

Smallholdings in Norfolk, 1890–1950: a social and farming experiment*

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Abstract

The smallholding movement is unique in modern agricultural history. It is the only occasion on which we see the promotion of small, rather than ever-larger farming units. Their creation had a profound, if short-lived affect, both physically and culturally on the rural scene: yet the history of the movement has still to be written. The documentation for the setting up and administration of smallholdings in Norfolk where by 1930, the County Council was the largest landowner in the county, is particularly complete. After surveying the national background, this paper will look at how far the aims and aspirations of the promoters of smallholdings were met in Norfolk during the years from 1890 to 1950.

Newlin R. Smith, writing in 1946, listed the ‘hopes’ which had inspired the smallholdings movement from its inception to the outbreak of the Second World War. These included a desire to halt the decline of small farms and so of rural populations, the belief that smallholdings would provide a way for ‘new blood’ to start to climb the farming ladder, thus providing the possibility of a career progression for the agricultural labourer, and a conviction that smallholdings would increase the political stability of the countryside at a time when agricultural unions were beginning to get a foothold in rural areas. Giving farm workers a stake in the land would make them more conservative in outlook. Finally there was the belief that small farms were more productive and so would help to increase the home-grown food supply.¹ Immediately after the First World War smallholdings were seen as a way of rewarding returning soldiers. This was particularly so in crofting areas of Scotland where the opportunity for solving the land hunger created by the Highland clearances was seized with enthusiasm.² In the 1930s it was hoped that smallholdings would relieve long-term unemployment as well promoting good health and military fitness.

All these aims can be traced back to the early allotment movement and are echoed in several of the articles in the *Annals of Agriculture*.³ In 1819 an act of Parliament authorized overseers of

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¹ Newlin R. Smith, *Land for the Small Man* (1946), World War I, *AgHR* 37 (1989), pp. 52–64.
pp. 207–18.

² L. Leneman, ‘Land settlement in Scotland after 1793–1873’ (2002), pp. 12–17.
³ J. Burchardt, *The allotment movement in England*,

the poor to acquire blocks of land of up to 22 acres for the purpose of letting land to the poor and unemployed. This was seen purely as a method of poor relief and resulted in the creation of some parish allotments. However, by the 1830s there was a campaign for smallholdings led by John Bright and J.S. Mill who established the Liberal Land Tenure Association. The same ideal is also reflected in the land settlements of the Chartist movement. A few private landowners also took the initiative, one of the first being Mr B. Hall of Six Mile Bottom, Cambridgeshire who, to provide an alternative to wage labour during the 1874 lockout, spent £40,000 on buildings, cottages and laying out allotments and smallholdings for up to 40 tenants. Hall reckoned in 1894 that of the 20 who took on the larger holdings, half were moderately successful, a quarter were struggling and a quarter were failures. Most of the successful ones were, in fact, tradesmen with other jobs.⁴ Joan Thirsk quotes several other like-minded landowners and clergymen such as William Lea, vicar of St Peter's Droitwich, who wrote in 1872 of the social and moral benefits of smallholdings and the advantages of creating a 'farming ladder'.⁵

Agitation for smallholdings of between five and 50 acres, and allotments of under five acres, increased in the 1880s, and it was Jesse Collings, an MP for Ipswich, who initiated further legislation in the House of Commons. Several enabling acts were passed of which the first was The Allotments Extension Act of 1882. Where a need for land could be demonstrated, a public enquiry had to be held, and if no suitable land was available for sale or rent, a Compulsory Purchase Order could be issued through a Provisional Order of the Board of Agriculture and land bought by the Local Sanitary Authority. In 1894 these powers were transferred to the new Rural District Councils. Initially land could be bought for allotments of less than five acres, but this did not satisfy Collings, who wanted to see smallholdings of up to 50 acres created. Having purchased the land, local authorities were authorised to take out loans for improvements such as drainage, enclosure, roads, buildings and making village greens.

It was not until 1892 that Collings managed to secure the passage of his Smallholdings Act. It was supported by the prime minister, Lord Salisbury who said in a speech in Exeter that year that although he did not think smallholdings were the most efficient means of land utilization, the holders of such farms would be 'the strongest bulwark against revolutionary change'.⁶ This emphasis on social and ideological, as opposed to economic and agrarian aims, is noteworthy. The Act allowed – but did not oblige – county councils to buy land for smallholdings as distinct from allotments. It was intended to create 'peasant' proprietors as the holdings were to be sold by hire-purchase to the occupants with one-fifth of the purchase price to be paid as a down-payment and the balance over a number of years.⁷ This put smallholdings out of the reach of most potential applicants, especially as they had also to demonstrate that they had sufficient working capital, estimated at £5 per acre, to take on the holding, and so generally little was done. Smallholding proprietorship was likely to defeat one of the aims of the movement. Establishment on his own land was likely to discourage, if not prevent, the new owner from moving on 'up the farming ladder'.

⁴ H. Laxton, I. Hodge, and G. Davidson, *Smallholdings under pressure* (1987).

⁵ J. Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture, a history* (1997), p. 207.

⁶ Quentin Bone, 'Legislation to revive small farming

in England, 1887–1914', *Agricultural Hist.* 49 (1975), pp. 658–9.

⁷ C. W. Rowell, 'County Council smallholdings, 1908–58', *Agriculture* (1959), p. 109.

Government grants and loans at 3½ per cent were available for purchase and for the drawing up of schemes, but up to the end of 1902, only eight county councils in England and Wales had made use of the act and only 569 acres had been bought. One of the reasons put forward by Collings for this poor uptake was that county councils were generally dominated by the land-owning class who benefited from the established tripartite landlord/tenant/labourer *status quo*. Collings thought that the Act was most likely to be implemented in counties where councillors were of the 'non-territorial class ... free from prejudice and who, from social and political considerations, have taken a wide view of the question'. He quoted as an example, Worcestershire, the first county to avail itself of the act, where, in 1892 a farm of 146 acres was purchased and divided into 32 smallholdings. However, as we shall see, there was no lack of enthusiasm for creating smallholdings on the landlord-dominated Norfolk County Council.⁸

By contrast, Nottinghamshire, remained unenthusiastic as late as 1922. Although the county committee was set up in 1892, no land was bought until it was compelled to do so after 1907. In 1922, it refused to buy land offered it by the Ministry of Agriculture and in 1924, the Council's chairman observed, 'My personal inclination would be to sell the whole of the Council estate if it were practical'. The reasons for this lack of interest could be that the county was well provided with private smallholdings, and gardens and allotments in the mining areas provided by both the Duke of Portland and the rural district councils.⁹

Alongside this move to establish farm workers on the land was another 'back-to-the-land' movement with entirely different origins. A series of agrarian communes and cottage farm settlements had been started by middle-class socialist and anarchist intellectuals in the 1880s and '90s. Rather than seeing their smallholdings as the 'first step on the ladder', they were their ultimate goal. Most were short-lived, partly because of the participants' lack of practical farming knowledge. One of the earliest of the cottage settlements was the Methwold Fruit Colony in the Norfolk fens, set up in 1889–90 by Robert Gooderich. Beginning with two acres, half of which he planted with fruit trees, Gooderich sold his produce, including newly-laid eggs, directly to contacts in London, thus dispensing with the need for a middleman. By 1900 he had built a small jam factory behind his house for processing surplus fruit. However, by 1908, there is no mention of the jam factory in the local directory. Following articles in various newspapers and vegetarian publications (all settlers had to be vegetarians) other Londoners followed him to Methwold and neighbouring fields were bought and divided up. By 1900 there were said to be about 50 settlers on two- and three-acre plots. Each settler needed about £500 to buy his land, build his house and buy tools, seeds and fruit trees, thus excluding the urban working class. An editorial in the *Cable*, a magazine for Lord Winchelsea's farming community, wrote of the Methwold experiment: 'But at Methwold in Norfolk, a new order of things has been inaugurated. The land there has been taken possession of not by country folk but by clerks and tradesmen from London ...'.¹⁰ Along with five others, Gooderich and another of the original settlers, Edward Frostick, are described as 'fruit growers' in the 1908 edition of Kelly's *Directory*, while three others are described 'fruit growers' on the

⁸ J. Collings, *Land reform, occupying ownership, peasant propriety and rural education* (1906), pp. 212–3.

⁹ B. A. Wood, 'The development of the

Nottinghamshire County Council smallholdings estate, 1907–1980', *East Midlands Geographer* (1982), p. 26.

¹⁰ J. Marsh, *Back to the Land* (1982), pp. 113–5.

'fruit colony'. But no fruit growers are listed in the 1916 Kelly's and all the 1908 names have gone.¹¹

A late example of this type of project was the women's smallholding colony at Lingfield in Surrey, promoted by the Women's Farm and Garden Association. Mrs Wilkins, who as Louise Jebb, had been responsible for an important survey of the early smallholdings published in 1907, was chairman of the sub-committee responsible for the colony. Land was bought in 1920, but by 1934 the last holding had been sold.¹²

At the same date as the first Londoners were arriving in Methwold, the Norfolk Smallholdings and Allotments Committee was set up in response to the Allotment Extension Acts to provide land for local agricultural workers. In contrast to that in Worcestershire, it consisted mainly of councillors who were large landowners including members of the Boileau, Buxton, Le Strange, Ripenhall, Wodehouse and Colman families. The first chairman was Lord Walsingham, followed by Sir Hamon Le Strange. One of the first cases it dealt with that year was an application from 22 inhabitants of Besthorpe who called upon the Committee to help find land in the parish for allotments which could either be purchased or rented by the Wayland Sanitary Authority. After much negotiation suitable land was found.¹³ Similar requests for small pieces of land came from elsewhere.¹⁴ The individual allotments required were normally under an acre and the rent charged was between 30s. and £2 an acre. Usually land could be found by negotiation and only rarely was it necessary to resort to compulsory purchase. During 1895 there were 32 representations from Norfolk parishes; some were satisfied but 22 were still pending at the end of the year.

Collings, in the book he wrote in support of his second Purchase of Land Bill of 1905, argued on rather shaky historical evidence that since the middle ages England had been reduced from a society of independent yeoman and landowning peasants to one dominated by large estates, tenant farmers and subservient labourers. The decline of the farming interest at the expense of the industrial had resulted in a reduction in the amount of wheat grown with a corresponding dependence on imports. The need to provide an alternative to socialism as a means towards social justice, the necessity of increasing the home food supply, partly as a strategy for national defence, especially in products suited to small scale production such as poultry, horticultural and dairy products, the need to reduce rural depopulation and pauperism, and the encouragement of a strong and healthy nation were all arguments advanced by Collings to justify smallholdings.¹⁵ He saw agricultural workers as the degraded remnants of a proud and independent peasantry and believed that if they could be restored to their former condition, they would be a stabilising force in the countryside against radical social upheavals.¹⁶

¹¹ Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO), MC451/11; *The Independent Vegetarian Advocate*, July 1891; Kelly's *Directory*, 1908 edn, p. 262.

¹² For a full account of the Lingfield experiment, see Ann Meredith, 'From ideals to reality: The women's smallholding colony at Lingfield, 1920-1939', *AgHR* 54 (2006) pp. 105-21.

¹³ NRO, c/c10 563, Smallholdings and allotments committee (hereafter SAC) minute book, 1889-1895, 4 May, 1

June, 3 Aug. 12 Oct. 21 Oct. 1889.

¹⁴ Kelling, St Faiths, Bawburgh, Litcham, Shipdham, Wells, Southrepps, Erpingham, Clenchwaton and Salt-house. The St Faiths request for eighteen acres resulted in a public enquiry and a compulsory purchase order (BPP, 1890-1, I, p. 63, 'Bill to confirm Provisional Order by Norfolk County Council').

¹⁵ Collings, *Land Reform*.

¹⁶ Bone, 'Legislation', p. 654.

I

The leading advocate of smallholdings (as distinct from allotments) in the east of England was the Lincolnshire MP, Richard Winfrey. He realised that a system which only allowed for the buying rather than the renting of land disqualified many applicants and so he founded and became chairman of the Lincolnshire Smallholdings Association in 1894 (the first of its kind in the country). This rented 650 acres around Spalding from a fellow enthusiast, Lord Carrington, which was then let to 202 tenants. In 1902 a neighbouring farm was leased and divided into smallholdings on which early potatoes, celery, peas, broad beans, turnips, mustard for seed, and bulbs were grown. In 1906 Lord Carrington built six houses and sets of premises suitable for farms of 40 acres on his land. They were constructed of creosoted wood and galvanized iron and consisted of a barn, hay loft, implement shed, stable for two horses, byre for two cows and an enclosure for calves and pigs.¹⁷ Winfrey's influence spread into Norfolk and in 1900 the Norfolk Smallholdings Association was founded, with Winfrey as chairman and Mr Jermy of Kings Lynn as secretary. Farms at Swaffham, Whissonsett and Watton were bought and divided. The 97-acre Whissonset farm was divided between 18 tenants, all of whom lived in the village. No new buildings were erected on any of the three farms and nearly all the tenants had other work. Rider Haggard described the Whissonsett farm in his survey of rural England as bringing new life to a village in which there had been two disused windmills, empty cottages and derelict farm buildings. The system of farming was traditional with cereals being grown and livestock kept.¹⁸ Unlike the Fenland farms, they were not run as market gardens, but rather on a mixed farming system, which was not as time-consuming for those with other employment. The farm at Watton was said to have a 'prosperous look. The land is better farmed and cleaner than when it was taken on'.¹⁹

In 1902 a national Small Holdings Association was formed. This bought the 376-acre Cudworth estate in Surrey and divided it into holdings of between three and 25 acres with cottages built on some of them. The Association was run on commercial lines and aimed to recoup its capital by the sale of the holdings.²⁰ As well as the Association, other voluntary bodies became involved in the movement. In 1906, the Salvation Army set up a company called Land for the People Ltd with the aim of buying land to let as smallholdings. Four hundred acres were bought at Boxstead in Essex and divided into 80 plots. On each there was to be three quarters of an acre of fruit trees and the holdings were to be cultivated by spade culture. Tenants were to be encouraged to keep pigs and poultry and to be market gardeners. They were to form a Society of Growers to act as a co-operative and the farmhouse would be occupied by an 'overseer'. The farm buildings were to be converted into a grading store for the whole colony, and in 1907 22 pairs of cottages were being built.²¹ Farm colonies were also established by East London Poor Law Guardians in Essex under the leadership of George Lansbury and with financial support from a wealthy American, George Fells. Land for further colonies was bought, including the 1300-acre estate at Hollesley Bay in Suffolk which had been an agricultural college for the sons

¹⁷ L. Jebb, *Smallholdings* (1907), pp. 216–8.

¹⁸ H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England* (2 vols, 1902), II, p. 506.

¹⁹ Jebb, *Smallholdings*, p. 234.

²⁰ Collings, *Land Reform*, p. 221.

²¹ Jebb, *Smallholdings*, p. 426.

of gentlemen. By the end of 1905 500 unemployed Londoners were being trained for a new life and the colony was to be a model for co-operation rather than competition. However, with a change of government in 1906, the status of the colony changed to being little more than an overflow workhouse.²² There were also smallholdings on some private estates. Rider Haggard noted some in the Waveney valley (Suffolk) where by hard work their tenants were making a living. They were mostly farmed by families with a labouring background.²³

As a result of pressure from Jesse Collings, Richard Winfrey and Lord Carrington, further Smallholdings and Allotments Acts were passed in 1907 and 1908. These acts redefined allotments as holdings of up to five acres and required every county council to set up a Smallholdings and Allotments Committee. Councils were given powers of compulsory purchase. Land could also be let, rather than sold to applicants and efforts were to be made to promote co-operatives. Thus Collings' dream of a landowning peasantry was dropped, but as he admitted, being a tenant of an elected county council was preferable to being a tenant of a private landlord. The publicity given to the passing of the acts focused public attention on the issue of smallholdings and the *Daily Mail* started one as an example for public guidance.²⁴ The government was particularly keen that 'colonies' of smallholdings should be established so that tenants could work as a community. Land could then be let directly to co-operative associations: the Board of Agriculture published leaflets on co-operation. Earl Carrington told a National Congress on Rural Development in 1911 that 'What we have to aim for is a peaceful rural revolution'.²⁵ Between 1908 and 1914, 205,103 acres were acquired in England and 14,045 smallholders settled on land.²⁶

II

In 1902 a group of labourers in the Norfolk parish of Nordelph asked Mr Winfrey to help them obtain allotments. One hundred and thirty men petitioned Norfolk County Council requesting 500 acres. Winfrey bought 50 acres there, but this was only a start and in 1904, the County Council made its first purchase of 91 acres at Chapel Farm, Nordelph on which 35 tenancies of between one and twelve acres were established. Twenty eight of the tenants were agricultural labourers, one a carpenter and the others included a baker and a grocer. One tenant was a traveling showman in the summer who hired his horses to his neighbours to work their fields in the winter. The farm included a house and buildings which had to be divided between the two main tenants. They were all part-time holdings on which wheat, potatoes and mangolds were grown. The land was described as 'very good, intensively cultivated, mostly near the village and suitable for smallholdings'. The success of the scheme was attributed to the availability of part-time piece work locally and the fertility of the soil.²⁷ By 1950 the pattern of holdings had changed and there were only two full-time and 19 part-time tenants on Chapel Farm.²⁸ In 1907 the neighbouring Parkfield Farm in Outwell was purchased and more smallholdings created.²⁹

²² Marsh, *Back to the Land*, pp.132-3.

²³ Rider Haggard, *Rural England*, II, pp.403-5.

²⁴ Smith, *Land for the small man*, p.78.

²⁵ NRO, c/c10/566, SAC minute book, 1909-1911, pp.219-20.

²⁶ Bone, 'Legislation ...', p.661.

²⁷ Jebb, *Smallholdings*, p.342.

²⁸ Norfolk Property Services, Guard Book 3, p.45.

²⁹ NRO, c/c10/565, SAC minute book, 1907-9, purchase completed by June 1907.

Norfolk is the ideal county in which to undertake a study of county council smallholdings. It was one of the first to create them and by 1914 its 13,000 acres of council-owned land, supporting about 1300 tenants, made it a leader in the field. Next in size was Cambridgeshire where the council owned 9217 acres supporting 1194 tenants. The much smaller county of the Isle of Ely owned 6950 acres, supporting 1051 tenants.³⁰ It was in the areas with a tradition of small farms and market gardening where demand for smallholdings was greatest and the holdings most successful. By the Second World War, Norfolk County Council owned over 30,000 acres of land, all let in smallholdings, making it the largest landowner in the county. As late as 1984 24 per cent of the total national area of smallholdings lay in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk.³¹

Not only were smallholdings numerically important in the county, but they are well recorded. The minute books of the County Council's Smallholdings and Allotments Committee start in the 1890s and are held in the Norfolk Record Office along with some plans and reports. Other documents remain with Norfolk Property Services and have been consulted there.³²

From 1908, the Norfolk committee was actively looking for land to buy and established a sub-committee to identify and acquire suitable properties. Between 1908 and 1914 it used its powers of compulsion 94 times (more than any other council).³³ Although a large proportion of the Committee's members were landowners, they were happy to compel Lord Stafford to give up 34 acres at Bawburgh and Lord Townshend 49 acres at South Creak. In 1911 40 more acres in South Creak were compulsorily leased from Lord Leicester. A significant purchase of 169 acres at Brick Kiln Farm, Whissonsett was made in 1909 for 13 prospective tenants of between five and 27 acres. They would pay 26s. 6d. per acre plus £15 per annum for the shared use of the house and premises. Elsewhere, between June and September 1909, 171 acres was leased for 21 tenants and 461 acres bought for 38 tenants. Compulsory leasing orders had been obtained but these were often lifted when suitable alternative land was offered for purchase. By the end of 1909 the Council owned 2423 acres and had leased a further 2024 acres providing holdings for 480 tenants. By the end of 1912 the acreage had shot up to 10,306 acres which supported 986 tenants.³⁴ The most extensive holdings in east Norfolk were on the good loam lands on the edge of the Broadland marshes where nearly all of the Burlingham parishes, covering 3063 acres, were purchased in 1914. By 1914 £30,7738 had been spent on buying, and £4798 annually on renting land.³⁵

Once the land had been bought, it had to be equipped. In February 1910 the first sets of premises were erected at West Hall, Denver, consisting of a dairy and three cottages. Often the purchase had included a farm house and buildings which could be divided, and cottages which could be improved. In 1913 two sets of farm premises erected in the Fens had cost £76 and £83 respectively. By 1918 the Committee had acquired 141 houses and erected a further 58.³⁶

³⁰ Smith, *Land for the small man*, p.84.

³¹ Laxton, Hodge and Davidson, *Smallholdings*, p.15.

³² I would like to thank the staff of Norfolk Property Services, both in Norwich and Kings Lynn, for their assistance in this research.

³³ Smith, *Land*, p.80.

³⁴ NRO, c/c10/566, SAC minute book, 1909–13, fo.261.

³⁵ NRO, c/c10/567, SAC minute book, 1913–16, fo.131.

³⁶ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1913–16, fo.38 (annex to minutes of 23 May 1918).

Acquiring vacant possession of cottages could require draconian methods which must surely have gone against the grain for Agricultural Union leaders on the Committee such as George Edwards. In November 1910, a tenant of a cottage in Upton refused to leave and was given until the following April to find somewhere else to live. Existing cottage tenants on the newly-purchased Burlingham estate refused to move. In November 1921, the special Burlingham sub-committee reported that they had 'utterly exhausted our powers to obtain vacant possession of these last-named cottages, principally because of a lack of alternative accommodation. We are now asking the committee for guidance'. The 'clerk was instructed to take necessary steps to obtain vacant possession of cottages required'.³⁷

Once the tenancies had been settled, the Norfolk Committee carried out an annual inspection – a system that lasted until 1924. Of the 813 tenants in 1913, only 108 were categorised as 'very highly satisfactory' while the largest category (296) were 'satisfactory'. Thirty nine were either 'not satisfactory' or 'very unsatisfactory'.³⁸ Specific farms occasionally gave cause for concern. A report on the smallholdings on a 287-acre farm at Litcham was presented in June 1914. The land was said not to be being cultivated to its best advantage. The working of heavy land was not understood. The farm, it was reported, should be cultivated on a four-course system, but a number of tenants were growing corn crops in succession. Mr Read held 50 acres, 26 acres of which was corn and 20 acres down to roots. He was 'doing his best and will probably be satisfactory subsequently', while Mr Howe who held five acres was growing only corn and 'will require careful supervision'. Both of these are typical comments on the tenants' farming.³⁹

III

The outbreak of war in 1914 had a profound affect on smallholdings. The purchase of land ceased and the Purchasing Sub-committee was disbanded. Like all the farms in the country, smallholdings were subject to reports of the Local War Agricultural Committees in 1917. In Norfolk, only the unfavourable reports survive. The farm at Litcham was still not satisfactory. Of the 287 acres, only six were in wheat and much of the land was in a 'foul state' but there was said to have been some improvement over the previous four years. There was neglected land at the coastal village of Brancaster, a holding at Whissonset would be difficult to fill when the tenant joined the army, while nine acres at Repps and 16 acres at Fincham were badly farmed. Eight acres at Ten-Mile Bank were in a 'neglected condition'. A report on the nine holdings at Low Farm, South Creake in 1916 was very critical. The 27 acres held by Mr Overton was 'a wilderness of weeds', but it was pointed out that it would be difficult to find another tenant in wartime. At Vicarage Farm, North Elmham, meadows were very wet due to the silting of the river. German prisoners of war were employed on river works, starting well downstream and it was suggested that those held at the nearby workhouse might also be available.⁴⁰ The secretary of the County War Agricultural Committee made the comment, 'My committee also think that the County Council might generally notify their tenants of the importance of cultivating their holdings in a

³⁷ NRO, c/c10/569, SAC minute book, 1916–21, fo. 25.

³⁸ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1913–16, p. 24

³⁹ NRO, c/c10/567, SAC minute book, 1913–16, pp. 155–6.

⁴⁰ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1916–21, fo. 7.

proper manner'.⁴¹ In fact the war years saw a general reduction in the standard of cultivation if the annual inspection findings are to be believed. In 1916 only 95 smallholdings were classified as 'very highly satisfactory' while the highest number (534) were only 'satisfactory'. As men went away to fight, their holdings were neglected and new tenants could not be found.

IV

Even before the war ended, there was interest in the possibility of providing smallholdings for ex-servicemen. A government report published in 1918 investigated the workings of the 1908 act county-by-county.⁴² Only in Derbyshire was there difficulty in letting holdings and frequent changes of tenant, both ascribed to the high rents and lack of tenant capital. In the market gardening areas of Bedfordshire and Lincolnshire, on the other hand, the scheme had been an 'unqualified success'. More detail is given in the report on Essex. Here smallholdings were divided into four types. The smallest and least successful were the part-time holdings. Some were well farmed but many were neglected. A specialist type, found only in Essex, were smallholdings producing seed under contract to companies who provided the initial stock, so little capital was needed. Although the work was light compared with other agricultural work, it required skill and provided a good living. Thirdly there were market gardens of about ten acres a piece. They could be worked by the smallholder and casual labour and were mostly farmed very well and successfully. Finally there were the mixed holdings of 25 to 50 acres which were typically worked with two horses, the smallholder and another helper. A 25-acre holding provided a good living for a farmer who concentrated on dairying with a milk delivery round. There are no direct comments on Norfolk beyond the number of tenants (1350). The Norfolk failure rate (5.7 per cent) is about average for the other counties listed, with Middlesex the highest at 22 per cent.

The Land Settlement (Facilities) Act (1919) provided a fund of £20 million (of which £710,000 was allocated to Norfolk) to buy and equip smallholdings for ex-servicemen, giving county councils increased powers to purchase compulsorily suitable land. Alongside this went the Smallholdings Colonies Act which provided for the settlement of ex-servicemen in co-operatives. Land was purchased at Patrington in the East Riding, at Heath Hill in Shropshire and Sutton Bridge and Holbeach in Lincolnshire. Originally the plan was to divide the land into fruit farms, market gardens and dairy farms, but it was decided to farm Patrington as a single holding on a profit-sharing basis. However, the idea was abandoned in 1920 and conventional smallholdings created. Norfolk had toyed with the idea of following the government advice and considered running the Burlingham estate as a colony, but the idea was soon abandoned.⁴³

Altogether, 24,000 ex-servicemen were resettled in England and Wales. The number of smallholdings more than doubled and that of houses quadrupled. This was 'an outstanding effort in the history of land settlement in England and Wales but did not by any means satisfy

⁴¹ NRO, C/C10/568, SAC minute book, 1916-21, fo. 14 (annex to minutes of 10 Mar. 1917).

⁴² BPP, 1918, V, (Cd 2903), *Report on the working of the smallholdings acquired under the Smallholdings and*

Allotments Act, 1908, pp. 371-80.

⁴³ MAF, *Land settlement for England and Wales, being a report under the smallholdings and allotments acts 1908 to 1919* (1925), p. 96.

the number of applications from ex-servicemen.⁴⁴ In Surrey 2162 acres was bought between 1919 and 1926, providing holdings for 257 ex-servicemen.⁴⁵ In Sussex by May 1921, 181 applicants had been accepted, but only 83 had been settled on 1055 acres of newly acquired land and compulsory powers were being used to secure more.⁴⁶ In Cambridgeshire there had been requests from 952 applicants for 15,300 acres. To help satisfy the demand, the Council began to acquire land by compulsory purchase. Shelford Bottom Farm was bought from Caius College to train disabled ex-servicemen. At the same time the War Agricultural Executive Committees were urging councils to avoid aggravation by acquiring land at change of tenancy in order to cause least disturbance.⁴⁷ In Norfolk there were no such inhibitions. Compulsory purchases were being made from members of the Smallholdings Committee such as Sir Thomas Hare, which suggests that the price being offered was a good one. Westerby, Boyces, Fen and Widders Farm (759 acres) were bought from him in 1919, at a cost of £41,430, or £54 an acre, a not unreasonable price for good fen-edge land although land could make as much as £88 an acre on the Isle of Ely.⁴⁸

The government still felt that smallholdings should form co-operatives or 'colonies' and a circular letter from the Board of Agriculture in 1919 under the signature of A. D. Hall urged county councils to buy land in sufficiently large blocks for them to be established. Councils should write to all the principal landowners asking for land, and letters were to be sent to all ex-servicemen who were returning to the land pointing out their right to apply for a smallholding. The requirements of local men should be met before applications were accepted from outside the county.⁴⁹

In 1919 the Norfolk purchasing sub-committee was reinstated and reports came flooding in from the local sub-committees suggesting farms that could be bought. Land that was of poor quality, too isolated or too far from a road was usually rejected. At Glebe Farm, Bale (131 acres), the tenant and his father had been there for 40 years and wanted to stay. As there were no ex-servicemen seeking smallholdings in the area, the recommendation was against purchase. The occupier at Manor Farm Hilgay (229 acres) was not so fortunate. Although a longstanding tenant, he was only on a yearly lease and was evicted. Between January and October 1919 5669 acres were bought, costing £101,681 (an average of only £17 an acre). Orders for compulsory purchase had been made in the north Norfolk parishes of Salthouse and Kelling. A report to the committee in July stated over 12,000 acres had been inspected and that 3782 acres, providing for 178 tenants would be available for occupation in September 1919. Purchases continued to meet the demand for tenancies. At a meeting in the Fenland parish of Welney in June, 30 applicants registered their interest in 600 acres and offered to pay rents of between 60s. and 70s. an acre. They were unanimous in asking the County Council to proceed with compulsory purchase. In the west of the county there were 612 ex-servicemen who had together applied for 7224 acres but only 1350 acres had been secured.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Smith, *Land for the small man*, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Meredith, 'Ideals to reality', p. 107.

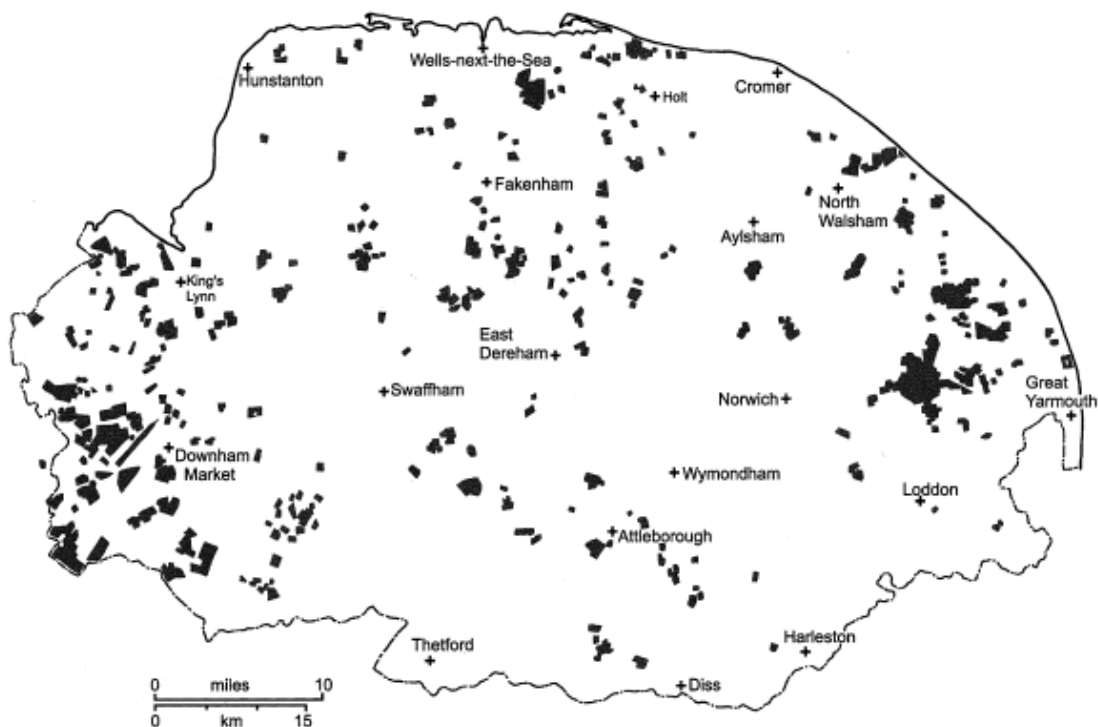
⁴⁶ C. A. Lockwood, 'From soldiers to peasants. Land Settlement schemes in East Sussex', *Albion* 30 (1998), p. 454.

⁴⁷ A. Howkins, *The death of Rural England. A social history of the countryside since 1900* (2003), pp. 88–9.

⁴⁸ Norfolk Property Services, Smallholdings survey books, 1951, 6, pp. 25–8; E. Whetham, *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914–39 (1978), p. 137.

⁴⁹ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1916–21, inserted after fo. 48.

⁵⁰ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1919–20, p. 60.



MAP 1. Map to show distribution of County Council smallholdings within Norfolk by 1926.
(redrawn by Phillip Judge)

By 1923 the Council's main areas of holdings were concentrated in two contrasting but very fertile regions of the county (Map 1). In east Norfolk, on the Broadland edge, there were 115 County Council smallholdings in Burlingham and over 20 in each of the neighbouring parishes of Ludham, Potter Heigham, Martham and Beighton. Here, medium-sized, prosperous farms, centred on large well-built houses and farmsteads, often dating back to the seventeenth century, were typical. The houses and buildings could be divided for the new tenants. The smallholders were mainly engaged in mixed farming, bullock feeding and the rearing of young stock, although some holdings were devoted to market gardening and fruit growing. To the west the main areas of smallholdings were in the Fens where rich soils meant that small-scale farming concentrating on fruit and vegetables had long been practiced and large landowners scarce. There were 105 County Council holdings in Terrington St Clement and 116 in Welney. Elsewhere, they tended to be in groups of under twelve, falling well short of the colonies that the Board of Agriculture had advocated. On these valuable lands of the black and silt fens, fruit growing remained important. The County Council provided a light railway running through Fern House Farm, Terrington which was divided into 21 smallholdings producing soft fruit and apples.

This policy of expansion through purchase was short-lived and went into reverse after 1925 with the end of the Ministry of Agriculture's ex-servicemen's scheme begun under the Land Settlement Act. The Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1926 handed financial responsibility over to the county councils. However, loans of up to 90 per cent of the value of the property

and repayable over sixty years were still available to the county councils from the Ministry of Agriculture. At this time Norfolk owned 27,479 acres, making it the county with the largest area of land (roughly two per cent of the area of the county) held for smallholdings by a local authority.⁵¹ But even before the 1925 Act, practical experience in conditions of agricultural depression had called into question the viability of smallholdings. Problems with rent arrears had quickly emerged. In 1920 and 1922 there were rebates of half a year's rent in acknowledgment of the drought of 1921 and the bad season and fall in prices in 1922.⁵² In December 1923 the bad debts of 36 tenants, amounting to £1227, were written off. The debtors were described variously as 'bankrupt', 'gone away suddenly', 'in prison' and 'tenant has no money'.⁵³ As the depression continued into 1925, a need for further reductions was acknowledged. Notices to quit were sent to 29 tenants unless the previous year's rent was paid by the 8 October. A further £435 was written off as unrecoverable.⁵⁴ Explanations for these bad debts varied. While one man was described as having 'no means and is one of those who spends his time dodging work', other cases were described with greater sympathy. One man 'was badly gassed during the war, discharged with no pension, lung trouble set in and he has since died'. Another tenant was a war widow with two children; 'there is very little hope of the council obtaining anything further.' In January 1926 18 per cent of the annual rent roll was still outstanding. Out of a total rent due of £11,172 in the east of the county, a reduction of £446 (four per cent) was recommended and in the west where £9093 was due, a reduction of £1701 (18.7 per cent) was suggested. Neither of these sums was accepted by the Ministry, and after some negotiation somewhat smaller amounts were agreed upon. From 1926 negotiations with several tenants whose rents were in arrears resulted in agreements whereby they were allowed to stay so long as the guaranteed income from their sugar beet crop was assigned to the county council.⁵⁵ Sugar beet had become the life-line for many Norfolk farmers as the crop replaced turnips in the rotation and commanded a guaranteed price. The by-products of beet pulp and tops could be fed to stock. It is clear by the mid-1920s that many smallholders were running their holdings as conventional farms in miniature rather than adopting crops particularly suited to small-scale intensive farming.

In these circumstances tenants were difficult to find, but it was reported in 1927 that although there were very few 'general applicants for smallholdings, the men who do apply are of a better average stamp than previously, and naturally so, as it requires more courage to venture in this respect with the present state of agriculture as compared with the rush between 1919 to 21'.⁵⁶ By this time small areas of land were being sold to rural district councils for housing and fields let as playing fields to parish councils.

Problems in securing rents continued into the 1930s. With the intensification of the depression, 15 per cent of the annual rent bill was in arrears in 1930. In September the sub-committee decided that 'In view of the very serious and continued fall in the prices of cereals, the

⁵¹ Norfolk Property Services, 'Report by the County Land Agent 1925-6' (1927) [a report printed for internal circulation], p.1.

⁵² NRO, c/c10/570, SAC minute book, 1923-4, letter inserted after minutes 27 Jan. 1923.

⁵³ NRO, c/c10/569, SAC minute book, 1921-3, annex to fo.63

⁵⁴ NRO, c/c10/571, SAC minute book, 1924-5, annex to minutes, 20 Oct. 1925.

⁵⁵ NRO, c/c10/572, SAC minute book, 1925-6, annex to minutes, 24 June 1926.

⁵⁶ 'Report by the County Land Agent, 1925-6', pp.3-5.

sub-committee proposes to consider the question of making an abatement off the Michaelmas rents.⁵⁷ Reductions of 12 per cent were granted in 1930 and 1931, but an 'abatement was no longer possible' in 1932. In 1932 £649 was written off as bad debts (the average for the previous six years had been £381) and in November 25 per cent of rents due in April were still outstanding. The fact that the number of tenants wanting to leave (23) was lower than in previous years suggests that very little alternative employment was available. The 12 per cent rent rebate was re-instated in 1933 'as prices still low' and was continued in 1934. By the end of 1934 conditions were improving and the number of notices to quit (14) was the lowest for several years.⁵⁸

The lapsing in 1925 of the 1919 Land Settlement Act was marked by the publication of a report on its achievements.⁵⁹ It pointed to the 24,000 ex-servicemen settled, the 2249 new houses built (744 of these had been built in 1908–14) and the 250,000 acres acquired across England and Wales. It addressed the criticism that many of the ex-servicemen were inexperienced at farming by stressing that most were country-bred and many were the sons of small farmers. While there were those who believed that 'a smallholding is a difficult and laborious road leading to bankruptcy', a national failure rate of 6.5 per cent could be partly explained by the agricultural depression of the early 1920s. The report acknowledged that to be successful, a tenant needed experience, industry and capital, but held that the scheme should be judged on its successes rather than its failures. Dairying was more likely to be successful than corn, and stock than crops. Market gardening was risky, but poultry keeping and potato growing were more likely to be profitable. The record was therefore mixed. And so the immediate post-war expansion of county council smallholding came to an end.

V

Unemployment after 1931 produced problems similar to those encountered with the demobilization which followed the end of the First World War. Again, the creation of smallholdings and land settlements was seen to have a role to play in alleviating larger economic problems. A second spurt of county council purchasing with the help of government money for the resettlement of the long-term unemployed began in 1934 with the setting up of the National Land Settlement Association. This was part-funded by voluntary bodies such as the Carnegie Trustees, the Society of Friends Allotments Committee and the National Council for Social Service. The government agreed to provide grants equal to the private donations up to a ceiling of £75,000 for each of the following three years. Its aim was to buy large farms around the country which would then be divided into small units and tenants selected from amongst the unemployed. In this the Association was breaking new ground, as in previous schemes it had been considered essential that prospective tenants had farming experience. This meant that training had to be given. Agriculturalists such as C.S. Orwin were extremely sceptical about the chances of the scheme's success. They feared that these efforts towards agricultural reconstruction and the

⁵⁷ NRO, c/c10/578, SAC minute book, Feb.-Oct. 1930, 22 Apr. 1933, p. 3, 19 May 1934, p. 4. quarterly report ending Sept. 1930.

⁵⁹ MAF, *Land settlement*.

⁵⁸ NRO, c/c10/581, SAC minute books, 1933–4, minutes

relief of industrial distress would result in the re-peopling of the countryside with 'disillusioned and resentful communities'.⁶⁰

Any land that came onto the market at this time of depression was likely to be run down, infertile and weedy so it had first to be brought back into condition. Tenants had to become members of the farm co-operative and buy and sell through it. A few hundred families, mostly from areas of high unemployment, were settled in this way. Many soon abandoned their smallholdings. The scheme was most popular where bare holdings were created near industrial villages as in Lancashire.⁶¹ By 1939, 25 estates had been bought providing 1000 holdings. In spite of the initial problems, by 1939 two-thirds of the tenants were making over £120 a year at a time when the farm labourer could expect to earn a little over £100.⁶² The project frequently prompted local resentment as farm workers were not eligible even though they might well have made more successful tenants.⁶³ An 337-acre farm at Newbourn, eight miles east of Ipswich was purchased in 1936 and divided into 48 holdings. All tenants were provided with bungalows, glass houses and 15 with poultry battery houses. All had piggeries for between four to six pigs. The scheme here survived into the 1960s.⁶⁴

In Norfolk however, the County Council wanted nothing to do with the initiative and no land was bought under its provisions: but the Council continued to expand its own holdings. Between June and September 1933 the Council acquired 1461 acres in the Broads and Fens with a further 270 acres in the Broadland parishes of Somerton and Happisburgh in July 1934. By December 1933, 45 new holdings had been created, 32 of which were already let. From February the Committee had the use of 51 unemployed men doing relief work for planting hedges, dyking and road improvements.⁶⁵

VI

A government report on smallholdings of 1913 contained an extensive section advising on the design of houses and buildings and providing model plans. Three-bedroom houses with living room and scullery and separate dairy and wash room were recommended. While smallholdings for market gardening might need little more than a packing and tool shed with a stable and cartshed alongside, much more elaborate outbuildings were needed for a mixed holding of 20 to 30 acres. Here there should be a fodder and chaff house, stable for two horses, cattle shed, cartshed and a yard with boarded fence. Loose boxes were thought preferable to pig sties for pigs. Dairy farms needed a cow house allowing 800 cubic feet per cow (600 if they were out during the day), a mixing room, stabling for two horses, a cartshed with loft and three loose boxes opening onto a partly covered yard.⁶⁶

In Norfolk, providing living and working accommodation for the new tenants was a problem. The accommodation available fell well short of the ideals laid down in 1913, and, as we have

⁶⁰ C.S.Orwin and W.F.Darke, *Back to the Land* (1935), (1971), p. 40.
p. 70.

⁶¹ Smith, *Land for the small man*, p. 200.

⁶² Rowell, 'County council smallholdings', p. 112.

⁶³ Whetham, *Agrarian Hist.* VIII, pp. 300-04

⁶⁴ P.J.O.Triste, *A survey of the agriculture of Suffolk*

⁶⁵ NRO, c/c10/581, SAC minute book, Feb., Sept. 1933.

⁶⁶ BPP, 1913, XV, (cd 6708), *Report of the Departmental Committee appointed... to inquire and report as to buildings for small holdings in England and Wales*, pp. 580-82.

seen, even where the estates purchased by the County Council had cottages on them, the sitting tenants might be unwilling to make way for the Council's new tenants. The Council was therefore forced into a succession of makeshift expedients. In August 1919 15 army huts were purchased for conversion to dwellings and in 1920 a further 100 for use at Burlingham and elsewhere 'owing to the urgency of equipping the council's purchases'. Where possible, existing buildings were divided between tenants, and cottages improved. By 1923 many of the Council's 2154 tenants were living in hastily erected bungalows. The council's sub-committee was slow to appoint an architectural assistant to draw up plans for permanent cottages: in June 1920 the Ministry of Agriculture drew urgent attention to 'the necessity of such an assistant'. One was appointed later in the year to meet the ministry's demand that plans and specifications for permanent cottages and buildings be prepared 'without further delay'. A Building Committee report of February 1920 took a sanguine view of the situation. Good progress had been made with the erection of wooden bungalows but there was a need to purchase sections for 60 more. By November 33 wooden bungalows had been completed and 22 more were being built, but there were still tenants unhoused, some of whom were living in lodgings at a distance from their holdings.⁶⁷ In 1921 rent rebates were given to tenants whose houses were not ready for occupation in Ludham, Outwell, Southery and Clenchwarton.

The problem was highlighted by an article in the *Norfolk Chronicle* in August 1921 entitled 'Ex-servicemen's scandalous grievances'. It pointed to the County Council's 'shabby and scurvy treatment of those who fought'. Many of the problems could be attributed to inefficiency, both within the county and at Whitehall, but the result was 'disgraceful'. The 50 new settlers at Burlingham, nearly all of whom were disabled in some way, were living either in badly subdivided old houses or in new asbestos bungalows which were hot in summer and freezing in winter. There were no proper stoves or water supplies. When the estates had been taken over, they were very run down and suffering from under-capitalisation after years of depression. The farm premises were leaky and in poor repair: the land was out of condition and a 'jungle of weeds'. The old premises had been divided amongst tenants but little had been spent on improvements. Elsewhere, new buildings were supposed to be provided, but progress had been slow. Tenants had been waiting for months for buildings that should have been ready before they moved in. Many were inconveniently placed for the holdings.⁶⁸ In September 1921 there was a meeting of 108 tenants from Burlingham and the immediate neighbourhood who complained about the lack of buildings and the poor quality of their housing.⁶⁹

Many of these complaints centred round the 93 asbestos (trade name 'poilite') bungalows which had been built by the County Council. Made of prefabricated sheets, they could be hastily erected but by 1925 they were already proving very unsatisfactory. The roofs were leaking as the rubberoid seals perished and the ceilings sagged. The walls were not weatherproof as the wooden splines shrank, and the fireplaces were unsafe. The sheds only had earth floors, the front doors were unprotected by porches and the timber-framed partitions were only covered on one side. Limited repairs and improvements were sanctioned and illustrations in the Land Agent's report for 1925-6 show these bungalows with new chimneys and porches as well as

⁶⁷ NRO, c/c10/568, SAC minute book, 1919-20, p. 215, minutes 13 Nov. 1920.

⁶⁸ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 19 Aug. 1921.

⁶⁹ NRO, c/c10/569, SAC minute book, 1921-3.



FIGURE 1. Asbestos bungalow in the process of demolition at Lingwood, on the Burlingham estates

sheds and butts for water storage, but they still remained sub-standard.⁷⁰ Fifty one were still in use in 1957, all of which save for 13 had been clad in either brick or cement. One of the last examples has recently been demolished at Lingwood on the Burlingham estate (Fig. 1).

The 1926 report described the housing situation in Norfolk as the government scheme for resettling servicemen came to an end. The two largest estates in County Council ownership were the Burlingham and Hindringham estates. The Burlingham estate consisted of Burlingham Hall, 16 farm houses, numerous farm buildings and a hundred cottages. It was then divided into 138 holdings, averaging about 29 acres each. After some of the farm houses had been divided, 28 dwellings were needed as well as several sets of farm buildings. The Hindringham estate of 12,000 acres in the north of the county was divided into 34 holdings. Eleven new timber or asbestos bungalows and three sets of buildings had been erected after its acquisition. By 1924, the Council had erected a total of 96 bungalows and 31 sets of buildings on all its estates.

Elsewhere exemplary brick houses were being built on the Burlingham estate in the east and Popenhoe and Fern House Farm in the west. Whilst those in the east and mid-Norfolk were red-brick with long eaves in a tudoresque 'cottage style' (Figures 2 and 3), those in the west were square-built, grey brick structures. All had three bedrooms, a parlour and living room with scullery and dairy out the back. Baths were provided under a removable work surface in the scullery. Older properties were modernised as on the Bacton Hall Estate and re-thatching of farm buildings at Burlingham was carried out. It is noteworthy that the influence of the newly-founded Council for the Preservation of Rural England was already being felt by the Committee, and their land agent found it necessary to justify his building policy in the light of their concerns. The reed thatching contracts on the Burlingham and neighbouring estates, undertaken against the opposition of those who favoured corrugated iron, amounted to £9963 and as such 'were possibly the largest thatching contracts ever arranged'. Only in the Fens, where the lack of sound foundations necessitated it, was corrugated iron routinely used.⁷¹

⁷⁰ 'Report by the County Land Agent, 1925-6', p. 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14



FIGURE 2. A larger type of house built in the 1930s for Kings Head Farm, North Elmham

Norfolk was not the only county having problems providing adequate buildings. Of the 85 dairying smallholdings in Dorset visited by a survey team in 1935, 33 were served by buildings which were poor or inadequate.⁷²

When the 1935 Housing Act imposed definitions for overcrowding which should not be breached, the Norfolk Smallholdings Committee voted to give a good example by setting itself higher standards. 'It is not anticipated that there will be many cases of overcrowding in houses occupied by tenants of the Council.' However, if they were not overcrowded, many houses were in a very poor condition. Three cottages at Kidman's corner, North Walsham were in the same condition in 1936 as when they had been let pre-war to farm labourers and therefore not at all suitable for the dwellings of smallholders. Three were to be amalgamated into two and a new house built. New wash houses and dairies were to be built and they were to be 'brought up to standard' but there was still much to be done.⁷³

By the mid-1920s, as emphasis shifted from buying new holdings to the equipment of those already existing, it was recognized that without houses and buildings holdings would be difficult to let. Oaklands Farm, Litcham was a mile from the village and a house was needed for a 70-acre holding there. A brick bungalow on a standard plan, and a U-plan set of weather boarded

⁷² E. Thomas, 'County Council small-holdings in Dorset and Hampshire: [part] 1, descriptive and sociological', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 44 (1937-8), p. 23.

⁷³ NRO, c/c10/583, SAC minute book, 1935-7, annex to minutes, 4 June 1936.

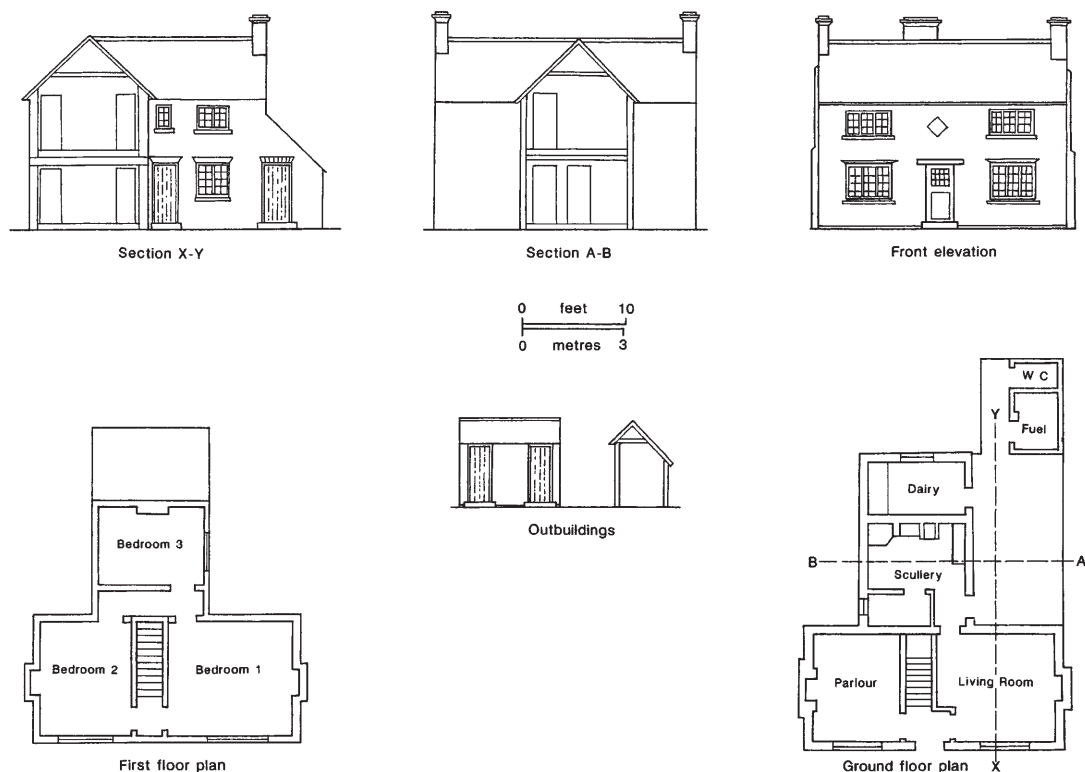


FIGURE 3. Plans and elevations of the type of house built at the Kings Head Farm, North Elmham.
(redrawn by Phillip Judge)

buildings were erected (Figs 4 and 5). To maintain the letting value of holdings, £5993 was spent on buildings that year.⁷⁴ The Milk and Dairies Act of 1926 meant that improvements had to be made to cow houses. In the Committee's report for 1926, it was reported that 'A standard type of cowshed, generally suited to smallholders, has been evolved after considerable experience of the problem, and also stabling, bullock lodges, cartsheds and fencing'.⁷⁵ New ones were built and bullock sheds converted for cows, suggesting that dairying was more profitable than stock rearing.⁷⁶ The need to build premises before holdings could be relet continued to be noted into the 1930s and dairies, loose boxes and cartsheds as well as a few barns continued to be built. Most new building was in weatherboard with pantile roofs.⁷⁷ The usual plan for new farm buildings for a farm of 30 to 40 acres consisted of an L-plan, weather-boarded group, with open lodges, one for pigs, poultry etc, workshop, implement shed feed stores and three loose boxes. Several examples survive on the Burlingham and Fenland estates. By the late 1930s new builds were likely to include a tractor shed.

⁷⁴ NRO, c/c10/574, SAC minute book, 1927, annex to minutes, 8 Sept. 1927 [sic].

⁷⁵ 'Report by the County Land Agent, 1925-6', p. 3.

⁷⁶ NRO, c/c10/572, SAC minute book, 1925-6.

⁷⁷ NRO, CVES 97, 98.



FIGURE 4. House and buildings at Oaklands (now Jubilee) Farm, Litcham.

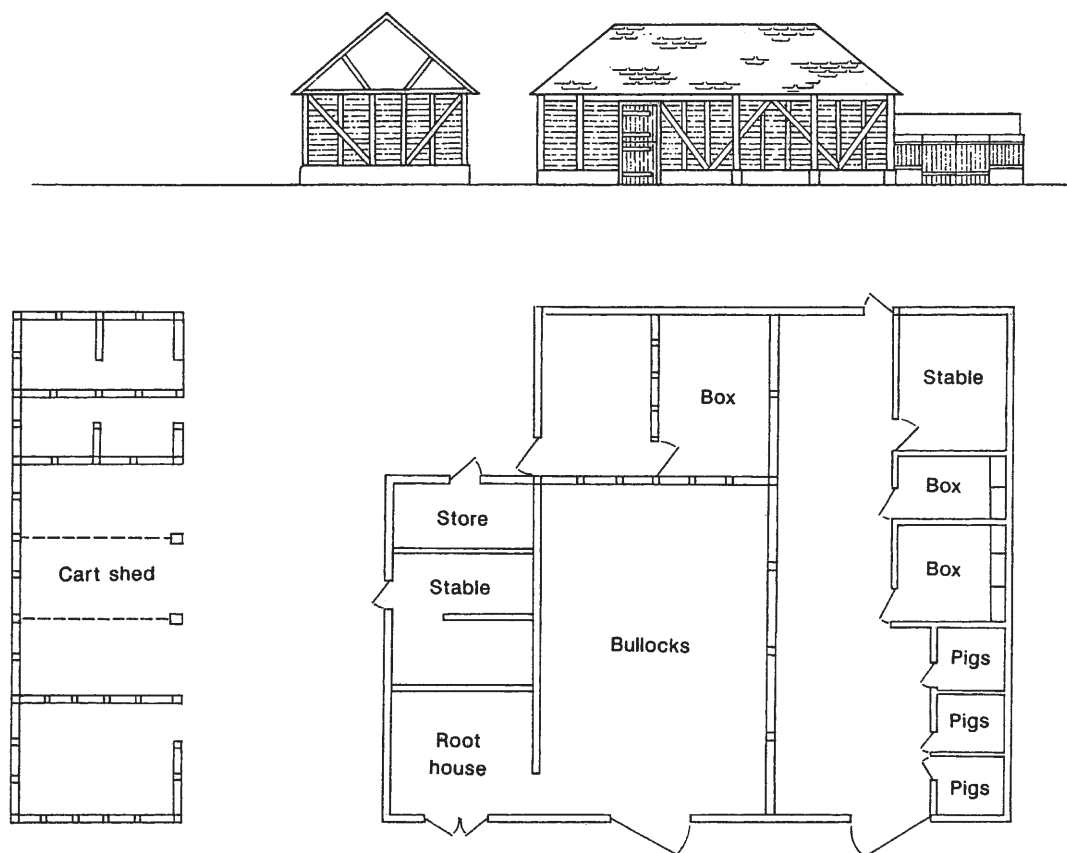


FIGURE 5. Standard plans for farm buildings on Norfolk County Council smallholdings of the type at Oaklands Farm. (redrawn by Phillip Judge)

VII

Norfolk County Council was one of the most enthusiastic councils in the promotion of smallholdings. By 1946 it had 1,896 tenants on 31,928 acres, two-thirds in east Norfolk. The County Council owned some of the best farming land in Norfolk, with extensive holdings on both the peat and silt fens in the west and the rich Flegg loams in the east. The type of farming and tenants in the two areas differed considerably. The Council owned 1306 acres of good silt land in the Terringtons, Walpoles and West Walton, but much of this was let to part-time, rather than full-time tenants, for whom little provision in the form of buildings was needed. By 1950 there were 63 part-time as opposed to 20 full-time farmers for whom the major activity would have been market gardening and small fruit production as well as growing orchards.⁷⁸ Market gardening did not form a separate category in the MAFF farm statistics until the 1940s. Small fruits and orchards included were however and the statistics show these peaking before the war.

⁷⁸ Norfolk Property Services, Guard Book 4, pp. 43–62, 105–108, 115–122.

In the east, the County Council's main holdings were around Burlingham. The soil here was a good medium loam and although fruit growing and market gardening were still important, holdings were larger, mostly full-time (97 as opposed to 20 part-time) and so a more mixed farming was possible.

From the beginning fruit farming was seen as an ideal form of farming for the smallholder. In an attempt to encourage it, an eight-acre plot at Burlingham and 3½ acres at Emneth were let to the Agricultural Education sub-committee as demonstration plots in 1923. In 1926 the total area devoted to fruit growing on the Council's estate had reached 762 acres and the main problem preventing further growth was seen to be the uncertainty of crops and prices. The 1925 price for strawberries and gooseberries, which were grown mainly in the Fens, was disappointing. Apples were badly affected by disease and late frosts. Fifty two acres of fruit trees were planted in 1921–22 at the expense of the Council, but it was reported in 1926 that many had been neglected. Potatoes were also an important crop in the Fens, but were badly affected by blight in 1926. Dairying was seen as probably the most promising business for smallholders with 119 new dairies and cowsheds being erected or converted in the early 1920s, mostly in the eastern half of the county. Poultry too could prove profitable, 'but too large a proportion of them [the tenants] are still content with the haphazard methods of feeding and management'. In common with other farms, the acreage of sugar beet on smallholdings was increasing in the 1920s and providing a buffer against depression, with 879 acres being grown in 1925 and 1747 in 1926. 'In several cases tenants who were behind with their rents and other accounts with the Council have been able to clear their debts' by taking up beet growing. Generally, full-time tenants chose to run their holdings as if they were a mixed farm, but on a miniature scale. 'Too many of the smallholders imitate the methods of the large farmer, instead of going more thoroughly into fruit and vegetable growing, sugar beet, poultry and dairying.'⁷⁹

In common with their larger neighbours, smallholders were putting land down to permanent pasture in the early '30s, the seed usually being provided by the Council. Altogether, 11 tenants were provided with seed for 60 acres in 1931 and similar help was given in 1932.⁸⁰ In 1933 about 150 acres were reseeded for permanent pasture. By 1934 22 per cent of all smallholding land was in sugar beet and as this was often the only way smallholders could pay their rent, the Committee was anxious that the sugar beet subsidy should not be removed.⁸¹

An opportunity to see smallholding farming at its best exists through the reports of the Norfolk smallholding competition run between 1927 and 1930. However, the number of entrants (usually around 40), was small compared with the total number of tenants (over 2000). The reports were generally very similar. The number of cows on smallholdings was increasing. Two tenants kept pedigree bulls. One competitor was taking part in the national milk recording scheme, but generally competitors did not have enough cows to warrant this. The pigs looked well and there were some pedigree boars. Some pig accommodation was underused. The yards were well stocked with bullocks and 'in some cases poultry keeping was undertaken on up-to-date lines' although in many instances this was not true. In September 1928 a leaflet was sent to all tenants with their rent demand entitled 'Poultry keeping for smallholders' and by 1930

⁷⁹ 'Report by the County Land Agent, 1925–6', p. 5.

minutes, 18 Mar. 1933.

⁸⁰ NRO, c/c10/581, SAC minute book, 1933–4, annex to

⁸¹ Ibid., annex to minutes, 6 June 1934.

the competition report comments that poultry husbandry had improved as tenants were keeping good laying strains. 'The tenants have apparently greatly benefited from the lectures on the subject at the Norfolk Agricultural Station' (a privately funded research station which undertook trials and publicised its results through programmes of lectures).⁸² Only one smallholder kept bees. Some holdings were clean and tidy while others were not. The cultivation, cropping and condition of the arable was good and the majority now grew sugar beet. The fruit growing holdings were particularly well farmed, although more plantations should have been sprayed. (In 1926 the Committee had purchased fruit sprayers which were to be kept at Burlingham for hire.) However, comments on the condition of pasture were far from favourable.⁸³ Although details of the competition cease to be recorded after 1930, events continued to be arranged. Sixty tenants turned up for a visit to the Sprowston Experimental Station in July 1932 and it was 'deemed a success'.⁸⁴

The 1926 report picked out some exemplary tenants to demonstrate the successes of small-holding. Market gardening, alongside pig fattening and a couple of bullocks, provided a good living for one tenant of 12½ acres. Another ten-acre holding was planted with strawberries and 550 fruit trees and bushes supplied by the County Council and this too was proving successful. Another tenant who had lost an arm during the war had been a horticulturalist before. From four acres he now produced strawberries, raspberries, black currants and sugar beet while fattening 30 pigs. His 100 head of poultry paid the rent. An ex-service officer and son of a small Norfolk farmer ran a mixed 50-acre holding where he kept seven milking cows, several stock cattle and five breeding sows. 'This man is likely to develop into a successful farmer'.⁸⁵

VIII

With the outbreak of war in 1939, smallholders, with the rest of the nation's farmers, were exhorted to produce more food. Along all with other farmers, they were subject to the control of the County War Agricultural Executive Committees (CWAECs). The farm survey of 1940–1 not only noted the condition of the farm, but also the efficiency of the farmer. In Walpole St Peter both the farming and the houses and buildings were said to be good, often better than those of neighbouring owner-occupiers.⁸⁶ In Great Massingham one tenant at Kennel Farm lacked capital and was working under a Direction Order. Other tenants were farming well, although some lacked capital. However, the buildings at Kennel Farm were poor.⁸⁷ The management of three of the tenants at Grove Farm, Martham was said to be 'faulty' while the buildings at Kemp Farm in the parish, were bad. Particularly criticized was the lack of a water supply to many of the farm houses.⁸⁸ But in these conditions at least one tenant thrived. In 1944 George Reed of Ten Mile Bank was the subject of an article in the *Daily Express*. A farm worker who had become a

⁸² NRO, c/c10/578, SAC minute book, Feb.-Oct. 1930, annex to minutes 15 July 1930; J. Hutchinson and A. C. Owers, *Change and Innovation in Norfolk Farming. Seventy years of experiment and advice at the Norfolk Agricultural Research Station* (1980).

⁸³ NRO, c/c10/578, SAC minute book, Feb.-Oct. 1930, annex to minutes 1 July 1930.

⁸⁴ NRO, c/c10/580, SAC minute book, 1931–3, quarterly report to Sept. 1932.

⁸⁵ Davies, *Report*, p. 111.

⁸⁶ TNA, MAF 32/745/261.

⁸⁷ TNA, MAF 32/720/230.

⁸⁸ TNA, MAF 32/728/141.

smallholder with 39 acres, he had been responsible for bringing twelve acres at Southery back into cultivation and had 'fought and won a ceaseless battle to make the soil of Britain productive ... in addition to growing wheat, potatoes, sugar beet, carrots, celery and onions for the nation, he grows oats and mangolds for his three horses, his two cows, his heifer and two calves; his sow and her litter of nine pigs; and his 30 chickens'.⁸⁹

IX

The change in government policy represented by the 1947 Agriculture Act made agricultural rather than social considerations paramount in shaping the future of the industry. Smallholdings were to be seen as part of a stable and efficient agricultural industry in which part-time holdings had no place. The 1947 Act also required a change in the composition of the County Council Smallholdings Committees. Two tenants, one agricultural labourer and one woman had to be included as well as farmers, fruit growers, horticulturalists and the Agricultural Workers' Union. The new committee took on its duties in October 1949 and a survey of the county's farms was undertaken in 1950–1 to suggest ways in which they could be re-organised to fit the new criteria. Part-time farms considered too small to be efficient were to be amalgamated. For instance, the eight holdings at Kennels Farm, Great Massingham were reorganized into four.⁹⁰ Moreover, in the post-war years, many of the houses and buildings were in poor condition with no electricity or piped water supply. Some were still 'bare land' holdings with no houses. As late as 1948 tenants in Nordelph and Stow were still living in timber and asbestos bungalows which were 'fast becoming uninhabitable'. There were plans to replace some of them with brick bungalows. Seven bungalows in Burlingham and four at Stow were to be encased in brick in 1949–50 at a cost of £500 each. There was a programme to provide water, electricity and septic tanks. In 1948–9, 70 houses were supplied with piped water and 139 with electricity.⁹¹ The result was the writing of a short development plan presented to the Committee in January 1952. There was, it reported, still a healthy demand for full-time holdings of 30–50 acres and the County Council had set aside £100,000 for new purchases. A further £120,000 was committed in existing contracts for improvements. New roads and water pipes were being laid and dykes cut. A total of 167 dairy holdings were being brought up to TT (tuberculosis-tested) standards and electricity installed in 482 holdings. Sixty-five sets of buildings were being improved and 11 entirely new sets were in course of construction.⁹²

X

We must now return to the list of 'hopes' quoted at the beginning of this paper to consider how far they were achieved in Norfolk. The smallholding movement probably did little to check either the decline in rural population or the decline, in the long term, of smallholdings generally. Horticulture occupied more people per hundred acres than any other sort of farming,

⁸⁹ *Daily Express*, 21 May 1944.

⁹⁰ NRO, c/c10/589, SAC minute book, 1947–50, minutes, 8 Nov. 1949.

⁹¹ NRO, c/c10/589, SAC minute book, 1947–50, annex

to minutes, 19 Nov. 1949.

⁹² Norfolk Property Services, 'Norfolk Development Plan, smallholdings (ts, 1952), p.3 and App. A.

but this cannot be directly linked to the smallholding movement. Many of the County Council's fenland holdings were in market gardening areas where small farms were typical anyway. Exceptions to this are the six fenland farms of the Stow Bardolph estate which were divided into 37 full-time holdings and the medium-sized farms of the Burlinghams which were reorganised into small tenancies.

There were those who believed that the smallholdings movement helped to create the vibrant and diversified countryside which was perceived as socially and economically desirable. To quote from the development plan of 1952, 'The Norfolk Smallholdings Committee has always had a firm conviction that, to provide an opportunity for the thrifty and industrious agricultural worker with limited capital to progress from the position of farm employee to the status of tenant farmer, was a worthy cause'. It was providing the means to independence that was seen as something valued by the smallholder. 'The fact that they are their own masters, with the countryman's love of freedom to plan his work the way he prefers, which compensates them for the arduous nature of their occupation'.⁹³

It is difficult to establish whether the hiring of a smallholding was the first step on the farming ladder for many or how much new blood the movement brought into farming. On the Dorset and Hampshire examples surveyed in 1935, nearly all the tenants were from a rural background, most had been tenants for ten to fifteen years and 61 per cent were between 40 and 50 years old, suggesting that few were moving on to larger holdings.⁹⁴ Certainly some Norfolk examples of successful tenants who moved on to larger holdings can be found. Mr Massingham, the winner of the farm prize in one year and reserve in another, is an example of the sort of person for whom smallholdings were originally designed. He left his holding in 1927 to buy his own 90-acre farm in Field Dalling. George Reed, the darling of the *Daily Express*, had previously sold 'his fine skills to the farmer who offered him the highest wage' whilst saving what he could and waiting to become his own master. 'Ambition', 'enterprise' and 'tireless energy' are the words used to describe him.⁹⁵ In the early 1940s Reg Buckingham, a casual worker in the Fens, started farming ten acres part-time, cycling ten miles to his holding. By 1950 he had been able to take on a 50-acre holding on the Stow (Bardolph) estate where he grew wheat, barley, potatoes, sugar beet. A new house had been built and 'soon a set of modern time- and labour-saving buildings will be added'. Reg was seen as a shining example of the sort of person for whom smallholdings had been intended. The *Farmers Weekly* special correspondent, travelling the county in 1950 saw many such farmers. 'Mr G. H. Holman began with a part-time holding of three acres in 1930, built up his farming in easy stages and now is a tenant of 46 acres in the Marshland section ... Mr A. F. Tate worked on a farm before the war, and lost a leg in action in Italy, is now tenant of less than ten acres growing black currants, raspberries and strawberries with wheat and beet'. Mr R. J. Layt and Mr J. E. Brister, both of Burlingham started with four and ten acres respectively and now rented 60 and 54 acres. Some tenants had made a success of dairying with small pedigree herds. The type of buildings erected for smallholders was commented on favourably and a typical plan reproduced in the article (Fig. 6).⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 1, 3.

⁹⁴ Thomas, 'County Council small-holdings', pp. 19–20.

⁹⁵ Kenneth Pipe, 'One man went to plough', *Daily Express*, 21 Apr. 1944.

⁹⁶ *Farmers' Weekly*, 29 Sept. 1950, p. 59.

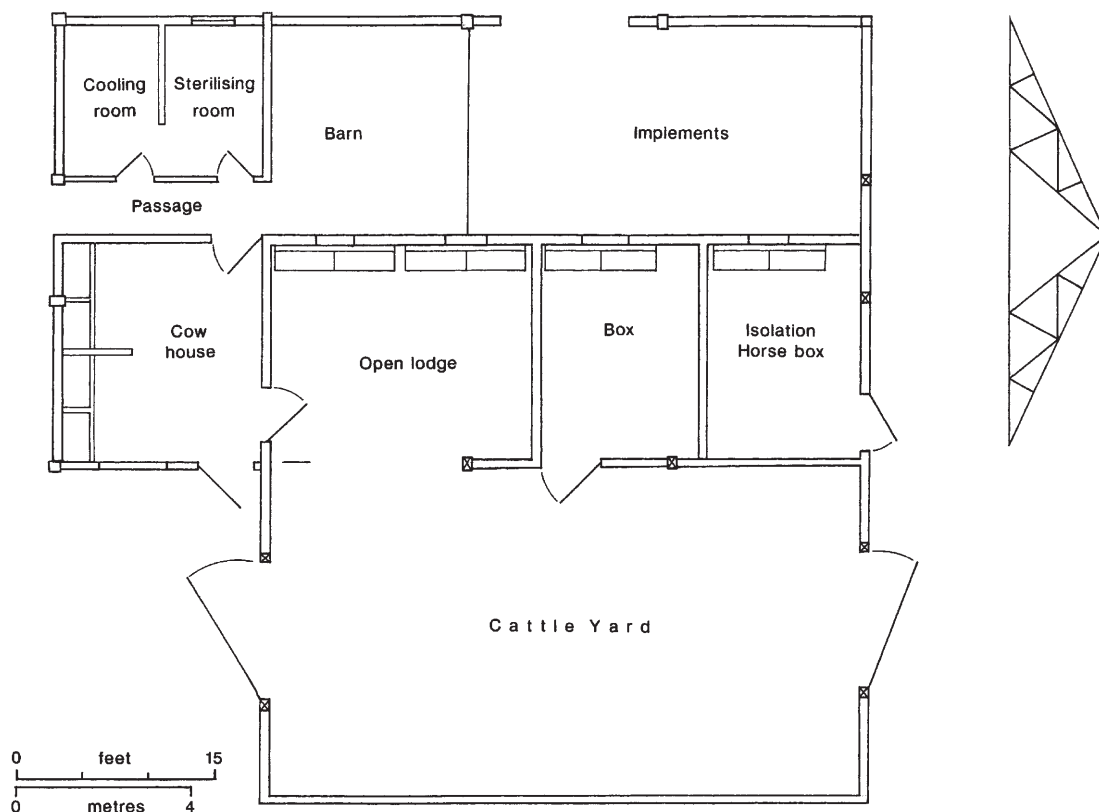


FIGURE 6. Standard plan of the type commended in the *Farmers' Weekly* article. (redrawn by Phillip Judge)

However, although a smallholding was a first step to greater things for some, by far the majority of tenants only just managed to keep going at the same level. The shift from farm-worker to tenant farmer could be difficult enough for those with some capital behind them, but for the average smallholder it was almost impossible.⁹⁷ A smallholding could only rarely generate sufficient income to allow the accumulation of funds and, as economies of scale came into play with mechanization, their position became even more precarious.

The hope of Norfolk County Council in 1952 that 'this new class of agriculturalist ... would greatly assist in food production, at the same time reinforcing the ranks of those responsible for the continuance of the industry' was probably misplaced in the long term.⁹⁸ While market gardens in the Broads and Fens worked by smallholders with little machinery were the most productive system in the early 1920s, by the end of the decade large farmers with capital were converting to vegetable production and overtaking the smallholders in efficiency. In 1935 Orwin and Darke were probably right in stating that there was nothing 'that the smallholder does which the larger farmer cannot do better'.⁹⁹

Smallholdings were successful in providing a house and livelihood for a minority of servicemen

⁹⁷ G. Henderson, *The Farming Ladder* (1944).

⁹⁸ 'Norfolk Development Plan', p.1.

⁹⁹ Orwin and Darke, *Back to the land*, p.68.

returning to a country with a housing shortage and rising unemployment, and failure rates amongst ex-servicemen were low. They were less successful as an alternative to the dole queues of the 1930s. There was a tenant turnover of about 47 per cent on Land Settlement Association holdings between 1934 and 1939.¹⁰⁰ Finally, smallholdings probably made little difference to the political stability of the countryside or to the friction between agricultural classes.

One aspect of the smallholding ideology which never made any headway in Norfolk or much elsewhere, was co-operation. 'The contented tenant is one having a completely separate holding, his own machinery, stock, implements and set of buildings and a detached house'.¹⁰¹ An article under the heading 'The Smallholders' Round Table – a weekly series, specially contributed' in the *Norfolk Chronicle* put the case for co-operation in 1921. Only by sharing a shop or stall and selling directly to the public, could smallholders hope to sell their fruit at a profit.

This is the only chance that I can see of making the fair price for the products of your land and labour. The only crop you can grow where you get equal treatment (with the large farmer) is corn, and a very bitter awakening is coming to those deluded men who imagine that a small holder could live by corn and chickens.¹⁰²

But this advice was not widely heeded. An isolated example of a successful 'colony' was the one established by the Ministry of Agriculture at Sutton Bridge in Lincolnshire (just over the county boundary) where 227 tenants worked some 5000 acres. Between 1926 and 1937 there were 75 changes of tenancy, but only nine of these were the result of failure and 35 tenants had moved on the larger holdings.¹⁰³

On this occasion we have been concerned with the social and economic impact of smallholdings on the tenants themselves and little has been said about the cost to the county councils. Between 1919 and 1926 much of the financial burden of purchase and equipping smallholdings was met by the Ministry of Agriculture and, both before and after that date, long-term, low interest government loans were available. No where in the minute books of the Smallholding and Allotments Committee is there any indication of profit or loss to the County Council. While there was concern over the necessity of rate rebates and the need to ensure value for money from contractors, there is no evidence as to how far the Council's smallholdings were regarded as a profitable enterprise or, more realistically, a burden on the rates.

The creation of smallholdings had a significant if temporary affect on the farming economy and landscape over many parishes within East Anglia. It could be argued that they were only successful in areas like the Fens which were not dominated by large landowners and where small-scale farming was already usual. Here, 'new smallholdings can crop up naturally ... depopulation was stayed, poor relief diminished, public houses disappear and a closer settlement of the land is accomplished at no cost to anyone'. On the whole, however, they failed 'where generations of farming on a large scale has destroyed the smallholding instinct'.¹⁰⁴ The Burlingham estate, surrounded by large farms, is an exception to this. Here it was possible to change a largely cereal-growing area into successful holdings operating on a horticultural and mixed

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Land*, p. 218.

¹⁰¹ 'Norfolk Development Plan', p. 3.

¹⁰² *Norfolk Chronicle*, 12 Aug. 1921.

¹⁰³ Smith, *Land for the small man*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Jebb, *Smallholdings*, pp. 14, 437.

farming system. In landscape terms, fields were divided, concrete roads laid out and poor quality cottages improved. While the original farm houses and buildings were used where possible, new brick bungalows and small low groups of buildings, often including ex-army huts, sprang up.

Enthusiasm for the smallholding movement ran out after the Second World War, when it became clear that increasing productivity could only be achieved on large-scale farms. This economic aim took precedence over any other considerations and, as holdings were amalgamated, a social experiment aiming to create the small-scale farms which were typical of much of Europe came to an end.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ More recently, in the 1970s and 1980s, many were sold off. In 2005 the Norfolk County Council Estate retained 17,511 acres with 211 tenants, of which 128 had buildings or a house on their holding.