

The land market, 1880–1925: A reappraisal reappraised

by Michael Thompson

Abstract

The notion that there was ‘a revolution in landownership’ in the spate of land sales in 1918–21 was based on claims in the trade journal, the *Estates Gazette*. Beckett and Turner’s article, ‘The end of the old order?’, demonstrates conclusively that that journal did not contain the detailed evidence to support its claims, thus appearing to demolish the ‘revolution’. Consideration of the scale and timing of the growth of owner-farming, however, coupled with experimental use of data on landownership from Kelly’s *Directories*, calls for second thoughts. It seems possible that something not far short of ‘a quarter of England’ may actually have changed hands in 1918–21.

It was a tremendous, and most touching, compliment to have the 2005 Winter Conference of the British Agricultural History Society devoted to themes from my own publications, and a very special boost to the ego to find that in their contribution John Beckett and Michael Turner had engaged in a serious, detailed, cross-examination and deconstruction of something I published more than 40 years ago. Deploying their characteristic statistical skills Beckett and Turner have reopened the question of the scale of land transfers in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, and their significance in the longer term for the structure of landownership and the nature of rural society. Since England possesses no central register of landownership and thus no public record of land transfers, as Beckett and Turner explain, it remains unlikely that the amount of land changing hands in the four years, 1918–21, can be definitively established.¹ Nevertheless, the size of these land transfers, whether exceptionally large or merely normal and average, remains of some importance to understanding some of the major socio-economic and political developments in inter-war Britain. The disappearance of the land question from its pre-1914 position in the front line of public debate, the rise of the National Farmers Union to become something not unlike a pillar of a virtual corporate state, and the accelerated decline of the landowner contingent in the House of Commons, these were matters which may, or may not, have been profoundly affected by the operations of the land market.

What is at issue for Beckett and Turner is the reliability of the claim in the *Estates Gazette* on 31 December 1921 that ‘one quarter of England must have changed hands in four years’. It is true

¹ John Beckett and Michael Turner, ‘End of the Old Order? F.M.L. Thompson, the Land Question, and the burden of ownership in England, c.1880–1925’, *AgHR* 55 (2007), pp. 269–88.

that I gave renewed currency to this claim by quoting it, in 1963, and translating the concept of 'England changing hands' into land area, by pointing out that if one quarter of the country was indeed transferred, then 'it is possible that in the four years of intense activity between 1918 and 1921 something between six and eight million acres changed hands in England'.² The claim, however, originated in the *Estates Gazette*, albeit given considerable support by national newspapers which were well aware of the hectic activity in the land market in these years, and Beckett and Turner's prime purpose is to discover whether the *Estates Gazette* possessed enough evidence to sustain that claim.³ A very minor subsidiary question is whether, either in 1963 or in 2005, I happened to think that that claim was reasonably accurate.

It should be readily accepted that Beckett and Turner's painstaking, ingenious, and exhaustive examination and sophisticated processing of the figures of estate sales reported in the *Estates Gazette*, and of the annual record of sales in the *Year Books of Auction Sales*, establishes that neither of those sources contains evidence of sales in the four years in question, when the individual records are aggregated, that covered anything like a quarter of the area of England. Their conclusion is that the *Estates Gazette* recorded sales which amounted to 6.5 per cent of the land area of England (or 8.7 per cent of the total cultivated area of England) that is about two million acres, nowhere near to one quarter. Their explanation of the discrepancy between the land sales which the *Estates Gazette* itself reported and its editorial assertions about their magnitude is that the journal, and the property professionals which it served, were obsessed by the break-up of large, inherited, aristocratic estates and the disappearance of the old social and political order which this break-up either reflected or caused. Hence the argument is that the trade journal, and by association the national press which was singing the same tune, exaggerated the scale of land transfers either deliberately in order to scare their followers into doing something to stop the disintegration of the old order, or from hysterical panic reaction to what they saw as approaching doom. That is of course a possibility, although it is not instantly apparent why either a calculating or a hysterical exaggeration should have been restricted to a cry that one quarter of England had changed hands.

A less emotive, and a possibly verifiable, explanation is that the *Estates Gazette* and the *Year Books of Auction Sales* under-recorded the actual volume of sales, and that those journals were well aware of this. It is possible that the editors, through their experience of the workings of the land market and their knowledge of the means by which they collected reports of its transactions, were able to make a well-informed estimate of the appropriate multiplier for converting reported acreages sold into a figure for the total area actually transferred. Since there is no evidence that the journal ever did the meticulous addition sums of sales reported in its pages in the way that Beckett and Turner have now done, it might seem unlikely that the editors' minds worked in this fashion. Nevertheless, in the 1890s the editor thought that 'the total of sales at the Estate Exchange is merely an index to, not a record of, business done in the land market ... The offices of solicitors having important conveyancing practice are in themselves a medium of transfer at figures probably in excess of all the public business recorded at the

² F. M. L. Thompson, *English landed society in the nineteenth century* (1963), p. 332.

³ *The Times*, which had always had a keen eye

for estate sales, reported on the feverish activity, for example, on 22 Mar., 29 Mar., 15 May, 30 and 31 Dec., 1919, 19 May 1920, 15 Oct. and 31 Dec. 1921.

Auction Mart'.⁴ This implied in a tentative way that the 'business done in the land market' was at least double the amount recorded in the *Estates Gazette*, and implicitly much more than double since there were also many sales at auctions, besides the private treaty sales handled by solicitors, which were not known to the London Auction Mart. There is no equivalent statement of the editorial hunch in the early 1920s, but conceivably there was still in mind a view that the reported figures represented half, or less than half, of the actual 'business done in the land market'. Some of the leading estate agents who handled many estate sales did indeed total their annual dealings, in both acreage and money terms, and publicise the figures, as Norton, Trist, and Gilbert had done in the previous century,⁵ and with some idea of their market share it would have been possible to extrapolate from individual firms' turnover to an estimate of the total volume of transactions. Unfortunately there is a lack of evidence that the *Estates Gazette* carried out any of these hypothetical calculations for converting its recorded land sales into the assertion that one quarter of England had changed hands.

It is not too difficult to show that significant sales were not captured by the *Estates Gazette*.⁶ It would be an altogether different matter to establish the overall scale of this under-recording by tracing a credible regional or national sample of unrecorded sales. That would entail a trawl through a large number of estate and solicitors' archives to establish details of sales, followed by comparing the results with *Estates Gazette* coverage: a laborious task which might be tacked on to the remit of, say, a VCH county researcher, but hardly one which would merit a self-standing research project. Luckily, despite the absence of a central register of land transfers, the *Estates Gazette* is not the only source available for estimating the scale of sales in the immediate aftermath of the Great War.

A starting point is the re-emergence of the yeomen, or owner-farmers, in the twentieth century. Owner-occupation generated statistics, more reliable for some years than for others, which were analysed in the classic 1955 article by S. G. Sturmeý, 'Owner-farming in England and Wales, 1900-1950'.⁷ Sturmeý showed that owner-occupation increased from 10.9 per cent of the cultivated area of England and Wales in 1914, to 36 per cent of the cultivated area in 1927, an increase from 2.9 million acres to 9.2 million acres, that is roughly one quarter of the cultivated area changed from being tenanted land to being land owned by the farmers.⁸ Beckett and Turner note this rather large transfer of land somewhat in passing, without indicating how it might affect their own estimates of the quantity of land changing hands.⁹ 'The main part of the increase in owner-occupation which occurred between 1909 and 1927 occurred in the years 1919 to 1921', Sturmeý concluded.¹⁰ 1909 was chosen as the base year for this calculation because he argued that the small decline in owner-occupation between then and 1914

⁴ *Estates Gazette* (hereafter EG), 2 Jan. 1892, p. 5, quoted in F. M. L. Thompson, 'The land market in the nineteenth century', *Oxford Economic Paper* 9 (1957), repr. in W. E. Minchinton (ed.), *Essays in Agrarian History* (2 vols, 1968), II, p. 44.

⁵ Norton, Trist, and Gilbert, 'A century of land values', *The Times*, 20 Apr. 1889, p. 11.

⁶ Thompson, *English landed society*, p. 332 (the sale of at least 8,600 acres of the Longleat estate between 1919

and 1921 was not reported in the *Estates Gazette*).

⁷ S. G. Sturmeý, 'Owner-farming in England and Wales, 1900-1950', *Manchester School* 23 (1955), repr. in Minchinton (ed.), *Essays in Agrarian History*, II, pp. 281-306.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Table I, p. 287.

⁹ Beckett and Turner, 'End of the old order?', pp. 279-80.

¹⁰ Sturmeý, 'Owner-farming', p. 294.

shown in the Agricultural Statistics was unreal, and that in fact there was an actual increase in the last years before the start of the war, the product of the flurry of sales by landowners who were scared by the 1909 Budget and Lloyd George's Land Campaign. There were indeed many estate sales in the years 1910–14, and talk of the break-up of estates; there was also a move on many estates to lease farms that had previously been in hand, and counted in the statistics as owner-occupied. The 1914 figure was most likely less inaccurate than Sturmeý argued.¹¹ He maintained that owner-occupation continued to rise during the war years, but without citing any specific evidence. There were certainly a handful of well-publicised sales during the war, but the general view of the property professionals was that business on the land market dwindled to a trickle, until a dramatic revival in the late 1918 season. Lord Redesdale's behaviour was perhaps characteristic of landowners anxious to sell but prudently biding their time: inheriting the Gloucestershire country house and estate of Batsford, in 1916 he resolved that it had to be sold, repeatedly telling the Mitford children who loved living there that as soon as the war was over it would have to be sold, because they were too poor to live there. In 1919 it was sold.¹² The property market collapsed towards the end of 1921; there were few sales in the next couple of years, then a recovery in demand in 1924 and 1925, which Sturmeý called 'the second period of increase [in owner-farming]', concluding that 'after 1925 land sales practically ceased and with them the increase in owner-occupation'.¹³

Virtually all the increase in the area of owner-farming in these years reflected the sale of farms by landowners to sitting tenants, though some of it came via middlemen who purchased entire estates and quickly resold most of the farmland, maybe retaining land with development potential or a specially choice mansion. It was only after 1945, with tempting tax and subsidy prospects on offer, that part of the further increase in owner-farming reflected a shift from tenanted farms to direct farming by the landowner, so that this part of the increase did not reflect any sales of land. Hence the importance of clarifying the chronology of the spread of owner-farming for estimating the scale of land transfers in the years 1918–21. The Sturmeý chronology suggests that some portion of the 6.3 million acres transferred from tenanted farms to owner-occupation between 1914 and 1927 should be attributed to the war years, and a rather larger portion to the years 1924–5. A trawl of sales reports in the *Estates Gazette* broadly supports this chronology, showing a steep decline in sales in 1926, to less than 9,000 acres in the year, as against recording of 50,000 acres in 1924 and 76,000 acres in 1925. In 1927 there were reports of more than 73,000 acres being sold; that included, however, 36,000 acres of poor quality land in Swaledale, and at least 27,000 acres sold after the collection of the Agricultural Statistics in June so that even if all of it had been purchased by tenants this would not have been shown in the owner-occupation figures for 1927. On the other hand, while these reports do indeed record considerable purchases by sitting tenants at the sales in 1924 and 1925, they also record similar purchases in 1922 on the Duke of Northumberland's Albury estate in Surrey, and in 1923, on Viscount Portman's Dorset estate, while purchases by tenants in 1927, such as of 5,000 acres of the Earl of Normanton's Lincolnshire estate and of 11,000 acres of the Duke of Rutland's Derbyshire estate, can be disregarded as having taken

¹¹ Thompson, *English landed society*, pp. 321–5.

pp. 38–44.

¹² Mary S. Lovell, *The Mitford Girls* (2001, 2002 edn),

¹³ Sturmeý, 'Owner-farming', pp. 295–6.

place after June.¹⁴ This evidence of course furnishes no more than a straw in the wind for estimating how much of the 6.3 million acres sold to farmers should be assigned to 1915–17 and 1922–7; it was certainly more than the 290,000 acres reported in the *Estates Gazette* as being sold in 1922–7, far from all of which was in any case bought by the tenants. A conservative guess is that one million acres went to tenants in 1922–7, and perhaps 250,000 acres in 1915–17. That would leave 5 million acres sold by established landowners to sitting tenants in the four years 1918–21, roughly two and a half times the volume of sales identified by Beckett and Turner for the rather longer period of 1917–24.

While the land market was dominated by sitting tenants as purchasers, either directly or indirectly via syndicates of speculators who bought for quick resale, they were by no means the only purchasers in these years. New men of wealth, and a few older established landowners, also entered the market as purchasers. For example, the soap-boiler and racehorse owner Joseph Watson bought Compton Verney from Lord Willoughby de Broke in September 1921; the textile manufacturer Amos Nelson purchased the 6,000 acre Gledstone estate, near Skipton, in 1922; Sir Herbert Leon, stockbroker, added to his Bletchley Park estate by purchasing the Denbigh Hall estate in 1918; Sir Alfred Mond, founder of ICI, acquired the Melchet estate in Hampshire at this time, and the Bovril fortune of George Johnston, 1st Lord Luke, was used to purchase the Stowell estate in Gloucestershire from Lord Eldon. This was resold in 1923, rather appropriately, to the importer and retailer of beef, Samuel Vestey, Luke settling instead at Odell in Bedfordshire. At about the same time, Lord Leverhulme was busily buying land in Hertfordshire and Cheshire, as well as in the Hebrides; the brewer Nall Cain purchased the Bocket estate in Hertfordshire in 1921, Sir Herbert Smith, Kidderminster carpet manufacturer, bought Witley Court and 1,100 acres of the 8,500-acre Witley estate, Worcestershire, in 1920, and Samuel Waring, of Waring and Gillow, purchased Gopsall Hall from Earl Howe. At the same time slightly older new money used the opportunity of a super-abundant supply of land on the market to extend its territories: Weetman Pearson, who had already used some of his fortune from civil engineering and Mexican oil to acquire Cowdray Park and his peerage before 1910, used more of it to enlarge his estate, in Scotland as well as in Sussex; and Lord Wimborne, grandson of Josiah Guest of Dowlais, was active in the market, selling Canford, which became a school (rather less well-known than Stowe, which had similar origins), and buying more land near his favoured second seat at Ashby St Ledger.¹⁵

¹⁴ *EG*, 30 Dec. 1922, p. 923 for the Albury estate sale; 22 Sept. 1923, p. 371 for the Portman estate sale; 29 Oct. 1927, p. 589 for the Normanton sale, 2 July 1927, p. 15, 9 July 1927, p. 51, and 13 Aug. 1927, p. 223 for the Rutland sale. Major sales recorded in the *EG* in 1924 include a further sale to 117 tenants, by Portman, 7 June, p. 825; the sale of 2300 acres in Lincolnshire to tenants by Tyrwhitt Drake, 22 Mar., p. 393; the sale of 1700 acres in Cheshire to tenants by the Marquess of Cholmondeley, 6 Sept., p. 313; 3600 acres in Warwickshire by Lord Middleton, 8 Nov., p. 643; and 3500 acres in Oxfordshire by Lord Harcourt, 6 Sept., p. 325. In 1925 sales included 11,000 acres in Derbyshire to tenants by Lord Howard of Glossop, 7

Feb., p. 193; 5092 acres at Bedale, Yorks, sold by Sir William C. Gray in 'a remarkable instance of combination by the tenants', 1 Aug., p. 156; 5000 acres in Lancashire by the Earl of Derby, 30 May, p. 801; and 2054 acres in Oxfordshire by Lord Redesdale, 26 Sept., pp. 419, 428.

¹⁵ H. J. Habakkuk, *Marriage, debt, and the estates system. English Landownership, 1650–1950* (1994), p. 691, for Nall Cain, Samuel Waring, Joseph Watson, and Herbert Smith. F. M. L. Thompson, *Gentrification and the enterprise culture* (2001), p. 71 for Amos Nelson, App. 3 for Alfred Mond, App. 4 (ii) for George Johnston, Herbert Leon. Beckett and Turner, 'End of the old order?', p. 287, for Leverhulme. *EG*, 21 Feb. 1922, p. 89, for Cowdray.

Even a dozen swallows, however, do not make a summer, and a handful of instances of purchasers who were not tenant farmers does little to establish how much of the flood of land on the market ended up in the hands of 'conventional' landowners, although it is clear that something needs to be added to the five million acres acquired by sitting tenants in 1918–21. There are no known sources that could furnish a conclusive answer to this question, but Kelly's county directories may be of some help, albeit of a somewhat impressionistic sort. These directories identify by name the principal landowners, parish by parish, and although it is not at present known what the sources of this information were – local vicars, solicitors, and post offices being obvious candidates – it is apparent from the changes recorded that the information was kept reasonably up to date. The compilers were status-conscious, and distinguished carefully between 'landowners', 'residents' (who would include resident-landowners), and 'commercial farmers', so that it is fairly certain that those identified as 'landowners' were not owner-farmers. Reinforcing this assumption is the habit of recording that 'the land all belongs to the farmers', 'most of the farmers own their own land', or 'nearly all the farmers own their own land', or words to similar effect, in those parishes for which no 'principal landowners' are mentioned. Such parish entries, infrequent before 1910, become frequent in post-1920 editions, thus further enhancing confidence in the accuracy of the directories. As might be expected, many parishes were accredited with several 'principal landowners', and in those parishes it is impossible to know how the land was distributed among them. Where a single 'principal owner', often named as 'sole owner', is identified, however, it is a reasonable assumption that the major part of the parish area, perhaps around 75 to 80 per cent, was in single ownership; in other words, such parishes were what used to be called closed parishes. For present purposes it is largely immaterial whether such 'single owners' were landed gentry or aristocracy, or local professionals, businessmen, or traders: it suffices that by Kelly's own definitions they were not farmers. In principle, therefore, by establishing the extent of changes among 'single owners' by comparing successive editions of the directories – disregarding changes due to inheritance – it should be possible to estimate the rough order of magnitude of sales by landowners to new, non-farmer, landowners.

As an initial attempt to test this possibility a sample of five counties has been analysed: Berkshire, Devon, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, and Northamptonshire, selected for no good reason except that a batch of Kelly's Directories suitable for extracting the pre-1914 and 1920s land-ownership information was readily available.¹⁶ Neither the geographical coverage nor the dates of the available editions are ideal for isolating changes in ownership in 1918–21 in England as a whole, but the broad outlines of changes which are suggested by the data may encourage others to undertake a more systematic and rigorous use of this source. The results of this exercise are presented in Table 1. The 589 parishes in the five counties which were recorded as having 'single owners' before 1914 comprised 30 per cent of the total area of those counties, and together the five counties account for 14.3 per cent of the total land area of England.

Note 15 continued

Kelly's *Northamptonshire* (1920 edn), p. 23 for Wimbome.

¹⁶ Kelly's *Directories* for Berkshire (1911 and 1928

edns); for Devon (1906 and 1926 edns); for Gloucestershire (1906 and 1931 edns); for Hampshire (1907 and 1923 edns); for Northamptonshire (1903, 1920 and 1928 edns).

TABLE 1. Ownership changes, 1906–late 1920s

County	County area (‘000 acres)	Parishes	Number of ‘single owner’ parishes	Area of ‘single owner’ parishes (‘000 acres)	Changes to owners of ‘single owner’ parishes			
					to owner-farmers		to new landowners	
					number of parishes	area (‘000 acres)	number of parishes	area (‘000 acres)
Devon	1,633	478	106	377	29	73	30	62
Gloucestershire	813	364	150	287	30	42	40	59
Northamptonshire	617	314	143	241	23	34	43	70
Three counties	3,063	1,156	399	905	82	149	113	191
Berkshire	436	192	79	133	4	7	22	38
Hampshire	1,049	343	111	314	7	9	24	67
Five counties	4,548	1,691	589	1,352	93	165	159	296

Source: calculated from Kelly’s *Directories* as explained in the text.

A possible drawback to reliance on these figures is that the amount of land passing to owner-farmers appears to be seriously understated, for the Kelly figures imply that no more than 1.1 to 3.8 million acres were transferred into owner-occupation, whereas the actual amount was 6.3 million acres.¹⁷ The data in Table 1, however, capture the transfer to owner-farmers only in those parishes which Kelly identified as having ‘single owners’ before 1914, that is a little over one-third of the parishes in the five counties. In the remaining 1,100 parishes which were recorded as having two or more ‘principal owners’ there were ownership changes in 758. Many of these were to sitting tenants, although as Kelly’s practice seems to have been only to mention the presence of owner-farmers when it could state that ‘the parish is chiefly owned by the farmers’ the directories were unlikely to mention the farmers when ownership of a parish was actually divided between some ‘principal landowners’ and some farmers. Nevertheless, some of the rise in owner-occupation outside the ‘single owner’ parishes was captured: in Devon, for example, parishes with a total area of 225,000 acres were identified as being chiefly owned by the farmers in 1926, while the transfers to owner-farmers in ‘single owner’ parishes accounted for no more than one-third of that area. Thus while the Kelly figures for the owner-farmer presence in Berkshire and Hampshire appear to be particularly suspect, one can be cautiously confident that in the other three counties the information does relate to transfers to new, non-farmer, landowners.

Upper and lower estimates of the acreage of land transferred between 1906 and the late 1920s from landowners to new landowners who were not owner-farmers can thus be calculated by extrapolation from the data for the three counties, Devon, Gloucestershire, and Northamptonshire,

¹⁷ Column 7, transfers in single-owner parishes to owner-farmers = 12% of the total area of single-owner parishes in the five counties: applied to England as a whole that would equal 1.15m acres. Since single-owner parishes formed 30% of the total area of the five counties, and the five counties were 14% of the area of England, the upper estimate would be 165,000 acres x 3.3 x 7 = 3.8m acres. The 6.3m acres transferred to owner-occupiers between 1914 and 1927 related to England and Wales, and there is no readily accessible means of removing the Welsh element from this figure.

with some confidence that they do not under-record the owner-farmer element but less confidence that they are representative of England as a whole than the data for the entire five-county group, which since they under-record the owner-farmers, must exaggerate the extent of the transfer to new landowners. All the estimates are based on the assumption that the county groups are representative of England as a whole: the three counties cover 9.5 per cent of the land area of England, and the five counties, 14.3 per cent. The lower estimates assume that the land changing hands was confined to the 'single owner' parishes, which obviously grossly underestimates the actual extent of the transfers, while the upper estimates assume that the same proportion of land changed hands in the counties as a whole as in the 'sole owner' parishes, which is likely to overestimate the actual extent of the transfers. Middling estimates can also be made, by making separate estimates for the volume of changes in parishes with two or more owners, and adding those to the estimated changes in 'single owner' parishes. Sixty five per cent of parishes had two or more owners, covering over 70 per cent of the total area of both three and five county sets. In both sets 69 per cent of such parishes recorded ownership changes in the relevant period, and the middling estimates assume that the changes in these parishes were similar to the changes in the 'single owner' parishes. These six estimates are presented in Table 2.

There is little difference between the estimates based on the three counties and the five counties figures, and the mean of the six estimates suggests that something of the order of four and a half million acres may have been transferred from old landowners to new, non-farmer, landowners between 1906 and the late 1920s. That, however, refers to the total area of the parishes in which such transfers occurred, and it is unlikely that the landowners concerned owned more than three-quarters to four-fifths of the parish areas, so that perhaps 3.3 million acres, rather than 4.5 million acres, changed hands in this direction. The known behaviour of the land market over this period makes it possible to make a shrewd guess about how much of this possible 3.3 million acres changed hands in the four years 1918 to 1921. A first spurt of great activity and talk of the break-up of estates between 1910 and 1914, followed by quiescence during the Great War, the big spurt of 1918–21, followed by little activity in 1922–3, a short revival of business in 1924–5, and few transactions in the remainder of the 1920s, suggest that it may not be unreasonable to attribute one-quarter of the transfers to the pre-1914 period, one-quarter to the relatively quiet years 1915–17 and 1922 to the late 1920s, leaving one-half, or 1.5 million acres, as the share of 1918–21.

Hence, if the Kelly evidence and the rather involved calculations based upon it are to be believed, the four years 1918 to 1921 witnessed something of the order of 1.5 million acres changing hands from one set of landowners to a different set of landowners¹⁸ to add to the 5 million

¹⁸ Some of them were established landowners adding to their estates, for example Sir Spencer Maryon Wilson and Lord Stalbridge in Berkshire, Sir Wilfrid Peek and Lord Mildmay in Devon, Sir B. M. Eyres-Monsell and Sir H. Ingram in Gloucestershire, Viscounts Woolmer and Peel in Hampshire, and Edward Scawen Wyndham and Sir George Reresby Sitwell in Northamptonshire. Others were 'new men', for example Sir Edward Mauger Iliffe (later created Lord Iliffe), press baron and owner of Kelly's *Directories*, and Sir Robert James Black, banker, in Berkshire, Sir Raymond Beck, Lloyds underwriter, and Sir Trehawke Kekewich, lawyer, in Devon, Lord Dulverton, tobacco manufacturer, and Samuel Vestey, meat importer and retailer, in Gloucestershire, Sir Charles Greenway, Anglo-Persian Oil, and Sir Heath Harrison, Liverpool shipowner, in Hampshire, and Sir P. S. Stott, architect, and Sir Charles Kenneth Murchison, stockbroker and politician, in Northamptonshire.

TABLE 2. Some estimates of area changing hands in England, c.1906–late 1920s (million acres)

	<i>Lower estimates^a</i>	<i>Middling estimates^b</i>	<i>Upper estimates^c</i>
On three-county data; ^d			
to new landowners	2.0	5.2	6.6
to owner-farmers	1.5	3.9	5.1
On five-county data; ^e			
to new landowners	2.11	5.6	6.9
to owner-farmers	1.15	3.0	3.8

Notes:

^a Lower estimates assume that the only changes were those in 'single owner' parishes, i.e. in 30% of the area of England either 21% or 22% of the area went to new landowners and 12% or 16% went to owner-farmers.

^b Middling estimates assume that in those parishes with two or more owners which experienced ownership changes such changes were the same as those in 'single owner' parishes, i.e. that 21% or 22% of their area went to new landowners and 12% or 16% went to owner-farmers. The area thus calculated has then been added to the area of changes in 'single owner' parishes detailed in column 1.

^c Upper estimates assume that changes in 'single owner' parishes were mirrored by similar changes in other parishes, i.e. that 21% or 22% of the area went to new landowners, and 12% or 16% went to owner-farmers.

^d In the three-county set 21% of the area of 'single owner' parishes went to new landowners and 16% to owner-farmers.

^e In the five-county set 22% of the area of 'single owner' parishes went to new landowners and 12% to owner-farmers.

Sources: based on a comparisons of Kelly's *Directories* as follows: Berkshire (1911 and 1928 edns); Devon (1906 and 1926 edns); Gloucestershire (1906 and 1931 edns); Hampshire (1907 and 1923 edns); Northamptonshire (1903, 1920, and 1928 edns).

acres changing hands from landowners to former tenant farmers, in all 6.5 million acres: that is to say, about one-quarter of the cultivated acreage of England, or one-fifth of the total land area of England.¹⁹ Of course, neither the *Estates Gazette* nor *The Times* – or for that matter any other contemporary – could have possessed such evidence in 1921, and it remains true, as Beckett and Turner demonstrate, that the internal evidence recorded in the *Estates Gazette* does not support the claim that one-quarter of England had changed hands. It is even suggested that the internal evidence available to that journal through the records of the Estate Exchange can be made to show that the volume of estate sales in 1918–21 was no larger than the volume of sales in 1896–9.²⁰ This suggestion derives from an implicit assumption about the share of urban property sales in the figures for the two periods, and from the possibly debateable conversion of nominal sales figures into real terms, which should depend on an index of the price of land (assuming that the sales figures related to land alone and not to some mixture of land and houses). In any case it is true that no cry was raised in the late 1890s that England was changing hands – although in the 1880s the Duke of Marlborough had remarked that 'were there any

¹⁹ Since the 5m acres going to owner-farmers relates to England and Wales, the figure for England alone must have been somewhat smaller, although as noted before, at present there is no way of disaggregating the

Welsh element.

²⁰ Beckett and Turner, 'End of the Old Order?', p. 281.

effective demand for the purchase of land, half the land of England would be in the market tomorrow'.²¹ One good reason for this silence was that there is little evidence that any appreciable portion of aristocratic or gentry England did change hands in the late 1890s. A thorough, and extremely painstaking, investigation of the 1909–10 land valuation records for Staffordshire, piecing together from the parish returns the total holdings of individual landowners, has shown that of the 37 large estates (of 3,000 acres upwards) at the time of Bateman's 1883 listing only six had been sold or broken up before 1909, four of them between 1904 and 1909, one in 1891, and only one possibly in the late 1890s; between 1883 and 1909 while some sixteen estates had seen comparatively minor sales, five actually recorded larger acreages in 1909 than in 1883, and the remaining ten estates remained pretty much unchanged. In addition four new estates of over 3,000 acres had emerged, two of them based on Bateman-era estates.²² The message from Kelly's *Directories* is much the same. To be sure in Berkshire there were changes in the landowners of a quarter of the 'single owner' parishes between 1888 and 1911, and while some of these may have happened after the 1909 Budget scare, the county, with its strong attractions for court and metropolitan high society, had traditionally experienced a high turnover of estates, one that was only slightly raised between 1911 and the late 1920s to reflect changes in one-third of the same parishes. By contrast, in Devon, Gloucestershire, and Northamptonshire only seven per cent of the 399 'single owner' parishes saw changes in their landowners between the late 1880s and 1906, compared with ownership changes in almost half of those parishes between 1906 and the late 1920s.²³ It is thus tolerably certain that whether the press exaggerated the scale of estate sales in 1918–21 or not, the volume of those sales greatly exceeded that of the late 1890s and was understandably thought to be of a different order of magnitude to anything experienced within living memory.

The apparent accuracy of the claim that a quarter of England had changed hands might perhaps have derived from the knowledge and experience of the land market professionals, rather than it being a mere fluke that a wild exaggeration inspired by hysteria, panic, and political bias chanced to be retrospectively authenticated. The idea that the press was producing inflated figures because it believed or feared that the torrent of sales portended the collapse of the old landed order is attractive, but possibly flawed even without this degree of retrospective justification. The argument seems to be that the end of the war saw, or was most likely to see, a resumption of the pre-war political assault on the hereditary landed aristocracy, reinforced by the increased wartime taxation and the fresh challenge of bolshevism, although the clarity of this cocktail is a little muddled by the curious observation that there were financial reasons for the post-1918 sales, as if there had not been financial reasons for any previous sales. As it happens, however, there was little in the actual political actions or developments in the years between 1918 and the 1921 press assertions about land sales to indicate an imminent resumption of the pre-war assault on landowners. Lloyd George, whose vitriolic rhetoric at the time of the

²¹ Thompson, *English landed society*, p. 319.

²² Dr David Brown has kindly shown me advance information from his contribution to A. D. M. Phillips and C. B. Phillips (eds), *A Staffordshire Atlas* (forthcoming). Ten of the 37 large estates in Staffordshire were either partly or completely sold in 1919–21.

²³ Kelly's *Directories* for Berkshire (1888 edn), for Devon (1888 edn), for Gloucestershire (1897 edn), and for Northamptonshire (1894 edn), in addition to those cited in n.16. These editions are clearly not ideal for capturing changes confined to the years 1896–9.

1909 Budget and the 1913–14 Land Campaign had thoroughly scared the landowners, was no longer breathing fire and brimstone and his land campaign immediately after 1918 was confined to advocating the provision of smallholdings for ex-servicemen. It was not until 1925, well after the press had had its say, that he reverted to something like his pre-1914 form on the land issue, with the rather obscure but undoubtedly anti-landlord policy of ‘cultivating tenures’ launched in the highly unsuccessful and quickly forgotten Liberal Green Book. Meanwhile the tiny group of ardent Liberal land-taxers which survived the 1918 election – Outhwaite, Wedgwood, Trevelyan – migrated to Labour, which was not yet regarded as an altogether serious contender for power, and the land taxes and valuation system of the 1909–10 Budget were repealed in 1920 by Lloyd George’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Austen Chamberlain. Of course Chamberlain, as a Tory, could be expected to act as the landowners’ friend: so when he made massive increases in death duties and supertax in his 1919 Budget he presumably did not have landowners particularly in his sights.²⁴

The Bolshevik threat was indeed a new factor, and the propertied classes were indeed seriously alarmed by the 1917 Revolution. Whether this scare prompted sales of land is less certain. On the whole, unless land was converted into something portable like gold or diamonds, of which there is no sign, turning land into another form of property such as stocks and shares or houses would not seem likely to ward off Bolshevik expropriation. The property press may have wilfully exaggerated the scale of the land sales, and may have persuaded itself that the collapse of the landed elite was imminent. With hindsight it is evident that in the event the landed elite did not collapse overnight. It has always been the case that if a quarter of England changed hands between 1918 and 1921, then three-quarters did not. That three-quarters has by no means subsequently remained in unchanged ownership, but since the land market has never repeated such frenzied activity concentrated into three or four years those changes have been spread out over the intervening decades without becoming headline-grabbing material – though that has not been true of the abandonment or demolition of some famous country houses. Many, perhaps most, of the large landowning families of the early twentieth century remain landowning families in the twenty-first century, having shed detached and outlying properties and retained their core estates. Many of the landed gentry and squirearchy, however, those who had estates of 1,000 to 3,000 acres or thereabouts, have parted with all their land. What has survived is very much a radically slimmed down version of the old landed elite, reinforced, as has always been the case, by new money – whose origins have lately tended to reflect sports and entertainment celebrities as well as the traditional finance and business fortunes. As Beckett and Turner point out, citing the *Estates Gazette* statement, in 1999 there were thought to be 4778 estates of more than 741 acres, which in aggregate owned just over 6 million acres, a little less than 20 per cent of the land area of England, or a little over 25 per cent of the cultivated area. Beckett and Turner rightly remark that this marks ‘a significant retreat’ from the distribution of landownership derived from the *Return of owners of land, 1873*. Such figures actually show that in 1873 – or as refined by Bateman and more precisely relating to 1883 – estates of 1,000 acres and upwards aggregated more than 17 million acres, 53 per cent of the land area of England,

²⁴ Roy Douglas, *Land, people, and politics. A history of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952* (1976), pp. 175–82.

or two-thirds of the cultivated acreage.²⁵ The true difference in the structure of landowning between 1873/83 and 1999 was in fact rather larger than this, since estates of between 741 and 1,000 acres are missing from the 1873/83 data, and would be difficult to find. In any case the six million acres in estates of more than 741 acres in 1999 included a great deal of land which had changed hands, perhaps more than once, in passing from its pre-1914 owners into the hands of the owners in 1999 who included many new men and women. Somewhere along the line the landowning classes, a group composed of a changing mixture of families, had shed more than half of their former estates, while the group of pre-1914 landed families had parted with much more than that. It still seems likely that the immediate aftermath of the Great War accounted for a large slice of this remodelling of the landscape of English landownership.

²⁵ There are many sources for the 1873 figures: they are usefully presented in the County Tables provided by J. Bateman, in G. C. Brodrick, *English land and landlords* (1881), pp. 173–83 for English counties, and p. 187 for a summary table for England and Wales. More accurate figures, based on the 1883 version of Bateman's revisions, can be calculated from Thompson, *English landed society*, Tables II, IV, and V.