the 1630s Sir John and his second wife, Frances, the daughter of John Egerton, first earl of Bridgewater, often visited the family of Oliver St John, the recipient of Mildmay Fane's 'Thorp Place: a Miracle'. In the 1640s, Sir John corresponded with Samuel Hartlib, and engaged Dr Thomas Browne, the eminent philos-

⁶⁸ Thirsk and Cooper, *Seventeenth Century Economic Documents*, pp 122–23: in 'Reason in Favour of Enclosure' at Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 1639, John Smith of Nibley, writing to his son, refers to the enclosing of 'forests, chases, wilds and wastes' by James I and Charles I, 'to the benefit of themselves and the general good of the commonwealth, both in the breed of serviceable men and subjects and of answerable estates and abilities ...'

⁶⁹ A Low, *The Georgic Revolution*, 1985, pp 13–98. Low's references to Spenser include, *The Faerie Queen* (1596), *Mother Hubbard's Tale* (1591) and 'a view of the Present State of Ireland' (1596).

⁷⁰ James I, 'Counsell for Ladies and Gentlemen' in A Fowler's *The Country House Poem*, 1995, p 101. See also Leah Marcus, 'Politics and pastoral: writing the court on the countryside, in K Sharp and P Lake, eds, *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, 1994, pp 139–59.

opher, as his physician.⁷¹ With these connections it is hard to imagine that they were not receptive to the cultural fashions of the day. Indeed, a letter survives from Sir Henry's grandson, Sir John, third baronet, to his cousin in Norwich dated 1666, in which he compares Milton's *Paradise Lost* with Spenser's poetry and that of 'Ye Antient Poets'; a fair indication of the type of education he had enjoyed in the 1620s and 1630s.⁷²

Andrew McRae provides more evidence of changing mental attitudes, which he argues can be found in the new language of improvement. The shift from 'feudal corporatism' to 'economic individualism' had to be accompanied by a belief that private ownership and self interested behaviour were not only for the public benefit, but a civic duty. What emerged was a new agrarian discourse based on individualism and a heightened respect for private property and the market. Words such as 'improvement', 'thrift' and 'profit' acquired a pecuniary meaning and gained respectability.⁷³ As we have seen Sir Henry used these words liberally to explain and justify his motives and actions. He, along with other landowners, would have believed that the ancient texts provided the authority and justification for a commercialized agriculture. The full expression of this philosophy appeared in Richard Weston's 'Legacie to His Sons' written in 1645 and published by Samuel Hartlib in 1652:

Certainly that man is worthy of Praise and Honour who being possessed of a large and barren Demeasne ... by his labour and industry produces

extraordinary fruit ... redounds not only to his own particular profit but also the Publique benefit. It is a thing much celebrated by Antiquity and though the noblest way to gather wealth [is for one] to employ his Wit and Money upon his Land, and by that means augment his estate.⁷⁴

By this time agricultural improvement had become a national – and indeed religious – crusade. Hartlib enlisted God's help that 'the National Husbandry of this Commonwealth should be improved to be able to bear necessary and Publique Burden with more ease to ourselves and to benefit Human Society'. Walter Blith called for a new phase of reform in 'The English Improver Improved', with his 'six newer pieces of improvement' to take improvement a stage further. In his address to Cromwell, he advocated positive steps to eradicate 'intermixed lands', 'unlimited commons' and 'tenants rights' – this was the mood of the 1650s.⁷⁵ The importance of literature on economic activity was that they endorsed at a crucial time a new economic and social reality based on the market. Literature and agricultural manuals played a vital role easing the way towards a general acceptance of the need for agrarian reform, and shaping new mental attitudes to agriculture. With the establishment of the Georgical Committee of the Royal Society in 1664, the transformation in these attitudes was complete. The case for agrarian reform had been made between 1600 and 1650; by the 1660s it was government policy and enforced through law.

While literature offered inspiration and determined the cultural context, men like Sir Henry Hobart converted these ideas into practice on the ground offering an example for others to follow. The capacity of these men to effect change was immense. Occupying a prestigious position at court,

⁷¹ Hartlib Papers: folio 7/27/25A-B dated 4 July 1643; folio 23/19A-B undated (copies in University of East Anglia Library). Dr Thomas Browne, related by marriage to the Hobarts, came to live in Norwich in 1637, and continued to serve and counsel the family until his death in 1686: G Keynes, *Letters of Dr Thomas Browne*, VI, 1930.

⁷² J M Rosenheim, 'An early appreciation of *Paradise Lost*', *Modern Philology*, 75, 1978, pp 280–82.

⁷³ A McRae, 'Husbandry manuals and the language of improvement', in Leslie and Raylor, *Culture and Cultivation*, pp 35–62. For a fuller discussion see A McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England 1500–1660*, 1996.

⁷⁴ Sir Richard Weston's 'Legacie to His Sons' printed in S Hartlib, *His Legacie, or An Enlargement of the Discourse of Husbandry Used in Brabant and Flanders*, 2nd ed, 1652, after 'To the Reader'.

⁷⁵ Walter Blith, *The English Improver Improved*, 1655, under 'The Epistle Dedicatory'.

a recognized expert on land reform, hugely wealthy and prominent in the locality, Sir Henry was uniquely placed to influence domestic strategies. This type of leadership was not uncommon. Joan Thirsk argues that 'clusters of gentry' led by major officeholders were principal agents of economic change. She cites the example of the Guildfords of Rolvenden who used their influence at court to acquire leases, lands and positions for themselves, their family and friends, and brought home the latest ideas which greatly benefited the Weald of Kent in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century.⁷⁶ We can see that Sir Henry performed a similar role in east and south Norfolk in the early seventeenth century. Within his own extended family circle, he loaned money, arranged mortgages, granted tenancies, engaged cousins as his agents in London and generally kept a watching brief over their concerns. In a period when interest in land reform was growing Sir Henry's advice and assistance will have been invaluable. Beyond his family, the community contained within his estate stretched across thirty parishes from the north Norfolk coast to the Yarmouth area and the Waveney valley in the south. The estate through its tenants and agents provided the mechanism for the transfer of husbandry methods from one region to another; it also elevated those practices associated, by William Marshall, with yeomen to the level of estate policy. In this process, Sir Henry provided the essential links. With his modest origins in east Norfolk, he understood fully the working of the local economy and the land market, from a perspective not far removed from that of a yeoman, and he knew that it offered little to a man with skill and ambition. The opportunities for expansion and improvement lay in the low valued sandy areas further west, lying to the north

and south of Norwich; less fertile, but still within easy reach of growing markets. Intensive methods used in the east could be adopted to raise fertility and yields. But improvement on the scale envisaged by Sir Henry could only be achieved – and maintained – with vast amounts of capital. In his strategy for improving heathland and sandy soils by lavish investment, Sir Henry anticipated the activities of those traditional heroes of Norfolk agriculture by over a hundred years. It is clear that even the predecessors of Coke, Townshend and Walpole in the late seventeenth century, now presented as the true innovators, built on past experience and well established principles.

Seen from this perspective the first half of the seventeenth century becomes an important turning point in estate management and agriculture. Fundamental organizational reforms, the example of the crown, the activities of landowners with vision and means and a changing mentality towards agriculture expedited the development of a fully commercialized agriculture. Progress was interrupted by the Civil War, but resumed in a period of falling prices, requiring landowners to increase the efficiency of their estates and experiment with new ideas. The hard lessons learned from this experience lead to the simplification and standardization of procedures, completing a century of revolution in estate management, if not in agriculture. Throughout the century the movement was underpinned by the intellectual and practical commitment of landowners to the idea of improvement. Without their contribution it is difficult to see how infertile lands would have been brought into regular cultivation, and estates kept in good heart during the prolonged recession, ready to face the demands of the second half of the eighteenth century. In Norfolk, Sir Henry Hobart emerges as the decisive figure in this story. With his expertise as a land reformer, his wide ranging role in the

⁷⁶ J Thirsk, 'The fashioning of the Tudor Stuart gentry' *Bulletin of John Rylands Library*, 73, 1991, pp 69–85.

locality and his enviable connections at court, which he clearly used to the advantage of his native county, he provided leadership at a crucial time. His outstanding example and links between the intensive farming systems of the east and the less fertile part of Norfolk further west indi-

cated the way forward for landowners intent on improvement. Sir Henry Hobart can fairly claim to be, if not 'the hero of Norfolk Agriculture', certainly one of the pioneers before Townshend, Walpole and Coke.

APPENDIX

Sir Henry Hobart's purchases and acquisitions 1596-1622

<i>Date</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Vendor</i>	<i>Price</i> (£ s d)	<i>Rent: 1622</i> (£ s d)
1596	Intwood and Swardeston Rectory	Sir William Gresham	3105 0 0 (estimate)	410 9 0
1601	Keswick, Colby's Manor Swardeston	Miles Branthwaite	2250 0 0	
ND	East Carleton (Sold to T Richardson £1100)	Sir Edwin Rich	3683 0 0	44 10 9 (sold, 1623)
1597	Manor at Acle	Tho Clere: 99 year lease	1100 0 0	71 2 9
1622		Earl of Arundel: reversion	1000 0 0	
1597	Barton Rectory Manors at Neatishean, Hoveton and Ashmanough	Bishopric of Norwich: 99 year leases	33 18 4 pa	166 6 8
1602	Estate at Martham and Somerton	Royal grant from Sir Edward Clere's estate	177 6 8	290 0 0 320 0 0
1606	Crangleford Mill	Norwich Hospital: lease	10 0 8 pa	26 13 4
1606	Manors at Morley and Deopham	Roger Hobart	900 0 0	191 8 10
1607	Land at Hethersett	Edward Flowerdew	unclear	131 13 4
1608	Estate at Hevingham	Thomas Thetford	8000 0 0	300 16 3
	Marsham and Saxthorpe			213 8 7
	Ketteringham Rectory			sold £800
1608	The Langley estate	Richard Barney	4000 0 0 + annuities	380 1 0
1609	Chapelfield House	Norwich Corporation 41 year lease	free gift	39 5 0
1610	Martham Rectory	Dean and Chapter, Norwich Cathedral: 99 year lease	20 0 0 pa	98 0 0
1610	Cawston and Hevingham Park	Royal grant from Sir James Bullen's estate	1454 0 0	90 8 1 78 18 2
1612	Estate at Horsham St Faith's	Sir Charles Cornwallis	7000 0 0 (estimate)	438 1 5
1613	St Faith's Fair	Whitmore and Sawyer contractors for crown	—	—
1616	The Blickling estate	Lady Agnes Clere	5500 0 0 + annuity	332 9 4
1616	Hanworth Rectory			
1616	Land at Wicklewood	William Greene	1800 0 0	60 0 0
1617	Land at Horsford	Lord Dacre	exchange	
1619-23	3 manors at Wymondham	Sir Henry Clere	10,000 0 0	492 6 2
1622	Methwold Parsonage	Earl of Arundel	1000 0 0	100 0 0
1622	Manor of Aylsham Lancaster	Royal grant: 23 year lease	free gift	40 0 0
1623	Weybourne Priory	Lady Agnes Clere	1500 0 0	104 13 1

	Weybourne Hoope	Sir George Hastings	1950 0 0	123 1 6
1624	Manor at Beeston St Lawrence	Miles Hobart	1100 0 0	76 15 9
1625	Manor at Oulton	Anthony Page	1200 0 0 (estimate)	60 10 0
1625	Manor at Banham	Earl of Arundel	2000 0 0 (estimate)	150 0 0
ND	Land in Sotterley	Gilbert family?	no details	60 0 0
	<i>Total of Norfolk estate</i>		54,219 0 0	4846 19 6
	<i>Lincolnshire estate</i>			
1621	Estate at Bloxham	Sir Gregory Woolmer	17,338 6 8	300 0 0
1622	Manors at Halstead and Stixwold	no details	no details	200 0 0
	<i>Total of Sir Henry Hobart's estate</i>		55,952 0 0	5350 0 0*
	<i>Additional mortgages</i>			
1622	Lopham and Fersfield	Earl of Arundel	3000 0 0	300 0 0
	Erith and Crayford	Sir Francis Fane	1450 0 0	100 0 0

* In addition, £10,000 should be allowed for annuities, leases, and no details.